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**Lushon's Plates**

Excerpt from the first chapter of First Collection

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Life is only  
a flicker of light  
In the vastness of darkness  
In the mercy of night

Gate of Kargath, *Leaving me*, 2004

*It is still snowing. The grey flakes fall through the darkness. Millions of souls, millions of lives that once lived and breathed and ploughed the earth with beasts made of steel.*

*Tonight the Old Ones are no more than snowflakes that melt on the windowpanes. The steel beasts they once mastered stand rusting in the streets. Burnt and charred by firestorms. As dead as their rulers, ghosts from a time past.*

*The snow slowly covers them.*

*Fire Eye destroyed the souls yesterday. I lay in my den, deep down among the roots of the tower, and heard the water running and trickling in the streets, even in my sleep. Satan melted a whole month's snow in just one day. Then he slipped back behind the hills to the west and let the night take over.*

*As I went up the steps, I could feel the world freezing. The ice forced its way into every nook and cranny, creaking and screaming, blasting its way through. The first howls rose from the streets. In the broken tower, women rustled with white magic. I could smell the sweat that ran under their dogskin coats. I could feel the blood in their veins. The clans have not hunted since full moon. Soon it will be time to kill again. Soon they will creep out of their caves, climb down from their towers and sniff each other out. Then the hunt will begin.*

*But not tonight. Souls will continue fall to the ground and only wild dogs and rats will leave their prints in the snow. Silence will prevail and I will sit here, crouched over my plates. Because I'm old now and can't wait any longer. It is my duty. For the future. For my father and my mother.*

*I run my fingers across the plates. I feel the weight of the titanium blocks in my hand, each one a letter, a symbol or a sound. Together the blocks form words, powerful words about a time that was.*

*The blocks, plates and hammer were left by the Old Ones. I have read the text that they left behind, their prayer that someone would find this place and write down their history, as they did. I have heard the voices of ghosts in the walls and I have answered them. Words I will write down. Words that draw forth memories. Words about that which has been. Because these plates cannot fade. Once the words are engraved in metal, they will be saved for posterity.*

*The blocks weigh heavy in my hand. I put them down on the plate and spread them out. Tonight, the story will begin. Tonight I will return to a time long before the great sleep. I put the blocks together in words and beautiful lines. I raise the hammer.*

*Suddenly I stop. My stiff body straightens, my shoulders pull back. Screams pierce the night. Immediately I am young again, and rush over to the window. In the street below the tower, in the space between the broken steel beasts, wild dogs throw themselves on a hunter. He*

*curls up like a baby as they tear off his skin coat. He is just a few steps from the Mound, where the clan set their traps between the concrete blocks. If only he had managed to climb up on to one of them, then the dogs would not have been able to reach him.*

*I watch as the dogs tear him to pieces. The blood melts small red holes in the snow. The man quivers and thrashes with his legs as they rip open his belly. Then he is still. He lets the dogs do what they want as he stares up into the black night. It is as if he is looking at me. I wonder if he already knows that he will soon become a snowflake and fall to the earth.*

*With a stooped back, I turn back to my plates and sit down. Once upon a time I would have smelt that person down there in the snow long before the dogs attacked. But time is a powerful god. I have seen more three-year winters than I can remember and death must come to me soon. But I am not frightened of death. Because my soul will never just fall to the earth and be melted by Fire Eye. My soul will live forever in these words.*

*The hammer falls. The words are engraved on the plate. But the blocks form new words and the words make up sentences. They are just fragments, fractions of all that these ancient eyes have seen. But the fragments unleash the memories and I wander through the world of memories as I did when I was young. Out of the City of Broken Towers, north over the plains, through the dead woods. Over the sea, in amongst the frosty mist and ruins. There, on the banks of the river, starts the story of a man called Evv Lushon.*

First Collection

The bridge was a broken arm that jutted out into the river. Below, the water ran like a black vein through the snow-covered landscape. The steam rose as it twisted between the ruins and broken walls, releasing a cloud of vapours before disappearing under a pile of rubble a stone's throw downstream.

A concrete wall had fallen out from the ruins on the riverbank and now formed a projection over the water at the base of the bridge pillar. Deep footprints led out to the edge of the platform, where a man sat squatting. He held his arms close to his chest and was leaning forwards, so that it looked as if his whole body was about to fall over the edge. A scarf covered most of his face, and the remainder was hidden under his hood. His fur cloak was already covered in snow, but the fishing line that dangled from his knee gave him away. He sat motionless on the edge of the concrete wall fishing, partially hidden by the river vapours.

He had been sitting like this for a long time. The snow lay thick on his back, but he did not get up to shake it off. It was as if he wanted to be covered by the snow.

He did not even seem to be breathing.

The fisherman sat there all night. When it stopped snowing, the wind started to blow up from the fjord. The clouds were driven northwards and a full moon appeared. A pale light spread across the valley of ruins, where blackened walls stuck up out of the snow throwing shadows across the streets. The snow that had drifted up against the heaps of rubble and destroyed buildings took on a frost blue hue. Twisted iron beams and poles slipped out of the dark like rusty red snakes, forever frozen in the night. The Old Ones' steel beasts and machines stood dead in the streets, half buried in the deep snow.

The city sprawled across the valley between the hills in the east and west. To the east, pointed fir trees punched holes in the whiteness, and to the west the hills were as white and dead as the city.

Soon dawn started to break. The fisherman sat with snow right up to his chest, but it was still possible to make out his tracks. They followed the riverbank down to the pile of rubble where they disappeared behind a mound of snow.

Suddenly an arrow shot out from behind the blocks on the other side of the river. It penetrated the fisherman's shoulder, and he dropped his fishing line. But he continued to sit there.

The sound of running feet rang out between the concrete blocks. Three men came into view by the pile of rubble. They jumped into the river and waded through the waist-deep water, then climbed up the opposite bank. Here they followed the footprints that led to the projection over the river.

The three hunters were dressed in animal skins and fur. They had bows slung over their backs, quivers on their belts and each carried an iron rod in a leather strap over his shoulder. Their faces under the wide hoods were smeared with ash. Their eyes bulged in sunken cheeks and they trod heavily in the snow. They followed the tracks one after the other, and as they neared the column of the bridge, they swung the iron rods from their shoulders.

They approached the projection with stealth. The snow was not as deep here, so the men moved in side by side and raised their rods.

The hunters attacked in silence. Their bearded faces twisted as the iron rods pounded the figure in front of them. They hit him on the back and smashed his head. The fisherman toppled over to one side. One of the men kicked off his hood. Only then did they discover that the leather coat was filled with snow.

The hunters dropped their iron rods and reformed back to back. Just as they were pulling off their bows, a stone fell from the column of the bridge. It hit one of the hunters on the shoulder. He screamed and fell into the river. The two other men lifted their bows as something rose up from the snow on the broken bridge. The creature threw off an animal skin and picked up an iron rod similar to the ones the men had, and hurled it at them. The arrows whistled through the night as another hunter fell.

The last of the three jumped over the edge of the concrete wall and landed in the river. The current pulled him under, but he soon surfaced again and flailed about with his arms to stay above water.

The creature remained standing on the bridge. He had the body of man, with a mane of hair that hung down over his shoulders. Under cover of night, it was not possible to see the fur that covered his back and arms. It was starting to get light and the fir trees on Easthill cast long shadows. The creature stood hunched over as if he wanted to drop down on all fours. He had a bow on his back and a quiver on his belt. The snow melted on his forehead and ran down over his dark eyes and high cheekbones. His nose and jaw were protruding, as if he had started to change into a dog or a wolf, but the transformation had stopped half way. His upper lip was cloven and short, pointed ears covered with grey fur stuck out from his hair. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air towards the river.

The hunter had managed to get to the other side of the river and was trying to clamber up the bank. The creature wrenched off his bow, pulled an arrow from his quiver, but the hunter

ran in between the concrete blocks and disappeared.

The creature threw his bow and the animal skin down on to the projection and looked over towards the hills to the east of the town. He protected his eyes from the light with his claw-like hands. Then he dropped a rope from the bridge and crept over the edge. His feet were also like an animal's. His heels were pulled up into his calf and as he landed on the projection, he spread his paws to stop himself sinking in the snow.

He quickly shook the snow out of his clothes and put them on, before pulling a pair of crudely made leather gloves on his hands. Then he flung the animal skin over his shoulders and fastened it at the neck with a leather thong. He put the cloak that the bait had been wearing on top. His breath froze in the air as he pulled the hood over his face and crouched down by the man lying in the snow. His forehead was smashed in, but his body still quivered with cramps as the creature tossed him over his shoulder. He then picked up his iron rod and bow and started to climb down from the projection.

When he reached the riverbank, the sun crept up over the prow of the hill. The creature turned his face away from the light, waded out into the water and started to follow the river down towards the pile of rubble.

He had not gone far before he stopped. He could still smell life.

The hunter who had been hit on the shoulder by the stone was clutching on to a pipe that stuck out from the bank. He was silent as the creature put the dead body down in the water and waded towards him. Keeping his face turned away from the sun, the creature poked around with his iron rod as he held the corpse by the ankle. Barely an arm's length from the hunter, he stopped and sniffed. Then he plunged his iron rod into the water, this time just a hand's length from him.

The sun had now reached down into the riverbed. The shadows drew a sharp line along the bank just over the hunter's head. The icicles that hung from the walls started to drip. The creature stumbled back a couple of steps, lost his iron rod and fell on his back in the water. Together with the corpse he drifted downstream some way towards the rubble, before he finally managed to find his feet again and scramble into the shadows on the east side of the river. Then he clambered out of the water, bending under the weight of the body, and trudged through the snow. The hunter started to scream, but the creature paid no heed.

The riverbank was not as steep here. The creature staggered away from the river and pulled his hood further down over his face. Then he howled.

Someone answered him. The call came from somewhere behind the mound of snow down by the rubble.

The creature walked straight towards the sound. But he was weighed down by the dead

man and he got stuck in snow up to his thighs.

Down in the river the hunter floated out from the shadowy bank. The current spun him round, and when he found himself on his back, he opened his eyes. His skin was already burnt and now the sun scorched his eyes grey. He was holding a soot-coloured mask in his hand, but as the current pulled him under again, it slipped out of his grasp.

As the hunter was sucked under the pile of rubble, the creature struggled to get out of the snow. He spread his paws, each of them broader than a man's hand. He stood like this for a while, bent over, as he fiddled with the bag on his belt. By the time he finally managed to open the clasp and to tie a scarf over his face, the snow on his cloak had melted. He grabbed the corpse by the leg and pulled it in behind the mound.

Here he hunkered down and felt around in the snow. Then he let out another howl. There was the screeching of hinges and a hatch opened in the slope just in front of him.

The creature stumbled towards the opening, feeling for the frame with his hands. When he found the ladder, he clambered down the rusty steps, pulling the corpse in behind him. He let the body fall into the dark and closed the hatch over his head.

The minute the sunlight disappeared he dared to open his eyes again. He quickly shot the bolt and locked the hatch before climbing down the ladder. Far below, torches glowed in the dark. There was the sound of footsteps on stone and whispering voices. He let out a deep sigh and held on to the icy iron steps. Then he continued his descent.

Halfway down he stopped again. He held on to the ladder with one arm and used the other hand to pull the scarf from his face. The smell of blood rose up to him. He opened his mouth and pulled back his lips. He ran his tongue over his carnivore's teeth and savoured the warm, salty smell.

Something snapped in the dark below. The voices sounded agitated.

He continued to make his way down. Below him the torches shone like pools in the dark. He could see three figures, dressed in rags and dogskin coats, with pieces of cloth wrapped round their feet. They held a torch over the dead man. Hunchbacked Lila was holding the arm they had cut off. Mittenhand was sitting astride the man's belly, sawing at his thigh. The third person, a young boy, was staring up the shaft and holding his torch to light up the ladder. When he smiled, his harelip parted to reveal a gaping column under his nose.

Mittenhand pulled out the dish that had been placed under the fresh wound on the hunter's shoulder. As Mittenhand had been born with fused fingers, he had to use both hands to lift it.

"Give'im drink, Mouth." He held the dish out to the boy with the harelip.

"Won't want," Mouth said. "Olda say no can."

"Crap." Mittenhand drank deeply and stood up holding the dish in his deformed hands. "Good for'im."

The creature had reached the bottom rung. The ladder stopped about an arm's length above the heads of the three figures, so he let go and landed in the middle of them. His animal-like legs bent under his body. Then he straightened up and took off his gloves.

"Have drink, Evv." Mittenhand held the steaming blood up to him. Even though he was far taller than both Lila and Mouth, he only reached Evv's chest. Evv was a night hunter, and once there had been more like him. But that was before the rapermen gained control of the hunting grounds to the north. That was before Connergashon.

"Can't," said Evv. His voice sounded like a bark. "Olda say make me dead sick."

"Not true. He lie, Evv." Mittenhand took another drink and licked his lips. His face was broad and scarred, with a broken nose and missing teeth. Satisfied, he wiped the blood from the corners of his mouth and passed the dish to Lila. She gulped down the rest and put the dish back in the netting bag that Mittenhand carried over his shoulder.

"Need go now." Evv lifted the dead man by the neck and leg. His face was burnt and his eyes were grey like dirty snow. "Bigge-Mahmed wants'im on fire today. He say so when we went."

Evv put the body over his shoulders and trotted off into the dark. His animal legs gave him a lope and he quickly outpaced Mittenhand and Lila. Only Mouth could keep up, running beside him, lighting the way with his torch. The floor under their feet was covered with gravel and yellowy-brown icicles hung from the roof. The tiled walls were decorated with black lines, drawings and symbols. They were symbols from the Old Ones, ritual marks from the *time that was*.

The tunnel led into a hall. The walls here were also covered with sooty-grey tiles. The roof formed a dome in the dark high above them, and the rectangular hall was divided in two by some tracks about a man's length apart. Silently Evv strode out onto the platform where the tiles were hard and cold as ice under his paws. Mouth went over to the edge and held the torch out towards the steel beast. It was right in the middle of the hall, empty and dead like a gigantic dried out beetle.

"You know, Olda say they could go." Mouth ran his fingers across one of the dirty windows. "Came out of hole there, an' roll over there." He waved the torch and pointed to the other end of the hall, even though he knew that Evv didn't need the light to see.

"They roll fuck fast in there." Mouth ran over to the steps at the end of the platform and shone the light into the tunnel where the tracks disappeared into the dark. Then he ran back to

Evv. "Sometime they go other way. The Old Ones decide. They decide everything."

Evv got a better hold of the leg and the arm of the corpse. Mouth thought that the steel beast was the most amazing thing there was. Every time they went past, he asked if they could go in.

"We go in." Mouth shot over to the opening in the middle of the steel beast. "Don't see car ev'ry day."

"You know is not car," mumbled Evv. "Is a metro-wagon."

Mouth slipped in through the opening. Evv knew that he usually sat on the seats inside, but he himself preferred to stay outside. Because he, Evv the night hunter, was the only one in the clan who could see the real wonder here in Stashon. The board was almost as big as one of the Folk's stone shacks and hung in the dark under the domed roof. Olda had explained that it was a *poss-ter*, a picture of the world before. The Old Ones had captured what they saw in a picture machine and fixed it on the board up there under the ceiling. In the middle of the picture was a car on a road that was as wide as Stashon, and all around the car were slopes covered in a colour that Evv had never seen anywhere before. There were also trees, but not like the ones up on Easthill. They didn't have needles, but something that Olda called *leaves*. The first time Evv came home and told him about the *poss-ter*, the old man had asked him to investigate, so Evv took a rope with a hook in the end, threw it up over the *poss-ter* and then climbed up. He had rubbed the soot off the leaves and the car and the whole beautiful thing. Then he discovered the symbols, lines that looked like the ones he had seen in the tunnels. They were above the picture, black and mysterious. They were *Lett-ras*, Olda said. *Lett-ras*, the language of the Old Ones. Olda had given him his leather cloak and a piece of charcoal, so that Evv could go back and copy all the *Lett-ras*. Already the night after he discovered them he had done this, and when he was at home with Olda again, he drew the symbols he had copied on to his cloak in the dirt by the fire. The old man had brushed his shaking hand over the *Lett-ras* and moved his lips in silent reverence. Then he had lifted his head and grabbed Evv by the arm. "Words from the year before the war broke out," he said. He pulled Evv close and whispered the Old Ones' words in his ear.

"Vol vo two thousand retro." Evv said these words quietly to himself as he stared up at the incredibly beautiful thing that hung there in the dark. "To be launched in two thousand and fifty three."

Then Lila and Mittenhand emerged from the tunnel. Lila dragged herself down the steps and continued along the tracks, whereas Mittenhand motioned to Evv to follow. "Get'im. Bigge-Mahmed beat'im if's late."

Evv lowered the dead hunter on to the platform and ducked into the steel beast.

Everything inside was covered with soot, and it stank of ash and death. Evv could still remember the skeletons that lay between the seats when he was a boy, but over the years, the Folk had taken them and ground the bones to make flour. Now only the ash remained. Mouth was sitting in the middle of a seat, holding on to the seat in front. Evv nodded towards the door.

Reluctantly Mouth got up and followed him out on to the platform. The torches at the end of the hall twinkled. Lila and Mittenhand ran as fast as their deformed bodies could carry them. Evv pulled the dead hunter up by the neck. Blood was still dripping from the gaping wound in his shoulder. The tiles were covered in red splashes. He sniffed the air in the direction of the tunnel back to the ladder. The smell of blood clung to the walls.

"C'mon, Evvern." Mouth held his torch close to the floor. "Won't hold torch up t'you."

Evv glanced up at the picture under the ceiling for one last time. The rope he had used to get up and touch the Old Ones' magic was still hanging there. He threw the dead hunter over his shoulder and jumped down on to the tracks.

The tunnel stretched into the distance. First straight ahead into the dark, then in wide swings that twisted between the roots of the city. The tracks ran through piles of dust and cement, they crossed thickets of wires and pipes and did not even stop where the roof had fallen in. In some places, Evv had to put down the hunter and take Lila on his back, because even though she was no more than eighteen years old, the three-year winter had made her more and more bent and arthritic. He pulled the dead man along behind him and clambered over concrete blocks and twisted iron poles, while Lila clung to his shoulders. Mittenhand and Mouth kept behind him and shielded the light of the torches with their hands. They needed Evv's night vision here in the tunnels. Rumour had it that Bigge-Mahmed had laid out new traps, and only the Folk knew where they were.

The tracks led them through two halls that were nothing like the first. They were low under the ceiling and the platforms were covered in plaster dust, broken tiles and rubbish. "Look at all them things", Mouth used to say every time they passed through these halls. *Things* were anything that the Old Ones had left behind, but that could not be used. Sometimes Evv and Mouth took things with them and got Olda to feel them, and sometimes the old man gave them a name. But generally they were just things. There were things everywhere and neither the Folk nor the genners wanted them.

As they approached the third hall, some dogs began to bark. Mouth, who was frightened of dogs, hid behind Evv. At the entrance to the hall, they passed another metro-wagon, but an enormous block had fallen from the ceiling and squashed it in the middle. A golden glow shone through the broken windows from the other side of the hall. They rounded the steel beast's

snout and Evv lifted Lila up on to the platform. The dogs growled and pulled on their chains by the opening in the blackened wall. Evv threw the corpse up on to the floor. The water dishes were dry and the floor was covered in dog shit. It was the third day in a row that the dogs had been chained. They were slaving. The scent of blood was driving them wild.

Evv climbed up behind Lila. The smell of smoke drifted out from the entrance and clouded the golden light. He looked over at Mouth and Mittenhand who were coming up the steps at the end of the platform. Mittenhand looked at him, his face pinched and tense. There was no mistaking the smell of smoke. They were late, far too late. The Folk had already started the fire.

Rishi appeared in the opening, squinting and dirty, her swollen belly bursting through her soot-smear shift. She raised her stick and hit the dogs over the back. They immediately lay down.

Evv bent down and pulled the hunter up over his shoulders. Then with careful steps he trotted towards the entrance. Mouth, Mittenhand and Lila snuffed the torches with their capes and shuffled together behind him.

"Ha, now you come." Rishi put one hand on her belly and pointed the stick at him. "You late, dog. Fuckin' late!"

Evv cowered even more, so that he was lower than the woman, and then he crept past her with Mouth, Mittenhand and Lila close at his heels.

"Bigge-Mahmed say to beat you!" Rishi swung her stick at his back but only hit the dead hunter. "Bloody genners! Can't do nothing!"

Evv carried on, bent double. In front of them, the passage opened into yet another hall. In the middle of the floor, the flames licked up from an oil drum. People stood huddled around the fire. They were dressed in leather and dog skins, with rags and worn boots on their feet. The men had scars on their faces and wrists, where their masks or gloves had slipped to one side in a moment of carelessness and exposed their skin to Satan's Eye. Most of the smoke was sucked up through a crack that ran the length of the blackened ceiling. Innumerable hooks and poles were attached to the ceiling, and a network of ropes, wires and cables was suspended from them across the hall. The roofs of the stone shacks that lined the walls were made from broken tin sheets and torn tarpaulins. Naked children ran around among the water barrels and piles of iron rods and bricks. Burning torches hung in iron rings along the walls, making Evv's eyes smart.

Several passages led out of the hall, like spokes from a wheel axis. Most had collapsed, but four were still open, creating deep caves. The pigs were kept in one, behind a hip-high wall, and the hunting dogs barked and howled in another. The third was filled with rat cages and the fourth, right at the back in the darkest part of the hall, was where the genners lived.

The people by the fire turned to look at the party that had just arrived. The woman who had met them squeezed past Mittenhand and hurried over to a large man. She turned and pointed angrily towards Evv with her stick. The man scratched his scalp under his black, curly hair and hooked his thumb behind the leather strap that hung across his chest. Evv could just see the tip of the iron pipe behind his hairy shoulders. Bigge-Mahmed always had his gun on his back. That showed that he was Boss.

Evv crept out into the hall and lay the dead man down on the floor. He was blinded by the light from the fire. It was as if a white mist had filled the hall. He covered his eyes with his hands and squinted between his fingers. It looked like there were at least a hundred Folk by the fire. The whole clan had gathered, and now they were all standing there, staring at him. The dogs in the tunnel stopped barking as soon as they recognised his smell. It was so quiet that he could hear the ice melting and dripping from the cracks in the ceiling. Behind him, he heard the footsteps of Mouth and the others. They were trying to sneak in behind the stone shacks by the pigpen.

"You tryin'a go, Lila?" The large man pushed aside men, women and children and strode towards them. "You not see I'm gonna speak?"

Evv went down on his knees. He had learnt that this was best when Boss was angry.

Bigge-Mahmed squatted down by the corpse and rolled it over. "Where's th'arm?"

He ran his hand over the gash in the shoulder and held a bloody palm up towards Evv. "You eat it?"

Evv looked at the floor and shook his head.

"So where's it?" Bigge-Mahmed stepped over the body and grabbed Evv by the hair.

"Tell me, dog!"

Evv closed his eyes as Bigge-Mahmed forced him to look at the firelight.

"Look at me when I talk!" Bigge-Mahmed hit him on the cheek with his open hand. Evv jumped and pulled back his lips in a snarl.

Then Lila limped over to them and held out the amputated arm to Bigge-Mahmed.

"Them fighting. Evv pull th'arm off."

The blow struck her jaw. Bigge-Mahmed kicked her hard a few times as she covered on the floor, and then turned towards Mittenhand and Mouth. He took the leather strap from his shoulder and caught the gun with one hand. He grabbed the front of Mittenhand's jacket with the other.

"You got blood on your mouth." He rubbed his thumb along Mittenhand's mouth. "You genner-shits bin drinkin' blood."

"No, no." Mittenhand held his deformed hands to his face. "Promise, Bigge-Mahmed."

We drink nothin'. The rapperman was 'live when Evv pull'im down the hatch. Them fight, and then Evv pull th'arm off."

Bigge-Mahmed ripped the netting bag from his shoulder and emptied it. The dish clattered on to the floor tiles, still wet with blood. Mittenhand sank to the floor and huddled over Lila. Bigge-Mahmed kicked him in the back a couple of times. Then he hit Mouth in the chest with the butt of his gun, and the boy keeled over.

"Think you genner-shits can fuck with Bigge-Mahmed?" He turned back to Evv. "You 'n Olda get no food today, dog! Give me my boots an' fuck off!"

Evv squinted in the light. Suddenly he remembered the boots. They were still lying in the snow by the river. Bigge-Mahmed had given them to him so he could make human footprints in the snow, but when it started to get light, his only thought was to get into the shade and dark.

"Forgotten ..." Evv clutched his head and rounded his back. "Forgotten them."

"You fuck!" Bigge-Mahmed let the butt fall on his neck like a hammer. "You forgotten'em? Then you'll fuckin' well get'em again!"

He grabbed Evv by the hair and started to drag him towards the hallway. "Out, you fuckin' shit! I want my boots!"

Evv managed to get to his feet. Even though Bigge-Mahmed was the tallest of the Folk, Evv was at least a handspan taller. Bigge-Mahmed let go of his hair, but pinched his harelip and twisted it round. The pain made Evv cringe and as he fell to his knees, a deep growl emerged from his chest.

"You tryin' it?" Bigge-Mahmed put the gun to his forehead. "You got nothin' to say to me, genner-shit. You fuckwit, I'm gonna beat you so you'll never forget!"

When Bigge-Mahmed let go, Evv crawled away and crouched with his back to the tiled wall. One of the men who had been standing by the fire came over to Bigge-Mahmed with an iron rod. Bigge-Mahmed spat on the floor and slowly moved closer. The whole clan gathered round him. Some picked up pieces of plaster and small stones from the floor. Evv moved sideways towards the exit while baring his teeth. The Folk had beaten him up twice before and each time it was days before he managed to get up again. The dogs started to bark. They could smell his fear.

"Leave him be!"

Bigge-Mahmed stopped and turned round. An old, balding man pushed through the crowd. His face was nearly as dirty and grey as his beard and wispy hair, and the rags hung off his sunken old body. He stared straight ahead with empty eye sockets and tapped the ground with a bent car aerial.

"Where are you, my boy? Come to Olda!"

Evv straightened up and sniffed the air. He could not distinguish the people from one another in the light of the fire.

"Don't worry, Evv." The old man marked the floor with his aerial and stumbled towards the wall, where he stood with his back to Evv. "Where are you? Say something. Help Olda out."

Evv followed his voice, and when he reached him, immediately put the old man's arm over his shoulders and hugged him close.

"There you are." Olda stroked his head. "Was frightened for you, Evv. You were away so long. Shall we go now?"

Bigge-Mahmed pointed the gun at him. "The dog's fuckin' well goin' nowhere before he gets my boots!"

Olda turned towards his voice. "You're not very bright, Bigge-Mahmed. Why send'im up now? You know Evv can't see when the Eye's burnin'! You want to lose your last night hunter? Leave'im be, you hear me. Come evening, he'll go get your boots! Let'im rest now!"

Bigge-Mahmed waved his fist at them and thumped his upper arm in an angry gesture. Then he turned and shouted at the crowd, who scattered like a herd of frightened animals. He straddled the hunter, pulled a long knife from his belt and plunged it into the dead man's ribs. Then he dragged the carcass over to the fire with his knife.

Evv took a firm hold of Olda's arm. As the old man was small and frail, he had to bend down in order not to lift him off his feet. Together they made their way across the hall. Evv made sure not to get too close to the light and the Folk by the fire, as he did not want to give them any more excuses to beat him. Neither he nor any of the other genners would get any food today. The Folk were already busy cutting up the hunter, so that each family got its share of the life-giving meat.

At the end of the hall, Evv helped the blind man into the passage that was called 'the genner pit'. This was where they lived, all those who had been born with defects and deformities. Here they had built their shacks from corrugated iron, bricks and junk. They lived here in the dark at the mercy of Bigge-Mahmed, because it was only when the Folk had food to spare, that the leftovers were thrown to the genners.

And now they gathered round Evv and Olda. Jummer with his clubfeet crawled out of his shack behind the oil drums. Flamehide got up from the waterhole where their drinking water seeped out from crack in the wall. He passed his hand over the yellow boils on his forehead and shouted over to them. Ninni and her husband, Terry Three Fingers, waited by the fire that was burning in an old drum in the middle of the passage. Terry put a grill pan over the fire and waved to them.

But Evv did not wave back. He had let them down again. Sometimes he managed to kill more than Bigge-Mahmed expected. Then he cut up his catch and hid some pieces of meat under his jacket. And when Bigge-Mahmed and the Folk were busy eating, he handed out the hidden meat to the genners. All the night hunters had done this. But now he was the only one. The rapermen and Connergashon had killed the others.

"No," Evv said as the genners thronged around him. "No, have none."

"Is true." Mouth pushed his way forward. "Lila try to get th'arm, but Bigge-Mahmed saw."

Evv turned away from the light as he led Olda past the oil drum. Out in the hall, the Folk had driven an iron stake through the corpse, and now they hung it over the fire. Women and children clamoured round Bigge-Mahmed and the other men like starving dogs.

"Yes, let him be," Olda repeated. "Evv's tired. Let him rest, then he'll bring food tomorrow."

Evv turned his back on the hall and got a better hold of the blind man. Hunger was gnawing at his stomach. He longed for the taste of fresh meat. It didn't matter whether it was a wild dog or a raperman. Even a rat would taste good now. But the rats in the cages were dog food and the last genner to steal and slaughter a pig had been beaten to death by Bigge-Mahmed.

At the end of the passage, Evv lifted Olda up in his arms. The ceiling had fallen in here, but at about head-height from the floor, a large cement platform stuck out from the rubble, creating a shelf with a good view of the passage and hall outside. Evv carried the old man up onto the platform and had to bend under the ceiling. Two blocks of cement had fallen together to form a vaulted roof over the platform, and they had made a shelter for themselves here. The shelter was just big enough for them to have some space on either side of the fireplace, a hollow that Olda had carved out of the cement and covered with bricks in order to hide the firelight.

Evv lay Olda down by the fire, and while the old man pulled up some blankets, Evv took off his belt and quiver, and put it at the back of the shelter, beside his bow. Some twisted iron reinforcement rods stuck out of the cement blocks that made up the ceiling, so he had attached a drying line to them. He cleared Olda's rusty tins to one side, got undressed and hung up his wet clothes. The old man had hung the tins just over his sleeping place, and he used to hit them with his aerial to make them swing backward and forwards. As the old man settled under his blankets, Evv hunkered down by the fire. Hunger gnawed at his stomach and he was naked and cold. Out of habit, he ran his hand over the scar on his left upper arm, a pale patch of skin that formed a half moon the size of a hand in the grey fur.

Out in the passage, Mouth and Mittenhand put some branches on the fire. Evv knew that

it was precious firewood, as it was his task to go up to Easthill and break branches from the trees. He turned away from the light, which now filled the genner pit. In the light of the fire, his pupils had shrunk to pinheads, but now they began to distend. Evv had eyes the colour of dirty seawater. They were flecked with blue, something that no one had ever seen in any other night hunter than him. But in the dark of night, when he ventured out through the underground passages or ran amongst the ruins, his pupils filled his eyes completely, making them black.

Right at the back of the cave hung a pair of trousers and a bag. Evv pulled on the trousers that were made from the seat covers from the metro-wagons scattered around in the tunnels. As he did not have any other coats, he pulled his blanket round him before creeping out onto the ledge. He did not want to tell Olda that he had lost his iron rod in the river, so he hoped the old man would go to sleep quickly. His neck ached after being hit with the gun butt, and Evv could feel anger racing through his veins. Olda said it was a sin to feel such anger. He called it hate and said that God did not like those who hated.

Evv looked up at the iron beams in the roof. Most of the plaster had fallen down and only the crossbeams remained. When he was a boy and was not allowed to go up to the surface, he imagined that there was something magical about the beams, that they were a sort of heaven that was only for genners. He used to hide up in the crossbeams because he was almost certain that God could not see him there. But then he fell down and hurt his knee, and Olda made him promise not to climb up there anymore.

Out in the hall, the Folk swarmed around the raperman. They danced in the smoky light, fuzzy figures enveloped in the smell of meat and warmth. Evv picked the snow out from his paws and stroked his furry legs. He knew that it was bad to hate the Folk because they never shared anything with the genners. It had always been like that. That was the Law.

"There's no point in being bitter," said Olda from behind him by the fire. Sometimes it was as if the old blind man could read his thoughts.