

The City and The City

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Extract

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Chapter One

I COULD NOT SEE THE STREET or much of the estate. We were enclosed by dirt-coloured blocks, from windows out of which leaned vested men and women with morning hair and mugs of drink, eating breakfast and watching us. This open ground between the buildings had once been sculpted. It pitched like a golf course—a child’s mimicking of geography. Maybe they had been going to wood it and put in a pond. There was a copse but the saplings were dead.

The grass was weedy, threaded with paths footwalked between rubbish, rutted by wheel tracks. There were police at various tasks. I wasn’t the first detective there—I saw Bardo Naustin and a couple of others—but I was the most senior. I followed the sergeant to where most of my colleagues clustered, between a low derelict tower and a skateboard park ringed by big drum-shaped trash bins. Just beyond it we could hear the docks. A bunch of kids sat on a wall before standing officers. The gulls coiled over the gathering.

“Inspector.” I nodded at whomever that was. Someone offered a coffee but I shook my head and looked at the woman I had come to see.

She lay near the skate ramps. Nothing is still like the dead are still. The wind moves their hair, as it moved hers, and they don’t respond at all. She was in an ugly pose, with legs crooked as if about to get up, her arms in a strange bend. Her face was to the ground.

A young woman, brown hair pulled into pigtails poking up like plants. She was almost naked, and it was sad to see her skin smooth that cold morning, unbroken by gooseflesh. She wore only laddered stockings, one high heel on. Seeing me look for it, a sergeant waved at me from a way off, from where she guarded the dropped shoe.

It was a couple of hours since the body had been discovered. I looked her over. I held my breath and bent down toward the dirt, to look at her face, but I could only see one open eye.

"Where's Shukman?"

"Not here yet, Inspector . . ."

"Someone call him, tell him to get a move on." I smacked my watch. I was in charge of what we called the *mise-en-crime*. No one would move her until Shukman the patho had come, but there were other things to do. I checked sightlines. We were out of the way and the garbage containers obscured us, but I could feel attention on us like insects, from all over the estate. We milled.

There was a wet mattress on its edge between two of the bins, by a spread of rusting iron pieces interwoven with discarded chains. "That was on her." The constable who spoke was Lizbyet Corwi, a smart young woman I'd worked with a couple of times. "Couldn't exactly say she was well hidden, but it sort of made her look like a pile of rubbish, I guess." I could see a rough rectangle of darker earth surrounding the dead woman—the remains of the mattress-sheltered dew. Naustin was squatting by it, staring at the earth.

"The kids who found her tipped it half off," Corwi said.

"How did they find her?"

Corwi pointed at the earth, at little scuffs of animal paws.

"Stopped her getting mauled. Ran like hell when they saw what it was, made the call. Our lot, when they arrived . . ." She glanced at two patrolmen I didn't know.

"They moved it?"

She nodded. "See if she was still alive, they said."

"What are their names?"

"Shushkil and Briamiv."

"And these are the finders?" I nodded at the guarded kids. There were two girls, two guys. Midteens, cold, looking down.

“Yeah. Chewers.”

“Early morning pick-you-up?”

“That’s dedication, hm?” she said. “Maybe they’re up for junkies of the month or some shit. They got here a bit before seven. The skate pit’s organised that way, apparently. It’s only been built a couple of years, used to be nothing, but the locals’ve got their shift patterns down. Midnight to nine a.m., chewers only; nine to eleven, local gang plans the day; eleven to midnight, skateboards and rollerblades.”

“They carrying?”

“One of the boys has a little shiv, but really little. Couldn’t mug a milkrat with it—it’s a toy. And a chew each. That’s it.” She shrugged. “The dope wasn’t on them; we found it by the wall, but”—shrug—“they were the only ones around.”

She motioned over one of our colleagues and opened the bag he carried. Little bundles of resin-slathered grass. *Feld* is its street name—a tough crossbreed of *Catha edulis* spiked with tobacco and caffeine and stronger stuff, and fibreglass threads or similar to abrade the gums and get it into the blood. Its name is a trilingual pun: it’s *khat* where it’s grown, and the animal called “cat” in English is *feld* in our own language. I sniffed it and it was pretty low-grade stuff. I walked over to where the four teenagers shivered in their puffy jackets.

“’Sup, policeman?” said one boy in a Besz-accented approximation of hip-hop English. He looked up and met my eye, but he was pale. Neither he nor any of his companions looked well. From where they sat they could not have seen the dead woman, but they did not even look in her direction.

They must have known we’d find the *feld*, and that we’d know it was theirs. They could have said nothing, just run.

“I’m Inspector Borlú,” I said. “Extreme Crime Squad.”

I did not say *I’m Tyador*. A difficult age to question, this—too old for first names, euphemisms and toys, not yet old enough to be straightforward opponents in interviews, when at least the rules were clear. “What’s your name?” The boy hesitated, considered using whatever slang handle he’d granted himself, did not.

“Vilyem Barichi.”

"You found her?" He nodded, and his friends nodded after him. "Tell me."

"We come here because, 'cause, and . . ." Vilyem waited, but I said nothing about his drugs. He looked down. "And we seen something under that mattress and we pulled it off."

"There was some . . ." His friends looked up as Vilyem hesitated, obviously superstitious.

"Wolves?" I said. They glanced at each other.

"Yeah man, some scabby little pack was nosing around there and . . ."

"So we thought it . . ."

"How long after you got here?" I said.

Vilyem shrugged. "Don't know. Couple hours?"

"Anyone else around?"

"Saw some guys over there a while back."

"Dealers?" A shrug.

"And there was a van came up on the grass and come over here and went off again after a bit. We didn't speak to no one."

"When was the van?"

"Don't know."

"It was still dark." That was one of the girls.

"Okay. Vilyem, you guys, we're going to get you some breakfast, something to drink, if you want." I motioned to their guards. "Have we spoken to the parents?" I asked.

"On their way, boss; except hers" —pointing to one of the girls— "we can't reach."

"So keep trying. Get them to the centre now."

The four teens looked at each other. "This is bullshit, man," the boy who was not Vilyem said, uncertainly. He knew that according to some politics he should oppose my instruction, but he wanted to go with my subordinate. Black tea and bread and paperwork, the boredom and striplights, all so much not like the peeling back of that wet-heavy, cumbersome mattress, in the yard, in the dark.

STEPHEN SHUKMAN AND HIS ASSISTANT Hamd Hamzinic had arrived. I looked at my watch. Shukman ignored me. When he bent

to the body he wheezed. He certified death. He made observations that Hamzinic wrote down.

"Time?" I said.

"Twelve hours-ish," Shukman said. He pressed down on one of the woman's limbs. She rocked. In rigor, and unstable on the ground as she was, she probably assumed the position of her death lying on other contours. "She wasn't killed here." I had heard it said many times he was good at his job but had seen no evidence that he was anything but competent.

"Done?" he said to one of the scene techs. She took two more shots from different angles and nodded. Shukman rolled the woman over with Hamzinic's help. She seemed to fight him with her cramped motionlessness. Turned, she was absurd, like someone playing at dead insect, her limbs crooked, rocking on her spine.

She looked up at us from below a fluttering fringe. Her face was set in a startled strain: she was endlessly surprised by herself. She was young. She was heavily made up, and it was smeared across a badly battered face. It was impossible to say what she looked like, what face those who knew her would see if they heard her name. We might know better later, when she relaxed into her death. Blood marked her front, dark as dirt. Flash flash of cameras.

"Well, hello cause of death," Shukman said to the wounds in her chest.

On her left cheek, curving under the jaw, a long red split. She had been cut half the length of her face.

The wound was smooth for several centimetres, tracking precisely along her flesh like the sweep of a paintbrush. Where it went below her jaw, under the overhang of her mouth, it jagged ugly and ended or began with a deep torn hole in the soft tissue behind her bone. She looked unseeingly at me.

"Take some without the flash, too," I said.

Like several others I looked away while Shukman murmured—it felt prurient to watch. Uniformed *mise-en-crime* technical investigators, *mectecs* in our slang, searched in an expanding circle. They overturned rubbish and foraged among the grooves where vehicles had driven. They lay down reference marks, and photographed.

"Alright then." Shukman rose. "Let's get her out of here." A couple of the men hauled her onto a stretcher.

"Jesus Christ," I said, "cover her." Someone found a blanket I don't know from where, and they started again towards Shukman's vehicle.

"I'll get going this afternoon," he said. "Will I see you?" I wagged my head noncommittally. I walked towards Corwi.

"Naustin," I called, when I was positioned so that Corwi would be at the edge of our conversation. She glanced up and came slightly closer.

"Inspector," said Naustin.

"Go through it."

He sipped his coffee and looked at me nervously.

"Hooker?" he said. "First impressions, Inspector. This area, beat-up, naked? And . . ." He pointed at his face, her exaggerated makeup. "Hooker."

"Fight with a client?"

"Yeah but . . . If it was just the body wounds, you know, you'd, then you're looking at, maybe she won't do what he wants, whatever. He lashes out. But this." He touched his cheek again uneasily. "That's different."

"A sicko?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. He cuts her, kills her, dumps her. Cocky bastard too, doesn't give a shit that we're going to find her."

"Cocky or stupid."

"Or cocky *and* stupid."

"So a cocky, stupid sadist," I said. He raised his eyes, *Maybe*.

"Alright," I said. "Could be. Do the rounds of the local girls. Ask a uniform who knows the area. Ask if they've had trouble with anyone recently. Let's get a photo circulated, put a name to Fulana Detail." I used the generic name for woman-unknown. "First off I want you to question Barichi and his mates, there. Be nice, Bardo, they didn't have to call this in. I mean that. And get Yaszek in with you." Ramira Yaszek was an excellent questioner. "Call me this afternoon?" When he was out of earshot I said to Corwi, "A few years ago we'd not have had half as many guys on the murder of a working girl."

“We’ve come a long way,” she said. She wasn’t much older than the dead woman.

“I doubt Naustin’s delighted to be on streetwalker duty, but you’ll notice he’s not complaining,” I said.

“We’ve come a long way,” she said.

“So?” I raised an eyebrow. Glanced in Naustin’s direction. I waited. I remembered Corwi’s work on the Shulban disappearance, a case considerably more Byzantine than it had initially appeared.

“It’s just, I guess, you know, we should keep in mind other possibilities,” she said.

“Tell me.”

“Her makeup,” she said. “It’s all, you know, earths and browns. It’s been put on thick, but it’s not—” She vamp-pouted. “And did you notice her hair?” I had. “Not dyed. Take a drive with me up GunterStrász, around by the arena, any of the girls’ hangouts. Two-thirds blonde, I reckon. And the rest are black or bloodred or some shit. And . . .” She fingered the air as if it were hair. “It’s dirty, but it’s a lot better than mine.” She ran her hand through her own split ends.

For many of the streetwalkers in Beszel, especially in areas like this, food and clothes for their kids came first; *feld* or crack for themselves; food for themselves; then sundries, in which list conditioner would come low. I glanced at the rest of the officers, at Naustin gathering himself to go.

“Okay,” I said. “Do you know this area?”

“Well,” she said, “it’s a bit off the track, you know? This is hardly even Beszel, really. My beat’s Lestov. They called a few of us in when they got the bell. But I did a tour here a couple years ago—I know it a bit.”

Lestov itself was already almost a suburb, six or so k out of the city centre, and we were south of that, over the Yovic Bridge on a bit of land between Bulkya Sound and, nearly, the mouth where the river joined the sea. Technically an island, though so close and conjoined to the mainland by ruins of industry you would never think of it as such, Kordvenna was estates, warehouses, low-rent bodegas scribble-linked by endless graffiti. It was far enough from Beszel’s heart that it was easy to forget, unlike more inner-city slums.

"How long were you here?" I said.

"Six months, standard. What you'd expect: street theft, high kids smacking shit out of each other, drugs, hooking."

"Murder?"

"Two or three in my time. Drugs stuff. Mostly stops short of that, though: the gangs are pretty smart at punishing each other without bringing in ECS."

"Someone's fucked up then."

"Yeah. Or doesn't care."

"Okay," I said. "I want you on this. What are you doing at the moment?"

"Nothing that can't wait."

"I want you to relocate for a bit. Got any contacts here still?" She pursed her lips. "Track them down if you can; if not, have a word with some of the local guys, see who their singers are. I want you on the ground. Listen out, go round the estate — what's this place called again?"

"Pocost Village." She laughed without humour; I raised an eyebrow.

"It takes a village," I said. "See what you can turn up."

"My commissar won't like it."

"I'll deal with him. It's Bashazin, right?"

"You'll square it? So am I being seconded?"

"Let's not call it anything right now. Right now I'm just asking you to focus on this. And report directly to me." I gave her the numbers of my cell phone and my office. "You can show me around the delights of Kordvenna later. And . . ." I glanced up at Naustin, and she saw me do it. "Just keep an eye on things."

"He's probably right. Probably a cocky sadist trick, boss."

"Probably. Let's find out why she keeps her hair so clean."

There was a league-table of instinct. We all knew that in his street-beating days, Commissar Kerevan broke several cases following leads that made no logical sense; and that Chief Inspector Marcoberg was devoid of any such breaks, and that his decent record was the result, rather, of slog. We would never call inexplicable little insights "hunches," for fear of drawing the universe's attention. But they happened, and you knew you had been in the proximity of

one that had come through if you saw a detective kiss his or her fingers and touch his or her chest where a pendant to Warsha, patron saint of inexplicable inspirations, would, theoretically, hang.

Officers Shushkil and Briamiv were surprised, then defensive, finally sulky when I asked them what they were doing moving the mattress. I put them on report. If they had apologised I would have let it go. It was depressingly common to see police boots tracked through blood residue, fingerprints smeared and spoiled, samples corrupted or lost.

A little group of journalists was gathering at the edges of the open land. Petrus Something-or-other, Valdir Mohli, a young guy called Rackhaus, a few others.

"Inspector!" "Inspector Borlú!" Even: "Tyador!"

Most of the press had always been polite, and amenable to my suggestions about what they withhold. In the last few years, new, more salacious and aggressive papers had started, inspired and in some cases controlled by British or North American owners. It had been inevitable, and in truth our established local outlets were staid to dull. What was troubling was less the trend to sensation, nor even the irritating behaviour of the new press's young writers, but more their tendency to dutifully follow a script written before they were born. Rackhaus, who wrote for a weekly called *Rejal!*, for example. Surely when he bothered me for facts he knew I would not give him, surely when he attempted to bribe junior officers, and sometimes succeeded, he did not have to say, as he tended to: "The public has a right to know!"

I did not even understand him the first time he said it. In Besz the word "right" is polysemic enough to evade the peremptory meaning he intended. I had to mentally translate into English, in which I am passably fluent, to make sense of the phrase. His fidelity to the cliché transcended the necessity to communicate. Perhaps he would not be content until I snarled and called him a vulture, a ghoul.

"You know what I'm going to say," I told them. The stretched tape separated us. "There'll be a press conference this afternoon, at ECS Centre."

"What time?" My photograph was being taken.

“You’ll be informed, Petrus.”

Rackhaus said something that I ignored. As I turned, I saw past the edges of the estate to the end of GunterStrász, between the dirty brick buildings. Trash moved in the wind. It might be anywhere. An elderly woman was walking slowly away from me in a shambling sway. She turned her head and looked at me. I was struck by her motion, and I met her eyes. I wondered if she wanted to tell me something. In my glance I took in her clothes, her way of walking, of holding herself, and looking.

With a hard start, I realised that she was not on GunterStrász at all, and that I should not have seen her.

Immediately and flustered I looked away, and she did the same, with the same speed. I raised my head, towards an aircraft on its final descent. When after some seconds I looked back up, unnoticed the old woman stepping heavily away, I looked carefully instead of at her in her foreign street at the facades of the nearby and local GunterStrász, that depressed zone.