

**EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL *THE PLUNDERER'S DAUGHTER*, BY  
JACEK DUKAJ**

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Later she will remember that she knew this city - from her dreams. Its lights and shadows, unmistakable with any others, the forms of its buildings, raised before the beginning of time, the crunch of the dust beneath her feet as she walks its streets, even the scent of the air. Certain vistas evoked an especially powerful resonance. Had she not once gazed out from this very place and craned her neck just so? Beneath the Raven's Tower, on the Bridge of Turning Back, between the Dihedrons. Here. There. Standing, sitting, kneeling, reclining. Eyes open wide and mouth agape, facing the three suns, the five moons, the purple plains, the icy cemeteries, the smoke of the volcanoes, the black auroras - and those nameless, ancient metropolises to which the City ceaselessly clings. It clings, drifts, snuggles up longingly, bends down its body - an old invalid to the embrace of a child. It has forgotten its own name as well. Memory dies away first, and the remnants that persist, those intentional configurations of matter . . . who will decipher them? They call them archeologists but in truth they are builders of the past, artists of mysteries. Zuzanna has been carefully constructing her own mystery: these dreams - this was how her memories of earliest childhood were reflected, of when her father had taken her in secret on nocturnal excursions to the City. A black-bearded fat man with a little girl on his shoulders - they had wandered along these avenues and he had shown her, uncomprehending, the inhuman statues and the hermetic houses, the forbidden writings, the invisible paintings, the terrible landscapes of the universe. Now she is certain that this is how it was, how it must have been, her

dreams the final proof. The most treacherous archeology of all - the archeology of memory.

ON THE PEOPLE FROM LUDLUM.

ZUZANNA AND THE UNIVERSE.

Thirty hours later the City was still standing. They drove up to it in three cars. Of course she'd changed into her elven suit and at once her thoughts arranged themselves into elegant sentences and the Prince proudly raised his head. Ula was peeking through her fingers, covering her sad little face with both hands. Zuzanna's hands were obedient; they didn't even try to reach for the amulet. After thirty hours the jewel hadn't changed shape.

During the night the towering lights of the City had lured out a few old-timers from the nearby village. They were circling the City, smoking cigarettes, and telling each other in gloomy voices stories of the equally stunning absurdities they'd lived through in the time of This government or That. Zuzanna had circumnavigated the City already before dusk, trying to mark out the boundaries of the metropolis, or rather to set down on the map of the area the seam, the invisible scar, the transplantation line of the impossible into the possible. The task turned out to be surprisingly easy. She was expecting sophisticated obstacles, some new wonders along the way, while in fact it was an uneventful hour's walk. The thing was that the City apparently didn't confine itself to the several-kilometer ring she marked out between the woods, the fallow land, the little river and the dandelion-covered meadows. Because once you stepped onto the white streets and made your way along the avenues of mysteries - one kilometer, two kilometers, ten kilometers . . . the City was endless. She could go on and on like that, no end in sight, no hills of faded greenery on the horizon; this was no ring - it was infinity stitched onto an old state-owned farm in a 360-degree arc. Malena suggested topological experiments. Cut across the City along its chord, further and further, until you discover the warping point of space. Note down the boundary buildings from the outside so that you can go in and follow their trail along the internal ring: the City won't have the chance to unfold into infinity. "Or like," the preborn said excitedly, leaping from one mechanical sculpture to the next (the glass monstrosities transformed themselves at every touch, multi-ton masses snapping into ever new forms with a creak that made her skin crawl), "Or like Ariadne. You trail behind you . . ."

"Kamil has a GPS in the car," Zuzanna broke in. Kamil had a GPS in the car, but, completely outed on ubik, he had taken the Arafat and driven to Krakow to pick up some friends from Sidhe Inc. He called

Zuzanna every hour, asking whether "the phenomenon had disappeared," slightly offended, to judge from his tone, as if she had been responsible for the appearance of the City. (And hadn't she been?) Zuzanna fetched some blankets from Kamil's grandfather's place and laid out a make-shift bed for herself on the sterile pavement of the City, five meters from the boundary of the meadow, fragrant with warm hay, and beneath the left wing of a hunchbacked skyscraper (the skyscraper had wings in the most ornithological sense - after nightfall their white-feathered edges lit up, the wind rustled through them, whistling). Ula, sitting cross-legged on Zuzanna's chest, chewed the end of her braid. "I don't like any of this," she muttered. "What exactly are you waiting for? It's going to disappear; it has to disappear." Indeed, it was difficult to imagine that the City could stay there forever and ever. The world doesn't tolerate such wonders. We constantly hear about the Yeti or the Loch Ness Monster: they exist, they don't exist, or something in between, but ultimately we can't just go there and see them and touch them. The City had to disappear. In the meantime, she slept under the stars and under the white wing on the pearly avenue. She was awoken by a ringing bell and several telephone calls from Svetomil the Vague. The detective kept appearing and then melting back into the warm darkness, hardly uttering more than a few words at a time. For instance: "He knows some of the places from the pictures, he's admitted it himself, I've got him by the balls, we'll be there tomorrow evening." The stars were the Earth's stars; Zuzanna recognized Ursa Major, which was in fact the only constellation she was capable of recognizing. Ula, snuggled in between Zuzanna's neck and collarbone, whispered lullabies to herself in nonsensical alliterations. Klein awoke and fell asleep again. Asleep - awake - asleep - awake: always the City. Rrrrdoommmmm, rrrrdoommmmm, rrrrdoommmmm! At daybreak the local parish priest had appeared, without entering the City, taken some photographs and talked on an ancient mobile phone. She had passed him on her way to the village; they had exchanged brief pleasantries, both of them unaccountably awkward. After changing into her elven suit she had returned to the City - now she gazed at it, not as the victim of a monstrous marvel, but as a conqueror. She almost raised her arms and shouted: "Mine!" She was slowly beginning to comprehend her father's scrupulous mysteriousness. Every street, every building of the City was a secret awaiting its discoverer. Stepping onto the pearly avenue she felt the passion of a collector. Each thing may have but one discoverer, just as virginity may only be lost once; you can't turn the common and familiar back into the mysterious. In this irreversibility lurks something barbarous, an inhuman brutality. She entered the abandoned buildings/machines/sculptures with eyes wide open, cautiously placing one foot in front of the other, turning her head in all directions until her neck began to ache, view after view immediately converted into compact binaries and - thanks to the

somnambulin in her blood and brain - registered on the chthonic servers. Even Ula and Malena respected Zuzanna's silence. They would get bored soon enough, they would stroll into the shadow of alien monuments with jokes on their lips, with eyes distracted, and impatience in their movements. In the meantime, however, every building interior whose entrance Zuzanna discovered promised a new shiver of excitement, new wonders. Although time and time again they found nothing but empty space: nobody lived there - had they ever been intended for habitation? - well, perhaps; after all, she knew nothing about these beings - bloodsucking octopi! two-meter insects! little green men! organic mud! monsters, monsters, monsters! - she knew nothing and consequently she expected everything. In one of the asymmetrical towers (she was still afraid to climb higher than ground level, so she could only see the first floor) she stumbled across a complicated web of multicolored strings cutting across the interior in all directions and at all possible angles. She raised her hand and touched one of them. It vibrated and the light falling through cracks in the walls altered. She touched a second string, Malena screamed at the top of her voice, but Zuzanna touched it, and touched it again: vibration, a change of light, dust in the air. It seemed that she had skipped ahead several hours and that it was not just the air that these strings set trembling. Could it have been the web of some time spider, some chronopathic beast, which had once lived in this very tower? In the next ziggurat she found the crumpled-up wrapper of a Snickers bar. She thought to herself: they were here, they were here before me, fifteen or twenty years ago, when "live" industrial materials on cabalistic DNA were not yet widespread; this is plastic from my father's time, the City has already been discovered once before and now I -

Rrrrrdoommmmm!

They drove up in three cars: a Flugá, a Guliatí and a Ford. The latter - a cabriolet - was the Vague's vehicle, certainly no rental, with the original registration: 31415926. Night was already falling and the cars rolled onto the meadow in first gear, rocking over the uneven ground upon the trains of their own shadows. A local boy watched them from the stream, with a stalk of grass between his teeth and his hands stuffed in his pockets, his dirty shirt still shining with a Kult hologram. Svetomil had been with Zuzanna for some time now in an open stream and she came out to face them. They halted at the end of the pearly avenue; Svetomil jumped out first.

She didn't go down onto the grass, but waited within the boundaries of the City. They were her guests and they were to know it. She greeted the detective with a curt handshake. In reality - that is, in the body - he was just the same tiny redhead, he didn't even reach her shoulders. He blushed when Malena kissed him on the cheek.

"Listen," he began abruptly, sidling up closer to Zuzanna and in doing so turning his back on the people getting out of the cars, "This is a very serious guy, he had to outfox Werner as well, the retirement is a load of rubbish, he's earning money on the side at Chapeotoplex, a nine-figure chthonic company like that is no small fry, they chartered a Thunderbolt to hop across the Atlantic, the guys with him . . ."

"Jesus, Svetek, take it easy. You've told me that a thousand times already."

"Yes, but -"

The others entered the City. She'd had a good look at Eduardo Carbona in the Vague's recent sdreams. He was the oldest one, that is, the only one outside the neutral age bracket of twenty to forty-five in which, thanks to the Cabal and elven technologies, there was no way of ascribing any particular age to a body. By contrast, it was precisely these kinds of bodies that the other three possessed: two men and a woman. The woman walked on Carbona's left, whispering something into his ear. The men, on the other hand, were clearly trolls, either Chapeotoplex or hired.

Carbona broke away from his whispering advisor in two short steps.

"Miss Klein."

"Thank you for finding the time -"

"Forget about it." He took her by the arm. "Come, let's talk seriously."

She looked around at Svetomil. The woman was showing him some documents; his expression truly was vague. The trolls were standing by the windowless walls of buildings on either side of the avenue. They weren't wearing dark glasses but their eyes were just as plastic. She knew the stories: after intensive SEPV training a person supposedly wasn't capable of looking anybody "straight in the eye," even if his life depended on it. These two probably had to squint when they looked in the mirror.

"Miss Klein."

"Yes."

They walked on further down the avenue. After a few steps she deftly slipped out of the Latino's embrace. She had inserted kronite gluettes on three inch heels into her elven suit and as a result she was slightly taller than Carbona, which also counted for something.

"You knew my -"

Rrrrdoommmm!

"Strike, asshole."

"It's striking. What is it?"

He understood her question in a different sense.

"LG," he waved his hand. "Liebach-Galo. We're still breathing EQR, but this -,," he stamped his foot on the pearly pavement, "is pure LG."

"This city . . .?"

"Symmetry of form. We don't know whether that's the nature of LG or whether it's intentionally programmed like that."

"You? The Werner Institute?"

He shook his head impatiently, neither affirming nor denying.

"The Institute, Chapeotoplex, the Miners, the Terracotta Ministers, obviously the Pentagon. True, Galo worked for Werner."

"My father -"

Rrrrdoommmm!

"For God's sake, do you know what happened to my father? Jan Klein."

Carbona gestured with a flick of his head towards the City.

"And what could have happened? The same as always. Maybe they know something at the castle."

"Where?"

"Werner still holds it. The High Castle. Apparently you've seen it."

She changed the subject as quickly as she could.

"Why me? It's the jewel, isn't it?"

He stopped. She turned round, reaching for the necklace with her left hand.

He stretched out his arm.

"The jewel summons it," she said, bending down her head to examine the intricate mechanism frozen into form, bringing it out into the light from under the elven material. "Its configurations, the way it changes, that's what determines whether the City appears

or not. I just don't understand why it didn't work in Krakow, why it didn't work when it was lying in the safe . . ."

Carbona waited with his hand outstretched.

"It doesn't work like that," he said. "The component combinations only signal a change in state; they don't cause anything. Nevertheless, it's a priceless symmetry booster. Galo's First Law: LG attracts LG - but we always had to build ten-mile amplifiers just so that from time to time . . . And then this little gadget turns up here."

"So if it isn't the cause," she said, tightening her fingers around the jewel, "then why is it already the second time -"

"I'm asking you to give it to me."

"Why suddenly in the middle of such a shithole . . . It doesn't make any sense."

"I'm asking," he repeated patiently, in a quiet, mild tone.

"Oyoyoy!" squealed Ula.

Zuzanna backed off a step, her heel rapping against the smooth sidewalk.

"Hold it, I've got an open sdream here, so if you're planning any criminal threats I can file for damages right away for every word."

"But I'm asking." He hadn't altered his tone, he hadn't taken his eyes off her face. "Do you think that's why I flew all this way? To answer your little questions about your daddy? What do I care about the old graffiti from the fountain? But Mr. Vague gave a very precise description of this exotic piece of jewelry. Have you read the contract your father signed with the Institute? Everything he found in the course of his employment is the property of the Institute. I'm asking."

"Maybe," she muttered. "But he certainly didn't sign any contracts with Chapeotplex."

"Call the cops?" asked Malena.

"My dear girl, do you think this is enjoyable for me?" Carbona snorted with sudden irritation. "I haven't hired myself out as the bad guy, I don't want to frighten you. Perhaps you think the local police or your lawyers will protect you. Whole slums in São Paulo with millions of people living in them were bombarded to conceal the tiniest warp in the symmetry of the LG. Do you remember '43? You'd

have nothing to wear, nowhere to live, in all probability you wouldn't even exist in this world. Not to mention your sdreams."

"I can tell the whole world . . . !"

"And the others before you couldn't? Come on. Give it to me. You're a beautiful woman. I'll have nightmares about this. Well. I'm asking."

Ula burst into tears.

"I'm calling," snapped Malena.

Zuzanna looked round at Svetomil and Carbona's people. She could only see the woman, who was standing in the meadow just beyond the boundary of the City with a telephone to her ear and her eyes fixed on her feet. The trolls had disappeared somewhere. Only at second glance did Zuzanna notice what the woman was looking at - they were separated by more than fifty meters by now - namely, at Svetomil, who was lying flat on the ground, arms and legs spreadeagled, the edge of the pearly sidewalk and the red smudge of his hair veiling his face. He wasn't moving.

There was no point asking Malena: if Zuzanna herself hadn't seen it then Malena couldn't know what had happened over there either. Klein called Svetomil in the sdream. He didn't respond.

Rrrrrdoommmmm!

Eduardo Carbona still hadn't lowered his arm or closed his hand. He stared expectantly with sad eyes at Zuzanna.

"They have me in their sights, don't they?" she asked. "You really think that you have immunity."

"It's hard to believe in the reality of violence, isn't it? Especially for you, the young ones, safeguarded by the sdream from childhood and living the whole time as if in a dream." Suddenly with his left hand he seized her by the forearm, clenched his right hand into a fist, and then slowly, all the while staring Zuzanna in the eye and without feinting, raised his hand and punched the girl in the face. Hard.

She didn't even dodge - more than anything she felt amazement. At the last moment pure animal instinct took over and she involuntarily made a tiny movement of her head. The fist glanced off her cheek. Even so - pain, shock, an earthquake.

She didn't scream, she didn't falter, and she didn't loosen the tight grip of her fingers around the jewel - though Carbona wasn't trying to tear it away from her in any case. But she did lose her balance and so as not to fall over she struggled; he let her go. She

was panting heavily, frozen in mid-step by doubts awoken via involuntary associations from the movies: would the trolls simply shoot her down if she tried to escape? Her eyes were watering, she was blinking fast. And so it was only a second or two later that she realized the darkness wasn't coming from inside her. Darkness had truly fallen on the City and it was no effect of a sudden sunset.

Carbona wasn't looking at her now; he was looking around and cursing under his breath. She could see his outline but she couldn't see his face. There was no light here, perhaps just a weak, violet afterglow somewhere to the north, but not from the sky - since first of all she had looked above her: there was only starless blackness.

"It's disappeared," she whispered. "It's disappeared, hasn't it? Along with us."

Rrrrdoommmm!

"They said they'll be here in ten minutes," Malena announced. "I connected them on one-way - I guess you don't have anything against that? The psychologist from headquarters is on the line - should I let him in?"

"Why can I still see you?" muttered Zuzanna, gingerly touching her painfully pulsating cheekbone with her free hand.

"Just don't play the PTSD on me!" snapped Malena. "I recorded everything; you've got the son of a bitch by the balls."

"They'll arrive and nobody will be there, the City won't be there. Maybe Svetomil, if he's still alive . . ."

She concluded that Carbona was talking to somebody in his dream. The disappearance of the City had taken him by surprise too; doubtless an intensive teleconference had broken out between the Chapeotoplex bosses. Zuzanna couldn't have cared less. Should she run away? Where was she supposed to run to? Besides - there were the trolls. Doubtless they could see equally well in infrared.

"Zuza, Zuza," sobbed the teary-eyed Ula, tugging at her trouser leg, "They're going to kill us, aren't they? They're going to kill us. We've all disappeared anyway, so what do they care about the police . . . Now they won't even have to tear the necklace away from you; they'll just pick it off your corpse. Do something! Let's run away, Zuza!"

"Shhh . . .!"

But it could have been true. Although it wasn't out of the question either that Carbona simply had other things entirely on his mind at that moment, that now he was more worried about how to get out of the City.

She cautiously opened her fingers but it was too dark for her to make out any details of the shape - nevertheless she felt distinctly the rapid motion of the jewel, freed from her grasp, the "amplifier of symmetry," as Carbona had called it. Shmrtt, shmrtt! The jewel snapped into a new form. It's a delayed reflection of an already accomplished alteration, she thought. I won't force anything by any mechanical manipulation of the parts; at most I'll break it - and that would be a catastrophe in this situation. Because then how would we get back . . .?

"Carbona!" she snarled, raising her fist, once again tightly clenched around the jewel, to the level of her face. "I've just pumped myself up on somnambulin," she lied in a steady tone when he turned round to face her. "My programmed reactions are faster than thought. I've instructed my daemons: they'll smash this little toy in the posthumous reflex. You won't get out of here alive."

"For God's sake," bridled Eduardo, "Nobody wants to -"

"Yeaah, and the boxing lesson was just a little flirting to break the ice. Call them, right now. I want to see them here," she said, recalling Svetomil lying sprawled out on the grass. "I want to see them with their arms and legs spread, faces to the ground, both of them."

"You idiot -"

"Do it!"

Just in case, she backed off a few more steps; she couldn't make out exactly what he was doing - perhaps he was scratching his chin, but perhaps he was reaching for a weapon.

One, two, three, her heart was beating hard; she began to count as she waited, but -

Rrrrdoommmm!

So she began to count, one, two, three, five, ten; she was about to scream out another threat when Carbona murmured:

"They're coming."

"I'll give you that police negotiator after all," Malena decided.

Zuzanna didn't protest. The truth was that Miss Klein was petrified and she preferred not to say too much so as not to betray her fear by the tremor in her voice or by half a word swallowed in a breathless gasp. Everything was reaching her with a delay: the shock of the blow to the face, the tearing away of the City from the Earth, the threat to her life . . . even the heavy darkness now

enveloping the alien metropolis hadn't made an immediate impression on her. But eventually full consciousness of her predicament – that it was happening *for real* – broke through to Zuzanna and she began to repeat to herself in amazement: I may die here, I may die here, I may die here, I may die here. What good was the sdream? Among a crowd of friends and relatives, I will die here alone, in the great, dark City, I alone – and Carbona, and his trolls . . . An angry sob began to well up inside her together with an overwhelming desire to inflict pain on herself; she would bite into her tongue and make it bleed, bite into the inside of her cheek; let her feel it, she deserved it.

Rrrrdoommm!

She shuddered, jerked out of a state of catatonic terror. She gulped in the air – but still didn't succeed in saying anything; fresh waves of events were hitting her before the preceding ones had even broken, before she had even exhaled the air from her lungs.

One:

An avalanche of light, a shock and a dull boom, followed by a blast of hot air. She had to squint her eyes, against the light and against the dust; the vista reached her with some delay. First, the purple sky, low, sagging with plumlike puffiness right above the City. Then flashes over the horizon – stars? moons? airplanes? Then – between the buildings and in the prospect of the pearly avenue – images of the City, or of what it was imperceptibly turning into, side street by side street: the plain of an alien planet, partly built up, partly overgrown with wild, rust-colored vegetation.

Two:

An agitated mustachioed man in a sweat-soaked shirt with a police badge on his chest, trying at all costs to attract Zuzanna's attention, waving his arms, shouting "Miss Klein! Miss Klein!", all but yanking her by the shoulders. She instinctively shoos him away with movements of her hands, without even looking at him, like a bothersome fly.

Three:

Smells. Sounds. A momentary pain in her chest, vertigo and ominous lightness, an unburdening of her body, as if something had forcibly sucked Zuzanna into a land of weaker reality, into a sdream, into a dream, into a fairy tale. The aroma of burnt coffee, strong, driving through the sinuses to the brain. And a swoosh, a rustle, a choral whisper brought upon the wings of that hot wind, the echo of a distant cacophony. One involuntarily inclines one's head to catch the sound and the meaning of particular words. But these aren't words.

Four:

The trolls. They weren't in any hurry to answer Carbona's call; the purple sky found them walking at a slow pace a dozen or so meters away from Zuzanna. But then, as if at an unspoken signal - for perhaps it really was a familiar and anticipated signal to them - they lurched into a heavy trot, their broad shoulders swaying, and with their right hands drew ugly, angular pistols from their jackets, their coarse countenances frozen even further once they opened their eyes wide to make full use of their *Super-Extensive Peripheral Vision*, which didn't seem to focus on any specific object, just like blind people's eyes. With their left hands they reached into their pockets in a symmetrical movement and raised to their faces white symbiotic masks, which rapidly puffed out around nostrils and mouth into grotesque lumps, contrasting all the more with gray, mud-colored skin, truly befitting a troll. Evidently the Gene Cabalists had souped up the physical coordination of these security guards as well: before she'd even become fully aware of the reduced gravity Zuzanna noticed the change in their way of running. If they'd stumbled at least, or wavered - but nothing.

They passed her. One of them came to a halt beside Carbona, the other one only stopped at the wall of a building behind the Latino. They didn't look at Zuzanna, but this might just as well have indicated that she was the center of their attention.

Five:

Rrrrdoommmm!

"It's coming!" What came out of Carbona's mouth was more reminiscent of a screech; the sounds were absurdly high-pitched, the vowels drawn out. It was clear who he was talking to, who he was shouting at: not Zuzanna, but his trolls. He was looking to his left, towards the districts freshly stitched onto the City, towards the lights over the horizon; she couldn't see his face, but if she could have seen it, would she have met a look of terror? "It's coming!"

It was coming, she spotted it leaping out of an open gallery on the first floor of a squat building sixty or seventy meters down the avenue, from the south, from the rusty plain and the New City - it had come from there. They knew this because it was leaving a streak of blue behind it, a chemical afterglow suspended in the air long after its passing, sparser in places where it had been running, more intense where it had halted. The blue snake stretched out over the avenue a good half a kilometer. It must have run most of the distance. Sixty, fifty, forty meters: it swallowed up the space in long bounds, she couldn't tear her eyes away from it. Only now did she notice that the blue didn't come from its body or from its

clothing, but from the blade of a scythe: a long, horizontal ribbon flowing sinusoidally at head height in accordance with the rhythm of the man's steps - for it was a man - up and down, up and down. Once he shook the scythe, raising the other end of the handle, and then the trail of blue almost touched the pearly surface of the street. "Who is that?" murmured Malena. "Miss Klein, I must inform you . . .," insisted the policeman. "Let's get out of here!" wailed Ula. "Let's get out of here!" And all of them were standing motionless.

Rrrrdoommm!

"Shoot! What are you waiting for?" screamed Carbona.

"It's a phantom," responded one of the trolls in an equally high voice.

"But it's still treading the ground, isn't it? Maybe something will get some purchase. Come on!" Then he turned round to Zuzanna. "You! You ! Get back, right now!"

Involuntarily she squeezed her hand even more tightly around the amulet. She felt the delicate pressure of its tiny mechanisms; it was trying to change its shape to reflect the new position of the City - or whatever its form was really reflecting - but she didn't let it.

The trolls were shooting; short bursts of machine-gun fire ripped through the monumental silence of the City - trrroottt, trrroottt, trrroottttttttt! They changed their magazines in alternation, first one, then the other; the empty cartridges clattered at their feet.

The Blue Reaper was still running, she saw the flashes of bullets ricocheting off the walls behind his back - the bullets passed through him as if through smoke, zero interaction; after all, even a single bullet would have mangled him had it touched his body. Perhaps he didn't have a body? If not, if he was entirely permeable, then what were they afraid of? He wouldn't even touch them.

"You don't want to? You can't?" hissed Carbona at Zuzanna.

She just backed further away from him.

"I hope you burn in hell, Zuzanna Klein," he muttered, before turning on his heel and moving off at a run towards a narrow passage between the neighboring building-machine and building-sculpture.

The trolls didn't even watch him go - they stood and fired.

The Reaper was twenty meters away. The blue blade was straight - the line of an invisible rupture from which the color poured out. If it weren't for that they would only have been able to see the

black, metal rod in the phantom's hands, the handle of the Scythe. Perhaps the blade was so thin that it was invisible, perhaps it was slicing through space itself, and the blue gushing out of it -

Rrrrdoommm!

"He'll cut your head off," said Ula.

Zuzanna took flight.

After a few steps she almost stumbled; her body didn't weigh as much as it ought to have weighed. She had to slow down and unstick her shoes from her feet. She ran on barefoot. The pearly sidewalk was very cold. Before long she felt short of breath; this air, although it was thick, didn't offer enough oxygen - what poisons made it so dense? Even the sound of her panting breath was different.

She looked behind her - at just the wrong moment. The phantom had already sliced through one of the trolls, from collarbone to pelvis, and he was just swinging - suspended in mid-air in a three-dimensional calligraph of death, an intricate ideogram of blue - to bisect the other one. The slashing blow delivered from this Möbius missed the troll by a hair's breadth; the security guard dodged, rolled over twice to his left and changed magazines again. Trrroottttttttt! The Reaper jolted back, a one-inch hole appeared at his chest through his white t-shirt, he dropped to his knees - but he didn't relinquish the scythe.

Zuzanna didn't await the result of this duel; she ran on. She knew that in these conditions - on this planet - she couldn't sustain any prolonged effort; she was already experiencing dizziness. But she wanted at least to vanish from the Phantom's sight. She turned the corner after a two-second obelisk (it appeared and disappeared every two seconds, a glowing pyramid of celadon-colored stone), sprinted another dozen meters or so, and hid herself in the dark, damp interior of a spiral tower. It was overgrown with iron flowers with petals like razor blades. She moved back by the wall so as not to cut herself. Immediately it became apparent that she would have to lean up against the wall. She folded up her legs and sat down flat, dirtying her elven pants in the rusty dust. Leaning over her were Malena, the police psychologist and Kamil - what was he doing here? who had let him in? Malena? I'll remove her authorizations! - stretching their hands out to her, saying something. She couldn't hear them, the blood was roaring in her ears. She wasn't in any state to say anything herself either, while she spasmodically sucked in the air, still out of breath, dark stains drifting before her eyes. Jesus, this was really no atmosphere for human beings. She barely managed to raise her arm to cradle Ula, who had clambered up onto her lap and was now staring up

with wide-open eyes, terrified, at Zuzanna's sweat-streaked face. In the entrance to the tower the shadows were seething – from the hot wind and the mist of fine dust it carried, or perhaps the Reaper had come for her? The black razor blades rustled with sudden hope. Zuzanna panted despairingly, helplessly bowing her head; she couldn't even see Ula now, it was getting darker, she was falling into the depths, into the darkness. Shshrshcht . . . Somebody touch me, for the love of God, this isn't a dream . . .!

Into the darkness.

Rrrdoommmm!

"She's conscious, I can feel that she's woken up."

"Zuza! You're coming back!"

"Slap her, it'll get through to her now."

Zuzanna opened her eyes and began to blink, bedazzled.

"Breathe slowly," advised Malena.

"You've lost fourteen hours," said Svetomil, kneeling down over Klein. "We have to establish a few things quickly."

"I'm going to throw up," murmured Zuzanna. "What kind of light is that?"

"How are we supposed to know? You can't see it yourself."

"Probably the suns have come up," offered Malena.

"What suns?"

"Sweet Jesus, will you finally wake up?!"

Svetomil handed her a thick file of documents.

"Here, we won't waste time on chatter."

"You're alive."

Malena slapped Zuzanna across the cheek with two swift, backhanded blows.

Klein shoved her away, sending her flying into the thicket of razor-blade roses, and the Scorpion injected Zuzanna with a small dose of satisfaction.

The preborn picked herself up, not even pretending to be injured.

"Right. Are you listening to me?"

Zuzanna slowly stood up, brushing off her suit and rubbing her aching back.

"How many of you are there here?" she said, looking around the ground floor of the tower. "Have you been hanging around me this whole time?"

"We didn't know when you'd come round," said Kamil. "Or whether you would at all. The gentlemen from the Lipszyc legal office would like to -"

The gentlemen stepped forward.

"Just a minute." Zuzanna counted the screaming apparitions crowding around her. "Eighteen! For heaven's sakes, do you think I'm some kind of mutant . . .?" A shudder ran through her. "Brrrr, why is it so cold here?"

"We're not freezing."

The papers that Svetomil had brought shrank several times in format when Ula picked them up. She read them, flipping rapidly through the pages. Zuzanna vacantly tousled her hair.

"Let's get out of this tomb."

Before she'd even left the tower she knew for certain that another change had taken place while she'd been lying unconscious. It wasn't just the temperature that was different, but the taste of the air as well, the pitch of the sounds, the weight of her body. She didn't even have to check the amulet.

They emerged into the light. The white-blue hemisphere of a planet filled half the sky over the City; cold light poured out over the streets and squares. Zuzanna placed her hands over her chest and hunched up her shoulders. The sight was too overwhelming, such a gigantic mass had no right to be hanging over the horizon; it was an image of cosmic catastrophe, a thing altogether unnatural. And where was the City supposed to be located now? On the moon of this giant? On some kind of artificial satellite? Why didn't the vacuum suck the air out of it? It had to be a sizeable object, especially considering that gravitation was stronger here than on the previous planet with the purple sky . . .

The riddle absorbed her so completely that she forgot about the Blue Reaper entirely and it was only when she came out upon the intersection - where, looking up the empty, quiet, windless and shadowless avenue of the City, she saw the four halves of the trolls' bodies piled into one bloody heap, still clad in their dark suits - it was only then that she panicked and those thoughts returned: I may die here, I may die.

Yet the Reaper was nowhere to be seen. Could he really have gone after Carbona? Either way, so much time had passed that if he'd wanted to catch Zuzanna he would have done so long before.

"Do you remember which way to the fountain?" she asked Ula. "I've got a horrible taste in my mouth."

Ula pointed the way without a word and -

Rrrrdoommmm!

"You have no idea what's been going on here," Kamil whispered into Zuzanna's ear, slipping his arms around her from behind. "You need to talk with the lawyers pronto. And above all to get yourself out of there sooner rather than later. The longer -"

"You don't think I want to?" she muttered.

"Hmmm, frankly speaking, I have my doubts. You seem rather fascinated."

"But did you have to let so many people in here? You know I don't have the head for such strong sdreams. As for suing Carbona - is there any point now? I guess the son of a bitch is dead." She nodded in the direction of the scythed-up trolls.

"You don't get it. You've been accused of more than a dozen serious crimes, mainly on the EU anti-terrorist conventions. All up it's more than a hundred years in prison. Since you can't be located they're rustling up an APB. You've got to give yourself up as soon as possible. The Lipszyc lawyers are negotiating the terms of surrender, otherwise God only knows what might blow out of this business. Zuzanna, this is a serious matter."

She twisted round in his arms, too astonished to spit out the joke on the tip of her tongue, but at a single glance she realized that he was speaking with absolute seriousness. She closed her mouth. Behind his back she could see the remaining guests of her sdream desperately seeking eye contact with her; probably every one of them had something of the utmost importance to tell her but clearly they were afraid she would disconnect them if they began to impose themselves. Some of them were looking at her with genuine apprehension: the lawyers, the deputy director of Lich Corp., an unfamiliar woman in a light-colored uniform, the policeman . . . Only Malena remained ostentatiously indifferent; she was looking around the City, staring at the sky.

"Let me guess what they want," whispered Zuzanna, unconsciously reaching for the amulet.

"Hmmm?"

Something warm and moist ran down her lips and chin. She stepped away from Kamil, pinching her nostril with her fingers and tilting back her head.

"I knew it," she began to grumble. "You thought I was drawing somnambulin from my bone marrow? And who started all that? Malena, you idiot, I'll never give you authorization again. Goddammit, any minute now - *khochhh, khirlll!*" She spat furiously, choking on blood.

From under half-lowered eyelids she watched as they melted into the air, slowly, but inexorably. At first the city just showed up faintly through their silhouettes, but before long certain parts of their bodies - legs, torsos - were not visible at all. The faces always faded last, since they were the most detailed.

And only in that moment did the real significance of being deprived of the possibility of dreaming somnambulin dreams dawn on her. In theory she understood it very well, but this was yet another one of those things she couldn't bring herself to fully believe - on the most fundamental level, the subrational. That she would be left alone. Alone in the City, alone in the universe. A shudder ran through her.

They - who would never freeze - quickly understood what was happening and moved towards her, shouting and making furious faces. Some of them simply seized her by the arms, wrenched her, jerked her round towards them, one group against another. But gradually the power of touch leaked out of them too, in the end it was barely caresses - they dissipated like ghosts in the morning. Zuzanna was left alone on an intersection of the City's broad avenues, beneath the monumental ice planet, with blood on her face, hands and jacket, violated by spirits, disoriented and shivering with cold, real or imagined. She breathed through gaping mouth, spitting and wheezing. A cold brightness washed into her from the horizon, in spite of her tightly closed eyes.

"Come on," said Ula, tugging at her sleeve. "You can wash over there."

Rrrrdoommm!

And so Zuzanna Klein found herself in exile. Banished from the known world and condemned to this unknown one, she would comprehend it or perish. At first impulse she was far from cursing her own stupidity, nor did she denounce Eduardo Carbona *et consortes* as monsters and murderers, she didn't cry, she didn't go into hysterics, she didn't take pity on herself. Because in the very beginning there was a shiver of exhilaration, a kind of childish excitement, which she herself did not fully understand.

It was exhilarating for the very same reason that it was terrifying: the threat of death. From here on everything would depend on her: she would save herself or she wouldn't. Or else it would depend on fate: perhaps there was simply to be no deliverance for her at all. But nobody else could help her and every suffering – including death itself – would be authentic.

The game starts from level zero.

She possesses:

- 1) a body;
- 2) a mind;
- 3) an elven suit;
- 4) shoes;
- 5) a telephone (useless);
- 6) an ipso ring;
- 7) her father's amulet;
- 8) Ula.

Number of extra lives: zero.

Save and restore to earlier state: Off.

So she had been granted precisely what she had always somehow longed for, even as she was making her way to the Rotterdam bank or descending into the Krakow catacombs of Abominado: the chance of real adventure. For the emotions to be real the risk had to be real too. The greater the risk the more adrenalin in the veins. Why else did people stake all their possessions on a single card at the casino? There was a limit to possible engagement when it came to sdream games, films and computer simulations: the fear was weak, so the joy and relief were weak too – a very shallow imprint in the psyche. The greatest plague for Generation T was not drugs or ipsators at all, but extreme sports that verged on Russian roulette. Zuzanna had never gone in for them herself, yet she understood the desire; she shared with those others the need for the *thrill*, the ultimate strain on body and mind, after which nothing could be the same again. And now, looking about the quiet, empty, alien City, a tiny figure in an overwhelming stage set, she shivered not from cold alone.

She would never be able to look at it without that sense of reverent awe, of wholly religious humility. An unbeliever – at the sight of the City and face to face with the wild,

incomprehensible universe - she experienced feelings close to mystical raptures.

Not angels, not the blood of saints, not relicts or sites of agony, but these monuments of otherworldly mysteries will be for Generation T the equivalent of the *sacrum*: things belonging in their essence to a higher, nobler world, the very sight of which takes the breath away, quickens the pulse, brings a blush to the cheeks.

Not the blessed martyrs, but aliens - real aliens - once walked these streets. As if for signs of theophany, Zuzanna looks for the testimonies of their civilizations, the effigies of their bodies. The sculptures suspended in air - made of stone, water, gas, crystal, and other materials dead, alive, and lifelike - depict creatures that might be intelligent beings, but might also be nothing but the fantastical creations of their minds. How to recognize a fantasy dreamed up by beings who until recently have themselves belonged exclusively to the realm of science fiction? Sci-fi by aliens: an insult to the intelligence and imagination of man.

Not miracles or the will of God, but million-year-old technologies, inhuman sciences devised and forgotten before the birth of *homo sapiens*, knowledge not intended for our minds - these have raised the City and all the other cities it snuggles up to at one of Zuzanna's piercing screams. She would question miracles, she would rebel against miracles, but she accepts the science of interstellar monsters with jaw dropping and heart aflutter. These megaliths rising above and plunging below the surface of reality in faster and faster rhythms, in motion, thus somehow alive, thousand-ton statues, maybe even machines, the insides of machines shifting the City through the universe . . . This architecture of warped gravitation, spirals of stairs creeping along parallel with the ground, and when Zuzanna steps onto them the ground seems to resist the laws of gravity, since up and down are always where the builders of the City wished them to be . . . These elven gardens suspended in mid-air on invisible shelves, these constructions with the lightness and composition of French pastry, this xenobaroque in the clouds . . . These mosaics of time and space, for the most part locked in dark rooms, under ceilings so high that her eyes cannot reach them, or so low that she cannot stoop beneath them - here anything can happen . . .

Not the revealed truths and words of the Holy Spirit, but the histories of long dead cultures and worlds - this is what Zuzanna tries to read, gazing from under furrowed brow at secret writings, writings on the walls, on the sidewalks, in the water, the smoke and the light, with a persistence and fascination worthy of a first-year Torah student. And perhaps she will come to understand by touch, perhaps she will work it out as she moves her finger tips across the

great glyphs pressed into the kronite clay, perhaps the white lightning of illumination will strike her as she falls asleep and awakes with the image of the Writing under her eyelids? She falls asleep.

Sometimes she succeeds - across the abyss of time and the even greater chasm of alien-ness - in gaining an intimate glimpse into the life and nature of the past inhabitants of the City; or at least she senses this intimacy. When she examines the remnants of domestic appliances, the clutter of a place of work or play frozen forever, when she kneels down over a tiny skeleton, complete even in the absence of spine or skull, when in vivid paintings she counts the moons and the shadows of beings wrapped in whirlwinds of colorful materials - perhaps it was they who once lived here, or perhaps she is looking at their cherubs, their devils, their Winnie the Poohs? The colors in these pictures and frescos come together to form absurd compositions, nothing here makes sense to the human eye: the suns are just as likely to be black, the shadows white. Perhaps the chaotic scribbles, the tangles of lines and senseless stains overlapping with one another appear as precise holographs only in the stereoscopic vision of eyes endowed with just the right inter-ocular distance and sensitivity. Doubtless at every step Zuzanna is passing lavish galleries of alien art, entirely imperceptible to the senses of animals like her.

None of this gives her any basis for generalizations about the inhabitants of the City; she can say nothing certain about them - that they were this, that, or the other. In fact, she can only say for sure that any generalization at all would be falsehood here. The eclectic nature of the City isn't random. More than one race has lived here, more than one species; aliens from all the planets among which the City has drifted have lived here - Zuzanna is sure of this. Perhaps not all of them at once, perhaps not all at the same time; and what about those in need of different atmospheres? - it's almost strange that so far she hasn't been drowned by methane seas or choked by ammonia suspensions . . . But this has been the place of their coming together, the capital of the universe. Now human beings are living in it.

In the end, the whole game came down to this: to find the inhabitants, somebody to whom she could surrender, and then to buy her way out of death at any price. Already, after a day of wandering around the Bell District (she had found Eduardo Carbona's decapitated body two side streets along), all her excitement with the adventure had vanished somewhere, the intoxicating taste of freedom had ceased to intoxicate her, and Zuzanna was beginning to seriously consider whether she might not have fallen victim to a family curse: the latest Klein into whose grave they would lay an empty coffin, since the body had been devoured by Mystery.

One of two things: either she would find a way to return to Earth or she would find a food source. She gave herself no more than two weeks; she had never studied Prana techniques. After that, well, she would have to select a method of swift and painless suicide. For instance, a leap from the top of one of these towers. Or a shot to the temple with one of the trolls' pistols. She searched the bisected corpses and even wanted to take a weapon with her, but it was so heavy and cumbersome . . . Zuzanna didn't fancy herself with a pistol in her hand.

From the beginning she had assumed that the most sensible idea would be to concentrate on the problem of bringing the City back to Earth; at least she was sure that this was possible, while she saw no reason for which any of the flora and fauna represented in the City or any of the other worlds attracted to it should turn out to be compatible with the physiology of *homo sapiens*.

So how could she gain control over the City, even temporarily? The first principle of rational inquiry: look for repeating relations and patterns, set up a Correlation Table in your head. This is how we decipher reality. Perhaps we don't discover fundamental laws like this, but we come to recognize, and - more importantly - we learn to make use of, the regularities that are their direct and indirect consequences.

So then: what other change always accompanied a change in the City's location? To what "LG symmetries" was it attracted? (She didn't wish to be influenced by Carbona's words; he might have been lying, she might have heard something wrong, remembered something wrong. And yet, so far only Carbona had offered her the words with which to name these unnameable things. She didn't understand them, but at least they could somehow tame this reality of wonders, soothe her with their scientific aesthetic).

The simplest, most instinctive speculation dictated that she look for relations between the position of the City in the universe and the present combination of the amulet's component parts. But such a relation failed to emerge. The jewel very infrequently and very briefly froze into permanent forms; usually it spun around loosely on all its axes under the influence of gravity alone, so that it was enough to jolt it even slightly. And when the City drifted off to another place Zuzanna was never manipulating the jewel in any special way; sometimes she was holding it tightly in her hand at the time, immobilized - there was no correlation there.

So if it really did serve merely as a "symmetry booster," then the relation must exist outside it. Ula asked Zuzanna questions, trying to help her identify the pattern. What point of the compass where you facing? Were you sitting, standing or lying down? And the

amulet - how was it positioned? Were you touching it, was it touching your skin? What was the temperature, the humidity, the time of day, the height above sea level? Zuzanna could see more and more clearly that this was leading nowhere. Ula, on the other hand, wouldn't give up. What were you saying at the time?

Perhaps it reacted to words. Think: what were you saying? The problem was that while the City had been shifting - for instance, to its location under the white-blue planet with the cold light - Zuzanna had been unconscious: she hadn't been saying anything.

Still they followed this lead. It wasn't words. But was it connected with Zuzanna in any way? After all, the whole time it was reposing in the Abominado safe the amulet hadn't worked at all - perhaps it simply hadn't had anything to boost.

Most importantly, why had father left it there? Perhaps precisely in order to "switch it off"; perhaps the jewel wasn't steerable, that is, not the jewel, but the very process of "symmetry boosting" or whatever it might be called . . . Perhaps father had had enough of the City suddenly springing up under his nose? In any case, this booster was clearly of great value to the initiated - perhaps it had been the reason for Jan Klein's death?

Okay, the process did not entirely submit itself to control. So what could the relation be? Zuzanna had already fallen asleep and woken up five times in the City, each time finding a different sky upon opening her eyes. What was happening while she was asleep?

Ula urged her to test out a hypothesis, namely, to put the jewel away while she slept, hiding it somewhere in a neighboring building. Zuzanna objected at first. "These are silly fears," said Ula. "Who would steal it?" "The Reaper," muttered Zuzanna. "The Reaper would take a lot more than that," Ula retorted. Eventually Zuzanna gave in. For the first time in a long while she fell asleep without the burden of the latticework design between her breasts. A procession of orange moons was making its way across a lilac-colored sky veiled by the smoke of volcanoes as she closed her eyes; the same moons were climbing from below the opposite horizon when she opened them again.

So it worked! She put the necklace back on as fast as she could. Raising the jewel (it was spinning freely, shifting its shape), she bit her lip in thought. What exactly do I do in my sleep? Do I toss from side to side, do I whisper magic words, do I unconsciously grasp and squeeze the amulet?

"But why do you think that you have to be *doing* something?"

"So now you're telling me it works entirely at random?"

"No. But if you fly in your sleep, then you don't really do anything, do you?"

Peering suspiciously at Ula, Zuzanna quickly ran over the history of the City's ebbs and flows so far in her mind. Her own dream she obviously did not remember (in any case, one remembers at most those final dreams just before the moment of waking), but the events in the cemetery and in the meadow of the old state-owned farm, and then here in the City - by all means. Was there some kind of common characteristic across all her mental states in those moments? No.

"Are you sure?"

Perhaps not a common characteristic, but Zuzanna realized that these had always been states of high energy, agitation, the vibration of fervent thoughts. And therefore her dreams - in her dreams it must have been the same . . .

"But no, that doesn't make any sense. After all, in Krakow I didn't take it off at nighttime either."

"But was the threat of starving to death hanging over you then? Were you desperately searching for salvation and a way of escaping from the labyrinth of the universe? Were you having these nightmares?"

Zuzanna shot a frown at Ula.

"And how would you know what I dream?"

The little girl lost her self-assurance. She dropped her eyes and began to pick at the hem of her dress.

"I sleep too," she murmured. "It . . . leaks through."

Zuzanna didn't ask what.

The obvious next step was the attempt to summon analogical states of mind and to induce the "LG symmetry" that would take the City back to Earth. Zuzanna regretted right away that her ipsator wasn't a classic masturbatory ipsator: that might have been the easiest way to build the symmetry. (She wondered half musingly what this LG could really be if you had to reach it by way of sexual ecstasy - some kind of tantric fluid?) But in the conditions at hand it was incomparably easier for her to infuriate herself to the point of cold hysteria - she had never before experienced such bestial fury - than it would have been to muster any arousal. It was easier and quicker each time she tried it; she could almost feel the Scorpion's venom coursing through her veins.

So she succeeded: with a dull earthquake, in hurricanes of hot and cold, fragrant and foul-smelling winds, at her demented scream – the skies over the City changed, suns and moons appeared and disappeared, along with stars, artificial constructions of astronomical size, geometrical patterns over the horizon of ice, stone and mysterious materials of civilizations that had perished millions of years before.

The first time, teetering on the brink of depression and already holding a shard of stained glass from the street as sharp as a razor against her wrist, she galloped on the back of the City through dozens of planets and a half dozen places that weren't planets. To the rhythm of her ear-shattering lament the fearful landscapes of the universe stretched out before her, one after another. Ula squeezed her eyes shut tight and blocked her ears. The hand with the crystal trembled as it pushed the jagged blade deeper into the skin. Would she really be capable of slitting her veins? Well, that was what the game was all about: if it hadn't been happening for real, if Zuzanna had only been *pretending*, the jewel wouldn't have had anything to boost. That was the difference between an adventure and a sdream about an adventure.

She had succeeded, but this didn't bring her any closer to solving the actual problem. As far as she could tell, the places attracting the City were purely random; she could perceive no regularity that she might then have been able to use to bring it back to Earth, no regularity besides the fundamental one: namely, that they were always much the same urban areas, the City stitching itself into other cities, and they were districts of almost identical architecture, so that the transitions were sometimes impossible to discern. The "symmetry of form." Only when Zuzanna summoned the City from without did it cease to matter: it appeared wherever she happened to be, where it had to appear. It was no surprise then that the amulet positively whirled and quivered in her hand.

Then Zuzanna conducted another experiment, though Ula advised her against it. The experiment demanded a long and exhausting march. (By this time Zuzanna was struggling with constant hunger cramps in her stomach, periodic drooling and a nauseating taste in her mouth). She left the City, left the streets, covered with coarse-grained sand, of the crumbling metropolis to which the City had attached itself, onto which it had projected itself like a hologram on a hologram. The weathered stone road led on into the depths of a desert of black dunes and white rubble. Zuzanna stuck her shoes back on – the eroded surface was hurting the soles of her feet. She wanted to go far enough that the City would disappear from view, which turned out to be a task practically beyond her strength. In the end she didn't have to work up the hysteria inside her

artificially; black despair rolled over her in a giant wave, and Klein sat down in the filthy dust, not even looking to see whether the City was creeping after her like a faithful dog or not; she didn't touch the amulet - she knew from the cool of the shadow that suddenly broke over her.

In spite of everything, it was a precious ability; she could now leave the boundaries of the City without fearing that she would be lost in some corner of the universe forsaken by God and aliens, thousands of galaxies from home.

So she began to explore the ruins - they were invariably ruins, in better or worse states of preservation, younger or older - which, as it appeared, always surrounded the City, regardless of what district she exited or onto what planet. She abandoned the Bell District, though until then she had tried not to stray too far away from it. Fate had decided for her: when summoned from without, in defiance of the symmetry of form, the City never appeared in the same way; fate had decided, or perhaps some malicious intelligence of the City's. Or perhaps it was simply so vast that statistics forbade random repetitions: she would never hear the Bell again.

So she wandered across deserted planets, wandered across the deserted City, and there was a double purpose to these wanderings, since having once understood the principle of symmetry she was desperately searching for similarities with earthly architecture, knowing that agglomerations attracted to an Earth-like district of the City would have the greatest chance of actually turning out to be metropolises of the Earth.

The rules of Hysterical Roulette were the following: first, exit the City, climb a nearby hill and wait there for the most familiar sight to appear in the kaleidoscope of frantic urban landscapes; second, from inside the district spin the Roulette Wheel once again, selecting from the infinite resources of the cosmos those cities best matching the district. Periodically it would be necessary to return to step one: by summoning the City to an already more Earth-like planet we can reduce even further the range of architectonic forms. And so on, until success. Theoretically, Zuzanna ought to hit upon the Earth in a finite time - the problem was how long that time would be.

Ula urged her to diversify her strategies. "First of all," she explained, "food sources may be found within the City itself." She dragged Zuzanna into every construction they passed.

"What do you expect - a supermarket, the Garden of Eden, a French restaurant," grumbled Klein.

Ula didn't back down; over time she had become considerably more stubborn.

"But don't you remember the Snickers wrapper?" she pressed. "They were here a long time ago."

All the same, a certain risk lay hidden in this: every fountain or water sculpture might turn out to be filled not with regular H2O but with poisonous liquid, so that it was wiser to stick to an already tested source. Still, Zuzanna needed to drink.

The instructions were contradictory: to wander, not to wander.

She wandered. Her legs hurt - her thighs, her calves, her feet. She walked barefoot, sticking on the high-heeled gluettes only when it was absolutely necessary. She cursed her choice of footwear now - elegance was a luxury for the safe and sated.

"Up. Look up," repeated Ula. "Raise your eyes, I won't see it in the reflections of your fingernails."

Cut off from her server, Zuzanna clearly couldn't search through the scans of past events - she reached into her own memory, the most unreliable. The Castle, the High Castle, Carbona had said. The Castle had also showed up in that sprayed-on inscription. *Apparently you've seen it.* Where and when could she have seen it? All that came to mind was the fortress in the sky that she'd spotted in the distance during the City's first manifestation at the cemetery. So it must have been the conspirators' headquarters. Now it was all the same to her: she would give herself up to them, give up the jewel, if they would only show themselves! She was searching for them so that she could capitulate.

Oddly enough, she was not in the least bit concerned about the chance of stumbling across the Blue Reaper. It was as if his sparing of her life back then - for he had spared her life: he could easily have tracked her down and killed her, unconscious, but he hadn't done so - meant immunity for life from the scythe of the Phantom. If the truth be told, right now she would have greeted even his appearance with relief: she would have gone to him humbly with head bowed and asked for aid. Or at least that's how she planned it, nodding off with exhaustion under yet another sky - though all three daemons rebelled against the image, even Athena, excessively proud as she was.

When she spotted the round-bellied helicopter, flying low in the sky over the tops of the asymmetrical skyscrapers, she was already so weak (she'd just fainted) that she didn't believe her own eyes. A hallucination, she thought. Especially since the machine was changing color as it flew, its camouflage armor-plating striving to melt into the ever-changing background. Perhaps Zuzanna simply yearned so strongly to see a chameleonic helicopter that a gleam of light and some tiny swirls of color were enough . . .

Ula, on the other hand, was in no doubt.

"Come on, get a move on!" she said, tugging at Klein. "Don't pretend to be dying."

"I should be able to hear it . . ."

"It's military - you wouldn't hear it if it landed inside a church."

"Okay, so where are you dragging me, where?" Zuzanna snapped with irritation. "How do you know where it's flying?"

Indeed, they couldn't know. In the end they decided that if it didn't reappear within the next hour that would have to mean it was making for the Castle; no matter that it wasn't necessarily flying in a straight line. Since it didn't appear they set off after it.

It was a march of nearly twenty kilometers, Zuzanna's head was spinning, she knew that if she stood still, sat down, or stumbled, then she would never pick herself up again. The suns were setting (so slowly that it was almost imperceptible), she searched in the golden-brown light for the angular stains of a shadow, a fortress suspended over the horizon - without success. Neither did she notice that she had left the City and was now hobbling along on an alien planet through the debris-littered streets of an inhuman metropolis wasted by time. She was still moving only because she weighed half as much here. The air had an acidic taste; it hurt her throat. She stared vacantly ahead; she stared, unseeing. Ula - bodiless, untiring, ever curious about the world - comprehended first.

"Here! Do you see? It's their work!"

They had reached the site of the excavations.

Scaffolding was still standing within the crater, dead floodlights hung in even-numbered clusters from the slender arms of kronite cranes and trusses, even the excavator, since it had grown out of elven technologies, was light and delicate, with a latticework maw and a rickety foot; on its side gleamed a large yellow WI logo: *Werner Institute*.

Zuzanna felt the tears spring to her eyes at the sight; immediately the Scorpion stung her with burning humiliation. She shuddered and began to descend towards the white buildings squatting on the slope above the largest ring of the excavations. On the door an identical logo could be seen.

At first she looked about anxiously, keeping her eyes peeled for the Wernerites or any sign of activity, but the atmosphere of the place soon weighed down upon her: silence like in the classic horror films, a deserted outpost abandoned years before, the only

hint of life a lone weathercock rattling in the gathering gusts of wind. It was true that the helicopter had been flying in this direction, and perhaps even right here, but the landing pad above the crater lip was empty, only the pale-colored dust whirling over its surface.

What had they been excavating here? It was apparently a natural crater, meaning that it had been formed as a result of some ancient explosion rather than by systematic archeological works. The sides dropped down too violently, but then the local gravity had to be taken into account. Zuzanna almost ran down the kronite-coated path, which curled down in a spiral towards the center of the caldera, plunged in darkness. The three setting suns threw shadows from one lip to the other; Zuzanna had to strain her eyes, so that she was even less certain of the reality of what she was seeing. From below the surface of the ground, which was the color of vanilla blancmange, erupted the eviscerated bodies of gigantic buildings/machines/sculptures/corpses, arranged in a vast geometric pattern - something between a diabolical pentagram and an angular fractal.

The door to the building opened with a slight shove, creaking plaintively. Ula went in first. On the left she found a cloakroom and a large mirror hanging on the wall. How ugly I am, thought Zuzanna indifferently: filthy hair, ravaged skin, protruding cheek bones, stooped over like an old woman. Only the suit was impeccable. She turned her eyes away and hobbled further into the building - if only there was some kind of a kitchen, a larder; after all, they'd had to eat something and surely they would have left some supplies behind. But there was little sign of that, the rooms had been vacated and cleaned out before the base was abandoned, leaving only bare walls. The lighting was working, the lamps were burning when Zuzanna crossed the threshold. Several times she called out in a loud voice, hoping at least for an answer from the domestic administration system - but even the echo refused to answer.

She found a map of the complex imprinted into the wall of a passage between buildings and told Ula to figure out the way to the canteen. Further down the corridor something was pounding in an irregular rhythm and for a moment - before it turned out that it was only a piece of plastic broken away from a window frame - Zuzanna felt like Ripley in *Aliens*. Only that her step was less certain. Dark brown shadows were thrown through the open window, one upon the crest of another; the suns were disappearing over the lip of the crater.

The larder was empty - but in an alcove behind the canteen stood a huge industrial kitchen robot - a Siemens, a similar model to Zuzanna's at home. She brought up the menu - and hope died: all the synthesis functions were suspended.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" she whispered, pressing her forehead against the cold machine casing.

"Is it broken? What's wrong?" asked Ula, hopping up and down, unable to see the screen. "What's happened?"

Zuzanna took a deep breath. Her trembling hand brought up the diagnostics. Power working, no faults reported, concentrate containers two-thirds full, there was enough for a whole army, only - no water. They hadn't dug out a well in the crater and probably they didn't trust the rainwater here; they'd had to bring in their water. Evidently they'd emptied the tank before they left. There wasn't even anything left in the pipes, they'd cleaned them out with air.

"Fetch a bucket and we're going back to the City," ordered Ula. "Behind the crystal door there was that bunker with the walls of water, you remember, you drank it before. Hide the amulet somewhere here. You're so exhausted that you'd summon a hundred new planets with one hallucination. But this will be our home, we're going to live here, we mustn't lose this world. Later you can check out the telecommunications center on the first floor. What are you waiting for? The suns will set eventually!"

Zuzanna laughed hoarsely, taking off the necklace.

"So where's this bucket then?"