

THE PLUNDERER'S DAUGHTER

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(EXCERPT)

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. Rrrrdoommmm, rrrrdoommmm, rrrrdoommmm! 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 –

Rrrrrdoommmm!

They drove up in three cars: a Fluga, a Guliati 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 sdream 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 Chapeotoplex.”

“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 dream. He didn't respond.

Rrrrdoommmm!

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 dream 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 sdream. 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. What good was the dream? 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.

Rrrrdoommmm!

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.

Rrrrdoommmm!

"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 – trrrroottt, trrrroottt, trrrroottttttttt! 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 –

Rrrrdoommmm!

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

Zuzanna took flight.