

Part 11

The rising sun soaked the thunderheads in shades of blood. They boiled and swelled to the south and west of Robbie Burton no more than ten miles away. Lightning pulsed within the climbing towers and sent groans and rumbles down into the bare valley where he stood. Five miles to his direct west another kind of thunder—of mortar shells, grenades, mines—sounding against the streets of Colorado Springs. The new day brought fresh rounds of sparring between KCR Guardsmen troops and various pockets of resistance throughout the city.

Red sky at night, sailor's delight.

A memory of his dad saying that surfaced to the front of the Robbie's mind. The two of them stood on a dock in Galveston at sunrise waiting for more of his dad's friends to arrive for their fishing charter. Inland, behind the skeletal towers of the docked oil rigs, a line of red thunderheads slowly marched toward them.

Red sky at morning, sailor's warning.

The salty, sour smell of fish guts and motor oil flared in his nose as if he was standing on the dock again. Robbie felt a pit form in his stomach and wondered if he had entered the coordinates correctly into his phone. He pulled out the info card that had been left for him under the doormat of his safe house:

N038.855 W104.593

13Z + 1

SUPERFLIGHT

A quick cross check between the card and his phone proved he was in the right place, yet a feeling of doubt curled inside of him. What if Danny had written the wrong coordinates on the card? What if the pick-up time was wrong, or had changed? What if his ride wasn't coming at all?

The emerging daylight unveiled a skull staring straight at him from the ground. It lay cocked against a stone with its jaw hanging in a long moan. Short tufts of coarse curly hair anchored onto the bone flapped in the wind like shreds of burlap. Behind the skull lay more bones, and Robbie spun back on his heel and saw the rest of the plain littered with ribcages, vertebrae, and more skulls. Skulls that seemed to Robbie to be looking directly at him with outstretched mouths stuck in an infinite plea. He returned his gaze to the skull in front of him, its jaw off hinge as if to smirk at him.

“This isn’t a coincidence,” he whispered. Yet Robbie wondered why this spot, in all of its conspicuousness, for a rendezvous. Terror shot across his mind—what if Danny had been undercover KCR the whole time and his time on Earth was coming to a finale in a few short moments. He conceded to himself the plain he stood on was likely a firing line for resistance fighters and other dissidents apprehended by KCR guardsmen, and even pondered whether he possibly knew some of these skeletons from the past month when the KCR began its siege of Colorado Springs.

The humid morning air flipped his scruffy blonde hair and slid along his ears as if a sick whisper was passed to him. The impulse to break out of the plain and run flashed across his mind. He could go south and east and make his way back to Houston by foot relying on the kindness of strangers along the way. He remembered from his world history class that even Germans under Nazi rule showed American G.I.’s separated from their units kindness and protection. Or he could head back north to the safety. As far as he knew, the KCR had not advanced on Denver, but the thought of returning to his dad in Fort Collins so soon without his mom or sister alongside him, or let alone the fact that he hadn’t been able to make it out of Colorado, wasn’t viable. The picture of his dad’s sunken, disappointed face caused Robbie’s heart to sink.

To the northeast a thin dust cloud rose on the horizon like cigarette smoke. Within a moment, two yellow orbs came into view and steadily grew larger. This is it, Robbie thought, and

instantly shot his head back and forth searching for a place to hide. He slid behind a patch of scrub brush knocking away a ribcage. Within moments a silver, '90s model Toyota 4Runner rolled into view. The SUV slowly pivoted and weaved its wheels around the bones so as to not run any over. It then sat there, idling, for some time. Robbie didn't know what to make of it. He felt if it was KCR a couple of men would've jumped out to inspect the area by now, but he was too afraid to chance it. His card left no details about his ride, no details on how to make contact. Daylight fell behind the pale green clouds that crawled above him. The first huffs of the oncoming storm blew sand and rocks against Robbie.

The 4Runner puffed a short honk from its horn. Robbie began to lift his knees, but hesitated. If this is KCR, he thought, there's no turning back. Another short puff of the horn came again and Robbie pushed his blonde head over the brush. He looked straight at the tinted driver's side window.

The window cracked itself open. "Burton?" a man's voice called. "Robert Burton?"

"Yes!" he shouted back. Robbie lowered himself so only his eyes remained above the bush.

"What's the third letter of the safe word?"

"P," he said. Robbie didn't recognize the voice asking the question. It didn't sound like Danny's voice. "P, as in *Papa*."

"What's your high school's mascot?"

"The *Rebels*. Is that you, Danny?" The window rolled completely down and Robbie stood up. A black man with a perfectly round head and bright, beaming eyes sat there smiling at him. "Who the hell are you?" Robbie demanded.

"Who the hell is *Danny*?" the man demanded back. His smile disappeared.

"My ride out of here," said Robbie. "But you're not him, so what gives?"

“Ah, I think got you. Is Danny about this high?” The man held his hand out the window near the top of his door. “And a bit pudgy ‘round the gut with a trimmed beard?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Yeah, I met him once awhile back.” The man’s smile returned. “His crew got me to come pick you up. You know I had to ask those questions to verify you, right?”

Robbie stood frustrated and confused from behind the bush. “No, this is not how this was supposed to go. And how do I know you’re not a guardsmen, or some hit man anyway?”

“Use the safe word, of course.” The man made a twirling motion with his fingers. “C’mon, baby, you know how this works.”

Robbie sighed. “What’s P plus L then?”

“Hmmm, there you go,” said the man. He tapped his chin and looked at the ground. Then he began counting on his fingers, his smile growing wider. “That’s good. Is it...ten?!”

Robbie ducked but then shot back up. “Yeah, ten,” he said.

The man grinned and shook his head. “You didn’t think I’d get it, I know. Baby, trust me, I’m part of the Sub-T and here to drive you to Houston, so please come take a seat already.”

A flash of light streaked across the sky behind Robbie before thunder ripped the air. Fat drops of rain began to pelt the dirt around him and sounded hollow thuds against the 4Runner. Robbie grabbed his backpack and dashed into the back seat behind the man. The cabin reeked of sour gasoline and artificial air freshener. Behind him in the cargo space sat two large, olive drab footlockers and two five-gallon gasoline jugs so old they had faded pink from their original ruby red color. Robbie could feel the metal frame of the seat bench under the cushions but welcomed the occasion to sit down after his long night of hiking. The man then turned the 4Runner around and started them out the way he came in. Sharp cracks and thuds sounded against the wheels.

“Lord forgive me,” the man whispered before a loud crunching noise churned from the wheels. “Nobody is perfect.”

“What happened to Danny?” asked Robbie. “He was supposed to pick me up.”

“My name is DeJon Heyward. It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Robert.”

Robbie sighed. He could see from the rear view mirror that DeJon was smirking. “Please call me Robbie. Robert’s for old guys. And I’m sorry and all, it’s just been a long night and morning. Like why would the pick-up be held at a killing field of all places?”

“First,” began DeJon, “the man you know as Danny isn’t actually named Danny. I know him by a different name, one that probably isn’t his real name either for his own safety and all. Now, your Danny couldn’t drive you because he got caught up in some other business, so he reached out to me ‘cause I just so happened to be in the neighborhood recruiting some boys to play football at our ward. Just so happens I owed him a favor. You want any coffee?”

DeJon lifted a green bullet-shaped thermos the size of his arm from the passenger seat and brought it toward Robbie, but he pushed back against it. Robbie kept his gaze out the window to the brush that lined the dirt road. In the days leading to this moment he had pictured how this trip would take place, first as a flipbook of crude pencil sketches before it developing it into a cinematic feature. DeJon’s arrival lit his visualization on faster than the KCR sacked Colorado Springs, and he felt very uncertain at how all of this would play out given DeJon’s appearance deep within KCR territory. He thought it was a miracle a black man was even able to drive freely in the Kingdom given the rumors he had heard, but Robbie knew the Sub-T had a reputation for a reason.

“Now as far as picking you up out here, it’s actually standard procedure.”

“Meeting at a mass gravesite is standard procedure?” Robbie shifted his glance back toward the rear view mirror. DeJon kept his eyes on the road but was no longer smiling.

“Yes, sir, it is. Did you notice how there really was no road leading in or out? How there was no fence or guard gate? No Kingdom presence at all. So why not take advantage of that?”

True, Robbie thought, there were no Guardsmen present, so that angle made sense. Yet something about an unguarded mass gravesite felt particularly off for him. “But why,” he stammered, “don’t they restrict access to an area that’s an atrocity? It’s a crime...against humanity!”

DeJon snickered. “They know they’re committing war crimes. Baby, I’d love to say they all have a guilty conscious toward their actions, and that they’re letting the dead lie, but it’s more than that. They’re actually removing all evidence it ever existed. If they aren’t there, then they were never there. Nature will cover everything up for them, eventually.”

Robbie nodded. “I see. I guess I wasn’t ready for all the bones then.”

“Yeah,” DeJon said. “That site looked pretty half-assed. You saw them bones because that grave was shallow. Those coyotes came on up from the prairie and had themselves a party, woo-ha!” He laughed. “There’s some fat coyotes wondering around these fields here plopping up and down with them bellies going plop-plop-plop!” DeJon held his arms out and gave a bouncing motion in his seat.

“People I’ve known who’ve gone missing since the KCR rolled into the Springs a month ago could’ve been there.” Robbie gave him a flat, incredulous face. “Shit, by hiking into that site I could’ve been snapping the bones of my buddies like twigs. Guys who were too injured or caught in the wrong moment probably ended up there or somewhere else.”

“Baby, I got you,” said DeJon. “I know you seen some hell and then some, but trust me when I tell you that a field of scattered bones is going to be the least of your worries where you’re going. You have much to fear from the living than the feelings of the dead you’re conjuring in your mind.”

Robbie nodded and genuinely understood the point DeJon brought forward, but what frustrated him was that DeJon didn't consider the paranoia he had felt from the previous evening into that morning—how he could've been followed and tracked as he left the sub development to get to his pick up point as well as all the theoretical situations that surfaced in his head when day broke. The living, breathing KCR Guardsmen did terrify him, and the specter of death lurked around each corner between fighting and then trying to blend in with everyone when he wasn't. The bones made the point that death was within reach more than tangible. He really wanted to make that clear to DeJon but Robbie fought back against his impulse to argue with him. Robbie knew DeJon could toss him on the side of the road or deliver him to the KCR with a bow wrapped around him if he pissed the man off enough.

“I got you,” Robbie said at last. “But is the Gallows Humor necessary?”

“Absolutely,” said DeJon. He raised a finger from the steering wheel and paused. “Baby, I'm a USMC vet, so I'm used to death. To make things a bit more bearable some of us like to make lightness from the darkness as a coping mechanism to make it to the end of the day.” He smiled at Robbie through the rearview mirror. “Now, while I know you're stressed and exhausted and new to this party, I can promise you this journey will be more enjoyable if you lighten up a little.”

The 4Runner slowed and DeJon took a right turn onto a coarsely paved road taking them east. Rain enveloped the world around them and Robbie felt as though he was back on the sea. He closed his eyes and fell into a turbulent sleep.