

URBANTASM

a novel

BOOK THREE: THE DARKEST ROAD

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EXCERPT: Welcome to Ninth Grade



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I took off my shades and my eyes fought to adjust. I stood in a dim, hot lobby, low-ceilinged without any windows except for the narrow panes on the dented metal doors. In the midst of the concrete floor, I made out a massive mosaic, every bit as intricate and ornate as the Wheels downtown. The picture stretched from wall to wall, projecting faint light from shards of fused glass. Steely grays, sandy browns, pearly silvers, and airy blues. The Eastern Mariners had been conceived when Akawe had money, so here, in this shadowy room, barely visible under the coalescing sneakers and sweatpants and tracksuits and girls' shaved calves, I glimpsed rafts and waves, clouds and water, everything moving, nothing static, and it seemed an autumn storm was building against some foreign horizon.

"It's a Bonbright," said Chris, who had come up beside me.

"A what?"

"Arnold Bonbright? He's the guy who did the mosaics on East Street. He went to City High, and then made this mosaic so people would feel loyal to Eastern."

"Crazy."

"Yeah, I know. I think it's based on some Dutch painting or something."

"It's too dark to see it, though. They need to put on some lights."

"You think it's too dark *here*? Just wait 'til you see the rest of the school. Later."

And Chris moved along. I slid my sunglasses back into place and started walking. The dim lobby gave way to even darker halls, vaguely lit by spasming fluorescents and the occasional lights that struggled out through open classroom doors. I passed clusters of kids, hulking, whispering, laughing, throwing their hands up at a glance, a gesture, a greeting, and then I saw a narrow face watching me as we passed. It was Adam. He stretched his right arm under his left as

he pivoted on his right foot, walking backward now, his left hand hooking his right elbow, his right arm turning up, the back of his hand toward me, fisted with his middle finger extended, his eyes glassy and his mouth a horizontal line. I turned away. I didn't have nothing to say to him.

I reached my locker, squinted to see the numbers on the lock, spun them and dropped my backpack inside. I grabbed a single notebook and folder – it was all I needed – and started making my way toward my English class with Mr. Esper. I passed Majenta and gave her a sharp nod – the sort of greeting she'd appreciate – but she was too intent on parting the crowds before her and I lost her. A moment later, I passed Ken Lessard, immaculate with his pale face and his hoodie drawn up, hiding his single earring.

“Sup loser? ‘Sup freshman?” he asked, reminding me why we all called him “the fucker.”

And then I saw Selby, walking with a tender-faced, agate-eyes white boy. He had dark hair and teeth that gleamed against the shadows. She quipped. He laughed, nervously. They parted. The boy with the perfect teeth swept ahead of me, the kids ahead flowing around him without resistance, and then he stopped at a point where the mass of students broke around another boy sitting sullenly in a wheelchair, docked at his locker, unloading some books. The agate-eyed boy leaned over his stark-shouldered friend and whispered in his ear. The boy in the wheelchair – older, larger, wiry – shook his head, but the agate-eyed boy grinned a nervous grin, patted his back, and moved-off. The boy in the wheelchair gave the locker a casual flick and it slammed shut, shaking the adjacent lockers. At the same moment a distant door opened and a single ray of sunlight illuminated him. A slender girl stood at his side. She had big bangs and a stupid grin, but she stood with her back against the wall and her ankles crossed and she clutched

a pink notebook in front of her stomach. The boy in the wheelchair pointed toward the light in the distance. The girl with the bangs gave him a nod and they parted, moving in opposite directions. The door shut, and with it went the light.

“John!” I heard Omara’s voice. “You made it!”

“Way to go, man!” Shannon was with her.

They both looked older in their day-to-day school clothes – khakis and second-hand polo shirts – than they did in their festival garb.

“Welcome to high school!” Omara said. “Welcome to Eastern!”

It took me a moment to respond.

“Go Mariners,” I said. “Go Blue.”

“Go Blue,” said Shannon as he waved goodbye.

Omara hooked her arm in mine.

“Where you going?” she asked.

“English. Esper.”

“That’s not this way,” she said, pulling me toward another, even darker, hall. “Over here.”

The girl with the big bangs was moving ahead of us. I knew it was her because she was wearing a pink knit sweater. She was moving slowly, too, trying to push her way up the left side, against the flow of kids, instead of riding the current of movement on the right. But then a hand from the right reached out and pulled her over, and I caught a glimpse of furrowed brow and pale face. It was Lucy. She’d cut her hair short like a boy’s. I felt a shock as I recognized her. *She’s here?!* But now she was chatting easily with the big-banged girl, and they moved on ahead of

me, oblivious to my presence.

“Were you tired this morning?” Omara was asking. “I was *so* tired! Three days at the festival, and I was so excited last night, I couldn’t sleep.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Lucy and the girl with the bangs said goodbye and divided into opposite directions. I tried to follow Lucy, to see where she was going, but at that moment Nova turned away from his locker and crashed into a sylphy blonde teacher in her late forties, and almost knocked her over. She was smaller than most of the students and groped about the floor, trying to find her binder.

“Oh, damn, sorry Miss Pavilik!” Nova said.

Miss Pavilik stood up, her yellow-gray hair tumbling in front of her face. I saw her mouth “It’s fine,” but “Mr. Richards!” barked Principal Newsome. “Slow down! Watch where you’re going!”

Nova nodded, winked at Miss Pavilik, and turned the corner.

“He’s a clown,” Omara said fondly.

I felt dizzy in the darkness and motion.

“Well, I’d better...” she went on, leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek, and left.

I watched Mr. Newsome as he turned the other way, into the main office. His penny loafers whispered against the aqua olefin carpet. He breezed past the secretaries saying, “Miranda, I hope your situation is better today than it was yesterday.” She answered with a sweet smile. “Much better, Mr. Newsome. Thank you for asking,” but “how’s the coffee today?” he wondered, and “I don’t know,” she said, because “I’ve got tea,” and she lifted the mug to her lips and took a tired, lukewarm glance out into the halls where the last of the students, a loose knot of cheerleaders,

leaped and laughed toward their classroom doors, their bangle earrings swaying.

They passed the girl with the big bangs who had evidently forgotten something at her locker and had turned against the waves of kids, trying to make up for lost time. As she passed the cluster of cheerleaders, she noticed that one of them was wearing a charm bracelet with dolphins, dice, and a yin-yang circle. It glimmered in the greenish fluorescence – an almost phosphorescent light – like coins piled at the bottom of a fountain.

She looked at this bracelet as if it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

When the bell finally rang, I was sitting in a desk near the back of Mr. Esper's classroom. The radiator mote swirled around me and I found a bookshelf filled with some authors I had heard of – Melville, Dickens – and many I had not: Calvino, Cortázar, Robbe-Grillet, and Sarduy.

“Hey!” said Mr. Esper. “Dr. Watson at the back! No sunglasses in my classroom!”

“Sorry,” I said, taking them off. I had forgotten that I was wearing them.

He splayed his hands in front of him, taking in the whole classroom.

“Welcome to ninth grade,” he said. “Welcome to high school.”