PART I: DISTANCE

FROM BLAISE ADENON'S NOTEBOOK: LETTER I

To Esso,

Once upon a time, a group of prisoners lived in a cave.

For their whole lives, they'd knelt in cold dirt, facing stone, with chains wrapped round their necks so tightly they couldn't even turn round to see where the amber light in the cave was coming from.

So each day they watched shadows flicker and dance on the stone wall, lit up by that hidden light behind them. They studied the shadows, named them, prayed to them.

Then, one morning, one of the prisoners broke free. He turned towards that bright light shining at the far end of the cave and he stared at it in wonder, desperate to know where it came from, where it led.

His friends, still chained, warned him: 'Stay, you fool! You don't know where you're going. You'll die if you roam too far!'

But he ignored them.

When he stepped outside the cave, nothing he saw – not the trees, lakes, animals, nor the sun – made sense to him. Energy flowed so freely out there it almost felt . . . wrong. But over time he got to grips with his new reality, finally realizing that his entire life, and all he'd ever known in the cave, had been a mere shadow of this bigger place.

A place he named the Upper World.

He sprinted back into the cave, excited to share the good news with his friends. But, when he explained what he had seen in the Upper World, they mocked him, calling him insane. And, when he offered to break them free from their chains, they threatened to kill him.

A real man named Socrates told that story over 2,300 years ago in Athens. Most people who heard it interpreted it as a whimsical fairy tale, a metaphor about how lonely it can feel to venture into the unknown. But what people overlook, my child, is that Socrates really believed in the Upper World. And that, when he told people what he'd seen up there, he was executed.



CHAPTER 1

ESSO · *NOW*

It takes an impressive mix of stupidity and bad luck not to be in a gang, but still find yourself in the middle of a gang war. I'd managed it in less than a week. And that was before the time travel.

I knelt down, resting my elbows on the one corner of the mattress where the sheet hadn't peeled off. Tired and alone in my bedroom, I was desperate for heavenly backup. But I couldn't make a call between Jesus, his mum, Thor, Prophet Mohammed (and the big man he works for), that bald Asian dude in orange robes, Jesus' dad, Emperor Haile Selassie, my grandad's voodoo sculpture, Morgan Freeman, or that metal slab on the moon in the olden-day film *2001*. So, to be safe, I prayed to the whole team.

'Dear Holy Avengers,' I pleaded into my interlaced fingers. 'First off, please forgive me for being a prick on Monday. And for lying to Mum about what happened.'

MONDAY (FOUR DAYS AGO)

Before Monday went off the rails, I actually learnt something in class. (Was that how school was meant to feel all the time?)

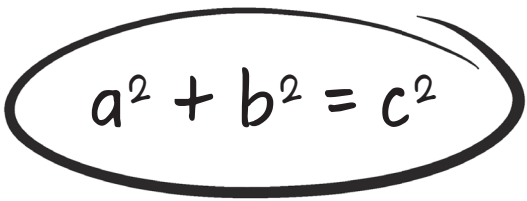
Penny Hill Secondary sat on the border between Peckham and Brixton. That wasn't an issue in the forties, when they built it, but became one once the mandem arrived. Now you had kids from two rival ends forced to spend seven hours a day with each other, and the rest of us expected to learn with that in the background.

Our classroom was arranged in four rows of eight desks. The ceiling hung a foot too low, making you feel like a chicken in a battery cage if you sat near the middle, like me. Miss Purdy was head of PE and doubled as a maths teacher. She could teach, though; as in, she actually knew what she was talking about and actually gave a shit. Her class had the fewest fights and highest marks because of it. Even *my* assignments were coming back with the odd B these days. Maths had always held some appeal with me. The naive part of me clung to the idea that one day I'd have a boatload of money and maths would have helped me get it.

I'd always just respected the fact that 2 + 2 = 4. I spent most days switching between my African home voice, my semi-roadman voice, my reading-out-loud-in-English-lit-class voice, and the telephone voice I put on when I needed BT to send someone round to come fix the router. I liked that all that stuff mattered less in maths class. The teacher could think I was a dickhead all she wanted, but 2 + 2 was still gonna equal 4.

What I couldn't have known, sitting there that Monday morning, was that the three-sided shapes Miss Purdy was drawing on the whiteboard would end up opening my eyes to all four dimensions. In fact, if anyone had tried to warn me I'd be moving like a superhero-psychic by the end of the week, I'd have told them they were on crack, then shown them the abandoned flat in Lewisham where they could meet some like-minded people.

'Today, we're revising Pythagoras' theorem,' Purdy said, circling an equation she'd just written on the board. 'And we'll be using it to figure out the length of the longest side of the triangle.'



Purdy waited, arms folded, for the class to quiet down.

'Shhhhhhhhh!' Nadia said, whipping her neck round to glare at two girls chatting behind her.

Nadia wasn't a teacher's pet by any stretch, and she didn't always care *that* much about class. But we had our GCSE mocks coming up, and she clearly wasn't about to get dragged down by kids who didn't care at all.

Meanwhile, I was staring off in the distance, doing the pouted-lip serious stare I'd practised in the mirror that morning. Nadia's eyes had to swing past me on their way back to the whiteboard and I wanted to leave the best impression possible. No cap: it was straight-up *embarrassing* how often I did stuff like that for her. I probably spent sixty to seventy per cent of each class either: a) staring creepily at the back of her head; b) glancing at her in my periphery; or c) pouting and hoping she'd pay attention to me, which I never got to confirm either way since I'd always be staring off into the distance like an aftershave model.

Purdy turned to the board with two different coloured markers in hand. 'To make this feel a bit real, I'll use a practical example. Let's say you're walking through Burgess Park. You start all the way

down here at the south gate and need to get up to the top by Old Kent Road. There are basically two different paths you can take: the first path, up the side and along the top, is what you cool kids might call a "long ting".'

She waited for someone to laugh . . . *Anyone.* After a long, cold dose of silence, she moved on. 'Tough Monday. So, taking the long path means staying on the pavement and going *all* the way up one side, then *all* the way across the top. But the alternative, shorter route just cuts diagonally across the grass.'

After she stepped away from the board, we could see that she'd written numbers next to two sides of a triangle, but left a question mark next to the longest edge. A collective sigh went round the room as we realized she was going to strip-search one of us for the answer.

'Let's start with the shortest edge of the triangle. Can anyone tell me what number I get, when I take the number *3* and square it?'

Nadia's hand went up, the one needle you could spot in the haystack. Purdy ignored it – she had to give the rest of us a chance once in a while, after all – and turned to someone paying much less attention.

'Rob, what is 3 squared?'

You'd have thought Miss Purdy was made of glass by how Rob looked straight through her.

Please tell me he knows that 3 × 3 = 9, I said to myself. Along with Kato, Rob was my best friend, and I knew maths wasn't really his thing. To be honest, not much at school was Rob's thing. But ask him the difference between UK drill, NY drill and Chicago drill, and he turned into Einstein. Or tell him about a story you heard on the evening news and watch him find an ingenious way to connect

it back to the Illuminati and their plot to take down Blacks, Browns and Eastern Europeans. He was Polish as well. But knowing that didn't really tell you much about him.

Kato, sitting on Rob's other side, whispered to him, 'Afghanistan! The answer's Afghanistan – trust me.'

'Afghanistan,' Rob repeated, showing his proudest face to Purdy.

She must have blinked three or four times in confusion. His response was so off it robbed her of words, and she had no choice but to shut her jaw and look away.

Kato was in pieces, using his sleeves to wipe at the tears of joy collecting on the ledge of his eye. Everything in life was hilarious to that boy. Probably because everything in life came so easily to him.

Rob glared at him, kissing his teeth till the spit ran out. I sometimes worried that, if I ever had to leave school for more than a week, I'd come back and find our fragile friendship cracked into three pieces. But ask anyone else at Penny Hill, and they'd swear we were unbreakable – the happy package known as 'Kato, Esso and Rob'. Even when only one of us fucked up, all three of us got in trouble for it. 'Kato, Esso and Rob did it!' As if those were the three names printed on my passport.

'Esso?' Purdy turned to me with desperation in her eyes.

'You just take the number and multiply it by itself, innit?' I replied. I didn't mean for my answer to come out sounding like a question but couldn't help my voice squeaking at the end. She tilted her head forward, waiting for me to land. 'So, it's just 3 times 3, which is 9,' I added.

She made me go through each step, releasing me only once I'd given her equation the TLC she felt it deserved. 'So, c – the long edge – is equal to 5,' I finally answered.

I'd calculated the final number in my head a few seconds early, and while she wrote it all out on the board, I debated whether to ask my follow-up question. Miss Purdy had told us at the start of the class that Pythagoras came up with his famous equation 2,500 years ago. *Two thousand five hundred years ago!* I'm pretty sure that was before paper was even invented. *But how?*

Problem was, regardless of what adults said, there *was* such a thing as a rubbish question. In fact, most questions I asked earned me that 'what a rubbish question' look from them. At school, a teacher could cuss me for bringing up a topic that wasn't on the curriculum. And at home, I'd get the same harsh treatment from my mum for asking a question about Dad. Any sentence starting with 'why' or 'how' was scary to *someone*.

But once a question took shape in my head I had trouble leaving the hole empty. It helped that Miss Purdy was still smiling at me, and that she usually took it well when the mid-rowers raised their hands. *Fuck it*, I thought silently, clearing my throat in preparation. *What's the worst that could happen?*

'How did Pythagoras come up with that equation in the first place?' I did my best to sound detached when, in fact, the missing answer was a crater that doubled in size every second.

Then came a flick to my ear. Fast and crisp, but light. *Was that . . . a ball of paper?*

'Neeeeeeeek!' Kato hollered. I turned to see him circling his fingers round his eyes like glasses.

Rob laughed as well, followed by the back half of the class. *I need new mates*, I decided. But then Nadia turned to me with an expression that was equal bits surprised and impressed; a look that made all the embarrassment dissolve. I put my R&B pout back on just in time.

Miss Purdy spent the next five minutes showing us how Pythagoras had turned his hunch about triangles into a mathematical law that would have to be obeyed for the rest of eternity, everywhere in the universe.

The second Purdy finished explaining, I felt like a rusty padlock sprang open in my head.[1] And, for only the second or third time in my life, I felt like maybe – just *maybe* – I might live in a world where things made sense.

When she turned her back, I punched 'Pythagoras' into Google on my phone. Turns out, like most of the sharp ones, my man was a nutter. According to the internets, he ran some cult where everyone swore never to eat black beans or piss in the direction of the sun. Oh, and they all worshipped the number 10 and believed that if you lifted the bonnet off what we all see as reality, you'd find nothing but maths under the hood – the language the gods wrote the universe in. Apparently.

There were also 'related' links to a few of his stans – one guy called Plato, another Socrates – that I didn't bother clicking. It was all getting a bit too trippy, so I put my phone away, knowing I was lucky I hadn't been spotted by Purdy. I was in her good books and had no intention of leaving them.

And then Gideon Ahenkroh walked in.

Even with his cap pulled down, you could just about make out Gideon's eyes as they traced the floor on the walk to his seat. Like every other boy at Penny Hill, he hung his trousers as low round his thighs as he could. Most girls did the same with their skirts, just pulled in the opposite direction.

[1] See page 341 for more information.

Rob, Kato and I exchanged looks. Looks that said, *I feel it, too. Something's off. Something hilarious is about to happen.* We turned back to make sure we didn't miss out.

'Gideon, you're late. Again,' Miss Purdy said. 'Also, no hats in class. Take it off and sit down unless you want to go to the head teacher's office. *Again*.'

When Gideon lifted his cap, all thirty-one of us flared up in laughter. There were penny-sized patches of hair missing all over his scalp, each one glistening like he'd dabbed glitter into his hair oil. D, who sat behind Gideon, had the best view of the zigzags coastlining the back of his neck.

If the phrase 'still waters run deep' could be embodied in a single roadman, that roadman was D. D didn't chase clout; clout chased him. The few times he spoke up, people either laughed, nodded in agreement or ran for safety. Everyone in South London generally agreed that D and his little brother, Bloodshed – both part of a Brixton gang called T.A.S. – were the least-light-skinned light-skinned brothers ever made. It was like someone had convinced Young M.A to have babies with Fredo, then got a scientist to delete any traces of Chris Brown from their DNA. D was the stockier of the two brothers, but still clipped six foot and could fill any room sitting down.

'Blood, that haircut is *poor*,' D said. 'Just holla at man if you want me to send the mandem to your barber's house. No one gets to boy you like that, except me.' He sank in his chair, his gold tooth glistening as he laughed at his own joke. After a short pause, we all laughed as well – it was less trouble that way.

An idea for a follow-up joke popped into my head. Part of me thought, *No, Esso. Don't be a prick. Gideon's already having a bad morning.*

Just allow him and move on. I was staring at the back of Nadia's head, knowing she'd be telling me the same. But the remaining ninety-nine per cent of me was shouting, *Go on, son. Give the people what they want. This is God's plan.*

'His mum cut it, innit,' I said. 'She knows she's not getting any, so she wants to make sure Gideon doesn't either.' A much louder rumble of laughter went round the classroom. I was pushing my luck with that joke, considering how rusty my fade and twists were looking, but even D nodded in appreciation. *Mission accomplished.*

Until Year 9, I'd never appreciated how much funnier having power made you. I was only a few feet down from the top of the pole at Penny Hill, which meant that people were supposed to laugh at my jokes now, *especially* if they were funny.

Nadia, meanwhile, wasn't laughing at all. I should have copped some of her disapproval, but instead she aimed it all at D, staring at him with eyes that could break vibranium. He blew a kiss back with a smile.

It always cracked me up how much those two hated each other. I remembered the day D's phone was going off in class and Nadia, seeing Miss Purdy couldn't do anything about it, walked over to D's desk, snatched his iPhone and chucked it out of the first-floor window. She even stood by to watch it skip across the concrete like a pebble on water. D felt like he had something over everyone, and Nadia felt like she owed nothing to no one. So yeah – milk and orange juice.

It turned out Nadia wasn't the only one not amused. Miss Purdy's arms were crossed, and Gideon's head was still sunk into his chest. *Poor lad*, I thought, surprised at how much I was regretting the joke.

But Gideon Ahenkroh had different plans for how things were going to end. He shot up from his seat, and a split second later I felt a hard *thump* against my forehead. I looked down to see a white-and-orange glue stick rolling on the floor.

Did Gideon really just chuck a glue stick at my head?

I hopped out my seat and chased him three whole laps around the classroom. Gideon faked a left, then stepped off in the other direction. By the time I pivoted back, he was out the door.

'It's on sight, fam!' I shouted into the corridor after him. For some reason, my tough talk always came out high-pitched and baitly American in the heat of the moment. 'What you running for? Come and let's do this, bro!'

I could hear Rob and Kato cackling behind me. They knew better than anyone that I wouldn't do shit to Gideon. I was built like a pencil; half the Year 7s at Penny Hill could've mashed me up.

I turned back to Miss Purdy, whose face was neon pink.

'Get back in here and *sit* down, Esso! Right now!'

That's how I got my first demerit.

That's how the maddest week of my life began.

WEDNESDAY (TWO DAYS AGO)

Penny Hill was too cheap to buy anything but second-class stamps. So, the minute I got my demerit on Monday, I knew the letter wasn't getting home till Wednesday morning, earliest.

When Wednesday morning finally came, I watched the envelope slide through the flap in our front door and snatched it before it even scraped the floor. I didn't bother opening it, just wedged it in the bottom of the garbage skip outside and kept moving. *Mission accomplished.*

Well, sort of. The postman had arrived an hour late, which meant I was an hour late for school.

That's how I got my second demerit.

I wasn't shook this time either, though. I had a system: Penny Hill would send the demerit letter on Wednesday afternoon, and it would arrive home on Friday morning. Hopefully the postman would be on point next time and arrive *before* I had to leave for school. Even if he didn't, Mum worked nights that end of the week, so I could run home during lunch break and snatch it before she was up.

Mum and I were getting on quite well these days. She'd started opening up about the pranks she pulled when she was my age and it was cool to see her goofier side. Better still, she trusted me to keep the flat tidy during the day, and double-locked at night, and had stopped asking questions when I came home late on weekends. Why mess that up? Especially since I'd already done the maths on the delivery timing and calculated there was zero risk of her finding out.

When Wednesday evening swung round, I decided to celebrate my newfound invincibility by going shopping in West End with Spark. His new Air Maxes were *sick*. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Spark in an old pair of creps or wearing anything but a full-body black tracksuit – all-year road uniform.

Spark was handing the size-eight trainers he'd just tried on to the cashier at NikeTown, who promptly rang up his 160-quid bill. Spark produced a card from his bottoms, which, even after he pulled them up, were still too baggy for his short legs.

After the fifth card and eighth attempt, the card reader gave up. It couldn't have been easy for Spark to keep all those PINs in his head, especially since most of them weren't his.

The cashier chuckled while turning to me. 'It looks like you might have to bail out your little mate here.'

As soon as he said the word 'little', my jaw dropped.

Then my heart sped up.

Spark was my guy. And a nice guy, at least to me. He and I had lived on the same estate since we were six, so I knew him well. Well enough that if Mum hadn't banned me from hanging out with him so many times, we'd be cousins by now. I'd heard this saying once, about how we all carry around a bucket on our heads, and every day the people around us, whether they know it or not, pile their shit into it. Most of us are born with deep, wide buckets, which means, even when we do lose our tempers, things don't ever get too messy. But then you had a kid like Kyle 'the Spark' Redmond, who, instead of a bucket, was born with a teaspoon.

I only hung out with him once every couple months, and never this far from our estate, and now I remembered why.

Spark grabbed the open box out of the cashier's hands and hurled it to the far end of the shop. I moved in quickly, knowing I had to wrestle him away from the counter and out of there before he ruined the night for both of us.

By the time we reached Tottenham Court Road, fifteen of Spark's mates had joined us, each wrapped head-to-toe in black, clogging up the already crowded pavement. Spark had told me before we went into NikeTown that he had a 'few friends' coming, but he hadn't told me he'd ordered the whole batch. And they were all Peckham yutes – East Peckham, to be precise, an even rowdier group than the T.A.S. guys D rolled with. I'd nodded heads at a few of them over the years but clearly hadn't left a strong enough impression for any of them to remember my name. The one with

cross eyes and a plaster on his chin wouldn't stop staring at me, like *I* was the one who'd crashed the party. I nudged Spark, who whispered a few words to him and got him to go back to ignoring me like the rest of them.

People who aren't from ends tend to view it in one of two ways. On one side, you have the exaggerators. The ones who make it seem like every time you step out of Brixton station, you're dodging machine-gun fire. But I knew plenty of people who'd lived in South London their whole life and never seen a crime happen. In fact, you were more likely to find guys holding Bibles, diplomas or bags of plantain than weapons – the main reason Mum moved here in the first place. But, at the other extreme, you have the people who see UK gangsters as way less serious than the guys they see in American rap videos. Maybe it's because the guys doing the killing here are fifteen-year-old boys in trackies (as if muscles and maturity stop bullets and blades). Or maybe it's because kids here prefer using knives over guns (and people forget what it takes to get within hugging distance of a kid and then slice his life away). Or maybe they just fall into that trap of believing that no one born with an English accent could move savage (despite everything British history should've taught us).

Regardless of who was right, the rules for survival were simple: don't hang with roadman. Or, if you were like me and had to, since you grew up with them and occasionally found yourself on a high street with them: know exactly what qualifies as a violation and don't violate.

I couldn't decide where I stood on Spark and his boys. Part of me only saw wasted potential. But the other part saw precious gemstones with histories so rare and raw that anytime one of them posted a song online, thousands of kids in Lancashire logged on to

listen. Most of the kids walking the streets that night had unpopped spots on their foreheads and inches still to grow. And yet, between them, they'd probably sold more hard stuff in Peckham that week than Superdrug managed in a year. They weren't boys; they weren't even men. They were road legends.

Each one had a story that walked with him: a detention order they just beat; a trap house they just robbed; a shoutout on the evening news. The world had sent them to the scrapyard years ago, not realizing that, with all that rusted metal around, someone would eventually figure out how to make a spear, then a cannon, then a fortress. And, I had to admit, being in the fort with that group of soldiers, some of the hardest in London, felt good. Safe and dangerous at the same damn time.

Still, I should have come up with an excuse to leave right there and then. I should have paused and thought about all the ways that sticking around could mash up my night, my week, my life. I should have jumped on the #12 bus rolling past and rid it all the way home.

But I didn't. Because walking down that road with all that smoke, all I could think about, all I cared about, was Spark not thinking I was a neek. Even when we were young – kicking his deflated football against the car-park wall – nothing had mattered more. And, like every other guy out that night, I knew Spark would die for me, not needing a please or a thank you. It didn't matter that he was the shortest and softest-faced out of the lot of us; I stayed because Spark, for all his faults, was the kind of guy you wanted to stay for.

'Bro, once Finn learns how to use the Force, my man is turning straight to the dark side. No long ting.' The voice came from the front of the mob.

The kid next to him hollered: 'Man like Boyega wanted to go full road on *Star Wars*.'

'Blood, imagine that?' the first one replied, a smile beaming on his face. 'Man using the Force to pull chicken wings off people's plates at Cantor's.'

Half the crowd started giggling, and the next kid jumped in, 'Jedi-mind-trickin girls into giving out their numbers.'

Then the next: 'Using his lightsabre to splash man from the dinger.'

'That film would be a mad one, still. Man would queue up for that one,' said the one who'd kicked off the conversation. His smile faded as he came to a hard stop, whipping his arm across the chest of the kid next to him. 'I seen that bredda before, you know.' He squinted a few seconds longer, pointing in the distance. 'That's Bloodshed – the T.A.S. yute. Him and that paigon-boy Vex did up my young G the other day.'

The kid blasting music through his mini speaker turned it down as a tall figure swung through the rotating doors at McDonald's. Skinny. Light-skinned.

Please don't let that be Bloodshed, I prayed.

Bloodshed: the kind of nickname you laughed at – until you found out how he'd got it.

As we walked closer, the unmistakable tats on his fingers came into view. We all watched Bloodshed's face widen in panic.

Eeesh, I thought. *Think, Esso. Think!* I scrolled through the options in my head. I could run away. But then I'd have to live with the whispers and disgusted looks that would follow me every time I stepped outside. Or I could drift to the back of the crowd, crouch

and pray that logic, compassion or some miracle would stop these guys from doing whatever they were about to do.

Or I could lie, was my final, desperate thought.

'Nah, I don't think that's him, you know,' I said, dropping my voice a couple levels. 'We should go back towards Leicester Square.'

But they all pressed forward like my words were nothing more than a pat on the back. It was easy for them. They wouldn't have to face D in class the next morning and explain why we'd rushed his little brother. They were built for this. I wasn't. I had no war scars, no gang stripes and no interest in trappin at the speed of light for the rest of my life.

'What!' the first person in our group shouted when he reached Bloodshed. Then everyone else in the group started barking the same thing.

'What!'

'What!!'

'What!!!'

The kid on my right shaped his fingers into a logo he knew Bloodshed would recognize. And Bloodshed, who stood half a foot above us, looked like a greyhound trapped in a kennel of starved pit bulls. He was the kind of kid who was mad enough to run into a fight one-up against five. But not fifteen.

Spark was at the back and had missed the start of the action. I could see the FOMO on his face. He sprinted full speed at the huddle and when he reached the edge of it, instead of slowing down, dug his foot in and leapt off the ground, soaring over our heads with his arm stretched out towards Bloodshed.

The echo of the slap vibrated in my bones. A moment of silence then followed, as everyone nearby paid tribute to the level of disrespect Spark had just inflicted on his victim.

'What you sayin now?' was Spark's first taunt.

'Pussssssio!' someone else shouted, and threw a quick jab at Bloodshed's temple. Then another fist came crashing down on his body, which at this point was balled up on the ground. And another. Whatever circulation had been flowing in Bloodshed's face raced to the edge of the knuckle marks on his forehead, making the rest of his skin turn a sandy shade of green.

Spark's mate with the long dreads reached into his Gucci pouch. He smiled like a man who'd already made his decision, was happy with it, but out of courtesy was giving the universe a few seconds to come up with a reason Bloodshed shouldn't be wed in eternal matrimony with his cutter.

Thankfully that reason came when three *stupidly* peng girls walked past. Their skin was glowing and showing, and you could tell they were from East by how hard they gelled down their edges.

'Cheeeeeeeeeez!' two boys shouted at the same time, which set off a chain reaction in the rest of the group. The taller two had bored faces on, but the shorter girl couldn't quite hide her toothy smile. Everyone turned their attention away from Bloodshed and towards them.

Everyone but me.

Which meant that, when Bloodshed's eyes started darting around for an exit, they locked on mine. *Crap!*

I whipped my face away, praying he hadn't recognized me, but knowing he had. How could he not? I'd literally been there when D

first taught him how to ride a pedal bike. It dawned on me that there was nothing I could now do or say to make Bloodshed believe I was innocent. There was no special ID I could pull out to prove I was just a harmless bystander. No website I could share that showed I wasn't a registered gangster and that, on every other day, I lived a moist, anonymous life. To Bloodshed, I was *there*, so I was now an opp as well. That's how it works: stay on the roads too long, or get seen with a roadman at the wrong time, and the scent never wears off.

Before I could process another thought, I heard the cracking of Bloodshed's knuckles against Spark's jaw, then watched as Bloodshed barged past the wall of yutes in front of him. His strides got longer and faster and longer again, wiping away any hopes the group had of chasing him. Spark had the most motivation out of all of us to run after him, but he was crouched on the concrete cradling his chin, mumbling about how Bloodshed and his guys were all dead men.

And, soon, Bloodshed would be saying the same thing about me.