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Opening extract from

Crowboy

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ORF

So I'm outside the city one evening on me usual rounds, sorting through the leftovers and picking me way through the day's dead. Not that there's much to be took. The best of the fighting's over now. That all happened in the first few weeks after the soldiers come, and what with the city having took a good battering and the best of its people dead or run off, everybody's got themselves settled down now to a good long siege. That's how it always happens. And it can go on like this for weeks or months. The longest I've known was almost a year. But it always ends up the same way. The army has a sudden push, the soldiers break in, they go tearing through the place setting everything on fire and killing anything that moves, and then they're off and away again to the next place. I usually try to be off and on me way meself before that happens. It's a risky business, though, and I've come close to getting caught up in it a few times.

Anyway, like I'm saying, I'm outside and I'm doing me rounds and if pickings ain't good they ain't none too bad neither. I can usually find something of currency—a boot, maybe, or a buckle off a belt, sometimes a helmet that's been overlooked. There's always shrapnel to be picked up, of course, and empty shell-cases. They ain't much in

themselves but they can add up over time, and there's always somebody inside willing to trade something for them.

But this evening I'm in luck as how earlier on there's been a bit of a skirmish out here. Seems a gang of them inside got theirselves all worked and fired up and went out on some kind of a raiding party. Suicide mission more like. Far as I can tell there weren't none of them made it back. Bad news for them, good news for me, on two counts. First, one gang less, and second, I get meself some rich pickings.

I gather up about as much as I can carry and then sit meself down against a piece of broken wall to have a bit of a rest before I go back inside. The sun's going down over the mountains and it's still warm, but I know that as soon as it's gone it'll get cold and I want to be inside and snuggled in front of me fire before that happens.

There's a tree nearby. Got no leaves on it, all thin and twisted and burned black. And it's while I'm sitting there not thinking about much in particular that I see there's something hanging from one of the branches. Hanging and swaying and twisting round in the breeze. Well, I'm the kind of bloke got to know what a thing is and can't let it rest till he does, so I gets up and goes to have a closer look and I see that it's a dead crow.

It looks like it's been dead a while, hardly more than a few feathers stuck to scraps of skin and bone. Its feet have been fastened together with a nail, and there's a piece of wire looped through its eyesockets and tied to the branch. I wonder why somebody should go to the trouble of killing a crow and hanging it from a tree like that. But that's the

old me, the one that was around before the war started. I suppose there ain't many left like me can remember that far back. I've seen enough since to know that at the right time and in the right place people will do just about anything they can put their minds and hands to. And living in a war's just the right time and place. So no need to wonder.

I don't know why that dead crow should take me like it does though. There's something about it, the way it's just dangling there, so long dead it don't seem to ever have had much to do with being alive. Like being alive don't have no real connection with what's hanging up there. And thinking that I start to get the feeling that being alive ain't got much connection with me neither, how I'm just a few scraps meself all tied with string and walking around but not really living. Well, that ain't a nice thought to have when the sun's setting and the dark and the cold's coming on, so I stamp me feet to try and shake off the mood, and I'm turning round to go back inside when I see them.

They're coming across the plain, with the mountains behind them, and it's like the mountains are on fire, and they're walking out of the flames of that fire. Just shadows at first, little stick-figures coming towards the city, with the earth and the sky burning all around them. And at first I think there's two of them, and then I think there's three, but with the light in me eyes I can't be sure. But one thing I am sure of is that they ain't just coming here. They're coming here for a reason, and it scares me, and I want to get away. But I know I can't, I'll have to stay, because I know I'm a part of that reason as well.

JOEY

we walk together and he walks ahead leading us though I know only I can see him and sometimes it's difficult even for me in the day he is a shimmering of light the way you see it in a pool or a stream sometimes and it sparkles and flashes and is very beautiful at night sometimes only a faint mist like the mist you see around the moon on a clear night but much closer sometimes so close I can almost touch him I have tried to tell her but I can't find the words to say it and I think maybe there are no words only what you can see and this makes me sad because I would like her to know that he is with us guiding us protecting us she was chosen as well she has her part to play whatever it is maybe I will have to find a way to show her or make a sign we are near the place now and he is a deep red his hair and his wings are flames and I know that soon it will be revealed to me the purpose so we walk on me and she together he in front leading the three of us

ORF

There are two of them, a boy and a girl, and by the looks of them they've been through it, and come a long way. Ragged and dirty and starved-looking, but that ain't nothing new. The girl don't look to be that old, and the boy maybe even younger, only there's something about him somehow seems a lot older, something in his eyes. Like when he's looking at something he ain't looking at it but looking at something inside it or way beyond it. The same when he looks at me. It don't make me feel easy.

He seems to lose interest pretty quick, though, and turns away, while the girl comes walking up to me and starts talking straight out, and our conversation goes something like this.

'You from the city?'

'Depends what you mean.'

'I mean do you live there?'

'Not exactly. I'm kind of staying there for the time being. Till I reckon it's time to move on.'

'What's the best way in?'

'There ain't no way in. No way in and no way out. It's under siege or hadn't you noticed?'

'You're out.'

'I come and go as I please.'

'Tell us how to get in.'

'What you want to get in for?'

'We just do. Tell us.'

'Who are you, anyway? Where'd you come from?'

'Over that way.'

'From the mountains?'

'The other side.'

'That's a long way to travel. Hard road as well.'

'It hasn't been easy.'

'And how'd you get through?'

'Get through?'

'Like I've already said, the city's under siege. Has been for months. There's soldiers dug in all the way round. From the mountains down to the river. So how'd you get through them?'

That brings her up sharp and there's this puzzled look suddenly comes across her face, like she hadn't even thought about it till now. She looks to the boy, but he ain't no help, he's sitting by the tree and messing about with something on the ground and don't take no notice. Then she looks out to the mountains where they come from like she's trying to remember something, but gives up on that and shakes her head and looks back at me and shrugs and says, 'I don't know. Maybe they just didn't see us.'

And it ain't until a while after that it strikes me as being in any way strange her saying that.

Right now she's on at me again asking if I can show them a way into the city. And looking at her and him squatting down there in the dust under the tree, I know that if they do go in there they're going to come in for trouble and unpleasantness of every kind on account of how things

have pretty much broken down and it's only the real tough and the real sharp manage to stay alive. And they don't look neither tough nor sharp. So I tell her that if they've got any sense left at all they'll turn round and go back to the mountains. They'll be better off there than in the city.

'It's pretty bad in there,' I say, 'and it's going to get worse. It's only a matter of time before the soldiers break in, and you can guess what'll happen then.'

'I don't need to guess,' she says. 'I know. I've seen it.'

And by the look on her face and in her eyes I can see that she has. And I can see as well that nothing I say'll change her mind about wanting to get in there, though what for and why I can't imagine. But what their business might be ain't no concern of mine. I got enough on me plate looking after me own. And if I don't show them how to get in, they'll find some other way, so I might as well as not. Like I said, it ain't got nothing to do with me.

So I tell her all right, I'll show them how to get in, and she turns to the boy and says, 'Come on, Joey. He's going to show us the way in.'

He looks up at her like it don't come as no surprise to him, like he was just waiting for her to say it, then he stands and comes over to me and holds out something in one of his hands. It's a piece of twisted wire, I can see that right enough, but like a fool I says, 'What's that?'

And he speaks, the first time he's said anything, and I won't forget the sound of his voice in a long time.

'There was a bird in a cage. But now the cage is broken and the bird's free.'

He drops the wire on the ground and turns away like he's

forgot all about it and me. And then it hits me where I've seen that wire before, and I look towards the tree and sure enough the wire ain't there no more, nor the dead crow that was hanging from it. But though the wire's laying in the dust there at me feet, there ain't no sign of that dead crow anywhere. Probably got it stuffed in his coat or one of his pockets, I thinks to meself. Or ate it. He looks hungry enough and crazy enough. But even though I'm just thinking it I know it's a cheap joke and I feel a bit ashamed of meself for it. It just annoys me that the crow's gone and I didn't see it go nor what he done with it and I don't like to think I'm being made a fool of.

'Are we going then?' the girl says to me, and I nod and tell her just a minute, and get me takings together and put them in me bag and sling it over me shoulder and say, 'Right then. Follow me.'

Then I take them along the wall to the place where there's a hole covered over with a tangle of dead bushes, and I tell her as how it leads down to an old tunnel that runs under the city a little way and comes up by a canal, and that's how I get in and out, and if they want to follow me they can.

'But you'll have to watch out,' I tell them. 'It's full of rats and other godless creatures, and it don't smell too good neither.'

'That's OK,' says the girl. 'We've been through worse.'

Yes, I says to meself, no doubt you have. But it ain't half as bad as what you'll go through once you get inside. But I don't say nothing about that to them. I just crawl through and there's the steps and I go down into tunnel and they come after and I lead them through the dark and the stink into the city.

GEEKS: SCHYTE

We're on lookout in one of the old buildings right on the edge of our territory and it ain't fair cos this is the third night in a row I been on lookout and it's freezing and I ain't got no coat. Fig has, all right, but her won't share it with me cos her's a selfish cow is what her is and I don't mind telling her so neither and I do but her don't take no notice. It's cold like I ain't never knowed it cold before and there her is sat snuggled up in her coat and here's me with me arse and ballocks freezing off and I'm right pissed off about it though if I tried to piss I couldn't it'd freeze before it hit the ground. So I ask her again, Hey, Fig, I say to her, lend us your coat just for ten minutes, go on. And her says to me, No, and I say to her, Five minutes then, and her says, Not ten minutes not five minutes not ten seconds, it's my coat and I'm keeping it so give up asking and shut your fat trap.

Well, that ain't very friendly, is it, we're supposed to be sisters and brothers all one family, that's how Akh puts it, but there ain't no point arguing with her and anyhow actions speak louder than words, so I starts walking up and down and stomping me feet and flapping me arms about hoping her'll take pity on me, but all her says is, What you doing there, Schyte, think you're a bird or summat trying

to fly away, and I say, No, I'm trying to keep warm, stupid. You're the stupid one, her says, making all that noise, do you want to give us away, or summat? So I say to her that if I could get warm I wouldn't have to stomp up and down, would I, so why don't you let me share your coat if you won't lend it to me, it's a big coat and there's plenty of room inside for the two of us. And I go up to her and I say, How about it, Fig, let me get in there with you and we can snuggle up together. And her says to me, Go and snuggle up on your own, Schyte, her says, you ain't snuggling in here with me, now back off or you'll eat iron.

So I give up any hope a getting warm and go across to the window and take a look out. It's all broke down buildings out there from the shelling when the army first come, some of them just walls standing on their own, there ain't nobody lives in them now, only rats and a few stray cats and dogs that ain't been ate. It's a clear night and the moon must be up cos it's all lit up bright out there and frosty and all I can see it sparkling off the streets. Off the smashed up houses and rusty pipes and broken windows and the rubbish in the streets what nobody can put a name to no more. Bits and pieces of people's lives. And all cos of this war what nobody can remember no more what it's about if ever they ever knowed in the first place.

It's got its good side though, ain't it, cos if it hadn't been for the war coming here there wouldn't be no gangs to belong to and no Geeks and being part of the Geeks is the best thing's ever happened to me in my life. Better than me life like it was before. That wasn't no kind a life at all.

I'm still looking out of the window when Fig says, What was that? What was what, I say to her, and her says, That noise, and I say, I didn't hear no noise, which I didn't, cos I'd've said if I had, wouldn't I? I heard summat, her says, and I ask her what and her says her don't know, just some kind of noise definite, maybe somebody's coming. There ain't nobody coming, I says, I been looking out the window and there ain't nobody out there, then the door busts open and in they come.

It's Troggs, four of them, Lex, Ell, Uba, and Yass, and they're armed, chains, crowbars, piping, the lot. Fig's up on her feet straight off with her weapon, but her can see it ain't no good trying to make a fight of it, they've got us outnumbered good and proper. Lex knows it, and all, and he ain't going to make no quick work of it, he's going to take his time and enjoy himself, he's like that, Lex, a right nasty piece a work. He signals to the others to hold back and stands all easy-like and grinning and says, Best drop your weapon, Fig, if you know what's good for yourself. It won't do you no good, one Geek against four Troggs. Then Uba pipes up saying, Poor little Figgy-wig, out here all on her ownsome, and nobody to take care of her. They ain't looked at me yet, and it's like they ain't even noticed I'm there, which is a bit funny cos I'm standing right in front of them.

Course, that's all part of the joke, ain't it, cos right after Ell holds her nose and pulls a face and says, What's that stink, and starts into coughing and choking and holding her throat, and the others all join in making noises, and Yass says, Smells like summat's died in here, what is it, a dead

dog you was going to have for your supper? Then Uba looks at me like he's only just seen me and says, It ain't no dead dog, it's just Schyte, summat's died in his gut, Schyte by name and Schyte by nature, which is a really good joke, ain't it, like I ain't never heard it before.

They're all having a good laugh about it except me, even Fig her starts to laugh but as soon as her does Lex stops and asks her what's so funny and the others stop laughing and all and suddenly it's got serious and I can tell it won't be long before the trouble starts. I'm wondering if I can slide out through the window, so I start edging towards it slow while Lex is getting closer to Fig and jabbing his finger at her, saying over and over, What's funny, what is there to laugh at, some kind of joke is there, I don't see nothing much funny and you won't neither in a bit when I've smashed your teeth in, and other stuff like that. I'm getting closer to the window when Fig says, What you want here, Lex, what you doing here, this ain't your territory, it's our'n. Her's got guts, I have to admit it, coming back like that with the four of them there, and it makes sure that they're all looking at her and not at me as I get even closer to the window.

Next thing Lex takes a step in closer to Fig and says, Your territory is it, that's where you're wrong, cos it's ours now we're claiming it. Then he brings his knee up sharp into Fig's gut and her doubles up and drops down onto her knees gasping, and I start to sneak me leg out the window when Ell sees me and yells out and Uba makes a grab at me and at the same time I can see Lex raising his crowbar over Fig's head but before Uba can take hold of me or Lex can

bring his crowbar down here's Akh in at the door and swinging Lex round and knocking the crowbar out of his hand, and here's Rok and Jax and Dis in behind him saving the day like shining angels of mercy.

Lost your way, ain't you, Lex, says Akh, this is Geek territory, you're trespassing, and Lex stares back at him and says, No, we just come for what's our'n. And what might that be, says Dis. You know what, says Lex, our goods what you stole. You calling us thieves, says Rok, you'll pay for that. Pay good and proper, says Jax, let's do them. Yeah, like they done to Fig, says Rok, only worse. And they're about to lay into them when Akh holds up his hand and says, Ease up, lads, not now and not here. Then he says to Lex again, he says, Go and tell Ekt that if he wants anything he can come and fight for it hisself, fair and square. If he's got the guts for it, puts in Rok, and Lex says, He's got the guts all right, and Jax comes back with, Make sure he brings them, then, so's we can spill them for him. Lex don't say nothing for a bit, then, he just stands there staring at Akh and the others like he's thinking of something really clever to say, but before he can, Dis says to him, What you waiting for, Lex? Sod off out of it before it's your guts as gets spilled. So Lex picks up his weapon and gives the nods to Ell and Uba and Yass and they make for the door, but just before they go he turns and says, We're going but we'll be back, don't you worry about that, you'll see us coming but you won't be seeing nothing once we've done.

After they've gone Dis helps Fig up to her feet and they're talking about what we're gonna do to the Troggs and how pretty soon there won't be no more Troggs only

Geeks to run the whole territory, and it's only then I realize I've still got me leg half out the window, and just before I can get it back in Jax turns to me and he says, What you doing, Schyte, coming or going. And before I can say anything Fig ups and says as how soon as the Troggs come I was sneaking off out of it and leaving her to face them on her own, which is a mean thing to say, specially as what I was doing was going to get help and I would've got it and all if Akh and the others hadn't turned up when they did. It ain't no use trying to tell her though nor the others, and the next thing I know is Akh's told me to stay on lookout on me own cos Fig ain't in no fit state and the rest am needed for a council of war and we can't leave nobody on lookout can we so as I'm already here it might as well be me.

Well, I got plenty to say about that only it ain't the right time just now, I'll wait till after we've give them Troggs a thrashing tomorrow, then I'll have something to say about it, you bet. And I'll have something to say to Fig and all cos as they're going I ask her if I can borrow her coat seeing as how her's going back to camp and I've got need of it, but her won't, will her, I might've knowed it, so here I am now on lookout on me own and the whole ballock-freezing night in front a me and no coat nor nothing and like I said before it ain't fair.