

Tweed. Black as oil down there beyond the conservation-site, slicked with silver from the light on the portacabin roof. The night quiet now but for the dashboard TV, some girlie show on and Lox sitting there thinking about divine lightning-bolts when Gary sank into the passenger seat and made himself comfortable.

"See those diggers?" he said. "Forget to put the stabilisers down and you end up in the hole with a ten-ton JCB on your head."

"You did well, Gary."

"Aye?" The chicken looking pleased with himself, all big blue eyes peering through thick blonde dreads. Now saying, "Well, any more cars you want buried, I'm your man."

"You're a star," Lox purred. He leant back against the headrest, stared through the sunroof into space. "Did you know in 5000 million years the sun'll become a red giant star, engulf our entire solar system?"

"It must've slipped my mind."

Lox sighed a patient sigh, taking his time with the chicken, not wanting to spook him too soon. "I remember a night not too dissimilar from this," he said, "out in Oman. Lying in a wadi, staring up at the stars, the sky a deep midnight blue, a hint of breeze coming in off the sea—"

"What is this, storytime?"

"—waiting for dawn and the *adoo* attack to begin."

"*Adoo*?" The chicken listening now, all big flappy ears.

"As in enemy. As in raghead. As in the Dhofar Liberation Front." Lox considered telling him about night skies in the desert and what they do to your thoughts when you're waiting to die: all that time and space pressing down on you, stretching to eternity, putting the fear of death right into perspective. Tell the chicken that and he wouldn't know what you meant.

So try another way.

Lox said, "I'm lying in the bed of a *wadi*, just me and my Armalite and half a million scorpions, the *wadi* running east to west between the fort and the town of Mirbat. To set the picture, okay, the captain's sent me out to lay charges outside the perimeter wire so he can sit on the BATthouse roof and set them off while he sips his afternoon tea. West is the beach and Mirbat Bay, east is the perimeter wire fence. North, beyond the shadow of the BATthouse where our unit is based, the *jebel massif* rising black into lowering mist. This is the Monsoon season, Gary. To the south, Mirbat, asleep, a few babies crying, dogs barking. Picture it?"

"Yeah," the kid said, "I picture it."

Lox pressed a switch, brought his seat out of recline, and pointed up through the sunroof. "*Ursa Major*," he said. "Seven star constellation looks like the profile of a saucepan? See it? Follow the curve of the handle down one side, along the bottom, up the other side and you arrive at Polaris, the Pole Star."

"So?"

"So it'll take you right to the North Pole, Gary, case you ever cross me again."

"You still angry with me?"

"What do you think?" Lox re-reclined his seat and continued. "That night as I lay there looking up at the night sky I suddenly realised I could be looking at a star that had died a million years ago." Working his eyebrows now, the muscles in his forehead, that disassociated tone Brando hadn't quite mastered in *Apocalypse Now*. "I realised then that death is only a matter of perspective in Time."

"You lost me," Gary yawned, "out there beyond Uranus."

"Let me put it another way," Lox said. "You could be dead already, only

the light of realisation hasn't reached me yet."

Which shut the chicken up.

Momentarily.

"So how come I've never heard of this war?" he asked.

"Because we weren't there officially."

"Aye? In what capacity weren't you there?"

"It's not something I like to talk about."

"You just spent the last ten minutes talking about it, now you don't want to?"

"You ever heard of the Official Secrets Act? You join the Regiment, you sign it. It means you uphold the battalion's secrets until death do split your head apart."

"*You?*" Gary laughed. "SAS?"

Enough was enough. Lox took the Colt from under his seat and ground the barrel into Gary's neck. Let the chicken feel the solid click as he cocked it.

Gary screeched, "I believe you, I believe you!" Pushed back against the passenger door, frantic eyes reaching for the stars through the sunroof, the kid hauling in air, hand over fist, rasping it out, the sound of a life breathing its last filling the night, becoming its rhythm, holding them there, spellbound.

Finally Lox said, "How can I convince you?"

"I am convinced!"

"You don't sound convinced to me."

Lox feeling it now, the need. The way he'd felt it that night in Mirbat when everything started going wrong: lying in the *wadi*, dawn mist crawling off the *jebel massif*, half-a-dozen charges still to lay when the raghead came at him out of nowhere. Two rounds later his first ever kill

dropped with a sigh just as the sound of machine-gun fire shattered the dawn. The *adoo* attack suddenly underway, shells raining in and there he was stuck in the middle of nowhere, no knowing how many wallahs were about to come round the bend in the *wadi*. But feeling it even then, the need—

"I'm convinced, Lox, *please!*"

Lox taking the pressure on the trigger, hearing the chicken's plaintive cries coming through the mist as though from afar, Lox there but not there, caught in a vortex of time, feeling the need now more than ever—

"LOX!"

Slowly, like dawn over Tweed, the mist cleared.

He was back in the car on the embankment. Stars overhead, Tweed down there beyond the conservation-site, the JCB a rooster pecking dirt. *All systems responding, Captain*. He could feel the need dissipate inside him, no longer begging for appeasement. The chicken jammed against the passenger door, the barrel of the Colt still buried in the flesh of his neck, his whole body shaking, tears streaming down his pale trembling cheeks.

*Kids, eh, what they'll do for attention.*

Lox had to unlock the tension in his arm before bringing the gun away. It had been that close. He pocketed the Colt and climbed from the car, stood gulping the cool night air.

Far too close, he thought. Slotting the chicken in the car would have meant cleaning up the blood and the expense of a new side-window. Then burying the Triumph himself, maybe spoiling his patent leather shoes.

Gary had no such qualms: he stumbled from the car and puked on his fancy high-top trainers.