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**Lushon's Plates**

Excerpt from the first chapter of Third Collection

**Translation by Kari Dickson**

The river flowed past silently. It was like a living, breathing black body that twisted through the city, as if it could never make up its mind whether to disappear out to sea or to stay. Every night it turned and flowed west, revealing the stinking mud flats. The water swirled around car wrecks, bones and junk as it retreated to the centre of the river. Remains of walls and road signs emerged from the surface between the broken bridge pillars on both sides of the black river. And then, when night was at its darkest and the river seemed determined to abandon what for centuries had been its home, it turned back. The road signs and reinforcement beams were submerged yet again, the river banks sighed and succumbed to the waves once more and the river rose against the pier outside the wall and rushed in through the Traitor's Gate.

Evv had seen this happen night after night. From his lookout point on the ramparts of Henry's Tower, he watched over the river and the south bank and every time a boat went past, he used the charcoal he was given at the start of his watch to make a mark on the wall.

At regular intervals, Evv turned and cast his eyes over the ruins and streets that snaked between the piles of rubble and demolished buildings around the fortress. It was a big city, much bigger than Osh Lo or Rostock. From the helicopter, he had seen towers rising above the heaps of blackened bricks and concrete, he had seen the countless streets and the great clock, Big Ben, which had stopped at ten past three. Now only a few of those towers remained, everything else had been reduced to rubble and was in danger of being ground to dust by the storms that regularly ravaged the city.

Even though he could sense the ghosts living in the soot-covered ruins, it was the other side of the river that he feared most. He had to keep his eye on the traffic on the river and the fires on the south bank. On the other side, two fires burned; this was where the boats normally moored. Sometimes he could see men moving around in the sharp light, and on still nights, he could hear them talking. They were also keeping watch. At other times he could see them, standing on the roofs and bridge pillars, looking over at him and then he was glad that London Force 8 had blown up the few bridges that remained after the war. But they had let one stand - Tower Bridge was but a stone's throw to the east of the fortress, so they could easily keep an eye on it. The bridge itself had been destroyed, but the two bridge towers that stood some twenty metres above the water, were still connected to the Connergashon's side of the river by the upper steel suspension beams.

The city to the south of the river was Connergashon's territory. And the boats were full of its men, the crusaders. They had rebuilt the churches and every Sunday God's voice called his believers to prayer. Evv had learnt about the Connergashon now. He had learnt about the

time that was and how everything fitted together, about civilisation and language and time, about people's knowledge and how his own race had evolved. The wise men and women had explained everything in the classroom, where he had his own chair and table, among the rows and rows of books, maps and computers. It was higher and wider than the small desks of the children and was one of six tables that had been specially made for night hunters. Sometimes Wally and the others from the Anubis Division would sit in class with him and they would learn about explosives and weapons and tactics. At other times he sat alone with the human children and the teacher printed words on the board and asked them to read.

Every day he sat there and listened. He had always slept during the day before, but here in London it was different. He had been given a black leather uniform, gloves with iron knuckles and a crossbow with his name carved into the stock. The letter A, a star and the figure 8 had been embroidered on the shoulder of the jacket. This showed that he belonged to the Anubis Division. The figure 8 was so that everyone could see that he came from London's Force 8, but there were no longer any other forces left in London, as they had all been annihilated by Connergashon.

Three months had passed since the helicopter flew in across the city and landed inside the Tower's inner ward and each day was like the next. Every evening he climbed up to one of the lookout points, where he stood among the frayed pennants and stared out into the night. There were four night hunters on watch at any one time and they were responsible for keeping an eye on the area surrounding the fort. Small windmills had been constructed on the walls and towers that whirred and turned, but on still nights like tonight, he usually just stood and listened and smelled. The only voices he could hear were those of the enemy watchmen on the other side of the river.

In the middle of the night he was replaced by Wally. Then he would go down the spiral staircase to the watch room under the lookout tower and out into the courtyard between the inner and outer walls. From here, some stairs led down to the water behind the Traitor's Gate, which was the only exit from the fortress. If anyone wanted to leave, they had to get into a boat and pull themselves along the chains on the wall while the guards raised the water gate. London Force 8 had dug a narrow canal that opened into the river, allowing the water to flow into the moat, so that no one could sneak in by the Gate. From here, he followed the causeway through the Bloody Tower and out into the inner courtyard, where he usually sat down on a bench by the White Tower. Here he dismantled his crossbow and put it in the case that hung from his belt before turning right and going in. Four flights up he reached the isolation ward. He always stopped at the top of the stairs to draw breath before tiptoeing over to the plastic wall. Sometimes he would stay for a long time looking at her, but other times it was too painful, so

he would hurry back down to the dormitory in the cellar. There he crept into bed and slept for the few hours that remained before Rose came to wake them with her pan lids and ladle.

After breakfast he had classes where he learned the knowledge and then there were a few hours when he could sleep before yet another day had passed and it was time for the night watch. It was at night that the people in the Tower needed the night hunters, because the enemy could sneak into the surrounding ruins and prepare a siege under cover of dark. Everyone knew that the crusaders controlled the south of the city, but recently street patrols had seen evidence of them on this side of the river too. No one had been south of the river for years, as the crusaders were too strong. Evv had been out with the patrols on many occasions and though they were always instructed to be on their guard, he never saw anyone. Only once had he caught the scent of a living being. That was the time he was woken up and asked to accompany Old Anger on a recce of the streets to the north and west of the fort. The scarred old night hunter had shuffled in front of him with a bent back and his crossbow in his hands. When they found the tracks of the people that Wally had seen mooring by City Bridge, Old Anger immediately pulled back his shoulders and picked up speed. They ran between the ruins and burnt out buildings, past bomb craters and rusty tanks until Old Anger suddenly fired an arrow towards one of many crossroads. Something screamed, but when they got there, there was nothing. The tracks ended in a blind alley. It was as if God himself had lifted the wounded person up into the night sky.

Evv liked being on watch, because so much went on behind the walls during the day. So many people lived their lives alongside him, children and old folk, night hunters and humans all mixed together, and it was only when he stood looking out over the Thames that he found any peace. Up behind the ancient, blackened ramparts, he could think and recall all the incredible things that had happened to him.

His world was bigger now. As they had flown over Europe and he looked down at the mountains, plains and rivers winding their way through the grey dusty landscape, Gerster had told him about the countries they passed and what they had looked like before the bombs fell. They saw fires burning in the towns, woods nestling in mountain passes and valleys that were sheltered from the dust and sand.

But the most incredible thing was to see Fire Eye rising. At first he had tried to hide, but when Wally stood in the open door without fear and looked out at the sunrise, Evv discovered that he too could now look at the light. It was the glass in his mask that made this possible, Gerster explained. The same glass had been used for the domes. When their eyes were protected by this special glass, transgeners could also see in daylight.

Every day he discovered new mysteries and miracles. He learnt about language,

explosives and genetics, war tactics and first aid. The things that he had taken with him in his bag were no longer just *things*. The thunder stick was a revolver and the picture blocks from the Kunta were a lecture on oil resources. The people who had welcomed him so warmly behind these walls had explained everything to him. They asked him to describe where he came from and Evv had told them about the dens and the dark winters of his childhood. He was Norwegian, they said. He came from the frozen north.

And every day he was getting better and better at speaking like the humans. Rose, who was not only their cook, but also the English teacher and nurse, said that he was a good student. The other night hunters hated being in the classroom and Old Anger seldom bothered to get out of bed if it was not time for his watch or food. But Evv was not bored. On the blackboard, he found the answer to everything he had wondered about. The teachers pulled down a white cover and showed pictures, just like they had at home in the Kunta. They even showed moving pictures that were alive.

Evv leaned against the parapet and looked out over the river. They had shown him what Sivv Lashon was. He had learnt about satellites in the sky that sent out signals to the GPS in his watch. They said that they were remnants from the USA, a great country in the west. But no one had heard anything from the USA for a long time and Rose explained to him that all that remained of civilisation from the time that was, was now here behind the Tower walls. And he believed her, because everything that Olda had asked him to find, he had found behind these walls. But it was not a better world. As long as it lasted, they were safe behind these walls, but it could not last forever. The food stores were diminishing every day and the Connergashon was becoming increasingly bold. New fires appeared on the bank every week and there were more and more barges on the river. Wally said that some of them even came from the Continent, bringing with them supplies and news of the war against the mushilens. Wally wanted to row out into the river and attack a boat, then kill all the crew except one, who would be taken back for interrogation. But MacRae thought it was too dangerous and would not let him. And they were not allowed to eat people. Though he never said it out loud, Evv knew that this law would disappear as soon as the food stores were empty and children started to die of starvation.

MacRae, thought Evv, letting his eyes rest on the smooth surface of the water. Colonel MacRae was the big Boss in the Tower. He had welcomed Evv when the helicopter landed. He grabbed him by the hand and said many words that Evv did not understand. The night hunters had waited behind him, but when Evv took off his helmet and mask and MacRae introduced him to them, they gathered round, shook his hand and welcomed him. They were not white like Wally, but had grey, brown and black fur, like most night hunters. Then MacRae had shown

him down to the dining hall where the table was set with plates of tinned meat and peas and jugs of water. MacRae was the oldest of the people in London Force 8 and his sharp dialect always distinguished him in the crowd. He was from the north, Evv discovered, from a place called Scotland. MacRae was Scottish, not English like the others in London Force 8. That was why he spoke differently.

The Colonel had sat at the table while he ate. Wally and some of the other night hunters carried Raya away when they landed and Gerster had said that she would get medicine and help. But Evv would not let them take Gro'am, he kept the child on his arm and fed him as he ate. Suddenly MacRae had leaned over and felt the boy's upper arm. He had looked at Evv with his cement grey eyes, set in a square grey-bearded face, and then ruffled his shaggy mane of hair, before opening another tin of meat.

When the meal was finished, the short Scot had led him out into the courtyard and then into a building called the Jewel House. Here they went into a room that was so white that it hurt Evv's eyes. A human woman with plastic tubes coming out of her ears greeted them and MacRae stood in the doorway with a deep frown on his forehead. Evv had to stand still while the woman held a metal plate on his chest and then he had to cough into a pipe. The woman punctured his arm and drew out some blood, which she then injected into a pipe connected to a computer screen. She had studied the computer screen for a while, then she took off her plastic tubes and nodded to MacRae. MacRae had smiled and led him back out into the courtyard. They went past the helicopters on the HeliPad and then into one of the many houses that made up the inner wall. At the time, Evv did not know that this was the classroom, but he noticed all the mag'sines on the shelves and the paper on the small tables. A woman had asked him to build shapes with wooden blocks and to look at drawings where he was supposed to see patterns of lines and circles. It was an IQ test, she told him, and when he was finished with the blocks and had answered all the questions, the two people wrote some secret words down on a piece of paper and nodded happily to each other.

After the IQ test he was paired with Wally, because all soldiers in the Tower were paired so they could share the night watches and look out for one another when they were on patrol or sent out on a mission.

The mist drifted up the river. It normally did about this time. The fires on the piers were enveloped in grey and shone like orange eyes. This was the time when the Connergashon might move. It was now that they would row their boats over the river, and if they were planning yet another attack, this was when they would take their positions.

Evv leaned out over the parapet. Below the wall there was a wide quay that ran the

length of the fort, broken only by the canal leading from the river to the Traitor's Gate. There were still some cement blocks left from the last attack when Connergashon built barricades and positions from where they shot at the soldiers on the wall.

The mist lay like a blanket on the river and now started to spill over on the banks. It was like a living animal as it snaked in and out of the ruins. It hugged the bottom of the outer wall and started to creep up towards him and soon the walls all around him had vanished. Henry's Tower was a wide, square building from where the outer wall ran east and west along the riverbank, but now only the two lookout towers that rose from the roof were visible above the mist. From where he was standing behind the parapet, it was as if he was floating on a cloud and when he turned round, the entire inner ward and all the buildings had been drowned in grey. Only the lookout towers, the White Tower and the Jewel House rose above the mist.

And it was completely silent now. Evv folded his arms over a grimy block of granite, leaned forwards and supported his chin on his hands. He could stand like this for ages, because it was good to rest his eyes on the river. Even now, when the mist was thick and grey on the water, he felt safe. The Tower was over two thousand years old, MacRae had told him. The walls had survived centuries of war and not even the firestorms had destroyed them.

Someone coughed. Evv snatched up his crossbow that was resting against the parapet and peered out into the mist. Then he heard the familiar heavy, determined steps and lowered his weapon. The sound came from the stairs, not the river. This mist could distort sound so much that you did not know whether it was coming from in front or behind. Wally's shaggy white head appeared in the stairwell.

"This fuckin' fog," he grumbled, doing up the top button of his collar. Wally was also dressed in the black day uniform, his mask hanging from his belt, as was compulsory. They could be called out on a mission at any time and needed to be prepared in case they did not get back before daybreak.

Wally didn't wait for him to answer, just nodded his head and climbed up onto the parapet, where he undid his zip and mumbled quietly to himself.

"You can't not ..." Evv struggled to find the words. Even though he had English lessons every day, he always had to mentally adjust before speaking. "MacRae say not to climb on'em walls, they crusaders can see you."

"Fuckin' MacRae, fuckin' orders. I don' fuckin' care. And them can't see in tha fog, not even them angels." Wally pushed his pelvis forwards and released a golden arch into the sea of mist. "Anyway, Old Anger tol'a joke. Fuckin' good joke, 't was, wanna hear?"

Evv hesitated. It usually took a while for him to feel comfortable with English. Rose had said that he should try not to think so much about what he was going to say. If he did that,

the words would just come on their own.

Wally jumped down in front of him and started to tell the joke and Evv stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth in concentration as he listened. Slowly but surely the words transformed into something he could understand and when Wally finished telling the joke and gave him a playful thump on the shoulder, Evv nodded.

"Fuckin' good joke," he smiled, even though he hadn't understood most of it.

"Typical Old Anger joke, fuckin' good," Wally said.

"Old Anger's funny man." Evv put his crossbow over his shoulder. "Old Anger, will tell'im when I see'im, ver'funny".

Wally scratched his head and looked at him with his pitch-black eyes. "Is true, him is ver'funny, Old Anger."

"Yeah," Evv replied, not needing to think so much any more about what he was saying. The words were flowing more easily now. "Him Old Anger say day before this that MacRae want us out on patrol soon. But I dunno."

"Canna know, no one knows what him MacRae thinks." Wally blew his nose in his hand and tightened the span on his crossbow. Then he put the stock to his shoulder and aimed into the mist.

"Fuckin' Connergashon," Evv said, because he knew what Wally was thinking. The white night hunter had numerous scars on his chest and back from when he and his brother were captured and tortured by the crusaders. Wally had never forgiven MacRae and the others for not getting there to free them in time. If they had been quicker, he would not have lost his brother.

"Yeah," Wally grunted. "And fuckin' mist. Tonight, I want to shoot me a crusader."

Crusader, thought Evv, and stepped up to stand beside him. That was what they called the Connergashon's men. And it was a good name. The patrols told that churches and crosses were being built all over the city. The humans said that the crusaders were frightened of God, so they built places of prayer to appease his anger. Evv himself had sat in the radio room and listened to their messages and transmissions. That was how he had heard about the war in the south, where the crusaders were fighting a bloody battle against the mushilens. They were heretical, black people who had been sent to the world by God, or so some of the priests believed. He had sent them in order to see if the believers, his children and disciples, were strong enough to conquer them.

Wally put down his crossbow, folded his arms over one of the blocks of granite on the parapet and sighed deeply. Evv did the same and for a while they just stood there, staring out into the mist. The bridge pillars looked like lonely giants standing guard over their old father, the Thames, as he lay somewhere deep in the grey silence. Maybe they had always stood there

and that was why not even the firestorms had managed to topple them. Sergeant Olson, who taught history, had told them strange stories about people and wars from the time that was, and it was here that they came in their boats, up the Thames. The Romans from Italy, the Normans and the Vikings had all conquered London in their time. But every empire had fallen, Sergeant Olsen said. As had the Western Alliance in the time that was.

"Play some'at nice." Wally pulled his worn collar up round his neck.

Evv fished out his mouth organ from the bag on his belt, but as he raised it to his lips, he remembered. "No, can't. You know. Not allowed when is mist."

"Don' give a fuck," growled Wally. "Ain't no fuckin' crusaders out tonight. They stay on other side. Trust me, Evv. I'd smell them fuckers if they was'ere."

Evv blew a long, low note on the mouth organ. Even though he and Wally were speaking English now, he did not need to think about it any more. The words were light on his tongue and flew out into the mist like small, invisible creatures. Rose said that in the time that was, English was the language of the world. Everyone could speak it. That was why they had to learn it now, if they were to build a new world.

He moved the mouth organ slowly over his lips. It was a simple tune that he had made up himself. He played it quietly so that none of the people would hear it and wake up. MacRae had clearly said that there was to be no talking, let alone playing, when the mist lay thick around the watch towers. It was in weather like this that the crusaders could sneak in and climb over the wall. But wasn't that wind he just felt? A faint breeze brushed the ramparts, a signal that the wind would soon blow away the mist.

When he put the mouth organ back in his bag, Wally's eyes were half closed. He stood there half asleep, half awake. He was dozing, but Evv knew that he could stand like this for hours without ever completely falling asleep. It was as if he switched off all his senses, except his smell, the only one he needed.

"I'm going down to the White Tower," Evv said quietly.

Wally did not answer. He never did when he was dozing. Evv took his crossbow and walked towards the stairs.

When he came out at the bottom, he could not even see the inner wall, the mist was so thick. Evv had never liked the cobbled street between the inner and outer walls, there was something ominous about the blackened stones and the water that sloshed and reeked under the Traitor's Gate. "Night hunter out into crusaders' land," the guards shouted as the water gate was raised and two night hunters went out to patrol the streets. That was ominous as well. The soldiers looked on the streets, even those right outside the walls, as Connergashon's territory. And it was here, between the walls, that the soldiers trained and sang songs that he never

understood. As a night hunter, he was not required to take part in the humans' exercises, but he had listened to Gerster and MacRae and all the other important men and he knew that if the outer wall fell, they would withdraw into the inner ward. They would not even try to take the wounded with them, they would just retreat and shut the gates behind them. Because the inner ward, thought Evv as he passed through the arcade that ran under the Bloody Tower, was the last defence.

At the end of the arcade, he came out into the courtyard. The mist made his face wet and he could barely see his own hands in front of him. But he knew the place so well now that he could find his way blindfolded. There was a large open square within the walls of the Bloody Tower and from here there was a slope up to the foot of the White Tower. This was where the ravens lay buried, behind what remained of the stalls and workshops from the time that was, and if he went straight on up the steps, he would get to the square behind the White Tower, with the helicopters, the classroom and the Children's House to his left. Evv followed the asphalt to the steps. Nineteen steps led up to the square where he sat down on one of the benches. From here, he could look down at the nine small crosses on the slope he had just walked up. Rose had told him that in the time that was, nine ravens had lived here in the Tower. They had had their wings clipped because the people believed that the kingdom would fall if they flew away. He still wondered whether the humans had cut off their wings completely or just taken out their feathers, but he had never dared to ask, as he suspected that the humans would think it was a stupid question.

He took off his gloves and tucked them into his belt. Then he lay his crossbow across his lap and started to unwind the nuts that kept the bow in the groove. The story about the ravens always made him sad. It reminded him of everyone he had lost. His father and mother, Greyhide and Olda ...There were so many, far too many and soon someone else would leave him.

He tugged the draw out of the groove that ran along the stock. Then he separated the two parts of the bow and undid the draw before getting up. Sometimes he would sit here on the bench for ages, dreading it. And sometimes, like tonight, he just wanted to get it over and done with. He wound a thong round the dismantled crossbow, stood up and walked over to the stairs at the back of the White Tower. There were nineteen steps here too, leading up to the first floor, from where the stairs continued on up to the ward. From where he was now, he had the option to open the door under the stairs and go back down to the cellar, to the night hunters' dormitory. But he never did. He could never settle until he had seen how she was.

Everything of importance happened in the White Tower. Right at the bottom, in the subterranean dome under the cellar, were the chambers where MacRae and Rose and all the

other people had been kept in hibernation. The dining hall and the kitchen were on the ground floor and on the upper floors there were council chambers, armouries and wards. But the humans did not live here. They did not sleep in dormitories like the night hunters. If the mist had not been so thick, he would have been able to count the windows and doors in the inner wall where the humans had their homes and lived in small groups called families. Wally thought it was unfair and that MacRae was discriminating between night hunters and humans. But they *were* different, Evv always thought to himself. Even though MacRae and Rose and all the others said that night hunters were as human as everybody else, Evv knew it wasn't true. He was an animal and animals did not live in families in small houses. They stuck together in packs, like hunting dogs.

He slowly mounted the stairs as the mist cloyed at his face. He could just make out the helicopters standing on their pads; they stared at him through the mist with their large, insect eyes, their long, thin wings poking out of the swirling grey. There were three of them, two big freight helicopters and a small 'recce-copter' with only room for a pilot and a few passengers. It was one of the big ones that had picked them up from the dome. Rose said that he should be grateful, because they had sacrificed a lot of precious fuel for that trip.

As he put his hand on the door handle, a woman coughed over by the Helipad. Otherwise it was silent. Only the old father Thames dared to break the misty silence with his slurping, complaining breath.

*There's no point.* The voice that always whispered to him when he opened the door made him hesitate. *She won't even notice that you are there. She's sleeping. She's dying. Forget her.*

"I canna forget," Evv said out loud and opened the door.

He entered the hall on the first floor. Inside the half-open doors onto the hall, he could see the light bulbs glowing under the ceiling. They were never strong enough to make his eyes smart and the people always complained that the wind generators did not produce enough electricity.

He had learnt about this as well. The small windmills on the walls charged batteries that made this energy that people called electricity. They harnessed the wind and changed it into light. How it happened, he had no idea. But he knew that it was man-made magic.

The lamps glowed, casting a faint light on each floor, except in the night hunters' dormitory. The armoury was on the second floor, but he seldom went there. When he first arrived at Tower, he had secretly explored the White Tower and gone as far up all the stairs as he could, to where stones blocked the stairs. The corner towers had been destroyed by the firestorms, but the rest of the building remained standing. It was burnt black and he could not

understand why people called it the 'White Tower'. Perhaps it had been white once upon a time, but now it was grimy and dark and full of gloomy memories. People had been prisoners here; Wally had even shown him the cells on the south side of the armoury. Words were scratched in the walls, words of suffering and despair. 'Be faithful unto the death and I shall give thee a crowne of life,' it said in one place. 'He that endureth to the ende shal be saved' had been carved into the wall nearby. Wally had translated these ancient inscriptions for him and told him that this was his secret place. This was where he went to remember his brother and to nurture his hate.

Every floor was divided down the middle by a solid stone wall that ran from north to south, but there were broad archways in the wall that opened the rooms out to their full length. There was plenty of space in the White Tower and Evv had learnt in the classroom that kings and queens once lived here. They were fortunate, Rose told the children, to be able to grow up in such distinguished surroundings.

But that was, as with so many things that the humans talked about, in a time gone by. Evv followed the stairs up past the armoury, but stopped a few steps from the ward. He drew a deep breath, letting it out slowly as his heart beat wildly in his ribcage. Then he went up the final steps and out on to the stone floor.

The stone walls and ceiling here were also covered in soot, but there were shelves of glass and steel mounted on the walls and piles of mattresses and sheets in the corners. The shelves were full of screens, test tubes, paper and files, objects he never gave much notice, as his attention was focused on the southwestern corner of the room. The farthest corner was separated from the rest of the ward by a plastic wall. The plastic was welded to the stone floor, walls and ceiling, creating a nearly invisible partition between her and the rest of the world. A door and an airtight sluice had been installed in the wall and only people dressed in protective clothing were allowed to go in. They had to punch a code into a box that was welded into the plastic by the door and they always covered the box with their hand when they used the code.

Silently he walked over to the wall and placed his hand on the cold plastic. Raya was lying a man's length from him, surrounded by blinking machines and tubes that Smith, the doctor, poked into her when they were trying a new serum. She lay under a white duvet, dressed in a white night gown, and beside the bed was a stand where Smith had hung a plastic bag filled with some clear liquid. The liquid ran through a tube that was attached to her lower arm. When they got to the dome, the humans had attached tubes to her body to take measurements and when they had taken the measurements, they shook their heads and whispered sadly to each other and then shut her away behind the plastic wall.

Her face was even thinner now. Her cheekbones stood out and her eyes looked far too

big under the thin bluish eyelids. She was pale and looked old.

Evv lowered his head. It hurt to see her like this, but he had to come up to her every night all the same. Generally she was asleep, but sometimes she just lay there staring blindly at the ceiling. Then she would ask about life outside. She wanted to know how he was getting on in the subjects they were teaching him and she wanted to know if Gerster, MacRae and the other people were treating him well. She asked how he was and about Gro'am. Evv tried to answer her as best he could. The boy was getting bigger each day and he had started to say a few words. But Raya never managed to concentrate for long, and could suddenly fall asleep as he was telling her things. The medicine made her drowsy. It had to, Smith said, otherwise she would lie awake coughing all night.

The pills that stopped the EHD from driving her mad had started to affect her lungs. The doctors had mentioned emphysema and Evv understood that it was something terrible. Slowly, but surely, Raya would suffocate as her lungs rotted. It was a terrible way to die, but as long as Smith kept the EHD in check with his medicine, she would at least keep her sanity to the end.

They had let her choose. Evv put his hand in his belt and turned his back to the plastic wall. Raya had spoken to him about it. Smith had given her the choice between taking medicine that would reduce the aggression and madness caused by the EDH 12 virus or to stifle the virus with medicine that would ultimately stifle her as well. She had chosen the latter, because she did not want to end up like Dietmar. And Evv had said that he understood. But deep down he was screaming. Deep down he wanted to break through the plastic wall and carry her away from the White Tower, to escape with her home to the wide open space that he remembered from his childhood when he lived in the reindeer wagon with his mother and father.

Just after they arrived in the helicopter and before she got too ill, they had had long conversations. He still did not dare say anything about his life in Osh Lo, but she had told him her story. Her words had painted pictures that he relived in his dreams, words that fuelled the hate he had for the crusaders. Because it was they who had blinded her.

Together with three other soldiers from the dome in the mountains, Raya had gone north with a car full of medicine and food. They had followed the same road that he travelled when they escaped from Rostock. They had been driven by the hope of finding communities outside the mountains and inspired by the instructions from the time that was - that they should bring medicine and knowledge to the human race, so that they could rebuild civilisation.

On their way through the Deadland they survived two attacks. The road led them to Rostock, where they hid the car and lived among the ruins for two weeks. Raya crossed the river on her own and learnt about the clans that worshipped God and the cross. They discovered paw prints in the snow and dust and remembered the Anubis warrior who had been brought to

the dome and shown off. They remembered that the researchers had said that transgeners were the race of the future.

Evv turned back to the plastic wall. She had said so much. So many painful words. And now she just lay there and slept most of the time. Four years, she had said. Four years she waited for a chance to escape. All that time, the car was hidden above the women's hall and all she needed was someone who could be her eyes and flee with her. Someone who had the courage to believe that there was a better world on the other side of the Deadland.

When the four soldiers had been in the town for two weeks, a sandstorm blew up from the south, but instead of driving back into the Deadland, they decided to use the opportunity to hide the car. If the clan hunters found it, they would realise that strangers had come to the town and the clans were hostile to all strangers. Lukas, the technician, had located the night hunters' lair and together the four made a bold decision. Under cover of the storm, they drove the car to the top floor of the car park. It was the only place where they could be sure that the clans would not find it. No one would dare to look there and the night hunters themselves would not notice. So as the storm thundered and overpowered the noise of the hammer, they hid the car behind sheets of iron and when the storm had passed, they wandered out into the town and away from the night hunters' territory. They had a mission to fulfil. The orders said that they should look for life in the sewers, under the town. They should set up information boxes with instructions on how the clans could prevent the spread of disease and take measurements of the radiation and poison in the groundwater.

They were just south of the town when a hunting party discovered them. About ten men encircled them, and when Lukas started to shoot, the hunters let loose their arrows.

Raya was the only one to survive. An arrow that was intended for her hit the radio she was carrying on her back instead. That was why she could not call the dome. They would have sent a new car to Rostock to save her, but when the clan hunters dragged her with them to the camp on the east side of the river, she knew there was no hope. The instructions said that they should send a message to the dome twice a day. If the messages ceased, the dome would assume that they had been killed and that it was too dangerous to send a new car there.

Evv remembered the long conversations. Words about what had happened, words that made him seethe with hate. But Raya did not let the crusaders break her. One night she managed to break free and escape. She got as far as the town wall ruins in the west before they caught her again. Dawn was breaking and the crusaders put on their masks and decided to make sure that she would never try to escape again.

They gave her a mask but broke the smoky glass in front of her eyes. With a knife to her throat, she was forced to keep her eyes open as Fire Eye rose in the east.

Some moons later, Sheff's night hunters carried out a raid on the clan and Raya was one of the women they took captive. Vanter and his men did not notice her ashen grey eyes until they got back to Parkhaus, otherwise they would never have bothered to take her. But her empty eyes saved her from the fate that befell the other women they captured. The night hunters were frightened that her blindness might be hereditary and that any offspring would be as blind as she was, so they left her alone.

Evv had asked why Sheff had chosen her, a blind woman, to sew his day uniform. Raya told him that Sheff himself had come up to the women's hall and called her over. He said that everyone had to play their part. The other women were responsible for giving birth to new hunters for the clan, so she would have to do something else. She was to sew a day uniform for the new hunter, the one who had come from the north. When she said they would be better asking someone else, Sheff had grabbed her by the arm with his claw-like fingers. The day uniform was her responsibility. How she did it was her concern.

Raya told Evv how the women collected leather from wherever they could. They used their own capes, the covers from their shelters and flayed the animal carcasses that the night hunters threw to them. They sewed night and day because they knew that Raya would be punished severely if she did not manage to deliver the uniform on time.

Evv clenched his fists. He was standing so close to the wall that his breath formed condensation on the plastic. Slowly she turned her head to one side and looked over at the plastic wall. Sometimes he felt as if she could see him, but her eyes were as grey and blind as before. Smith and the other medical people had shone a light in them, scratched their heads, and come to the conclusion that she was not well enough to cope with a transplant. But even if she had been healthy, they would not have been able to give her back her sight. To do that, they would have to remove the membrane from another human's eyes.

She pushed herself up on one elbow. "Is that you, Evv?"

Again her words seemed to float around his head. He had just been speaking English and needed some time to rearrange his thoughts.

"Yes, is... is me," he stammered. "Is Evv. Just sleep now. Will go, now."

"No. Don't go. Stay a while."

Her voice was muffled by the plastic wall. He moved closer, so close that his protruding canine jaw was touching the plastic wall. Rose had said that Raya spoke German like they did before the nuclear war. In the time that was, all northern European languages had integrated. The Norwegian that Olda had spoken was not so different from the German that came from Raya's mouth. That was why he always found it easier to understand her than Sheff's night hunters. Rose thought that the night hunters had probably spoken a kind of *dialect*. Language

had evolved and *degenerated*, she said. He did not know what she meant by that.

"Gro'am," Raya said. "How is he? Is he talking more?"

"Gro'am's askin' for you. The boy not know where you'r. Wonders when you'r comin' back, does Gro'am." Sometimes he thought it was best to tell white lies. Gro'am could barely string two words together, let alone ask a question.

"You... You don't need to lie." She put her hand to her forehead and breathed in and out heavily a couple of times. "Why should he ask for me? I didn't care about him. There in Parkhaus ... I just thought about myself. How I was going to manage. How I was going to survive."

Evv coughed and looked down at the floor.

"I'm not good at showing how I feel," Raya continued. "When you and Gro'am came up to us, I hated you both because you were night hunters. But Gro'am is just a child. He isn't responsible for what happened. Naina loved him like her own child, Evv. That was why she gave him back to you. Because you are the only one who can look after him."

Evv put his hand on the plastic wall again. A few weeks ago he would have said that she shouldn't worry about him and Gro'am, because she would soon be well again and then she could stay with them. But he didn't say that any more.

Raya sat up on the edge of the bed. Her legs poked out from under her night gown. They were pale and thin. She wrapped her arms around herself as she always did. She was so very thin now and got cold easily. She shook her head and yawned and the moment she started to speak, it was as if she had forgotten what she was just talking about.

"How's your English?" she asked. "Learnt anything new?"

"Learn bloody loads," Evv tried to smile. "Rose's nice. But kids make lots noise sometime."

She tilted her head and tried to smile. Raya was no longer the woman he had got to know as they drove through the Deadland. She was so gentle and careful in her movements, like an old woman.

She cautiously got up and stood unsteadily on the stone floor. One step after the other, until her outstretched arms touched the plastic wall. Evv moved his hand to meet hers. He could feel the warmth of her skin through the plastic and when he closed his eyes, it was as if he could feel her heartbeat. She was still alive, but Smith and the other people treated her as if she was already dead. He had gone to Smith and told him that he had to give her medicine and make her better, but Smith had replied that he was working night and day with the blood tests. He had to isolate the antidote that the night hunters carried, but he had still not managed to do that.

"It's autumn." Raya raised her head as if she wanted to breathe in the smell of the wind and mist outside. "But late. November or December. I haven't counted the days. I forget. But soon..."

Her frail body was wracked by coughing. Evv could feel his fingers curling. He had to take his hand away from the plastic before his claws ripped it to shreds. It had all seemed so hopeless when he had spoken to Smith. He had gone down to the dormitory and just sat on his bed. He must have looked very sad, because Wally turned in his bed and asked him what was wrong. When Evv told what Smith had said, Wally sat up and leaned towards him. There was another way to get the antidote in her, he said. One of the first people in the Tower to get EHD 12 was a woman. She contracted the virus during an encounter with the crusaders, when she stabbed one of them in a fight. But this was not just any human woman, it was Old Anger's secret lover. And when Smith said that he needed a transgenner because he wanted to try to cure the woman with a direct blood transfusion, Old Anger immediately volunteered. The virus was annihilated and for a short while it seemed that the woman had been cured. But some hours after the treatment her heart stopped and after three attempts at resuscitation, the doctors could not keep her alive any longer. Wally had lowered his voice and waved Evv closer. Smith tested her blood, he whispered, and they found that her 'genetic make up' was no longer human. In the time between the blood transfusion and her death, she had transformed into something between a human and a night hunter. And Smith and the other people did not want to know. They said that it was 'immoral'. So it was not the fear that Raya might die that stopped them from doing the same for her, it was the fear that she might turn into a night hunter.

"Christmas soon." Raya wiped the mucous and blood from her lower lip. "Before, when I was little, we gave each other presents. It was a Christian tradition, Evv. But my mother thought we should do it. We went to the shopping centres and bought food and presents. It's a good memory."

"S good, Raya. Know 'bout Christmas, Rose told 'bout it. Said that them kids in class'll get presents."

Raya did not answer, but stood bent and helpless, as if she was about to collapse at any moment. She opened her mouth, and he could see that she wanted to say something. But instead she went back to bed. She crawled in under the duvet and lay on her back. The coughing made her tired. Never a day passed without him remembering the conversation with Smith. He had asked the doctor to give her his blood, because maybe her heart would not stop like the heart of the other woman. Maybe she would get better. But Smith had just turned his back on him and refused to listen.

"Gotta go," Evv said. "Shall ask him Smith t'come?"

"No." She closed her eyes. "I want to sleep."

"Me sleep too. But you know me'll come at night."

"Yes, I know. See you then, Evv Lushon."

The same words every time. Evv left the room, but when he had only gone a few steps down the stairs, he paused and listened, as he always did. If she called after him, he would run back to her again. But she never did.

The stairs took him right down to the ground floor. When he got to the small hallway where the children played as the people sat at the big table in the dining room, he continued on down to the cellar. The night hunters' dormitory was not like the rooms in the floors above, as the cellar was broken up by the ancient stone pillars that held up the rest of the Tower. A wall divided the room into a west wing and an east wing, but archways opened out the room so he could see all four rows of beds from his own. There were two rows in each wing, and all the night hunters had a cupboard and bedside table by the wall at the end of their bed. There was also a well for them down here. The round shaft was not far from Evv's bed in the west wing, where the stairs came down. It was as wide as a person and the people from the time that was had put an iron fence round it. When Old Anger and Wally were annoyed, they would stand there and spit into the water, without a thought for the fact that this was the same water they used in the showers at the back of the dormitory and for drinking. There was a door from the shower room down to the catacombs under the dormitory, which had been excavated just before the war. Evv had been down to see the cocoons, because the humans wanted him to learn and understand. It was here that they had lain in hibernation. It was here they had slept while the world burned and the buildings around the Tower's ancient walls crumbled and fell.

The stone pillars ran into beautiful arches under the ceiling. Every time he came down the stairs and tiptoed over the stone floor so as not to wake the other night hunters who had just fallen asleep after their watch, he was filled with reverence. No one shouted or made a noise in the dormitory. It was a quiet place.

He sat down on his bed and put his crossbow on the pillow. The barrel was longer than the one he had used in Rostock, the bow was more taut and the stock was more comfortable on his shoulder. The entire weapon was black, so that it could not be seen at night. Wally had told him that the humans made them just after they had woken from the great sleep, because they needed to save ammunition. The humans themselves used guns, and Wally believed that this was yet another sign that the humans did not see themselves and night hunters as equal. Night hunters could be sacrificed, so they were given inferior weapons.

But there was no point in thinking like Wally. The albino night hunter was bitter and eaten by hate, Rose said. Wally did not understand that they all had to work to create a future

where night hunters and humans could live together.

Evv slowly undid his uniform jacket that was buttoned diagonally across the chest. He slipped the sheath off his belt and opened the strap over the thumb protector, before taking out his knife. The blade was no longer than his fist, but it was broad and heavy. It was a double bladed knife, with a saw blade on one side, and his name was carved into the iron hilt. It was a night hunter's knife, and he had to sharpen and oil it and keep it in good condition, as he did his crossbow. He slipped the knife back in its sheath and put it down on his bedside table. Then he folded his belt and put it beside the crossbow. Finally he undid the zip of his inner jacket lining. The body heat from a half-night's watch radiated from his naked torso when he took off the black leather jacket. The scars on his shoulders and arms shone pale in his grey fur. But all the night hunters in London had scars. Evv turned his jacket inside out so the leather could dry out and hung it on the bedpost. It still felt odd to sleep in the middle of the night, but he knew that he would soon have to get up again if he wanted breakfast. And after breakfast he had his lessons, first English and geography with the children, then classes for the night hunters, in subjects like genetics and weaponry. To begin with he sometimes fell asleep in the English lesson and once Rose had jabbed him on the shoulder with a pen. He was having a bad dream and jumped up with a snarl, but Rose, who was used to transgenners, calmed him down. The children, however, did not forget it and now kept their distance.

Evv stood up and took off his trousers. His leather socks were attached to his trousers with laces just below the knee. The leather socks were tightly sewed round his paws and had a reinforced underfoot, so that they would not wear out too quickly. Wally's leather socks were so worn that his claws stuck out, but he refused to accept new ones, even though MacRae had ordered him to. Wally was convinced it was just another thing that the humans wanted them to do because they hated the sight of the night hunters' animal paws. Evv undid the laces and peeled off his trousers and leather socks and lay them over the end of the bed. He still had not told anyone about Olda and the Kunta, because he was ashamed of how he had lived. He had been like an animal, quite simply an animal. MacRae, Rose and the other humans in Force 8 always said that transgenners were humans as well, but Evv just did not believe they were the same. There were too many differences. Humans had day vision, night hunters night vision. Humans were beautiful and did not have fur, night hunters were ugly. That was the way it would always be.

He scratched his chest as he padded over to the cupboard on bare paws. MacRae himself had given him the military dog tag that now hung round his neck, but he usually took it off before he went to bed.

He put the chain down on the bedside table and opened the cupboard. He had to do it

without making a noise, otherwise Old Anger, who was snoring under his duvet two beds down, would wake up. Wally had the bed between them and as Old Anger seldom bothered to listen to anyone, Wally now usually turned to him when he wanted to talk. And he always had something to say.

Evv picked up his jacket and trousers and put them on a hanger. He left the cupboard door open and looked down at the bag that he kept at the bottom under his clothes. The humans had taken his revolver, but he had been allowed to keep the other things. On his bedside table was what Olda had called 'time', but which Evv now knew was called a 'watch'. It was a valuable watch, because not only did it show hours and days, it was also a GPS. They asked him to put it on every now and then so that his arm movements could recharge the batteries.

All the same, none of the things he had taken with him were as fantastic as those he had seen here in the Tower. Evv opened the drawer in his bedside table and took out the small, black book. Rose had taken him to a room they called *li brarri* and had shown him the shelves covered in piles of white magic and said that they were called *books*. He could borrow them as often as he liked.

This book was called the Bible. Evv had chosen it because Olda had often talked about it. The Bible was about God and Jesus. And he hoped that it would give him an answer as to whether night hunters would go to heaven, like Olda said, or to hell. He had ploughed his way through the first three pages, but then given up and started to read haphazardly in the pages that felt as thin and light in his fingers as newly-fallen snow. There was a lot about God in the Bible. He did not like God, because he was strict and all the people in the book were frightened of him. God was the Connergashon's and crusaders' God.

But it was different with Jesus. Five nights ago he had found a part about him that said that he cured sick people. The writing was in English, as it was in all the books, but Rose had asked him to write down all the words he didn't understand so she could explain them in class.

"Two blind men and a mute," whispered Evv and ran his index finger under some big Lett-ras in the middle of the page. "Matthew 9 to 27. As Jesus went from there, two blind men followed'im, calling out to'im ..." Evv had not yet managed to get through this part himself, but he remembered what Rose had read out loud. "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"

Old Anger grunted under his duvet, so Evv dropped his voice. "When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to'im and he asked'im ..."

Evv moved his finger along the lines. The Lett-ras were as small as grains of sand, but he knew these words by heart. "'Yes, Lord, they replied. Then'im touched their eyes and said 'According to your faith it will be don' to you,' an' their sight was restored.'"

Old Anger sat up in bed. His white and grey hair hung round his scarred shoulders like

dirty snow on a rugged cliff. "Fuckin' hell," he grumbled and pulled the hair from his eyes. "You again? For fuck sake shut'a fuck up!"

The old night hunter lay down again and pulled the duvet over his head. Evv kept his mouth shut. All the night hunters knew that Old Anger could get furious. Wally said he was different before his human lover died. After the blood transfusion, Old Anger had blamed himself for what happened, because he thought that it must have been his night hunter blood that made her heart stop. The old night hunter had become aggressive and unpredictable, so Evv generally tried to avoid him.

He looked down at the book again. He did not need to talk out loud when he read. Rose had taught him to listen to the voice inside. It was like thinking, only it was the Lett-ras in the book that did the thinking for him.

He continued to follow his finger down the page, turned over and stopped at the evil spirit. It was a mute, the book said, who was demon-possessed, but Jesus drove the spirit out and the man could speak. Once, back at home in the Kunta, a human boy had a fit and fell to the ground in cramps. The Folk had said that he was possessed by an evil spirit. But there was no Jesus there, just Bigge-Mahmed and his men who hacked the boy to bits.

It said in the Bible that Jesus cured the blind and drove evil spirits out of people. But his father was different. Evv turned back to the first page and looked at the words. The first part was Genesis. He had read these first pages so many times that he knew them by heart.

'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said: "Let there be light," and there was light.'

It was God who had given light to the world. Without God there would be no Fire Eye. Satan would not exist and all the night hunters would be able to wander freely in the eternal night. Evv hated God for this. It must be a lie that he was Jesus' father. Because Jesus was kind and God was powerful and terrifying and evil.

He followed the lines with his finger right down the page to the end of the paragraph.

'Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the seas and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'

It was God who said that the humans should decide. He had made them in his image. Maybe that was why the humans always did what they wanted and destroyed the world with their weapons. They ruled over all animals and only God ruled over the humans. But if God wasn't keeping an eye on what the humans were doing, what then?

That was the problem, Evv thought, and put the book down on the bedside table. God had not kept an eye on what the humans were doing. Maybe he was getting old and tired up there in heaven. Maybe he had fallen asleep for a while and when he woke up, the bombs had already fallen.

All this thinking made him tired. He would ask Rose about it in the English lesson. She would smile and put her plump, warm hand on his cheek, as she always did when he asked difficult questions. Then she would write his question up on the blackboard and all the children would put up their hands and say what they thought.

Old Anger started to snore again. Evv got up, took off his white underpants and folded them. Then he put them on the bedside table and pulled back the duvet. His bed was made from aluminium pipes and the mattress was soft and took on the shape of his body when he lay down.

He pulled the duvet over him and scratched his groin. He and all the children had been told that God sent Jesus to the earth to save them. He was not sure what 'to save' actually meant, but he guessed it had something to do with curing. God should have waited to send his son, because it was now that they needed him. Jesus could have cured Raya.

His eyes closed. He had so many thoughts and even more questions. But most of all he wondered when the big battle would happen. Although no one in the force talked about it, all the night hunters knew it would happen soon. London Force 8 had to drive the crusaders out of the city before they occupied the north side of the river and took complete control.