

# **URBANTASM**

**a novel**

## **BOOK TWO: THE EMPTY ROOM**

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**EXCERPT:  
Solidarity Forever!**



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I had done it. I had conquered seventh grade. I thought back to the first day at Radcliffe when all of the metal shit in my backpack had set off the metal detector. How messed up had the last nine-and-a-half months been? Now it was all over. I could start from scratch this summer, if I wanted to. Every gate led to a new garden.

I hid out in an alcove near the teachers' parking lot. I didn't want [REDACTED] to spot me again; she had too many water balloons.

Eventually, most of the students had left, though the janitors were just getting started. A white Nissan Bluebird with a mismatched red passenger door creaked around the corner with Adam hanging halfway out of the passenger's window.

"John, get in!" he yelled.

"This is our ride?!" I asked.

"This is Dwight. He, um, used to go out with Carla."

Dwight, our driver, turned to glare at me. He was some kind of redneck, with strawish hair, red rings around his eyes, and a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"You got my money?" he asked.

I handed him a ten and swung into the back. It was about as crowded as I expected. Michael amply took up the middle seat. Selby sat on Chuck's lap behind Dwight. Elizabeth sat behind Adam. He obligingly slid his seat as far forward as it would go.

"Hop on!" said Elizabeth.

It was still a tight squeeze, so we skipped the seat belt.

[REDACTED]

Groaning beneath our combined weight, the Bluebird idled halfway across the parking lot before finally picking up a

bit of speed and turning out into the sun. Everyone's window but mine was down and the wind whirred through the tiny cab. To our left, shadowbox fences cordoned off some quiet neighborhood while the looming corrugated gray-and-white walls off Starrville blew by to our right, block-after-block, for a full mile. *My father's in there somewhere*, I thought.

We reached another major intersection and turned right into heavy traffic. Exhaust shimmered in the noonday heat, and a line of a hundred or so cars ran off toward the horizon. I could just see the gray line of I-92 in the distance. Eastward, it joined up with 292 and eventually I-96 before charging on into Detroit. But it didn't matter yet where it led. We were stuck.

The sound of honking and cheering drifted back toward us.

“What the fuck?” said Dwight.

After several minutes, the column of cars started to crawl forward again. We pulled even with the factory entrance. Hundreds of workers were streaming out through the glass lobby doors, walking stoically toward their cars or clustering around the entrance. The mass exodus of people and vehicles had pretty much shut down Genesee Road, but a picket line was already forming along the curb and sidewalk. It was a noisy and kaleidoscopic crowd of men and women, young and old, white and black, long-sleeved flannel and short-sleeved camo.

They held aloft dozens of blue and green signs proclaiming “XAWU ON STRIKE!” The largest sign announced that “Akawe Metal's Gonna Test X's Mettle!” Other members waved flags: the black-and-blue XAWU flags, the ubiquitous American flag, and inexplicable POW-MIA flags, and several others I didn't recognize. The mass of humanity was still sorting itself out, figuring out who was going to stand where and do what, but at the moment, the autoworkers were

well-rested, hopeful, and defiant. A few irritated motorists heckled them. “I could blow my horn, or you could blow me!” one called out, and the autoworkers shouted right back: “We built that truck you're driving! You don't like us, why don't you give it back?” But the supporters on the road far outnumbered the detractors and their horns merged into a beautiful, blaring, dissonant applause.

“Honk your horn!” I told Dwight.

“What?! No way!”

“My father works over here. Do it!”

“No!”

I tried to roll down my window, but the handle was stuck.

“Can you roll down my window at least?” I asked.

“It's broken.”

When we pulled even with the picket line I waved at some of the autoworkers.

They looked skeptically at the beaten-up Nissan. I shrugged helplessly. A couple of them waved passively back at me.

“They did it,” I said. “They actually did it. They're fucking standing up for themselves.”

“Damn, John,” said Selby. “Don't go gettin' all political on us.”

“I'm proud of them. I know what they're worth. They know what they're worth.”

We finally got on the expressway and I put on my sunglasses.

The day transformed. By the new light – the summer light – the June glare – that shot through my gray shades and angled on along the peripheries, making me squint... by the

white expressway dashes that flew under us with building speed, leaving Akawe far behind us and running on toward Detroit... I felt free.