



**The Bikes of New York**  
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**New Section**

**THE BIKES OF NEW YORK**

*A novella*

**by Cheeseburger Brown**

**THE BIKES OF NEW YORK**

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# Chapter 1

## 1.

**I don't know where he goes when he's on the bikes, and neither do you. But you can tell he's somewhere: the far away look in his eyes is unmistakable.**

Luc Drapeau pedals the spinning world beneath his wheels, but never moves an inch. He pedals straight to Kingdom Come.

You may or may not think twice about him as you pass. You're on your way to work, or on your way home. You might be thinking about supper or taxes, underwear models or overdue bills. If you're social you might afford him a nod or a smile as he sweats for loose change, going nowhere, eyes at infinity. You don't feel very guilty. At least he's got the bikes, you reason.

Better the bikes than a beggar.

Luc Drapeau recognizes you. You might not know it, but it's true. He's far away but he's not gone. He knows the hours by your transits. Maybe he counts you, like sheep.

He sees the cars, too, what few remain. Do you remember when even the widest boulevards were thick with them on a Sunday afternoon? Now we all mosey along in liquid herds, stepping aside for the rare vehicle, warned by the conspicuous whine of its engine interrupting the scrapes and murmurs of purely human noise.

Luc Drapeau grunts, sitting up straighter as his pedaling tapers off to a ghost of a motion. He lets his cleats drop off the pedals, the pedals shudder to a halt. Through his thighs he feels the wheels fly on for a few seconds, lost in their own far away place of inertia.

But nothing's free: the bike quivers as the wheels stop.

Luc licks his lips. The bike box buzzes. He reaches out his cupped hands, which shake either from exertion or anticipation or both. He

receives a small slurry of brown coins: silver and bimetallics, etched in grime.

He puts the coins in a zippered pocket that stashes inside his shorts. Wouldn't you?

That's his day of work. He's made his kilowatt quota. Other unfortunates pedal on but Luc Drapeau has a baby at home, and a wife who prays for better days. He wants to see them so he doesn't forget what being alive is for. He needs to see them so he knows why to get back on a bike tomorrow.

He wants to feel lucky. God knows *we* want him to feel lucky, so we don't feel so much like pigs. It isn't our fault the machine of the West staggered. The wiles of the worlds' economies continue to elude even the craftiest AIs, so who are we to pretend we saw it coming? Maybe it's karma, maybe it's cruel—some of us just got off better than others when the bottom fell out of the world.

So you and I have jobs, and if we didn't we could ride the bikes like Luc Drapeau. We could stake out a favourite ride in a public square or the concrete parkette skirt of any commercial concern. The bikes are everywhere, after all. Every institution needs power, and so many people need coins.

They say it's an urban legend but it isn't: if you put your ear to the asphalt of a major avenue at a quiet hour of the night you can actually detect the murmuring spin of the great underground flywheels. The bikes feed their motion. So does the bouncing sidewalk beneath your feet, pumping the city to life.

Do you remember when they used to light up the buildings all the way to the top, even at night? Nowadays the only thing up there is the endlessly replicated silhouette of the wind turbines, turning and turning and turning. The tips of the city's fingers are dark. Nobody wants to move conditioned air up that high anymore. There just aren't enough bikes.

It's hot.

Luc Drapeau is even hotter. He strips as he walks, peeling off all but his worn cycling shorts. He leaves a trail of sweat droplets on the pavement that evaporate with thirsty haste.

He stops for water at the corner of St. Urbain and Rue Jacques Parizeau. An old Jewish bird runs a fountain there. You've probably never

drank there—it's local, nestled in the alley next to a cat farm. She doesn't serve strangers. "Monsieur Drapeau!" she cheers, smiling toothlessly.

"Madame," mutters Luc, nodding as he takes a cup from the rack.

If we did happen to stumble in there, you or I would have to pay in advance. But she tallies up Luc's draught only when he's sated, and because she's a sweetheart she always knocks a couple of milliliters off. She has a secret crush on the dimples in Luc Drapeau's buttocks.

"Merci," he whispers, putting his money on the counter and turning to go.

"À demain," she says, eyes flicking down.

The sun is setting. The streets are emptying. There are few lamps anymore, and the darkness is a threat to some and an opportunity to others. The changeover in ecosystems is heralded by a hurrying in the pace of people. They all want to be at home, no matter what home is.

Luc Drapeau's home is a hole in the wall. The bed folds out of the ceiling, but it's never folded up. Luc opens the door and takes off his street shoes before climbing up on the bed, then turns awkwardly to close the door behind him.

He strives to be quiet. His wife sleeps beside his son, curled into a tight cocoon in the blankets. She's left out a candle and match for Luc, as well as a package of dinner.

He pulls the tab, hears the contents start to sizzle.

Dimly through the walls he perceives the bass peal of cathedral bells echoing across twilit Montréal, announcing the hour. Luc winds the radio and puts on earphones. The national service is playing Debussy.

He puts his coins on the pillow, next to his wife's head.

## Chapter 2

### 2.

On Saturday afternoons Luc Drapeau and his family take a stroll through Mount Royal park, Luc's legs quaking from his morning on the bikes. The road is strewn with blossoms, in places mashed green patties thick enough to advertise the brand names of shoes, logos stamped in the pulp. Birds sing, because nothing can stop the birds. It's spring so they sing extra loud.

"What is it, Celise?" he asks again.

"Nothing," she says again. She's waiting for the right moment.

They carry parasols, just like you and I do. Even though they're poor there are some things that are indisputable necessities these days, like shea butter and almond oil for sunblock; like sunglasses; like multivitamins and condoms. You find money for those things, sometimes even before you find money for food. I do, too.

The hillside watermongers can fuck right off. Luc Drapeau ignores them pointedly. They prey on the thirsty, profiteer rather than ride or work. They sell trick bottles that magnify the content, and the content could be somebody's piss. They look for suckers. They look for people who don't know better—class tourists. Me, maybe. Maybe you. Luc they leave alone.

At the crest beneath the great crucifix a six piece brass band has adapted Berlioz. The baby squeals and cranes his head, threatening to spill free. A ring of listeners sit in the grass. An old man pretends to conduct. Celise stops the pram and drops her shoulders, grinning.

Luc wanders close and fishes a brown dime from his pocket. His wife catches his eye, questioning.

"Music, Celise," he says quietly but firmly. "*Music.*"

She hesitates before nodding. He closes his eyes and drops the coin in the brass band's hat. The trombone player salutes during a two measure rest, and the tuba player winks behind his mouthpiece.

Luc gives them a tight little smile.

Montréal is spread out beneath them, wavering under a scintillating blanket of ochre haze. A brace of flycycle gliders are out, white dots sailing between the skyscrapers. Probably the cops. The tallest towers pierce the haze in their thirst for the sun, the fans at their pinnacles beating silently. Between the buildings glisten the new canals.

"Luc," says his wife, touching his shoulder. He turns around. She says, "Something wonderful has happened."

He raises his brow. "Celise?"

"Our prayers have been answered," she says. "I have a message from Cousin Philip. He says he has arranged a job."

Luc blinks. "A job?" he echoes dumbly. "... A task?" he adds, letting a note of cynicism enter his voice.

"A *job*," says his wife, her cheeks colouring. "A salary," she says.

Luc is on top of the world. He picks up his wife and swings her around. He scoops his son out of the pram and kisses him until the boy gasps for breath between giggles. The brass band's number winds to a close and everyone applauds.

"There is only one thing," says his wife, biting the inside of her cheek.

Luc gently lays the baby in the pram, looks up, his lids heavy. "What is this one thing?" he asks quietly.

"The job is not in Montréal," says Celise.

"Where is it?"

"It's in New York City."

"New York City?"

"Yes."

"Tabernac."

"Luc!"

He paces in a small circle, chin in his palm. "I don't see how it's possible, Celise. How could we do this? How would we get there? Even if we did, we would be *immigrants*. We might as well try to get into Canada."



"Philip will help us. He's arranged everything. He knows how smart you are, Luc. He wants you there."

Luc sighs. He pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes closed. Is this salvation or damnation? At first blush they both smell the same, both starting from a knot of fear deep down in his stomach.

Celise takes his hand. "We can't stay here, Luc. You know it. The Republic is suffocating. Every day there are more turning to the bikes. It can't go on forever."

He nods. He tracks birds as they wheel across the sky, gliding from wind wave to wind wave. "I know," he says hollowly.

A blue and white flag snaps in the breeze, its line jingling against the flagpole. The baby fusses.

"It's time to go home," says Luc. "We should start packing," he adds.

Celise drops her head against the base of his neck, snuggling against a film of rasping stubble. "I love you," she breathes. Luc puts his arms around her, rocks her gently side to side.

"I dream of never having to ride again," he says.

"Your dream is coming true," she tells him tenderly. "Just you wait and see: in New York, everything will be different."

# Chapter 3

## 3.

Imagine Luc Drapeau arriving in New York.

Imagine how a man from a sinking ruin must feel to see a city soar. The streets aren't clogged with hunched shoulders, they teem with frenetic obstinance—hard pride rather than mute consolation, ambition over Christ, strategy before tradition. Where Montréal mourns New York is vital.

There are cars, and some of the skyscrapers are lit two thirds of the way up: candles of affluence, torches of hope.

On Cousin Philip's card Luc takes transit instead of walking to his first day of work. He rides a commuter tram down Columbus as the sun is cresting the high-rises and suffusing the island with an amber glow that signals the start of daytime life. He gawks at mundane things and smiles at people. He is studiously ignored. He almost misses his stop. "Hé, arrêtez!" he cries, flailing for the exit. "Stop, s'il-vous-plaît!"

When he hops off to the graffitied landing the departing tram splashes his pantlegs with pure Manhattan swill, humming to itself as it goes. It clangs its bell to hurry the passage of a line of livestock. The sheep are startled, and so is Luc.

On these streets Luc is livestock, and so are we all. Within a quarter hour of dawn the throngs have thickened into a purposefully coursing, semi-permeable river of meat and cloth and chatter.

He shuffles forward, pushed from behind. He cranes his head to take in the panorama of high walkways connecting the buildings above, reflections glistening below in the canals between them, plied by dozens upon dozens of bright yellow gondolas piloted by brown-faced, hard-nosed gondoliers. They pole with purpose, ferrying the high and mighty to Wall Street in a steady rush south. They shout the financial conditions to one another, vying for audibility over the gondoliers' report on the

tide and the cries of the streetside wallahs hawking their wares. "Hot dog! Newsfeed! Recharge!"

And there he is, Luc Drapeau, feeling the throb of civilization through the soles of his shoes.

It isn't his imagination, for in Manhattan every sidewalk bounces to harness every footfall for the public pool, every recoil channeled to the island's banks of flywheels turning underground. It's rush hour at Penn Station that keeps Lady Liberty's torch glowing; it's Saturday in Times Square that lets the Freedom Tower shine.

The air becomes stifling as the sun rises higher. Luc blinks and consults his mental map again: he walks another block east, crosses a bridge clotted with bovine commuters on foot, comes out into a mildly flooded plaza. The plaza is filled with bikes, the uniform noise of their work rising like a nest of bees.

Luc walks through the field of them, feeling like a free man.

The riders sweat and sometimes grunt. They gulp as they drink hard-won water. They do not let their pace slacken. To lose momentum is to let joules fall down the well. Waste not, waste not.

I barely pay them any mind when I walk to work, and you probably don't either. Luc luxuriates in this disconnection we take for granted. He relishes it, tickled inside. He wants to laugh out loud.

The family's last nickel has been spent on his new suit. He feels glamorous. He feels tall.

He climbs the steps into the lobby, nods cheerfully to a blue police robot while he's scanned, then presents his papers to the dour doorman with a crisp flourish. "Goodmorning, sir!" he says in his best American accent.

The doorman frowns, shifts his weapon against his hip. "I'm going to swipe your card, okay? Do you understand me?"

"Sure, I speak fluid the English," claims Luc. He attempts to retrieve his card by reaching into his pants, which causes the doorman to interject heatedly. He points his weapon at Luc's groin while Luc slowly extracts his zippered pouch.

"Throw it on the ground," says the doorman.

"Are you serious?" asks Luc. "My wife give that to me."

"I don't know what's in there, okay?" says the doorman. A queue begins to jam up behind Luc. People complain to one another. The

doorman stares into Luc's eyes. "I'm going to have to ask you to throw it on the ground at this time."

Luc is sweating. "My card is what's in there. Also my wife's cousin's card. A few loose change."

The doorman's eyes widen in alarm and his crewcut black hair seems to quiver on his sloped head. He raises his weapon and points it at Luc's forehead. He barks, "Why do you have your cousin's wife's card?"

"My wife's cousin's card for the transit," stammers Luc. "It was for me a favour... "

The queue behind him dissipates in search of other entrances. Luc and his interlocutor stand like stones in a river, diverting the flow, hemmed in by grumbling eddies.

"Now you're changing your story," says the doorman. "First it was this one's card, now it's another one's. You expect me to believe a status card gets you on the downtown tram at this point?"

"It is a card for the tram. A tram card!"

"Let me tell you here and now that you're not getting into this building without a status card," says the doorman, relaxing his weapon a trifle. "We don't accept tram cards."

"The status card is also in this pocket."

The doorman shouts, "Do not reach for your pocket at this time. Is that clear?"

The weapon is aimed between Luc's eyes again. He whispers, "*This* pocket in my hand."

The doorman narrows his eyes shrewdly. "Yours or your cousin's?"

"My hand, my status card."

"Okay," he agrees reluctantly, lowering his arm. "At this time I need you to throw that pouch on the ground for me, sir."

Luc sighs.

Cousin Philip's office is a wonder: floor to ceiling windows overlooking Manhattan, the filigree of embedded solar collectors barely visible in the expensive glass. Down below the streets are clouded in yellowish murk, the pedestrian traffic a vague blur of parasols. Luc turns from the view as Philip walks in. "Luc!" he says as he flashes a pearly smile.

"Philip, how are you?"

"I'm so glad you made it," says Philip, pumping his hand with a soft, uncalussed palm. Philip has become fat, a rarity these days outside the field of politics. His skin is pink and untanned. "Everything's well with Celise, the baby?"

"Yes, yes indeed. Thank you for all your arrangements."

Philip waves his hand dismissively, his cufflinks glittering. "Never mind that, Luc. Once you get your first paycheque we'll get you out of that boarding house and into a real flat—something wired. How does that sound?"

Luc is stunned. "Electricity in the home?"

"Things are getting better every day," says Philip, which is his company's slogan. "America is recovering, Luc, and New York is on the leading edge. We're paving the way for the West. Necessity is the mother of invention, after all, and we're showing the world just how inventive America can be."

"The business she is doing well, then?"

Philip chuckles as he crosses the office. "Are you pulling my leg, cousin? Have you even *looked* at our numbers lately? We're going to *own* this city, Luc." He pauses beside an ornate humidior on his desk and extracts two cigars. "And after that—the world. Cigar?"

"Thank you."

Philip smacks a match against its box and holds out the flame for Luc, then puffs his own smoke to life. "I haven't forgotten the work you did for my father back in Québec. I know what kind of a shark you are. I also know things have been bad for you for a while, but they're going to turn around. You're with us, now. Welcome to your new life."

Luc loiters by the window, eyes cast down into the haze. He is lost in a daydream of impossible delights until he notices a squadron of vehicles cruising across the bike plaza. A moment later a flycycle glider swoops past the glass, making him jump. "Something is going on," he observes.

"Eh?" grunts Philip, blowing smoke rings.

"There's many police outside."

Philip frowns. He walks over and touches his forehead to the glass, looking down into the plaza. He licks his lips, the cigar hanging forgotten out of the corner of his mouth. "Oh, shit," says Philip drily.

"Shit?" echoes Luc.

“Shit, shit, shit,” reiterates Philip, the colour draining from his jowls. He turns around and picks up a telephone on his desk, stabbing at the buttons. “Security: situation report. Oh. Oh, shit.”

“Philip?” asks Luc, brow raised.

The door of Philip’s office bursts open. Police in black uniforms and riot masques stomp inside and point their weapons at Philip and Luc while pressing their faces into the top of Philip’s desk. Their cards are grabbed and scanned, their fingers pricked and drops of their blood slotted into a hand-cranked identifier. The identifier beeps ominously.

One of the officers flips up his visor and announces crisply, “Philip Beaudoin, you are under arrest for waste fraud. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or transmit can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to access a legal intelligence and to engage said entity via telepresence during questioning. If you cannot afford access to a legal intelligence, one will be appointed to represent you.”

“Shit,” says Philip again. He is hauled to his feet, and he casts Luc a glum shrug just before the hood comes down over his head. His wrists are manacled—click, click, click.

The officer holding Luc looks up. “What about this one?”

The one with the identifier shakes her head. “Import worker from the Protectorate. He’s nothing.”

And he is: he’s nothing. Luc wanders down the stairwell with all of the other nothings, mills in the lobby watching the executives and managers of Philip’s company marched blindly by braces of cops out to waiting cars, blue bubble-lights spinning and flashing blandly.

Luc feels little. The morning’s dizzying flight from ecstasy to desolation has left him numb. His mouth still tastes like cigar smoke—woody and rich. It’s a dream, a nightmare, a cruel joke.

“Tabernac,” says Luc.

# Chapter 4

## 4.

Now, perhaps, we notice Luc Drapeau. You or I might give him a second glance: he's one of us—just a regular guy—in some kind of a *situation*. He's got a nice suit but he's sitting on the curb with his head in his hands, sweat glistening on the back of his neck.

But I've got places to be and so do you, so we move along. This is New York. Who lolligags for a hard luck case? Just angels and predators.

Luc's borrowed tram card no longer works, and he's forgotten his parasol in Philip's office. It's a long, hot walk uptown and Luc has paused to give his tired dogs a moment to breathe. The air smells like armpits and yeast, punctuated by crackles of ozone from a nearby row of wallahs' carts. "Hot dog! Newsfeed! Recharge!"

He licks his lips. He's spent his last coins on water but he's thirsty again.

When he closes his eyes he sees Philip's hapless shrug as the police bag his head. The inside of Luc's nose still smells like cigar smoke. He opens his eyes again: what is he going to tell Celise?

On the far side of the Eighth Avenue Canal is a plaza of bikes, crisscrossed by the sharp noon shadows of the walkways above. Over the shuffle and shout and splash of city bustle Luc can just barely detect the noise of the riders' overlapping efforts, pedals spinning in rough-edged social synchronicity giving rise to a unified low hum—a hum so familiar that it's often hard to hear, even up close.

But Luc can hear it. He can *feel* it.

He finds himself crossing the canal over West Fiftieth Span then winding his way back to the bikes. It's a busy day. He saunters along the plaza's periphery, his jacket at his shoulder, hunting for a free mount.

He whistles Poulenc: *Trois mouvements perpétuels*.

Luc Drapeau doesn't hang his head in resignation. He blinks in anticipation, eager for relief. He knows in the ride he will find solace. At least for an hour his purpose will be clear, and his reward tangible. His heart beats faster. He flexes his palms.

A bike comes free.

Luc lingers, stretching out his calves. He glances up to check if anyone else is heading for the bike. Instead he sees another bike vacant, this one cleared by an old woman in a burqa who gasps for breath as she snatches up her coins from the box. He passes her as he strides to his mount and settles in.

He rolls up his sleeves. He hangs his jacket over the seat and ties his tie around his brow to catch the sweat.

After testing the pedals gingerly he closes his eyes for a moment, his lips twitching in communion with the trinity. He pushes the pedals through a full cycle, feeling out the machine's character, lets go then catches the pedals again playfully, sends them falling into the round and taps them onward...

Luc rides. The world falls away.

He enters a private dimension where time is flexible, space is irrelevant, and pain is numbed. Luc wouldn't tell you anything more specific than that, so neither will I. It's the dignity of dreams.

The snap back to reality is rude in the best of cases. In this case it is especially rude because someone has bodily rammed Luc off his ride and sent him sprawling to the pavement to strike his head on the next bike in line. He gasps, ducking to avoid the rider's flying pedals, scuttles sideways to stay clear. "Tabernac!"

Two hard brown boys with narrow eyes stand over Luc, their boots on his mount. The people around them keep their heads down and ride on. The boys wear matching crimson sweatbands around their foreheads and wrists; black tanks and biking shorts; leather gloves and tattoos. They sneer when they're not chuckling, and they're chuckling now as they look down at him.

Luc's muscles are vibrating from interrupted motion, his heart pounding. "Why you did that there?" he asks, getting up on one elbow and breathing hard. "You think that's funny, the pushing?"

"No," sneers one of the brown boys. "Do you?"

Luc gets to his feet. "You want to ride this one, kid? Be my guest. I will take only my jacket."



He reaches for it but finds himself suddenly on the ground again, his forehead pressed into gritty concrete by a knee. The knee pulls away and Luc slowly lifts his face. One of the boys squats down in front of him. "I did not say you could get up," he chuckles to Luc, then sneers, "And I am not your kid."

Luc is on his hands and knees. "I don't have any money," he says.

"Eat your money," says the boy. "This is about respect."

"Respect? How about respect for the elder?"

This earns Luc a backhanded smack across the face. He winces, skin stinging. He casts about to the other riders but their eyes are locked elsewhere. The brown boys are chuckling again. "No, *Pepé Le Pew*, this is about respect for the powers that be."

Luc frowns. "Who are the powers that be?"

"Kala Kala, motherfucker," hisses the boy. "These are Kala Kala's bikes, and you're in Kala Kala's square."

"I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Yes," agreed the boy with a chuckle, "you will be sorry."

Luc is blindsided by a kick to the ribs from the tough guy behind him. The other two advance and let their feet swing, pummeling Luc's body and limbs with their boots. He tries to roll into a ball and take it quietly until they get bored but they don't get bored. It goes on and on. They laugh. The kicks become sharper.

"*Jésu!*" groans Luc, just someone stomps a heel against the side of his head. "Somebody help me!" he cries, reaching out to the riders around him. They keep their heads bowed. They pedal faster. Luc's outstretched hand is thrown down and jumped on. "*Au secours!*" he pleads.

He is kicked in the mouth. He tastes the iron tang of blood.

A moment later he is picked up, his face squeezed between rough hands, the blurry features of the sneering brown boy swimming close. "You suck Kala Kala's cock," the boy whispers fiercely. "Say it. *Say it!*"

"I suck Kala Kala's cock," says Luc.

He is dropped. He folds like a pile of laundry onto the pavement, leaning against the back of a bike. Its rider ignores him. Luc spits blood and sees stars. He wipes his mouth with the sweat on his forearm.

He looks up.

The boys are walking away, pulling Luc's suit jacket back and forth between them as they shred it. "Tabernac, tabernac," swears Luc, shaking his head. He gets to his knees and then slowly stands. His knees quake.

He spots a dress shoe he didn't know he'd lost. He picks it up, fondling it absently as he looks around and blinks, dazed.

The bells at St. Patrick's mark two.

On the way home Luc Drapeau stops at St. James to go into the toilet and clean himself up a bit. He drinks the rust-coloured, lukewarm splatter from the sink. He dabs at two small bloodstains on his collar and succeeds in giving each one a rust-coloured halo.

He opens the door of the boarding house in Brooklyn, climbs the steps, fumbles through the dark hall, passes quietly into the cramped unit. Celise sits on the bed feeding the baby, cradling him in her arms, her gown untied and her milky breasts exposed. Her hair is wet and the room smells like baby soap and talc. She looks up, searching the feeble candlelight to understand Luc's expression. "You've been hit!" she gasps.

"I was mugged," says Luc.

"Your jacket!"

"I left it at the office."

"Jésu', Luc."

"I know, I know. I'm fine. Don't worry. Everything's fine."

He sits on the bed beside her as the baby ceases to suckle, turning aside and falling quiet. Celise touches Luc's face tenderly, watches him wince. He drops his eyes to the sleeping baby. When he looks up she's still watching him. "I was worried," she says.

"Don't worry," he tells her.

"This place is so strange."

"We'll find our way," he promises.

# Chapter 5

## 5.

Luc Drapeau shows up for work on Wednesday morning, a winning employment lottery chit clutched in his hand. When he rubs his fingers against the papery plastic he can feel the thin strands of data fibres woven inside. The address winks above a small square of map, guiding him here, to the Sewage Pumping Station at Avenue D and East Thirteenth.

His name is called: "Drapow, Luck!"

In a grimy green change-room he strips off his suit pants and shirt, folds them carefully into a rusty, cubical locker that smells like mildew, then takes a sanitation jumpsuit from the row of hangers. The jumpsuit smells considerably worse than mildew.

He is paired up with a veteran of the job to learn the ropes. Her name is Rosie. They ride down together in a rickety elevator. Rosie also smells considerably worse than mildew. "Wanna chaw?" she asks, offering over a greasy tin of spit tobacco.

"No thank you," says Luc.

"Suit yaself," she says breezily, expectorating a string of brown swill on the floor. "But it helps."

"Helps what?"

The elevator settles with a lurch and the door grinds open, admitting a wall of eye-watering stench. Luc gags reflexively. Rosie chortles. "Told ya," she says, punching his arm in a friendly way. "That'll put some hair on ya chest, huh?"

"Jésu'," croaks Luc.

They pull up their hoods and secure their breathing masques, the air inside rubbery and close, the filters only mildly successful in cutting the stink. They draw on gloves and toggle the lamps on their foreheads, the dim, amber beams illuminating vapours swirling up by the low ceiling.

He follows Rosie's bobbing light down the tunnel. She raises her masque intermittently to hork into the shadows. "Come on, slowpoke," she calls, her coarse voice muffled and alien. "Shit don't wait for no man."

They descend a ladder to a landing where a gang is at work trawling a river of filth for settled solids or sources of potential blockage. They wade into the mire with nets, hooks and scoops. The quarry seems to come in bursts and now, in a lull, the workers hop up to sit on the edge of the platform, pools of unspeakable mud collecting around their backsides in stringy clods and runny rivulets. "Rosie!" they call. "How the hell are ya?"

"Got a greener," she grunts, nodding at Luc.

"Hi," says Luc.

"Strong stomach on you there, bub?" asks a husky fellow as he pushes up his masque to shove a wad of spit tobacco into his mouth.

Luc shrugs. "It's okay, my stomach."

The husky fellow snickers. "We'll see, huh?"

"Aw, leave him alone, Donny," says Rosie, spitting into the underground river. "It ain't like he asked to be here."

"Damn, Rosie," replies the husky fellow. "Nobody *asks* to be here. I mean, *shit*, woman—nobody except you."

They all guffaw. Donny, the husky fellow, kicks his boots playfully in the rancid water for a moment and then casts his headlamp upstream. Rosie follows his gaze. She squints, her eyes penetrating the dark in a way Luc's cannot. "There's a nice piece of incoming right there," she declares. "Let's get lively."

The work is hard, and awful.

When we were kids this is the kind of thing that would've been handled automatically with sluice filters, dehydration vats, timed settling tanks and chemical treatments. In the old days some bored fool would sit with his feet up on a desk, watching gauges and reading the newspaper until something beeped. Before the fuel crisis this was the drudgery of robots and untouchables, not men.

The objects of their attention are dumped in various chutes according to composition, the art of diagnosis imparted in dribs and drabs by Rosie as examples present themselves. "Smell that funk? That's the ammonia. That goes right in the yogurt tank for breakdown. Now that, on the other

hand, is a log of good old fashioned human crap. Send that to chute two for bio-reclamation."

Luc sighs, catching his breath from retching. "The whole island's waste is sorted like this?"

"Shit no," replies Donny, scooping up something indescribable and flinging it into the mouth of a chute behind him. "This is just the stuff the boys upstream *missed*. This, bub, is what you call fucking *quality control*."

They take another break as the river runs comparatively clean for a spell. Up topside the day is wearing on and the air coming through the ventilators is getting hotter, the occasional puff of humid breeze carrying smells like perfume, perspiration and charcoal. Luc catches a sweet glimmer of these saner scents as he pushes up his masque to mop the sweat from his face. "It's hot," he pants.

"It ain't nothing no hot now," warns skinny Miguel, leaning on his hook. "Just you to wait and to see, my friend."

Luc waits. Luc sees. An hour passes and the air becomes a visible *mi-asma*, tendrils churning in the soft cones of their headlamps. It is hard to breathe. Luc's ventilator has begun to smell like cheese. His arms ache as he hoists his scoop to snag a loop of knotted cabling. He grunts wearily as he flings it to the chute.

Moisture beads on his masque, fogging the glass.

The gang have all unzipped their jumpsuits and peeled them down to the waist, working bare-chested with sweat running off them like rain. They glisten in the dark as they shout lewd jokes to one another, guffawing, swearing, pausing to spurt tobacco juice. They stand in the river like fishers. They know each other well.

Donny stands in front to catch first. He has his back to everyone, a matted carpet wall of flesh. He calls out, "Poker at Lee's?"

"Shut up," Lee calls back. "I'm tired of cleaning up after you assholes. You barfed on my fucking couch, Don."

"Yeah," giggles Skinny Miguel as he hucks a wad of faeces into the chute. "That was gross, Donny."

Donny grunts. "Fuck you all."

Luc is dizzy. He raises his masque to take a less obstructed breath, gags as his throat recoils from the putrice. He stumbles sideways and plows into Rosie, his face suddenly smeared between her heavy, tattooed breasts. She catches him in her beefy arms and heaves him effortlessly

back to his feet. “Ya getting panky on me or just losing your shit, boyfriend?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” mutters Luc, tasting her sweat on his mouth.

He leans into the edge of the platform as he pulls his masque down and gratefully gasps in a few humid breaths through the cheesy filter. He coughs. The untreated air has left his lungs feeling scorched.

They’re all watching him.

Luc looks up slowly. “I’m okay,” he claims.

“Hup-hup, bubs!” calls Donny. There’s material on the way. He settles into his ready stance and so does the rest of the gang. Skinny Miguel takes a couple of preparatory swipes at the water, his pimple-scarred back flexing.

Islets of curdled foam drift out of the tunnel and pass between them, leaving yellowish crusts on their hipwaders. Next comes an armada of rotting apple chunks surrounded by squadrons of dead bees. Lee slaps them out of the water by the dozen, their tiny bodies skittering across the concrete landing.

“How’s the new girlfriend working out, Skinny?”

Miguel shrugs. “She isn’t to let me do it, Donny. I ask, I ask. She still say no.”

“I got something you can give her to make her let you,” offers Donny. “You just put it in her drink, bub.”

“No, I wait until she is to let me for okay to do.”

Donny snorts. “You’re a homo.”

“Fuck ya,” contributes Rosie as she rolls her eyes. But Donny isn’t listening: he’s leaning forward, squinting into the tunnel. Rosie takes a step forward, craning her head. “What’s up?”

Donny looks back over his hairy shoulder. “A pretty bit of incoming.” He grins, his teeth brown with tobacco. “I’m letting it go to the new guy. Ready up, bub?”

“What is it?” asks Luc.

Donny keeps his beam off it as it comes by him. Lee pans his head along to catch a glimpse of the lumpy shadow and then flinches away. “Oh, man,” he groans. “Special delivery.”

“What is it?” Luc asks again.

Skinny Miguel steps aside silently, eyes darting back and forth between his colleagues and the incoming. He looks over at Luc with a funny smile pinching the edges of his eyes, visible only fleetingly as the thick air blows thicker between them.

Luc looks down, his headlamp slicing the gloom.

It's a baby.

He can't control himself. He scampers away reflexively, flailing his arms and then tumbling backward beneath the surface. He feels like he's been hit in the chest. He struggles for air against his masque, then tears it from his face and sputters on the pure, uncut swill.

Rosie pulls him out by the hair and the first thing he sees is the purpled infant body bobbing in the disturbed wake by his hips. "Jésu'!" cries Luc, scrambling up onto the platform and collapsing against the stinking, streak-stained concrete. "*Tabernac!*"

The gang is laughing. They rock back and forth, helpless. Donny's husky frame jiggles as he slaps his thigh. Rosie leans against Lee, red in the face with mirth but then suddenly sober as she spots the incoming on its way out. "Don't lose it, you dipshits!" she bellows. "Look alive!"

Miguel surges after it, swinging with his hook. Luc doesn't want to watch but he finds he cannot turn away. On his third attempt Miguel snags it, right before the grate. In one smooth motion he picks it up and casts it flying to the chutes.

To Luc's horror he misses, and the waterlogged body bursts apart against a concrete bulkhead, dropping to the platform in a series of dense splatters.

The gang roars with laughter.

Luc vomits. He cannot stop. He gags and retches on his own bile while quaking on his hands and knees on the hard landing, afraid to look away from his own mess lest he see something worse, afraid to close his eyes because what happened is still burning in the afterimages. "Mon Dieu," he whispers hoarsely, "mon Dieu, mon Dieu... "

This is when the shift manager comes down the ladder, masque against his clipboard as he strains to read in the dim light. He looks up at the gang standing in the river and he wolf-whistles, the shrill sound echoing off the stone walls. "Why don't you come over to my place and cook me dinner sometime, Rosie?"

Rosie cackles. "Aw," she says amicably, "fuck off."

“What do we have here?” asks the shift manager, turning around to see Luc on the floor, strings of saliva hanging from his quivering lips.

“Greener,” explains Rosie.

The shift manager raises his brow as he takes in the remains of the baby spattered before the chutes. He steps gingerly over the worst of it while he shakes his head and chuckles, scratching behind his ear with a pencil. “People flush the darnedest things, don’t they?”

“Yup,” agrees Lee.

The shift manager prods Luc with his boot. “So, hey there buddy. Back to work, huh? Gotta learn by doing. No rest for the wicked.”

Luc shakes his head. “I can’t... I can’t...”

“Okay, okay,” nods the shift manager with a wan smile. “What’s your name, buddy?”

“Luc,” rasps Luc. “Luc Drapeau.”

He makes a note on his clipboard, then tucks the pencil behind his masque. “You’re fired, Luc.”

Luc nods feebly, his eyes now pinched shut.



# Chapter 6

## 6.

Along the banks of West Forty-Third Luc Drapeau runs a gauntlet of beggars. They have no legs. They sit on little squares of dirty carpet, their stumps out front. Some of them hold signs in their laps that explain *CAN'T BIKE* or plead *ZAKAH ZAKAT* or simply say *SOLDIER*.

At the apex of the Sixth Avenue Bridge is a wallah with a braided beard, tapping lazily at his foot-pedal to add pinches of momentum to the cart's flywheel. Luc worms out of the crowd's current to ask, "How much for a hot dog?"

"Ten dollars or two and half coupons," says the wallah, smiling as he wipes his hands on a kerchief. The beads in his braids click together when he moves, winking in the heavy afternoon sun.

"I have coupons," says Luc.

"Two and a half," says the wallah.

Luc steps into the shade of the cart's parasol and withdraws his termination voucher from the pumping station. "It's worth five."

"I don't make change," says the wallah. "You'll have to buy two."

"But I don't want two hot dogs."

The wallah shrugs. "Okay so for you one hot dog costs five."

"Give me two hot dogs."

"You got it, fella."

The wallah blows on the charcoal bricks and drops a couple of wieners on the grille with a pair of long tongs. He peers through the smoke, focusing on a quick appraisal of Luc's shirt, tie and slacks. "You want a newsfeed, huh?" he asks. "Recharge?"

Luc shakes his head. "I don't have a phone."

The wallah loses interest, scans the passersby behind his customer as he rocks back and forth on his foot-pedal. Luc watches his food cook. When the hot dogs are ready he dresses them with mustard and sauerkraut and continues walking west, gnawing on one and carrying the other.

Gulls wheel overhead.

He climbs the steps up to Times Square, feeling the buzzing of the bikes before he sees them: scores of mounts, scores of riders, dozens more waiting in the wings, standing under public parasols, talking or dozing or waving hand fans. Up to his left, the great dull eye of a dead megalithic television. To his right, a line of rickshaws and a gaggle of streetwalkers.

Luc chews his hot dog.

His chewing slows as he notices a man escorted roughly out from the rows of bikes, tossed to the pavement and repeatedly kicked. His attackers turn and stalk away, leaving the man to cough and sputter and lick his wounds.

Luc shakes his head sadly, then notices something about the man: the beady eyes, the bristle of black hair, the looming frame—Luc recognizes him. He wanders closer to confirm it. It's the doorman from Cousin Philip's building. Luc extends his hand to help the man to his feet. "Thanks," he grunts.

"You remember me?" asks Luc. "You point a gun in my balls, my face."

The ex-doorman squints critically, reducing his small eyes to mere slits. "... You had the purse, right?"

"The pocket," nods Luc.

"I remember you."

"You want a hot dog?"

The two men eat, staring out over the Times Square bikefield. They don't talk for a few moments, though when the desperate leading edge has softened off his hunger the ex-doorman introduces himself and offers his hand to shake, "Dade Miller."

"Luc Drapeau," says Luc Drapeau.

"There wasn't anything personal when I made you throw your pouch on the ground."

"It's nothing."

Luc swallows his last bite and rubs his hands together for want of a serviette. He observes minor squabbles erupting among the bikes, shouted arguments or pushing matches over whose turn comes next or when that turn should start. They've been picked on by the gangs so now they pick on each other. The square's ambiance is knit from ugly noises.

Luc glances sideways. He can see that his companion is trying to disguise his famine, straining not to devour his meal in just two or three bites. With admirable restraint he pops the last piece into his mouth and chews mechanically as he dabs at a cut on his brow.

"So the bicycles, they are all controlled," says Luke, eyes over the square.

Dade nods. "The Burmese. I didn't make a deal with them. You?"

"No," says Luc. "I don't even know how to get one. What do they ask?"

"Half."

"Half what?"

"Half the money from the bike box."

"Tabernac."

Dade rubs his jaw. "When that punk over there told me the terms I got angry, and when he started talking to me like I had to lick his boots I hit him. So they jumped me and three of them tossed me on my ass."

Luc and Dade both jump when an eager voice speaks out behind them; they turn to see a short but muscular man with cocoa-brown skin and bulging eyes, gesturing emphatically as he says, "It's ain't right, brothers. It just ain't right at all. Those boys is owning what the people is supposed to be owning—the needing people, brothers, like you and me. You know what those boys spend their bike box money on? Blow and blowjobs. It ain't right when a brother just wants to buy bread, you hear me?"

"It make no difference," says Luc. "I need the money. I'll do the deal."

"Shit," says the bulging-eyed man. "Everytime one of us needing peoples be bending over to let theyselves get fucked by Burma, they fucking the rest of us, too. They be making the system work, brothers. They be giving up, so we don't have no chance in Hell. It ain't right."

Luc sighs. "What do you think I can do about it, one man?"

"Brothers *got* to stand up."

Dade nods fervently. "Fucking A," he says. "I'm not rolling over either. I'll fight to the end. What's your name, guy?"

"Anthony," says Anthony, licking his thick lips. "I'm from Philly."

"Good to meet you," replies Dade, pumping his dark hand. "This is Look Drapo. Me and him just got laid off. I bet the three of us can take those little shits at this point and ride some bikes. What do you say, gentlemen?"

Luc holds up his hands. "Impossible," he says. "Taking on a street gang? How could we expect to succeed? It's not courage, that, it is the suicide."

"There's never more than a few of them around at a time," says Dade, scanning up and down the rows of bikes. "I count four. They're just kids. I could've messed them up myself if they hadn't taken me by surprise. I'm a fucking juggernaut—trained combat machine."

"Damn right!" agrees Anthony. "You got to believe, brother. Believe in yourself—in your power to *stand*."

Dade nods firmly and turns to walk back into the bikefield. Luc touches his shoulder and Dade pauses, his face fierce. "It's too dangerous," says Luc. "Let's figure out something else."

Anthony grimaces. "You fucking us all, Look. You a pussy, brother."

"I've got to stand up," whispers Dade with white hot resolution, his mole-eyes fixed on Luc. He shakes loose Luc's hand, turns, and resumes walking. Anthony scampers after him, flexing his fists with nervous energy.

Luc hovers on the edge of the square, watching them go.

He sees them skulk around the field until a couple of bikes come free, their riders exhausted. Luc sees their heads lower and disappear as they mount the bikes. He shifts his view over to the other side of the square: one of the brown boys with a crimson headband is staring. He signals to his companion and they both move in to investigate.

Luc starts and stops half a dozen times, ultimately finds himself striding quickly between the rows, closing the distance between himself and the two strangers that are the closest thing to friends he knows in this city.

He reaches them a moment after the boys from Kala Kala do—five of them, not four. A shouting match is already in progress. They've arranged themselves in a loose ring, hedging in Dade and Anthony from

every quarter. The riders around them hunker lower, avert their eyes. Anthony is yelling, "It ain't right, you Burmese motherfuckers. It just ain't right!"

He's pulled off his mount and stomped on with a depraved vigour that makes Luc dizzy, doubting his senses. Dade surges to his feet but gets nowhere before two boys have rushed him; Luc winces as Dade takes a hard hit on the jaw, an arc of spit flying loosely from his mouth. "Stop!" cries Luc. "Stop this!" he begs.

Dade roars, casting off his attackers. His shirt is torn and his face is red with rage. He pushes his way to Anthony's side and begins wrestling another Kala Kala punk, yanking him away by the hair. They end up on the pavement, rolling over each other and then rolling over Anthony.

Luc is interrupted from his observations when he's grabbed from behind and punched in the gut.

When he is able to look up a sixth gang member has arrived, and from the reverence in the eyes of the other five alone it is evident that he is some kind of lieutenant or chieftain. His biceps are densely tattooed, his face pinched and hard. He wears a syrup of gold chains around his neck and a jumble of bracelets on his arms. He chews a toothpick as he surveys the scene: Luc held by one boy, Dade by three more, Anthony curled up in a ball on the pavement, twitching.

"Boys," says the lieutenant with an eerily soft, smooth voice, "this is no place for this kind of mess." He claps his hands twice. "Move it to Tick-Tock Alley."

Tick-Tock Alley turns out to be a disused lane running behind a giant clock shop on Broadway. It is lined by rusty dumpsters full of warped cogs. A constricted breeze causes scraps of garbage to continuously skitter and twirl between the narrow brick walls. Behind a barbed-wire fence is a massive, streak-stained ventilator, the air quivering with the drone of its function.

The Kala Kala lieutenant raises his voice to be heard over the machine, ordering his boys to drop their captives. "So-o-o," he drawls, standing over them with his thumbs in his belt. "Who's gonna explain the problem here?"

Dade says nothing, breathing hard. Anthony is dazed, his face bloodied.

"There's no problem," Luc says quickly. "Just a misunderstanding. We don't want trouble. My friends and I, we just want a deal with you so we can ride."

The lieutenant leans in close to Luc's face, rolling the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. "Oh yes?"

"If you please."

The lieutenant straightens, pursing his lips. "You know, it looks a lot to me like you guys are troublemakers. I'm gonna need some assurance of your obedience. I can't have no respect problem on my territory, you can appreciate that, I hope."

Luc steels himself. "What do you want?"

He shrugs theatrically, his gaze now wandering along the walls of the alley. "I'm gonna need to see some teeth smashed out." He looks back at Luc, fixing him with his brown eyes. "But I'm gonna offer you a chance for a prize: if you smash out your *own* teeth, you can have a deal and you can ride. If *we* have to smash them out for you, you'll never touch a Manhattan bike again."

Luc blinks. "What?"

It is at this point that Luc notices that the bracelets laced up and down the lieutenant's forearms are strung with teeth: grey and yellow and brown. It is no joke or empty threat. They are savage. One of the Kala Kala punks steps up beside his boss, cracking his knuckles. "Who's first?"

Luc is speechless. Dade just stares. But Anthony looks up sharply and shakes his head. "You motherfuckers aren't taking no teeth," he yells. "You motherfuckers be going down! You motherfuckers be *begging* my ass for mercy before I done."

The lieutenant smiles wanly, puts his hands behind his back and rocks carelessly on his heels. "You see?" he says with a dramatic sigh, a cavalier wink of cruelty in his almond-shaped eyes. "I *hate* having respect problems. It just looks bad. It depresses me. It makes me mad." He drops down on his haunches in front of Anthony and lowers his voice to hiss, "Apologize, nigger."

In response Anthony spits a large wad of bloody saliva on lieutenant's gold chains, then grins up at him with pink teeth.

The lieutenant stands up quickly, the muscles in his neck taut. He taps his boy on the shoulder, says, "Fuck this. Take their legs." Then he strides out of the alley, his head high.

The punk draws out a machete, the blade ringing as it clears its sheath.

Luc's eyes widen. He pushes up against the wall behind him, stumbling to his feet and pressing backward. Dade is looking back and forth between Luc and the gang members, his skin pale. "What did he say?" he asks, his voice cracking.

Two of them descend on Dade, and another blade is drawn. "No!" shouts Luc but two others grab him, throw him back down to the asphalt. Luc bucks with all his strength but one of the punks presses his torso flat while the other jerks out his legs and stands on his shins. He raises the machete high.

Luc hears the blade chop down meatily, clang on bone or pavement. He feels nothing.

With a loud grunt the weight on his chest disappears. Luc opens his eyes. Dade has a machete in each hand and he's swinging them in tight, murderous arcs as he bears down on four of the Kala Kala boys at once, backing them into the side of a dumpster. Luc notes that his legs are intact as he reflexively bounds to his feet and charges after his friend.

Dade wallops the blade against one of the boys, who cries out. Fingers fly loose. Dade rounds on the next gang member with a savage ululation and strikes again, slashing at the boy's calves as he falls over himself to flee.

"Dade, stop!" shouts Luc.

Dade hesitates. It's enough of a distraction for the Kala Kala boys to run away, one of their number hobbling between two others, another pinching one hand beneath the opposite arm. There are coin-sized drops of blood on the pavement, an arc of spray dotted along the dumpster. "Are you okay?" breathes Dade. And then, "*Look out!*"

Luc spins. The fifth gang member lunges at him, his stained blade singing in the air.

Luc dodges. The punk overbalances and Dade steps up to catch him with a direct and motivated punch to the face, which breaks his nose. His machete clatters to the ground. Luc seizes Dade's hand, stopping from swinging again, and the punk runs off with his hands cupped to his face.

"Yeah!" hollers Dade, shaking his fist. "You'd *better* run!"

Luc draws an unsteady hand down his sweaty face and leans against the dumpster, his heart pounding. "Jésu' Christ," he pants. "Jésu' Christ mon Dieu, this city is damned."

“You see that?” cries Dade, oblivious. “We beat them, Look! I said we could take them and we did. They’re not so tough. They’re all talk. Fucking A, we did it!”

Luc hears a groan. He frowns. Dade hears it too, and looks over. He blanches, his mouth suddenly agog and working without sound.

Luc feels a shiver roll down his spine.

Anthony groans again. “Oh lord,” he mutters. “They took my legs. Oh lord. They gone. Oh lord. My legs.”

“Holy shit,” whispers Dade, averting his eyes.

Luc holds the side of the dumpster for support. “Come on,” he says. “Let’s get him to a hospital.”



## 7.

You and I have better places to be on a Wednesday afternoon. We're nowhere to be seen. Unless our hearts give out or we fall from a height, this is a conversation we would never overhear.

We don't care for places with dried blood smudges on the floor.

The echoey halls of Freedom Pier Hospital smell in equal measure of disinfectant and bile, cut by stale coffee in the vicinity of a bank of vending machines. In their shadow is a low table spread with decade-old magazines, printed off and jammed into plastic sleeves covered in oily finger whorls.

Dade sniffs. "I don't mean to be rude," he says, "but you smell like a sewer."

Luc Drapeau takes this in stride, nods dismissively. "There *has* to be a way," he says, rubbing his chin. "This gang can't run the whole city. They are how many?"

"That's a very military thing to say," says Dade thoughtfully. "Did you fight in the war?"

Luc shakes his head. "No, I was too young."

"Yeah, me too," says Dade. "I had a fake ID but it didn't pass. They laughed me right out of the recruitment office at that point." His face colours in remembered shame, but he blinks it away. "Lost my brother in Turkey."

"I'm sorry," offers Luc.

Dade's face hardens. "I should've been there."

The fluorescent lights make their complexions look green. Announcements warble tinnily from the public address system, calling nurses, paging doctors. Luc shifts in his uncomfortable chair, rasping one finger along the stubble on his throat. "Like you said, we only ever see a few or maybe five at a time. Not even a platoon."

"Them who?"

"Kala Kala."

"You think they're not out there?" replies Dade, features creased with incredulity that snaps quickly into squinty seriousness. "They're out there alright. Everytime you think there aren't enough of them to be watching everywhere, they come out of the woodwork to mess up your situation. Trust me, man, they're there."

"But that's just what it's all about, isn't it?" says Luc insistently. "*Trust*. We trust that their posturing is supported, though no one sees the army that back them up. They walk around like they own the world and we believe it. We trust the city wouldn't be afraid of them if weren't true—and so we make it true."

"But it *is* true," says Dade. "They beat off the Scarpellis and now the island's theirs: Kala Kala from shore to shore. I hear they're pushing into Queens, too."

"I'm not saying it's false," says Luc forcefully. "I'm saying it *could* be false, and nothing would change. Do you understand me? If Kala Kala disappear tomorrow, how long would it take for the people to use bikes without fear?" Luc leaves that dangling an instant, then leans forward in his chair and presses, "And when they finally did start using the bikes, would it not take just a single beating to put them back into that fear?"

Dade licks his lips quickly, blinks. He glances down at his large hands and then looks up again. "I'm going to level with you, Look," he says seriously. "My situation, intellectually, is something that I'm still working on developing."

"... What does that mean?" asks Luc, perplexed.

"Basically it means that I'm not following you."

Luc nods, rubbing his temples wearily. "Okay, okay. Let me put it like this: how do you know Kala Kala own New York?"

Dade points to a cut on his brow. "I have lots of good evidence like this."

"Before today, before you tried the bikes, did you ever hear of Kala Kala?"

"Sure."

"How?"

"They're in the feeds. The media's always talking about them. The police have an unsolved case, they say they're investigating the possible

involvement of Kala Kala. The mayor wants more money from Albany to fight Kala Kala. Who *doesn't* know about Kala Kala?"

Luc nods, his foot tapping with nervous energy. "Has the mayor ever met a member of the gang?"

"I don't know. Probably not, unless he likes to bike."

"What about the police—do they arrest many members?"

"They pick up a couple of hoodlums now and again, but they usually deny having a connection to the gang."

"But the police, they know better?"

"They have their sources. You know, sources on the street."

"Bikers."

"Sure."

Luc raises his brow. "People like you and me, perhaps."

"... Well, I guess. Kind of. People *like* us, yeah."

Both men look up as soft, swishing footfalls hiss down the corridor toward them. The doctor is a walking plastic bag, but you can see through it and he's wearing green paper pajamas underneath. Parts of the plastic are run with brown and red stains and speckles. As he approaches he hides behind a clipboard, flipping through its pages. Luc and Dade slowly stand up.

"You came in with Mr. Smith?" the doctor says, apparently to the clipboard. The doctor smells like soap and ozone, and when he moves he sounds like saran.

"Yeah," says Dade. "He's our buddy."

"He's lost a lot of blood, but his chances are good," says the doctor. He has bags under his eyes and his skin is flecked with shrapnel scars. He mumbles on, flipping the pages back and forth. "His card's got some valid medical accumulated so we'll be moving him into a room shortly."

Luc asks, "What about the belts?"

The doctor blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"We used our belts to make the tourniquet, my friend and I," explains Luc, hiking up his slacks. "Can we get our belts back?"

The doctor frowns, ruffles his papers. "Um, I don't really see anything here about belts. Did you ask the nurse?"

"Which nurse?"

"You should probably go ahead and talk to a nurse about that."

"Tabernac. My wife, she will kill me."

The doctor glances up sharply. His features are so slack and heavy it makes Luc feel exhausted to look at him. "At least you've got your legs," he says dully.

Luc says nothing.

The doctor flips back to the front page on his clipboard, slips a stylus out of his pocket. "What can you gentlemen tell me about how Mr. Smith's injuries came about?" he asks, eyes on the page.

Dade opens his mouth to speak but Luc hushes him, gesturing. He turns to the doctor and says, "He was on the bike when he get attack from a gang."

"Kala Kala?" prompts the doctor.

"No," says Luc, ignoring Dade's questioning look. "No," he continues. "They were Les Bicyclettes Libres."

"Lay Bicyclette Liver?"

"*Les Bicyclettes Libres*," corrects Luc. "They're from Québec. Haven't you heard of them? They've come to wage war against Kala Kala. It's a mess out there, the streets."

The doctor nods vaguely, jotting an incoherent scrawl across the creased page. After a brief hesitation the page renders it into legible text with a little winking timestamp. "Okay, great," he mutters, yawning. "Do you have a node we can reach you at?"

"I use my church's," says Luc, spelling the address.

"I've got a union node, but at this point I'm never connecting there again," grumbles Dade. "The union can suck my balls."

The doctor doesn't pause, writing on. "I'm putting that down as *no contact*, okay?"

"Yessir."

The doctor turns and shuffles away, his right foot leaving little bloody bag-prints in his wake. An old, dented vacuum scuttles out of a slot on the baseboard and follows him, erasing the marks as it goes.

Dade turns to Luc. "What was all *that* about?" he asks, frowning.

Luc smirks tightly. "Starting a rumour," he says.

## Chapter 8

### 8.

It's Friday.

For you and me that means pay day. For Luc Drapeau it means a looming crisis: the rent at the boarding house is due and the cupboard is bare. "Will you be paid directly to the bank?" asks Celise.

Luc shakes his head. "It's not sorted out yet," he says, gaze locked on the dingy mirror as he ties his tie. "Philip will probably give me cash," he claims.

"You're bothered," she says, touching his shoulder and searching for his eyes in the reflection.

"It's nothing," he says, looking down to pull on his shoes. "A lot on my mind."

"You're working so hard," she says softly.

He grunts. "I'm going to be late."

On the streets the crowd jostles him. Luc is angry. He has a headache, his nerves feel electric and jittery. When he's pushed he strikes back with a hard shoulder, gets stern looks from his fellow cattle. A white woman with an armload of black wool nearly knocks him down and Luc shoves against her aggressively. "Hey!" she barks, "I'm walking here!"

"Try walking where I'm not," he shoots back.

Dade is waiting for him by the fountain on the Park Avenue median at East Sixty-Third. The water is filthy and green but Dade is washing his shirt in it anyway, sawing it against the rough concrete edge. He looks up to see Luc. "Morning, Look," he says. "Did you hear about that murder in the Bronx? Some maniac took a guy's head right off, mounted it on a street sign."

Luc nods. "Good, we'll claim it."

"But that's just it," gushes Dade; "this wallah was telling me about it last night and you know what he says? He says, 'I bet it was Los

Bicyclettos,' and I'm like, 'who are they?' and he's like, 'I think they're Spanish or something, they're taking over the bikes.'"

A smile flickers over Luc's lips. "That's very good," he concedes.

"So," says Dade, wringing out his shirt, "where does the whisper campaign take us today?"

Luc shakes his head. "Not today," he says, eyes on the bronze haze over the island, illuminated and cut with shadows as the sun crests the skyline. "Today we ride."

Dade frowns. "How do you figure?"

"My wife needs to buy food."

"You got a wife?"

"And a son. And I'm bringing them money for supper, no matter what happen. I don't even care what—God himself could not stop me from riding today."

"I live with my sister," says Dade. "She gets coupons on account of her disability situation."

"Enough to feed you both?"

Dade scratches his chest awkwardly. "We can stretch it, at this point."

"So why are you here?" Luc challenges, his eyes damning.

Dade quails at the sudden show of aggression. "What do you mean?"

"Why don't you go home and eat your coupons? There's no danger, there's no fight. You're hungry but you live."

Dade looks as if he might cry, his square face twitching and his strong chin dimpling. "I'm tired of being hungry," he says fiercely. "I'm tired of mooching off my sister, and I'm tired of a situation where I haven't got any damn dignity in my own city." His lips tighten, his small eyes mere slits. "Besides," he says, "I don't turn my back on my friends."

"I'm sorry," Luc says quickly, the edge in his voice dissolving.

"Is that good enough for you?" Dade demands, breathing hard.

"I'm sorry," Luc says again, touching the taller man's arm. "You are not here to be judged by me. I don't mean to strike out at you. I am feeling the pressure, very much the pressure today."

They spend a moment in silence. Traffic is building on Park Avenue: bidirectional parades of the rich, coasting along in their tiny cars, the overlapping humming of their progress singing a unique, Park Avenue song as it echoes off the buildings. A fat Chinese girl rolls down her

window and chucks out an apple core. It bounces across the pavement, kicking off chunks of wet flesh, comes to a skittering halt by Luc's foot.

He bends down, picks it up, breaks it apart. "Here," he says, handing half of the rapidly yellowing apple core to Dade.

"Fucking A," says Dade, devouring it in two bites. All is forgiven.

They walk to one of the smaller bike courts on Madison. It's still early, and some of the mounts are open. The men stroll along the periphery, scanning for representatives of Kala Kala: they spot a lone Burmese kid sitting on a bench, winding up a radio, a crimson sweatband canted across his brow. As they look on one of the bikers finishes his tour, and once he's collected his coins from the box he walks right over to the kid. The kid counts it and hands him back some change. Head hung low, the man puts up a parasol made of old shopping bags and sits down to catch his breath.

"Is that not the saddest thing you ever see?" says Luc. "Twenty adult people, cowering before a teenager."

"Shit," agrees Dade.

"Let's chase him off. I think we buy ourselves then maybe ten, fifteen minute before he get back here with the back-up."

Dade fumbles with his hands nervously. "Then what happens? We run?"

Luc's mouth tightens. "We show them we are not afraid."

"Shit," says Dade again.

They walk up to the kid abreast. He's scrawny, half-starved. His eyes look big in his face. "I don't know you," the kid says, trying to sound tough. "You got a deal with us?"

Luc shakes his head. "There's no deal, boy."

"Boy?" echoes the kid. "You don't know who you're fucking with, guy."

Luc chuckles. "I don't know?" He looks over at Dade and slaps his arm genially. "Did you get that? Can you believe it?"

Dade laughs uncertainly. "Huh huh, no," he says.

Luc suddenly rockets forward and grabs the front of the kid's shirt. He hauls him to his feet, breathing into his face. "These bike belong to Les Bicyclettes Libres, boy. You tell your friends. You tell them not to come around here anymore, otherwise bad things do happen."

The drone of the bikes has stopped. Every rider has turned on their mounts to watch what's going on. Luc raises his voice. "I tell you again, these bike belong to Les Bicyclettes Libres!"

The kid is sweating. "You're a dead man," he swears, his voice breaking.

Luc lets him go. The kid drops back on the bench, eyes wide. "Now," says Luc slowly, "fuck off."

The kid runs.

Luc and Dade wade into the bikefield, all eyes upon them. "We don't have much time," says Luc as they approach an open mount; "we alternate, okay? I ride, you keep watch. We split the moneys, we trade turns."

Dade nods dumbly, his flickering gaze nervous.

Luc reties his tie around his forehead and unbuttons his stained dress shirt, peeling it off and drooping it over the back of the bike's seat. He takes his place with relish, flexing his hands on the moist grips. His lips move in silent prayer, then he lifts his feet to the pedals.

Luc rides.

His mind submerges as the momentum builds. Cycle by cycle he falls into a pressing, insistent rhythm, each round building on the next until his legs lose feeling and act of their own volition, a flying blur. His heart and his breathing slide in and out, interleaving, marking time and power.

"Ho-ly *shit*," says Dade, watching the meter. "Do you know what you're putting out, Look?"

Luc doesn't hear him. He's a million miles away. He's rolled New York into the horizon behind him, peddling across oceans and through space, bending the air.

Fellow riders are staring. Some have let their pedals grind to stop. Others stand, find themselves wandering closer, leaning past each other's shoulders to watch the joules move. "Hey," they mutter, "get a load of this guy, will ya?"

"He's doing *six hundred watts*—it's impossible!"

Luc pushes harder, faster, further.

"Dude is a goddamn *horse*, man!"

"Go Frenchy, go!"



The spell is broken when Dade grabs his shoulder urgently. "Here they come!" he says, and on the third repetition Luc hears him. He takes his feet off the pedals and lets them coast, drag, stop. He wipes the perspiration from his face with his shirt, looks up to see a crowd around him. They cheer.

A instant later the crowd ripples and is pushed apart in one quarter: through the gap come three Burmese toughs trailed by the kid. "That's him!" shouts the kid.

The foremost man is another lieutenant like the toothpick chewer who ordered Anthony's legs off. He swaggers up beside Luc's mount and spits on the ground. "What the fuck is this?" he growls. "Who the fuck are you?"

Luc is not interested in dialogue. Propelled by the manic energy still coursing through his body he launches himself off the bike and meets the lieutenant's head with his fist. All his power goes into the punch. The lieutenant spins twice and hits the pavement, knocked cold.

The onlookers gasp. As Luc stands over the lieutenant the other gang members agitate to get closer, but Dade steps in to block. The Burmese cast about nervously as the crowd knits itself into a tight ring around them, sealing off escape. "Leave Frenchy alone!" shouts someone, and the cry is picked up and echoed by others.

"These bike," Luc enunciates carefully, "they belong to Les Bicyclettes Libres. It is a case closed."

The crowd cheers again.

"Kala Kala is going to make you pay!" yells one of the Burmese.

"No," corrects Luc, face stony. "You will do the paying, and you are starting by paying back to these people their moneys."

The gang members look at one another, uncertain. Before they can decide how to respond the crowd liquifies around them, and they find themselves pinned by a dozen hands at once: tan, brown, white, tattooed, or scarred—all of them blistered, weathered and raw. Dade takes a hold of the kid and roughly pats him down until he finds the stash of tribute, then hands it to Luc.

Luc weighs it in his hand, licking his lips. He raises his head and announces loudly, "Les Bicyclettes Libres don't need your moneys. Each of you take what you earn today."

The crowd hesitates as a mass. Nobody moves.

“You hear me?” cries Luc. “Come, and take your moneys. You give it to your families. You give it to your childrens, okay?”

One by one the riders approach and, heads bowed, count out their handful of coins. They slip the coins into pockets, purses, pouches, brassieres, shoes. Each has their ritual. The gang members watch them through narrowed eyes, panting.

“You never give these moneys away again, you understand?” shouts Luc, turning slowly to address each set of eyes. “These are *your* moneys. You work hard for these. *Never* give them away, your moneys. When you give them away, you make us all weak. You understand me? *Never!*”

Some nod. Some stare. “Right on, Frenchy!” cries a woman in the back.

One of the Burmese wrestles against the restraining crowd, tugging them to and fro. “Kala Kala is going to fuck you up so bad you’ll die twice,” he promises darkly.

“What?” says Luc with a dark chuckle. “You beat me up? You take my legs? Haven’t you heard? Les Bicyclettes Libres, we’re French. We don’t take the legs... we take your fucking *head*.”

The Burmese pales. He’s heard the rumours.

The other one unleashes a stream of profanity, struggling against the hands holding him at bay—threats, taunts, promises, bravado. There is an instant effect on the gathered onlookers: a wavering of resolve, a flinch of doubt, a guttering worry to submit. Luc is desperate to find a way to interrupt the volley of belligerence, to somehow shut down the raving intimidation.

And so Luc begins to sing. He sings defiantly—open mouthed, red-faced, spittle flying, mad. He sings the first thing that comes into his head: the anthem of revolutionary France, *La Marsellaise*.

*Allons enfants de la Patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé! Contre nous de la tyrannie, l’étendard sanglant est levé!*

The Burmese is shocked and confused, so he yells louder. “You’ll all die!” he screeches. The more he howls the louder Luc sings, drowning him out. The crowd doesn’t know the words but they recognize the melody, and a few of them begin to hum along. The heady zeal of unified voices is contagious, and it spreads quickly.

*Aux armes, citoyens! Formez vos bataillons! Marchons, marchons! Qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons!*

More join in until the two standing Burmese are faced with a wall of song. They are released and they stumble backward, falling silent, eyes wide. "You people are crazy!" one yells, but he cannot even hear his own voice over the synchronized din and it unnerves him. They spill out of the bikefield as they scoop up their fallen lieutenant between them, struggling to catch up with the fleeing kid who's already half a block away up Madison Avenue.

The crowd roars. They push in, clapping Luc on the shoulders and back. One of them presses a coin into Luc's palm, and then another. "No, no," says Luc hoarsely, his last drop of energy spent. He wilts against Dade, holding the bike's handlebars for support. "Keep your moneys, you people," says Luc, shaking his head and trying to hand the coins back. "Les Bicyclettes Libres ask nothing from you."

A one-eyed man with a shaved head thrusts a quarter at him. "Maybe you're not asking, Frenchy, but we're giving."

Luc shakes his head again.

Dade squeezes Luc's arm. "Look," he says, "think of your boy. Take the damn money."

The woman from the back of the crowd forces a handful of nickels at him. "That was a real pretty song," she says. "What's it all on about?"

"Reclaiming life from the tyranny," whispers Luc. "Standing up for the freedom."

"Fucking A," says Dade.

They spend the rest of the day riding, trading off mounts for tours on watch, eyes peeled for signs of Kala Kala. Those on the bikes split their spoils with their guards and then switch places, passing off parasols. A couple of false sightings are called, but even as the sun begins to dip Kala Kala has yet to actually return. A buzz of optimism suffuses the court. People even tell jokes, laugh a bit. Many of them hum or whistle mangled variations of *La Marseillaise* as they pedal.

At twilight they hurry home ahead of the night's predators. Luc and Dade linger, drinking bottles of water like princes, their shadows long and purple on the sidewalk. "That was some day, huh?" says Dade.

Luc nods. "Some day, my friend," he agrees, "but tomorrow might not be so good. Kala Kala, she is not giving up without the fight."

"They're scared of us," Dade points out.

"They won't be for long," says Luc. "We've bought just one day."

"Yeah," says Dade, "but it was *one helluva* day."

Luc can't help but smile. "Yes indeed," he says airily, watching birds circle home to their nests in the skyscrapers. "Yes indeed, my friend. It was."

Luc Drapeau walks home with heavy pockets and a light heart.

## Chapter 9

### 9.

Luc Drapeau has a new suit: pin-striped fine fabric, accented tie, black vest, cufflinks.

Like most commuters he wears runners, sensible footwear for the sunrise and sunset walks across the island, part of the million footfalls of a work weary army bouncing the streets with their tread so the stoplights work.

He carries a briefcase. Inside is tank top, a towel, a jar of water, sweatbands, cologne.

Dade is waiting at the fountain. He's decked out in new duds, too, his ensemble faintly recalling a uniform—sweatpants with a stripe down each leg, faux-epaulettes on the shoulders of his shirt—expressing undeniably his attraction to authority. "Morning," he says.

"Morning," says Luc.

They don't have to hail a taxicab to start their rounds: Paco is already waiting, patiently winding his radio so he can continue assaulting the city with loud ranchera music. "Hey, boss!" he says, smiling his gap-toothed smile. "Ready to go?"

They stop first at Bryant Park, one of the largest bikefields on the island. Paco parks at the curb on West Fortieth, Luc and Dade cross the canal on a footbridge and pass under the looming columns of Sixth Avenue's raised highway, its shadow splayed across the bikes, its underside swimming with caustic reflections off the water.

The field captain is a short, muscular Sicilian named Vincent. He strolls up to meet them as they approach. "Situation?" prompts Dade in a clipped tone.

"Sirs," says Vincent, "we had a brief incursion approximately a quarter hour ago. They came in numbers, broke right through the ranks, beat the living shit out of Aubrey Flemington before we could rally."

"I see," says Dade grimly.

"I'm sorry, sirs," says Vincent. "All week they've been coming at us a dozen at a time."

Dade grunts. "How's morale?"

"It's solid, sir," replies Vincent quickly. "The riders got high on swarming those Burmese assholes out of here. They've been spewing watts like nobody's business ever since. They feel invincible."

"What about this Aubrey Flemington?" asks Luc quietly.

"Sir," says Vincent, turning to Luc, "he sang our song as they loaded him up on the ambulance. He said anyone who stopped singing was letting his beating *matter*."

"He's a good man," says Dade. "I think we should assign him his own field at this point."

Luc nods. Dade makes a note in his little notebook, slaps it closed. As Vincent turns Luc notices an intricate wound healing on his bicep. He touches the man's shoulder. "What's this?" he asks.

Vincent grins. "It's my tat, sir. All the captains are getting them."

Luc rotates Vincent's arm, examining the scabbing that delineates an eight-spoke bicycle wheel flanked by a crude set of wings. "This symbol," says Luc, "it comes from where?"

"I saw it in Times Square," he says sheepishly. "They're selling T-shirts."

"Very good," says Luc with a curt nod of dismissal. Vincent jogs back into the park. Luc and Dade look at one another significantly. "It seems our lie is gaining legs," observes Luc.

"This is way bigger than us now, Look," says Dade seriously. "Word is that Kala Kala members are fighting each other over shrinking territories, and the losers claim they were assaulted by us. Isn't that bizarre?"

"They're saving face," says Luc thoughtfully. "Better to be shamed by a phantom than a peer."

They amble toward the bikefield, noting the orderly set-up of legless beggars forming a ring of perimeter interference encompassing an inner ring of watchers. Inside this dual-layered protective fold are the riders themselves, spinning the flywheels, splitting their take according to an informal convention, the throbbing heart of a Bicyclettes Libres social organism. Vincent walks a beat that weaves through every organ,

negotiating disputes and leading them in song. The park reverberates with their mismatched voices:

*Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques,  
Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?  
Sonnez les matines! Sonnez les matines!  
Ding-dang-dong, ding-dang-dong.*

Dade smiles. "I used to sing that in kindergarten," he says wistfully.

"Me too," says Luc.

In Chelsea they meet trouble. Paco guides the cab carefully along the narrow trail on the west side of the Tenth Avenue Canal, their view of the long line of bikefields along West Twenty-Fifth intermittently interrupted by non-functional light standards and the banners of gondoliers. Dade frowns. "Something's up."

Luc presses his face against the glass. "It's an incursion going on," he says.

"What should I do, boss?" asks Paco, turning down the rachera.

"Pull over."

The little car bumps against the curb, the humming engine spinning down. Luc and Dade pop open their doors and squeeze out. Luc scampers down the bank and then leaps straight off, sailing through the air and coming down in a passing gondola. "Whoa!" yells the pilot, dropping his pole.

"Sorry!" calls Luc as he jumps off into another gondola even before the first has recovered from the impact of his landing, kicking up a circle of spray. Dade follows wordlessly.

A grey-haired banker cowers behind his briefcase in the second gondola, crying out, "Taken, taken! This boat is taken!"

Luc and Dade hop onto a scow freighting burn-canisters of animal manure, dodge past the pilot as he swings a dripping oar at them, then hurl themselves onto the opposite bank with a twin set of grunts.

It's a hell of a way to J-walk.

The bikefield is chaos. Ten Kala Kala punks are taking turns savagely kicking the field captain, another two breaking apart the crowd, menacing them with machetes. The outer fringes are bleeding away,

panicked, but the exodus slows as somebody starts shouting, “It’s him! It’s him!”

At first Luc thinks he’s been spotted, but it’s not that—the riders are pointing to the other side of the field where three men are striding in formation, a tight triangle, their chief at the apex dressed in a cheap suit and grey vest.

“Who is *that*?” mutters Luc, furrowing his brow.

The Kala Kala cluster realigns itself to meet the incoming wedge, leaving the field captain drooling blood on the pavement, cradling an arm that swings at a sickeningly unorthodox angle. Luc nods at Dade and Dade runs over to the man’s side while Luc continues moving toward the centre of the disturbance. He comes up behind the gang members as they swagger forward to meet the suited man’s party.

“Zis field, she is hours,” says the suited man in a thick, false French accent. “If you know what is ze good, you will turn haround and leaf.”

“It’s the Frenchman!” whispers one of the Kala Kala lieutenants to a taller, creamy-skinned Burmese with ring-studded fingers. He wears black jeans and a black T-shirt tucked over his paunch, his black hair oiled and glistening. His age dwarfs the other Kala Kala members: he must be thirty years old.

“Do you have any idea who I am?” he asks, squaring his shoulders.

“I am not caring,” retorts the suited man. “You come here to steal, to beat people, I know all I need—you are hour enemy.”

“I am the son of Shaya,” continues the man in black. “Shaya is displeased, and when Shaya is displeased New York weeps.”

The suited man scoffs. “Would you like a tissue?”

“I see right through you,” says the son of Shaya, his brown eyes locked on his opponent. “You want to run around, talking shit, getting everybody all riled up over nothing. Oh yes, I *know* it’s nothing. I’ve been keeping tabs. I *know* there isn’t any army from the Protectorate coming to take this city away from my father.”

“Is zat a fact?”

“I *know* you’re the only one, liar. You may have turned the crowds against us, but it won’t last.”

“And why not?”

“Because your bullshit system is all about hype, and you’re the source of it all. So when my boys here chop off your legs and make you watch



while we cut out your balls, the crowds will understand their frog prince is finished and things are back the way they were."

"Zut alors," says the suited man mockingly. "I think maybe you underestimate their resolve. Zthese people, zhey don't need me. Zhey're strong. Zhey won't be hintimidated, by you or by hanyone hanyomore." He pauses, lets a little smile play across his lips. "Of course, zhere is *one* hother consideration."

The son of Shaya sneers. "What's that?"

The suited man spreads his hands. "We are *many*."

At that two lines of hard-faced youths in matching T-shirts emblazoned with the winged bicycle wheel pour into the field from both flanks simultaneously. The Kala Kala punks spin to face them but are quickly overwhelmed. The youths, however, do not attack, but merely manhandle each punk into submission, pinning their arms behind their backs and kicking out their feet from under them until they are pressed into the concrete. They are outnumbered two to one by the youths, and four to one if the crowd of bikers is counted. The crowd is no longer dissolving but crystallizing, forming a solid barrier between Kala Kala and the street. Three machetes are handed to the suited man, who collects them into a bundle on leans on them like a short cane.

The son of Shaya doesn't flinch. "Go on," he challenges. "Break their bones. Do you know how many more I have? They're disposable."

A number of the punks look askance at their commander upon hearing this.

"No," says the suited man in a voice that carries across the bikefield. "Nobody is disposable. Nobody's bones are breaking today." He turns to the pinned punks, shaking his head. "You can renounce zhis life, you know. You want ze money? You ride as we do. You are welcome to ride, like hanyone."

The punks look at each other. The son of Shaya frowns. "Don't listen to this bullshitter!" he bellows. "You *know* what my father will do to you, each of you, *and* your families."

The suited man laughs. "For ze contrast, I am hoffer you a way to *feed* your family. It is hup to you, for choosing, which way to liff."

He signs a small salute to the youths, who respond by releasing the gang members. They slowly get to their feet, rubbing their arms and wincing, eyes darting warily.

There is a thick moment of inaction.

And then one of the punks opens his mouth. He moans a staccato mumble of wordless lilting, sweat on his brow.

It takes Luc a moment to decode the slipshod crooning: it's *La Marseillaise*.

The others have no trouble. The crowd picks up the melody instantly and begins to fill in the gaps, some shouting malformed versions of the words, most belting out nonsense syllables in rough rhythm. One more punk joins in, and then another and another.

"You see ze power of song?" asks the suited man playfully. "You see ze power of peace? Go home, son of Shaya. Tell your Daddy you've lost this war."

The son of Shaya is an island in a sea of joined voices. He glowers rather than show fear. A single loyal hooligan stands at his side, searching fruitlessly for an avenue of escape. The crowd begins to advance and the remaining Burmese are forced to retreat, shuffling backward as they are relentlessly herded.

A triumphant cheer resounds as the son of Shaya and his last loyal fool topple into the canal, coughing and sputtering.

Luc finds himself standing next to the suited man, watching the spectacle of the Kala Kala rats dodging gondola poles as they swim to the opposite bank. The suited man looks over. "Nice suit," he says.

"Thank you," says Luc. "That was some performance there."

"And that's some accent," he notes chattily. "You're awesome. And your suit looks just like his, too. I guess I'm not the only one to come up with the idea of aping the Frenchman."

"You do a good job."

"That accent is just killer!" enthuses the suited man. "Do you actually speak French or something?"

"I learn some in school," shrugs Luc.

"Right on, buddy," he says, clapping Luc on the shoulder. "Vive les Bicyclettes Libres, eh?"

"Vive les Bicyclettes Libres," agrees Luc.

Dade loads the beaten field captain into the back of Paco's taxi, then bangs twice on the roof. Paco salutes and pulls cautiously out into the road, bound for a hospital. He coasts in beside a cow and then accelerates, honking as he goes. Luc watches after the car. "He's going to be alright?"

“Broken arm, he’ll be fine,” says Dade as they begin to walk. “So, what’s the situation with the copycat Look?”

Luc dodges a stray dog as they squeeze between two wallahs carts, then dodges again to avoid the urchins chasing down the dog for meat. “Like you say, he’s a copycat me.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“No. Why should it?”

“He’s taking a cut of your coin.”

Luc shrugs. “It is earned, the coin. He said just what I would have said.”

“He said exactly what you *did* say, yesterday, at Battery Pond.”

They turn on West Twenty-Fourth, the air thick with birds circling over a grocers’ market. “This is a good sign, my friend. Every living thing, she replicates. It means our movement is *alive*. Like you say, it is bigger than us. It is it’s own animal.”

Dade grumbles. “It just seems like credit should go where credit’s due, you know?”

“I don’t mind,” replies Luc seriously, “especially when due credit might mean being dead in the gutters. The risk is share, so the moneys should be share, too.”

They take lunch at the Old Eatery Restaurant with a selection of top field captains and scouts, tucked into their usual booth in the back corner. Luc spins the end of his beer in the bottom of the glass and then drains it as he listens to the latest intelligence report on Kala Kala movements.

Jennifer Hampton, chief scout, tallies the day’s details with her sharp chin in her palm, flipping through her notebook. “They’re obviously putting some effort into keeping tabs on us,” she concludes; “for the past week they’ve been ghosting you, turning up within an hour either side of your inspections.”

“Basically, then, we have to switch up our rounds at this point,” offers Dade, speaking around a mouthful of rice.

Jennifer shakes her head. “I don’t think so. The false-Lucs have put a crimp in their intel—now they don’t know if you’re coming or going.”

Vincent wags a slice of buttered bread meaningfully for a moment until he swallows, then says, “I don’t like those guys. They’re opportunists. They should be working through us.”

Luc snorts, puts his empty glass down hard. "Why for? The point is not for us to own the bikes, Vincent, the point is to make sure the peoples can use the bikes without being terrorize."

"We're building this thing," argues Vincent, "we should keep control to make sure it stays on course."

"Why for?" Luc says again, more sharply. "Do you want us to become like them? Is that your wish? A war of the gangs, winners taking all?"

"We can keep it clean," says Vincent.

"That is the bullshit," Luc replies evenly. "If we take their role, even our own version of the role, we will become like them. Mark my word: we will be sitting at this very table planning beatings, each of us the monster."

"Not me," says Jennifer. "I believe in this, Luc. It's about giving the power back to the people. I'm not losing sight of that. I've ridden those bikes under Kala Kala for three years and the Scarpellis before that—and I won't ever subject someone else to what I had to go through. I'm here because I need to feed my daughter, and I don't want to lose any more teeth over it."

There is a general nod of agreement around the table. Luc silences the muttering by holding up his hand. "Jenniver, yes, never lose sight. Okay. But we must be always bearing in mind the greed. Do not any of us become greedy for the total control, or believe it is our due. We do this for every biker, not for just us ourself."

There is a silent pause, then Dade begins to nod. "Luc's right. We all know it. We just have to keep it all in perspective, right?"

"Right," concedes Vincent.

Jennifer nods uneasily. "Right."

In the afternoon Luc and Dade ride. They have their choice of bike-fields. Luc wows a group of onlookers by peaking out at almost seven hundred watts, but he's oblivious to their enthusiasm in his private riding zone. Dade accepts tribute on his behalf, tallying every coin in his notebook. When it's his turn to ride he pushes himself to match Luc's output, ends up gasping for breath and retching in a bush.

"How do you do it?" he pants.

"It's not me," claims Luc, avoiding his eyes. "It's Jésus'."

The day wanes. Luc walks home. He still feels disturbed by the direction of the conversation over lunch, scrubs over and over again through

the words in his memory, fretting. He worries about what they're becoming, and where it all will end. He wonders how long it can go on before it comes down to a contest of murders.

He stops in the middle of the New Williamsburg Bridge, watches cargo barges slip beneath him, sails flapping in the indecisive twilight breeze. He scans up and down along the rail, noting a few others who, like him, are staring out over the water, hands clasped loosely over the edge.

When he works his way back into traffic to continue walking he notices that one of his fellow contemplators has also broken off staring, and is now feeding himself into the current of people two dozen paces behind Luc. He's pale, bearded, thin, nervous.

He's still there when Luc hits Wythe. When Luc lolligags the man doesn't catch up, instead slowing to an awkward saunter. When Luc speeds up the tail accelerates to match, lingering unconvincingly at wallahs' carts whenever Luc glances over his shoulder.

He heads the wrong way down South Fourth, away from the boarding house. He passes into a market and worms into the densest part of the crowd, swallowed by zealous dickering, pressing hands, flapping parasols. Without warning he strafes sideways and pops into the mouth of a narrow alley, hugging the bricks.

A pimple-scarred prostitute servicing a blind man looks up, startled. "Don't mind me," whispers Luc.

"You want a date?" she asks once her mouth is clear.

"No thank you."

An instant later the tail comes into view, looking around desperately. He steps up on a milk-crate and cranes his neck, panning his view over the clot of humanity and wringing his bony hands. "Fuck, shit, fuck," he wheezes. "Where'd you go, Frenchman?"

Luc steps out of the alley. He takes the man's arm roughly and hauls him off the milk-crate. He's impossibly light. "What do you want?" Luc hisses in his face. "What do you think you're doing?"

The skinny man blinks rapidly and his nostrils flare, tugging back against Luc's grasp. "Fuck fuck," he pleads, "please don't cut off my head."

Luc appears to mull this over for a second. "We'll see," he says. "Who sent you?"

“Son of Shaya’s going to give me a fix,” he blubbers, his face contorting childishly. “Alls I have to do is tell him where you live, man. I didn’t want to, but I got no choice. Shit, please don’t kill me. Please, man. Have a heart.”

“You ask me to have a heart when you’re doing a job to endanger my family?” demands Luc, squeezing the man’s arm.

“I just need a fix, man. Fuck.” He starts to cry, his hands shaking. “Fuck, shit, fuck,” he moans.

Luc is disgusted. He sighs, his eyes wandering over the rooftops and catching sight of a rusted crucifix glinting in the bronze sunset. “Alright,” he says, letting go of the scrawny tail’s arm. “You have five second to run, otherwise...” Luc trails off, zips a finger across his neck to demonstrate his point.

“Fuck!” says the tail, recoiling. He staggers into a group of Indians, shoves them aside and runs away.

Luc leans back against the bricks, pinching the bridge of his nose. He opens his eyes at the sound of footfalls behind him, watches the blind man tap his way out of the alley. The prostitute wipes her lips on the back of her hand and kicks out a hip as she swaggers over. “Hey,” she cooes, “you’re the Frenchman, aren’t you?”

“I’m not from France,” mumbles Luc.

“You’re the bicycle guy.”

“I’m not no one,” he snaps. “Leave me alone, okay?”

She leaves, a tiny purse bouncing against her ass. Luc is left standing the alley, suddenly too tired to move. He is famous and afraid. On this side of the river he feels too vulnerable to bear it—too close to Celise, too close to the baby.

“Tabernac,” he swears quietly, shaken.

# Chapter 10

## 10.

It rains, it rains, it rains.

New York is enveloped in a swamp of brown dust, a summer's worth of grit and grime and flaked skin airborne into billowing clouds of haze that roil up between the sheets of rain, bent by the wind, bleeding off over the Atlantic in a series of murky waves. The streets run with mire.

Today water is free, and everyone has a bucket out.

Parasols become umbrellas and the trams are packed. I can always find a couple of dollars to splurge on transit rather than walk on a day like this, and I bet you do, too. The sidewalks are still full, however, because to many more there is no choice: that dollar must be bread.

Luc Drapeau hops off the streetcar, tugs up his cuffs to avoid splashing his slacks. He juggles his briefcase while his umbrella unfurls with a clicking whine of spring-loaded clockwork. It's Swiss.

He hums Offenbach.

Luc crosses half of Park Avenue and then steps up onto the boulevard island, his pace slowing when he sees that Dade is not waiting for him at the fountain. Luc squints at the pavement. Scratched into the upper layer of grime is the word *RUN* in crude strokes, rapidly washing away.

He leaves off the humming, looks up and turns slowly in place, scanning carefully beneath the low hem of his umbrella. He spots Dade. He's on the far side of the street, standing in line at a food wallah's cart, looking back at Luc through a curtain of rain drooling off the awning. Dade points at Luc, and then raises his hands and makes two fingers scurry in his opposite palm.

Run.

Luc begins to walk along the boulevard, circling tightly around the fountain as he pans his head in search of danger. He accelerates, swinging his briefcase. To you or I it looks like he's just received an

urgent call, or he's late for an important meeting. But Luc's heart is beating to save his life, his legs coming alive with adrenaline.

He looks over his shoulder. There's a blue and white police cruiser there, dogging his steps. Luc takes off at a sprint. In seconds his toes are barely tapping the ground as he lays on a surge of real speed, his briefcase swinging and his furling umbrella pointed like a javelin.

He risks a glance back at Dade across the street. Dade is emphatically gesturing "No!"

Two cars with reflective windows draw out of oncoming traffic. Before they've bumped against the curb four big brown men in sombre grey suits have stepped out and begun crossing the boulevard to converge around Luc.

Luc tries to stop but he's going too fast. He slips on the slick pavement, stumbles over his runners, pirouettes out of control. His briefcase goes sailing high over Park Avenue, trailing an arc of spray. Luc skids directly into the four men. He's caught roughly and propelled in a coordinated motion by several sets of hands directly into the back of the first car. He smacks his head against the opposite door, his body flying up against him with mis-spun inertia.

A moment later he is compressed rudely between two of the men, three in a seat designed for two. The doors are closed and car is already moving. Though the tinted windows Luc gazes forlornly at the police cruiser crawling along in traffic on the other side of the boulevard, running the plate of a Dell with a broken tail reflector.

"Tabernac," mutters Luc.

"Shut up," says the man on his left.

The car creeps forward. The windshield wipers clunk back and forth. Luc's head hurts. He can see Dade in his peripheral vision, marking their progress as he wrestles his way through the pedestrian parade to keep up. His umbrella is long forgotten and his face runs with rain.

Traffic is really bad.

"Don't do the turn at Fifty-Nine," Luc says to the driver. "Fifty-Eight is better for the morning."

The driver fusses over the controls, scrolling around a satellite-fed map. He glances at Luc in the rearview and then turns on East Fifty-Eighth. They move along more swiftly. "You're right," he says.

"Are you mens from Shaya?" asks Luc.



“That’s enough talk,” snaps the man on his left. “Block the windows.”

The windows turn black. The driver huddles over the dashboard. The radar meeps quietly. Luc leans back into his seat, sandwiched between shoulders, and closes his eyes to wait.

A few thousand breaths later he’s escorted from the car and rides an elevator with fancy authentic wood paneling inside. The elevator car smells like cigars, cologne and worry. Luc’s belly swoops. “Twenty-one,” says the elevator, doors parting.

Luc steps out of the car. Two of his escorts step out with him, and then take places on either side of the doors as they slide closed. Luc looks to the one on his left, who nods at him to continue forward.

There’s a fire in the hearth and rain streaming down the tall windows. A dog sleeps on an elaborately woven carpet, legs twitching with dream. There is an unoccupied desk of dark wood. Music is playing: a run of percussion with a distinctive, eastern flavour of tail-biting syncopation and pregnant rests.

Luc stops before the desk, head inclined to the music.

An older gentleman with a halo of wispy white hair walks out from behind a screen, polishing his glasses. He replaces them on his cocoa brow and then dusts his hands on his slacks. “Do you like the music?” he asks. His voice is a mellow baritone.

“Yes,” says Luc. “Who is it?”

“Kyaw Kyaw Naing,” replies the gentleman, taking a seat behind the desk. “He was a genius.” He clears his throat. “Please, sit down.”

Luc sits in a plush armchair with ornate arms. “I’m sorry to get your chair a little bit wet,” he says. “I lose my umbrella.”

“I find your civility gratifying, given the circumstances. But it’s no less than I would expect from you, Frenchman. You do operate with a certain sense of style, don’t you?”

“My name is Luc,” says Luc. “Let’s us use none of this *the French man*, okay? It bother me.”

The gentleman smiles. “I’m called Shaya, Luc. You already know this, I hope.”

“I do guess that.”

“Very good. And, no doubt, you bring to bear a comparable level of insight to what might be the matter of our discussion, yes?”

Luc tightens his lips, looks Shaya in the eye. "We're here to talk about the bike, then maybe you kill me."

Shaya laughs, then shakes his head and folds his wizened hands on the desk before him, rings winking in the light. "Luc, I am a business man. I live by making deals. You are my guest here today."

"Your son, he is not so restrained."

"The Son of Shaya? Ah yes, Hock-Aun. Well, what can I say? The streets are the streets, and they're his play toy." Shaya pauses, rubs his chin thoughtfully. "Perhaps I do the situation too little justice—they're his proving ground. A safe place for him to stretch his legs and learn the ropes: managing people, handling money, sorting out problems."

Luc furrows his brow. "You do not run the bikes?"

"Gracious me, no," says Shaya. "If this were my affair I can assure you we wouldn't be having this conversation today, you and I, on account of your unavailability. I believe in nipping these sorts of things in the bud, you understand. Hock-Aun, on the other hand, is still learning. He's young. He's let affairs spin quite out of control."

Luc crosses his legs. "So now you clean up after him?"

"Hardly," says Shaya darkly. "He'd never learn a thing, that way. Do you have children?"

"I have one."

"Then you see my point, I'm sure. It's best to let them make their own mistakes in order to maximize the educational value."

Luc lets a beat go by, cocks his head. "So what do you want with me?"

"It's the turncoats that present a problem," says Shaya, spreading his arms. "They're bad for branding. It erodes our mindshare in the city, and that impacts my bottom line. While I'd love to give Hock-Aun all the time in the world to find his feet, business *is* business."

"I see."

"I hope you can appreciate what I'm trying to do for these kids. Do you have any idea what things are like back in Myanmar?"

"No."

The old man assumes a professorial posture, gesturing at a globe of the Earth on the corner of his desk. "When Bangladesh went under water, America was holding Myanmar. Do you remember? This was before the fuel crisis. They opened the gates to the surge of refugees, and in

return promised Myanmar's princes their sons would find opportunity here. Let the Bengali rats into your country, we'll reward you in ours."

The lecturing tone irritates Luc. "So you came... " he prompts.

"Me? Gracious, no. I'm fourth generation. I grew up in Boston. But I did see an opportunity to bring in loyal kinsmen by the boatload to work my factories and run my streets." Shaya sits back, his head high. "I saw my chance to overwhelm the Scarpellis and carve something out for myself here, and I took it. When you've got nothing else up your sleeve, raw numbers work wonders." He clears his throat again, leans forward over his clasped hands. "But numbers require coordination, and to coordinate them I require their loyalty—loyalty based on Shaya providing them a way of life where every other door is slammed in their faces. That loyalty comes into question when they imagine they could eat from your trough just as well as mine."

Luc takes a breath. "What does that mean for you and I, then?"

"As I said, Luc, I'm a business man. Let's make a deal."

"What do you want?"

"I want you on my side. I want you working with me to keep Kala Kala strong. I want you to run every bike on this island."

"And Hock-Aun?"

"I have other diversions for him," says Shaya with a dismissive wave. "Think about it, Luc—a salary, personal guards, upward mobility. You can go far. My organization is diverse, and growing fast. What do you say?"

Luc bites his lip, hesitating.

Shaya pushes on. "Consider, before you answer, the alternative. You and your family can never be safe from me as enemies. I would see your children's fingers broken one by one if I thought it would ensure your compliance. As a nuisance you're as good as dead, as a member of my team you could be a prince. Which will it be, Luc? Think seriously. This isn't a bikefield: this is no game that can be won by bluffing."

Luc shakes his head. "I don't have to take my time," he says. "I'm not a hero. I will not go against you, Shaya. You threaten my family, I can only choose to stop. Maybe for a better man it would be hard, but for me this is a decision that is easy."

Shaya smiles, and offers his hand across the desk to shake. "Very good. Welcome to the family, Luc."

Luc purses his lips, doesn't move from his chair. "I will not go against you, Shaya, but I also cannot join on your team," he says carefully. "I wash my hand of it, you understand? I walk away."

Shaya narrows his eyes. "Gracious, man, *why*? Do you understand what I'm offering you?"

Luc nods. "I do." He stands up slowly, buttons his jacket and flattens it out against his body with a sweep of his hand. "But, with respect, there are some sin I am not prepare to repent come Judgement Day."

Shaya stands, his mouth grim. "Luc," he says simply, imploringly. "Come now."

"You have what you want," Luc says. "I'm gone. You do for the bike as you see fit. It isn't my problem anymore. Just leave me and my family in peace."

Shaya looks into Luc's eyes for a long moment, piercing him. Luc stands firm. Shaya blinks, then begins to nod, his glasses reflecting the overheads like a winking lantern. "Very well. Go in peace, Luc." Then he holds up a single finger in warning. "But, should you slip—should you find yourself back at the bikes... you appreciate that I owe you no special favour, I hope."

Luc nods once. "I know."

"It would mean war."

"I know."

Shaya raises his brow, holds Luc's gaze for one last moment, then waves at his men flanking the elevator door. "See our guest safely to a destination of his choosing," he calls, turning toward the windows.

"Thank you," says Luc.

"Not at all."

The boarding house has a leaky roof. The corridors are wet and they resound with a pitter-plop cacophony of drips collecting in pots and pans inside every flat. The candles keep going out, perfuming the air with waxy steam. Luc Drapeau holds out a shivering hand to count the doorjamb until he's home.

The door is whisked open in his face. "Luc!" cries Celise. "Where have you been?"

"Celise," says Luc. "I love you."

She frowns and pulls him inside by one sopping sleeve, propelling him into the corner by the heater and commanding him to strip. He

unbuttons his shirt, peels down his pants. Celise closes the door and then leans against it, staring down her narrow nose at him, brow knit. "It isn't the only thing you need to explain," she tells him. "We've received a benefit rebate from the Sewage Department. That's interesting, isn't it, Luc?"

Luc sighs. "Yeah," he concedes. "It is."

"So," she says dangerously, "what *else* is interesting?"

Luc drips quietly for a moment, his lips blue. Celise scoops up a towel and lobs it at him. "Where's the baby?" he asks, drying off, his eyes anywhere but on hers.

"There's a girl across the hall," says Celise. "She helps me."

He looks up. "You pay her?"

"Yes."

"Where does the money come from?"

"Where does *your* money come from?"

Luc swears. She scolds him. They stare at each other in quiet rage, cheeks quivering, pupils cold. Luc closes his eyes, drops his head and sits on the edge of the bed. "I have a lot to tell you, Celise," he whispers. "But it's all over now."

"What?" she demands sharply. "What is all over now, Luc?"

He brings his eyes to hers. They're hurting. "The bikes," he says to her. "It's all over with the bikes, Celise. I promise."

"Tell me," she says.

"I will tell you," he replies, nodding somberly. She crosses the room and sits on the bed beside him. "I will tell you everything," he says. "And then we can both forget it, together."

Outside the rain splatters and cackles, drums and rattles.

# Chapter 11

## 11.

Luc Drapeau: father, bread-winner, cog.

He has a job at New York Yeast. There's no shame in it, despite the tell-tale odour that leeches from his skin and hair even on the Sabbath. His contributions help to feed millions, his small effort a clockwork tick in a massive machinery of bacterial nutrient processing, filtering, flavouring, packaging, shipping.

The pay is a pittance.

Each day he watches a thousand petri dishes march by, each cast under the unblinking eye of the detector light that flags undesirable spores with an eerie purple glow. Luc's eyes do blink but they must blink fast, for the line waits for no man.

His lungs taste like yogurt.

Come break Luc and his colleagues loiter in a rooftop garden, clustering around the benches as they sip sour coffee or milky chai, leaning over the rails and watching the traffic crawl like lines of ants through the haze below. The sad conifers wilting in rows provide an interruption in the stink, refreshing their noses with green needle perfume, dank and sharp and foreign.

"Whatcha thinking about, Drap?"

Luc shrugs. "Nothing."

"You coming around for poker tonight?"

"Yeah, okay."

Luc turns around to refill his cup at the machine but the machine is on the fritz. Also, the blowers by the door have gone quiet. Inside, the corridor has been swallowed by shadows. The yeast workers begin to babble amongst themselves, awakened to the fact that the floor is without power. "Yo, what gives?" they ask one another.

Far below the ants have ceased to march in orderly lines. "Something's going down in the plaza," calls one of the workers, dangling his torso over the rail and squinting through the thick, shimmering air.

Like kids at play a score of workers push all at once against the southern railing, shoving each other aside amicably in competition for vantage. The railing creaks. "It's a fucking riot!" yells somebody, pointing into the plaza.

Luc looks. The ants are swirling. Like oil from water the pedestrian traffic is drawing away from the plaza, opening a wide hole around the bikes that help power the yeastworks.

The bikes are abandoned. Around them assemble two clusters of people which crystallize along a common grain like iron filings, feeding forward to clash.

"It's a war for the bikes!" shouts someone else. A shiver runs down Luc's spine.

A moment later he finds himself sprinting through the dark corridors, slamming open the door to the stairwell, whirling down the flights with his clean-room shoes squeaking on every third riser.

He bolts across the lobby, tripping the yeast contamination alarm. It dopplers away behind him as he flings open the front doors and stumbles out into the plaza, blinking against the diffuse sunlight.

The scene before him is worthy of Hieronymus Bosch.

An army of Kala Kala thugs, perhaps as many as two hundred, is swarming over the face of the plaza, leaping three and four at a time upon individual bikers, pounding them down with canes, crowbars, sticks of lumber. The air is thick with cries.

The combatants rush around Luc as if he's not there. He's a ghost in a biohazard jumpsuit—he might as well be a lamp-post or a newsfeed terminal. He's not involved.

Sirens wail in the distance, nearing quickly. Dust flies—through it Luc hears grunts, screams, the sickening crackle of breaking bones. He's knocked to the ground by two wrestlers, observes their struggle from his new viewpoint lying between two bikes. He covers his head when they stumble over him again, tripping on the bikes and hitting the ground hard. A machete sings and one of the fighters stops moving, his opponent fleeing after casting the sweat from his brow with a bloody hand, leaving a smear of war-paint.

The sirens become more insistent. An authoritative bark is bellowing over a bullhorn, commanding people to disperse. The roiling crowd reacts as a cohesive organism, suddenly washing westward over Luc like a tide running out. He ducks behind the bikes as combatants of both stripes leap over him in a panic.

A canister of tear gas bounces to a halt a few feet away, jetting pale ochre smoke.

Now Luc is running with the herd, leaping over half-seen bikes, stumbling over fallen bodies, pumping his legs furiously to keep ahead of the wall of vapours sloshing up behind him. His eyes begin to burn and he runs faster, panting desperately, the smell stinging his nostrils and throat. Those he passes by are coughing, crying, gagging.

More tear gas canisters rain down, striking the pavement with dull thuds, hissing as they vent their cargo, spinning in place.

Luc stops and throws up the hood of his biohazard jumpsuit, sparing a moment to wonder why he didn't do it earlier. Breath comes cleaner through the masque. A split-second later he's blindsided by a cohort of terrified runners, pulling their shirts over their mouths as they stumble in random directions, red-rimmed eyes wide. Luc is thrown against a street sign pole and stars explode across his vision.

Propelled by instinct he shimmies up the pole. His clean-shoes slip on the metal but he's grabbed a hold of the sign itself, feels it bowing dangerously as he uses it to haul himself up over the fray.

Yellow smoke boils at his heels, haunted by staggering shadows.

The crowd flees to the west, separating into rivulets that worm away into the nooks and crannies of byways, bridges, shops. Luc looks back east as riot police swarm the plaza, occupying themselves with arresting the fallen, swinging truncheons and aiming tasers where they meet resistance. To the west again: Luc spots a knot of runners hemmed into an alley by a squadron of Kala Kala gangsters.

They're hunting his friends.

Luc breaks out into a cold sweat. "God help me," he whispers as he drops from the pole.

He runs toward the alley, keeping direction with his feet until he pops out of the swirling veil of tear gas. Through his visor he catches sight of the punks, a filigree of fine scratches on the plastic overlaying the image with spectral crosshairs.



He narrowly dodges a horse and carriage, slips into the alley after them accompanied by the sound of startled whinnying.

He slows as he approaches the action: Kala Kala and Les Bicyclettes Libres members skirmishing desperately, locked in hand to hand struggles over machetes. Some turn to stare at him. He remains an observer, however, ensconced inside his jumpsuit, until he peels back his masked hood and smells the acrid fumes and tang of blood without mitigation. His heart starts to pound.

He shouts, "*What is this?*"

No one answers him but many fall away from their struggles to watch as he continues to plod forward. He can hear their whispers, he can smell their breath. "It's the Frenchman!" they say with shock, Kala Kala and Les Bicyclettes Libres alike. "The Frenchman's back!"

A scent of shame wafts over them. All fighting ceases. The people part before him until he finds himself looking into the eyes of Hock Aun, the son of Shaya, flanked by panting guards. Their knuckles are scraped and bloody, their chests spattered.

Luc looks down. At their feet is Dade.

He has been ruined by them. Luc can barely bear to take it in. He crouches at the man's side, cradles his battered head in his hands. "Dade," he whispers hoarsely, "Mon Dieu, Dade, what have they done to you?"

Dade is conscious. His lips work lopsidedly for a moment, then open bloodily. "Look," he croaks, his mangled face drawing into a half smile. "I knew you'd come back. I just knew."

"Yes, my friend," says Luc heavily. "I come back."

"I knew it," Dade repeats, blowing involuntary pink bubbles from beneath a flap of flesh hanging forlornly from his neck. His body quivers and tenses in Luc's arms, eyes fluttering closed as the pupils roll.

Luc gently places Dade's head back against the stained pavement. He stands up slowly, looks at the blood on his hands. He raises his gaze to meet the eyes of the son of Shaya. "You monster," he breathes. "You animal. This man, *he hurt no one. Not ever, this man.*" A tear runs down Luc's cheek, and then another. "He is a *good* man," he says.

"You're a liar," retorts the son of Shaya, flashing his teeth. "A hundred of our number dead in an evening, and you have the nerve to say this is a man who never hurt anyone?"

Luc turns to the members of Les Bicyclettes Libres standing near him. He seizes Vincent's eyes, pins him. "You do this? You slaughter the Kala Kala?"

"No boss," says Vincent. "We didn't do nothing. I swear. Business as usual."

There is an unearthly silence in the alley. From the distance come the muted sounds of the police bullhorn, the warbling of ambulance sirens as they clean up the plaza. In the alley there is only the noise of Luc's clean-shoes grinding into the pavement as he turns back to the son of Shaya.

"*You kill them,*" he says softly. He turns to the Kala Kala stalwarts. "Tell me, who disappear? The loyal or those who choose riding for Les Bicyclettes Libres?"

One of the Kala Kala boys flinches. Luc doesn't miss it. The son of Shaya sneers. "Check your bullshit at the door, Frenchman. Nobody's buying your lies. You've got blood on your hands, and you know it."

Luc looks at his hands. He looks at Dade.

Jennifer steps forward, one eye swollen shut grotesquely. "None of the ex-Kala riders showed up to bike today on my field," she says, her voice trembling.

"Not mine neither," adds Vincent.

Luc sighs, shaking his head. "How can you do it?" he demands suddenly, sharply, staring into the son of Shaya's face. "How can you do it, killing peoples of your own families? How can you look their cousins in the face and try to pin blame on a man like this?"

"This piece of shit," replies the son of Shaya, nudging Dade rudely with his boot, "deserves all that he got and more. He's your dick-sucking bitch, and you're the one who's turning them against their cousins."

"*Do not touch him!*" bellows Luc, his face red with rage.

The son of Shaya steps back, startled by the rancor, and looks around to take note of his stalwarts. With an uneasy hitch in his breath he notices how the space around him has widened, the members of Kala Kala now blending with the others. They're muttering. They're questioning. They're looking back to the son of Shaya with something unspeakable in their eyes.

Luc shakes his head, his lips trembling. "It is you, the monster. It is you who make this city a place to suffer. It is you who rob the peoples of

their hopes and peaces. It is you who make it go on and on, *on and on*, never ending until the blood is everywhere, soaking us." He looks down, gulps as he weeps. "*Staining us,*" he adds darkly. "*Perverting us.*"

"It's your fault they died!" yells the son of Shaya.

"By your hand," says Luc. "By *your* hand."

The son of Shaya's face twists in anger. "Kill this prick," he commands.

Nobody moves.

"Kill him!" he repeats.

A couple of the Kala Kala members take a step backward, distancing themselves from both the son of Shaya and Luc.

The son of Shaya wheels on those closest to him, spitting as he shrieks, "Get *back* here, you cowards! Are you listening to the lies of this *shit*? Are you his fucking *bitches*?" His eyes burn as he swears, "You had better stand up for Kala Kala right now, or Kala Kala will slit your throats while you sleep. *Kala Kala feeds you!*"

"Mens feed themselves," corrects Luc. "Kala Kala kills."

No one says anything for a long moment, ragged breathing on all sides. And then, with a piteous liquid gurgle, one lone voice rises from ground level—Dade lifts his battered face and huskily sings:

*Allons enfants de la Patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé;  
Contre nous de la tyrannie, l'étendard sanglant est levé.*

It is a transcendent moment and the spirits of the disenfranchised punks cannot help but be elevated. One by one they step further from their master and open their own mouths to join in the song. It is picked up by the dozen or so members of Les Bicyclettes Libres, tears running down their bruised cheeks. The truest purpose of an anthem becomes clear to even the hardest hearts.

"The lust for liberty cannot be extinguish," says Luc, his gaze piercing the son of Shaya. "The more you are brutal, the more you make all mens into brothers."

And now the son of Shaya is alone, backing up against a brick wall, shaking his head, his rings glittering as his hands shake. "*I'll kill you all!*" he promises, the veins in his forehead pulsing. "I will never rest until

every one of you is skinned and your children are my whores! *This will not stand!*"

Without warning he rushes at Luc, swinging wildly. Luc is punched across the face, his lip split by a ring. He staggers backward but catches himself, and when he looks up again the son of Shaya is being held tightly by two score hands, pressed prostrate into the pavement. "Why you do this?" Luc asks, aching inside. "Why cannot you accept that things have change?"

The son of Shaya screws up his face and spits on Luc.

Luc sighs. He turns away from the son of Shaya and closes his eyes. There is a pregnant pause as every man and woman watches him, holding their breath. The city itself seems to be hushed: the chaos of the plaza seems so far away. It is as if this small group of people has gathered without reference to anything, here, in this alley, to stand in the sun and hurt each other while the birds chirp.

When Luc turns back he wipes the blood and the spit from his mouth on the back of his hand. He licks his lips. The son of Shaya watches silently, features twitching with fury as Luc walks up to him, hovering over the kneeling monster with the weight of Heaven on his shoulders.

Luc narrows his eyes. He says, "Take his legs."

# Chapter 12

## 12.

It's autumn in New York.

"Where to, boss?" asks Paco, tapping down the volume in order to be heard over the blaring ranchera music. "You want to check out Bryant maybe?"

Luc shakes his head as he shoots his cuffs, the golden links winking in the afternoon sun. "Times Square, Paco," he says.

The wind is indecisive, blowing leaves off branches in one direction and then sending the debris skittering along the streets in another. Central Park is a gay mashup of yellow and bronze, ruby and rot. The trees don't care that there will be no snow—they go by the length of days.

As they drive down Park Avenue Luc cranes his head to catch sight of his balcony high above, takes a moment to wonder what Celise is doing at home. For a moment he imagines she is standing at the widow's walk in a billowing white dress, looking down at him, but it's just a sheet hung out to dry in the breeze. In truth she's probably asleep, the fat baby resting on her breast. Maybe the radio is still playing, the way Luc left it this morning. It drinks from the wall and doesn't need to be wound, so anything is possible.

He wonders when they will forgive each other.

Paco pulls over on the side of Broadway. Luc steps out, flattens his jacket with a smoothing hand, then scans the bikefield. Everything is running as it should be, the winged bicycle wheel banner of Les Bicyclettes Libres snapping against the flagpoles. It's been a long summer, and many hard battles have been won.

"Look!"

Luc grins. He spreads his arms wide and captures Dade in a hug. "How does it go, my friend?" he asks, pulling the man's hand around to shake.

"Situation nominal," says Dade. When he smiles the lines across his face bend, the silvery scar-tissue flashing. One of his eyes is a false but you can't tell. "The air smells like fall. Makes me remember school."

"Yeah," says Luc. "Me too."

Dade blinks. "Shouldn't you be in church still?"

Luc shrugs, looks away. "I don't go there no more, the church."

A murder of crows sweeps over the square, squawking at a morning dove in defense of their turf. Their cries echo off the concrete, piercing the hum of traffic and the babble of the crowds. The dove flees, flapping fiercely, disappearing behind the buildings.

Dade clears his throat. "You have time to grab a coffee?"

"Sure."

The two friends amble into a familiar café, accept nods of greeting from teenage waitresses who show cleavage for tips. They take a regular table with a view of the bikes, settle into their chairs and dawdle over the memorized menu. "Who's on point?" asks Luc idly.

"Jennifer," replies Dade, squinting over the menu, lips moving.

"She doing good?"

"She's a believer, Look. She's solid as they come."

Across the street the bikers are singing. Luc doesn't recognize the melody but they carry it well. He returns his attention to the table as their waitress puts down two cups of coffee, lingers as she leans, her young breasts swaying playfully. She snaps her gum and touches Luc's shoulder. "What can I get you fine gentlemen today?"

"Just the coffee is good," says Luc.

Dade can't say anything, so he simply smiles. His cheeks colour and his hands sweat. He breathes a sigh of relief when the waitress leaves.

Luc chuckles. "Why don't you ask her for the date?"

"She'd never go anywhere with me at this point," says Dade. "Look at me, man."

Luc scoffs. "You're a big wheel in Les Bicyclettes Libres, Dade. I bet she have the fantasy about a date from you. For attraction the scars they are nothing compare to having influence."

"She's just a kid."

Luc shrugs. "She have a job. She make her own decisions for life." He pauses, sips his coffee. "Like we all do."

Dade brings his cup to his lips but hesitates, his gaze flicking over Luc's head. His mouth slowly forms an 'O' of surprise. "What?" says Luc, turning around. People are running in the streets. "What's this?" says Luc, perplexed and suddenly worried.

A tall latino with acne-pitted cheeks flings open the door of the cafe and shouts, "The Times Square television is on! The Times Square television is on!"

The entire population of the café jumps out of their seats and rushes to the windows, leaning over Luc and Dade to press their faces against the glass. "What'd he say?" asks someone, spilling Dade's coffee. "What's going down?"

"It's on! It's on! The TV came on! Look!"

Just as suddenly as they had surged to the windows the crowd now gushes out through the door, joining the river of scurrying pedestrians crossing the street into the square. Luc and Dade get to their feet and wander after them, casting about curiously, stepping out into the cooling air of the encroaching evening with a dumbfounded waitress at their side. "Wow," she gasps, "have you *ever* seen something so beautiful?"

Times Square is aglow.

The waitress is too young to have ever seen the like, but we're not. You and I remember when every city was like this: a blast of lights, a dazzle of advertisements, a phantasmagoric pulsing of messages and images and electric glitter. Luc and Dade and damn near everyone around is instantly transported back to childhood, staring in rapture and wonder at the scintillating billboards and flashing signs flanking the great bright window of snowy static on the jumbo-size television screen above their heads.

"Co-ca Co-la," reads the waitress carefully. "I wonder what *that* is."

Traffic has stopped. Paco is standing on the hood of his cab, gap-toothed mouth agog. There comes the collective sound of overlapped ratcheting as a hundred people all wind their radios at once, hungry for the news. They point, they gape, they blink.

It comes.

The static on the screen is replaced with a giant image of the mayor of New York. As his lips begin to move the crowd falls silent, allowing the words to be discerned echoing from tiny speakers clutched in hands, embedded in dashboards, from dusty or rusty housings mounted on the sides of buildings...

"People of New York, good evening," says the mayor. The crowd roars, and then insistently hushes itself. "This is a very special evening for all of us," continues the mayor; "all of us in the world, all of us in America, and especially all of us here in the greatest city on Earth."

The crowd goes mad again, and this time the din is harder to silence. When the hubbub dwindles the mayor's voice rises into audibility again: "... since the fuel crisis life has been hard, and many of us have suffered terribly. But I'm here to announce that our hardship is coming to an end. I'm here, tonight, with the special privilege of telling New York first—it's over, people. A new day is dawning."

Dade furrows his brow, frowning. "What's he mean?"

"Shhh!"

"For the past year," continues the mayor, "my office has been in negotiations to acquire a new, ground-breaking technology that will change the way we look at power forever. We've kept this quiet because I didn't want to raise your hopes without knowing—and I mean *knowing*—this could be a real and viable solution for us." He pauses, collects himself, looks squarely into the lens. "We have erected a brand new power plant to utilize this technology, and I'm happy to inform you that that plant just came on-line, as of about, um, fifteen minutes ago. Folks, New York is now *on the grid*."

There is no containing the jubilation. The square veritably explodes with cheers and shouts. A hundred hats are thrown up into the air at once, spinning as they sail back down. Horns honk. Bells ring. Feet stomp.

"In the coming days and weeks every citizen with a permanent address will be receiving one of these," says the mayor, holding up a small, oblong silver orb; "*This* is an Aresian Power Bead, and once activated it will channel electricity wirelessly from the power plant directly into your homes and businesses. Clean energy, renewable energy—delivered to you reliably and affordably, now and in the future. Welcome to the new age, New York! *In our path the whole world will follow.*"



The mayor has more to say but it's lost to the hooplah, which increases tenfold as the elevated lamps up and down Broadway wink on one by one, prying the streets out of the twilight. A moment later fireworks fly up over the Hudson, crackling and bursting in air, casting garish curtains of pink and green light crawling down every face as the sparkles fall. "Ooooh!" coo the multitudes; "Aaaah!"

Dade is beside himself. He keeps saying "Ho-ly *shit!*" over and over again. He grabs Luc's shoulder and shakes him, then hugs him, then throws his arms in the air and hollers with glee. "Holy shit, Look! Can you believe it? Fucking A, man! Fucking A! It's all over!"

Luc nods, his lips pressed tight. "Yeah," he says heavily. "It's all over."

The streets have become a party. People are pouring out of their apartments and offices, hearing the news, hounding the overwhelmed restaurants and bars and wallah carts for beer and liquor and wine. More fireworks burst in the purpling sky overhead.

"What's wrong?" says Dade, searching Luc's face—orange in the glare of the fireworks, now blue. "What's the matter, Look? Aren't you happy?"

"It's all over," Luc repeats, his features a study in misery. "I sacrifice everything to this, and now there is nothing for us."

"What do you mean?"

"The bikes will close," explains Luc, pinching the bridge of his nose as he closes his eyes. "The bikes will close and I'm left damned. Do you think the world will change overnight? It won't. In a week everyone will have electricity, and there will be no more bike. But you and I, my friend, we will *still* be poor."

Dade's face falls, the realization sinking in.

"We will still be poor," repeats Luc grimly, "but all the bike will be gone."

"Things *are* going to change," says Dade hopefully.

"Yeah," concedes Luc, eyes on the fire-spangled sky. "And God only knows what we will be forced to do for our bread until the changes are done."

New York celebrates. It won't be until the cold light of dawn that people begin to wonder what debt they'll owe the makers of Aresian Power Beads—what debt the whole planet will owe Ares—in return for being pulled out of the darkness. No one knows what deal the mayor has

struck, or what this technological lifeline may cost their wounded civilization.

Mars has won.

But tonight there is light and laughter, and it's contagious. Even Luc cannot remain glum. He smiles when someone pours champagne over his head, breaks into guffaws as Dade picks up the pretty waitress and swings her around, then kisses her.

Someone in one of the buildings edging the square has released bags full of shredded paper and it falls like confetti, a twirling snow of manila cardboard, white bond and dead film.

Nobody will ever forget this night. I won't. You won't.

For Luc it also holds the memory of his final ride, head bowed over the handlebars, feeding the great, unseen, underground flywheel, pedaling his way to infinity in the middle of the Times Square bikefield all alone. I don't know where he's going but he's getting there fast, pushing his body to the limit, sweat running off him like rain. The bike hums, its connections crackle. Luc's legs are a blur.

He's desperate, mad and Hell-bent. He's trying to feel clean.

Though he never moves an inch he weeps all the way over the horizon, chasing his soul.

## New Section

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cheeseburger Brown is a compulsive storyteller. He is the author of illustrated storybooks and novels about robots and spaceships, as well as a free syndicated stream of scifi serials presented each week via the Internet.

Mr. Brown lives in a century-old schoolhouse in rural Canada with his wife, two children, and several large dogs. He enjoys a nice song, but dances poorly.

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