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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Abrupt Physics of Dying**

Written by Paul Hardisty

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# The Abrupt Physics of Dying

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When the sky is torn  
When the stars are shattered  
When the seas are poured forth  
When the tombs are bust open  
Then a soul will know what it has given  
And what it has held back

*The Holy Qu'ran, Sura 82: 1-5*

# *Part I*

## No Way Back from Here

*20th April 1994. Lat 14° 53'N; Long 48° 27'E,  
Masila Plateau, Southern Yemen*

The Kalashnikov's barrel was surprisingly hot. He imagined the brand the flash suppressor would leave in the middle of his forehead, the desert sun heating the metal to burn skin, a neat round scar marking him forever as godless, or, if it were a hole, dead. It had been a long time since someone had pointed a gun at him.

Claymore Straker sat motionless in the passenger seat of the Land Cruiser, staring down the barrel at the dark, bloodshot eyes of the man whose finger was a mere twitch away from redistributing his brains, and waited for the panic to rise in his chest. Facing the end of his time, calculating a life's worth, weighing his heart against a feather – surely these things should be cause for terror, or at least reflection. But he felt neither fear, nor panic, nor the urge to run. What came was more a sense of a long journey gone wrong, the feeling of arriving at what should have been the destination, only to find the sun-burned skeleton of a home, the wood long since scorched the colour of bone, the parched hills beyond showing through open windows and fallen walls, the cloudless sky piercing the gaping holes in the roof. Thirteen years ago he'd taken a wrong turn. And somehow he'd ended up here, looking back along the length of a gun barrel at a kid not much older than he'd been, back then, when he'd killed for the first time.

A bead of sweat tracked down his temple and dripped from the hinge of his jaw to spatter on his shirt. The sound it made was that of an insect hitting a windscreen. Another followed, the same rupture. It had been only a few minutes since they had been forced to the roadside, and already the inside of the vehicle was like an incinerator. What had led this kid here? Clay wondered. Had he had a choice? Was he, as Clay had been back then, desperate to prove himself, terrified of screwing up, preferring death over the humiliation of failure? And now that he was here, in the temple, what would he learn about himself?

The kid was speaking to him now, yammering in high-pitched Arabic. He wore a charity drive jacket over a faded *thaub* that probably hadn't been washed since it was made. The cloth wrapped around his head – the traditional Yemeni headscarf, the *keffiyeh* – looked like a roadside mechanic's shop rag, torn and stained. Clay figured the kid for eighteen, no more, despite the weather in his face – much younger than the other gunman who now stood at the driver's side with weapon levelled at Abdulkader's neck.

The kid pushed the barrel harder into Clay's forehead, forcing his neck back into the headrest. Again, the same words, louder this time, more insistent. He seemed to be looking at the steering column, the keys.

'Look, I don't understand you,' Clay said. His voice was calm and even, someone else's. '*La'a atakalim arabee.*' I don't speak Arabic.

'He wants you to get down from the car,' said Abdulkader. 'Slow. Keep your hands where he can see.'

Clay heard the grating sound of the driver's side door swinging open. The other gunman barked out something in Arabic and the kid snapped his rifle back from Clay's head and stepped away from the open window, the weapon now set to drive rounds through the thin metal of the door, straight into his torso. Clay stepped out onto the pulverised dust of the road. By now Abdulkader was beside him at the roadside. They stood with their backs to the vehicle, hands clasped behind their heads. The two tribesmen stood facing them, the car keys dangling in the older man's hand. They seemed to be

examining Abdulkader: he was clearly one of them, a Hadrami, perhaps not from this part of the Masila, but not an outsider. He spoke the same guttural dialect, carried his grandfather's curved, rhino-horn-handled dagger, the *jambiya*; he, too, could trace his lineage back to the Prophet.

The older man was speaking now, spitting out rusty-iron words, jerking the hoe of his beard towards the ground as if he were trying to cut a furrow in the sand. Abdulkader answered. A conversation ensued, the man questioning, Abdulkader's gravel-road voice rumbling in response. This continued for some time, the tone modulating between near fury and friendly chat. And then the older man laughed. The few teeth he had were stained a deep shade of brown, like weathered tar. He reached over and put his hand to the barrel of his kinsman's rifle and lowered the muzzle until it pointed to the ground at Clay's feet.

'We will go with them,' said Abdulkader. 'Sit in the back seat.'

Clay did not move. As long as they were still out here, on the road, talking, they had a chance. The moment they got back into the car, they would be prisoners.

'Tell them to go home, Abdulkader. This doesn't have to end badly for anyone.'

Abdulkader looked at him a moment, turned to the older man, translated. The older man listened, paused a moment as if reflecting on what he had heard, then fixed his gaze on Clay.

'*La,*' he said, jerking the barrel of his rifle towards the car. No. '*Emshee.*' Move.

'Please, Mister Clay, do as he says,' said Abdulkader, turning and climbing into the front passenger seat.

Clay planted his feet, stood facing the two gunmen, the older man frail, wizened, his beard tinted with henna, the kid taller, with deeply veined arms and a long sinewed neck that sprouted from narrow, slumped shoulders. He stood with the muzzle of his AK pointed down. Like him, it looked battered, poorly cared for. Fear swirled in his eyes.



Clay opened his palms, showed them to the gunmen, the universal sign of greeting, of supplication: I hold nothing that can hurt you.

'*L'awh samaht,*' he said. Please. 'Let us on our way, before someone gets hurt.' He looked back along the road towards the Kamar-1 well. '*Jeyesh'a,*' he said. Army. 'The Army is close by. Tell them, Abdulkader. If they go now they'll be safe.' They had no escort, but it was worth a try.

The kid blinked twice, a question forming on his face. The elder tribesman, clearly the leader, barked out something in Arabic. The boy levelled his weapon and jabbed it into Clay's ribs. The safety was off.

Abdulkader started translating, pointing back along the road, but the old tribesman cut him off, silenced him with a single word.

Clay could feel the AK's muzzle trembling, see the kid's hand shaking on the pistol grip. He looked into the young man's dark brown, almost featureless irises, the black retina, and locked them.

'No way back from here, *broer,*' he said in English, knowing the kid would not understand.

'Please, Mister Clay,' called Abdulkader from the car. 'Get in. He will shoot you if you do not.'

The kid flicked a glance towards his kinsman, gave his AK a jerk, digging the muzzle hard into Clay's chest.

Clay stepped back, put a half-step between them, hands still clasped behind his neck. He was a head taller than the kid, had a good twenty kilos on him, more. Clay reached slowly into the breast pocket of his shirt. 'I have money,' he said, pulling out a thick fold of Yemeni *rials* and holding it out towards the gunmen. '*Faddar,*' he said. 'Please, take it and go.'

The kid's eyes widened. The older man frowned, extended his stance, made to swipe Clay's fist away with the barrel of his weapon.

It was the mistake Clay had been waiting for. He opened his hand, caught the barrel in his palm, and tightened his fingers around the wooden forestock. The AK's muzzle pointed skyward. Yemeni

banknotes fluttered to the ground. Time slowed. Clay started to rotate the ball of his right foot, the pivot that would swing him away from the kid's line of fire and bring his weight around into the old man taking shape – his knees starting to bend, centre of gravity lowering, left elbow drawing back for the strike. The calculations were already done in his head: twenty-five hundred Newtons of force delivered with an angular momentum of twenty-six joule-seconds. Enough to crack bone, shatter cartilage. In a heart-skip it would be done. The old man would be down, the AK would be pointing at the kid. Clay could feel rage fire its waking reactions – that fission improperly buried in his core, suspect and unstable. Soon it would start to cascade and then it would be too late. There could be only two outcomes, and in each the kid would die.

Clay opened his palm and let the rifle go. He raised his hands slowly back to his head. He'd held the barrel for a quarter of a second only, long enough that the old man would know what could have happened. The last banknotes settled to the ground like winter leaves.

The old man jerked his weapon away, stepped back. He glanced quickly at the kid as if embarrassed at being caught out, then glared at Clay. The kid still hadn't reacted, just stood there slack-mouthed, the killing end of his weapon still inches from Clay's chest, the fear in him palpable now, a stench that thickened the air around them.

Abdulkader said nothing, just sat in the Land Cruiser's passenger seat as if resigned to this fate, this direction that events were taking. Soon, its trajectory would harden and grow strong and send them all tumbling into a place he had spent the last decade trying to forget.

The older tribesman raised his weapon, aimed it at Abdulkader's chest. The safety was off. He spoke. The anger rose in his voice. The message was clear.

Clay took a deep breath, looked into his driver's eyes. Abdulkader had joined the company as a driver two years ago, just after first oil. The money he earned helped him to support his two wives and seven children. Although Clay hadn't known him long, a year perhaps,

he'd grown fond of this man, his hundred-kilometre silences, his deep, considered logic, the gentle way he had with his children – balancing the littlest ones on his knee, laughing as he watched his sons kicking an old under-inflated football around the dusty paddock, the way he cared for his goats, pulling a stone from a kid's cloven hoof, feeding a sick doe with his calloused palm.

Clay raised his hands. '*Tammam,*' he said, turning slowly and opening the car door. OK. '*Ma'afi mushkilla.*' No problem. Easy. He stepped slowly to the car, climbed into the back seat.

The older tribesman lowered his weapon, walked around to the driver's side, got in behind the wheel, started the engine. The kid signalled Clay to move across the seat, got in, closed the door. After ten minutes on the trunk road, the older tribesman slowed the vehicle and turned it onto a narrow stone track that skirted the edge of a broad scarp. Clay could just make out the headworks of the new Kamar-3 well in the distance. Looking down from the scarp, the land fell away into a broad graben dissected by the root ends of dozens of smaller wadis. Eventually some of these coalesced to form one of the main tributaries of Wadi Idim, a deep canyon that ran down to the escarpment and burst out onto the coastal plain.

The vehicle lurched along the rocky track for what could have been half an hour, maybe more, the terrain a monotony of serried gullies and swales cut into the twisting contour of the scarp's edge. From the air, this landscape had the appearance of a slab of dried flesh, hooked and hung, the deep wadi dendrites like dark arteries in negative relief. But here, tethered to the ground, straight-line distances were meaningless, one mile of map progress won only with two miles of relentless contouring around mesa and wadi, a journey of seemingly endless wanderings.

At the apex of one of the gullies, indistinguishable from any of the others, the old tribesman stopped the car. He opened his door, stepped to the ground and crouched to lock the hubs. Then he got back behind the steering wheel, put the Land Cruiser into four-wheel drive, and started the vehicle lurching down the slope.

From the back seat, Clay could make out only the faintest indication of some sort of track, a few stones piled here and there, a shelf of wheel-crushed slate, occasional tyre marks in softer sand. Through the heat haze, away in the distance, the dark clefts of a series of steep-sided wadis cut deep into the limestone bedrock. The cliffs of each facing wall shone white in the distance like the teeth of some Triassic carnivore reborn from the rock of its deathbed. The satellite imagery had shown no settlements anywhere near here. From memory, that whole series of wadis, still perhaps ten or more kilometres away, petered out somewhere west of Idim, and had appeared to be inaccessible by vehicle. Not a bad place to be if you were trying to hide, or if you didn't want witnesses.

Clay reached across the seat back and touched Abdulkader's shoulder. 'What do they want?' It wasn't money, and it wasn't Abdulkader's battered old Land Cruiser. Were they to be hostages, pawns in the increasingly bitter feud between the tribes, the government, and the oil companies, or just examples, their bullet-holed bodies a warning to those who might think the tribes irresolute and fractious?

The old man turned and glowered at him. Abdulkader said nothing.

Clay assessed options. He had pushed as hard as he dared back at the roadside. By the way the old guy was driving, it was clear he was determined to get away from the road and out of sight as quickly as possible. The kid was nervous, twitchy, obviously inexperienced. His finger was on the AK's trigger, not on the guard, and the safety was off. The muzzle was pointed at Clay's ribs. Side on, Clay had little chance of disarming him before he got off a shot. And with Abdulkader in the passenger seat directly in front, the risk of trying was too great. He would have to wait.

Clay sat back and watched the dry benchland rattle past, limestone rubble and shale plates strewn over the flat ground with not a living thing to grace any of it.

Soon they were descending a narrow defile in the rock, in places barely wide enough for the vehicle. As they cut down-wadi, the

air became cooler and they fell into shadow. Battlements of rock towered above them, vertical blocks of massive dolomite the colour of scored hide, sheer and featureless. Ahead, the canyon narrowed to nothing more than a crevasse, the width of a man's shoulders. The elder tribesman stopped the vehicle in the lee of a huge limestone boulder, turned off the engine, and motioned with his head to get out. If they were going to do it, this was as good a place as any.

The gunmen herded Clay and Abdulkader towards the rock face, weapons levelled. Abdulkader was talking to them, pleading, but the men stood impassive, checking their magazines. Clay felt his stomach go cold. The elder tribesman shouted a command, levelled his weapon, flicked the AK to auto, and widened his stance. The kid, to his right and a few paces back, raised his weapon to his shoulder, sighted down the barrel at Abdulkader.

'No,' Clay shouted. 'Stop.' He stepped forward, put himself between Abdulkader and the gunmen.

The old guy narrowed his eyes, yelled out something.

Clay raised the palm of his right hand to his chest. '*Ana*,' he said in Arabic. Me. 'Leave him. It's me you want.'

It wasn't so bad, dying.

## The Sun

The old tribesman was about ten paces away. He looked at Clay for a moment, then past him to Abdulkader. The kid stood staring down the sight of his weapon. Clay met his gaze, stared back. At this range, he knew his body would provide only minimal shielding for Abdulkader. He tensed, ready to charge. If he was going to be killed, he would die fighting, perhaps giving Abdulkader a chance. That's how he'd been trained. Even though it was long ago, it was all there, so close to the surface, so readily exhumed and brought back to haunt.

The old man barked out a command. The kid blinked, stood unmoving, seemed not to understand. The old man shouted again, louder this time, and turned to his understudy. The kid lowered his weapon, stood staring at the old man, a look of confusion spreading over his face.

Clay coiled his muscles tight. This was the opportunity. 'He can't get us both,' Clay whispered. 'As soon as I move, go.' He judged the distance, readied himself. The old guy was a second and a half away, maybe less, the kid just beyond him, close. Clay burst forward, a sprinter from the blocks.

But Abdulkader was already moving, cutting obliquely to position himself between Clay and the old man. He stopped and turned, faced Clay, opened his arms wide as if to catch him.

Clay pulled up, stood staring at his friend. 'Get out of the way,' he said.

Abdulkader did not move. 'Do not fight them.'

Clay glared. 'I know what you're trying to do. Don't.' Clay moved right, then left, but Abdulkader followed, keeping himself between Clay and the gunmen.

'There is no need, Mister Clay.'

'*Yallah*,' the old tribesman shouted, jerking his AK in the direction of the crevasse.

The kid started to move, backing away, weapon raised. His sandalled feet shuffled through the dust. He reached the canyon wall, pushed his back against the wall of rock, and stood there looking back at Clay and Abdulkader, that same perplexed look on his face. The old tribesman shouted at him again. He peered into the crevasse for a long moment, looked back at his kinsman, and disappeared into the wall of rock.

'Now's the time, Abdulkader,' said Clay, grabbing his friend by the arm. 'He's alone.'

Abdulkader gripped Clay's forearms, holding him fast. His eyes were wide, sky clear, insistent. 'Please, Mister Clay. You must trust Allah.'

Clay looked down, back up at his friend. 'Only about two people in this world I trust, Abdulkader. Allah isn't one of them.'

Abdulkader frowned.

'*Ahituts beyah'lahu*,' shouted the old tribesman, now distinctly agitated. He had moved back, put more distance between them, and now stood poised with AK on hip, motioning towards the crevasse.

'He wants us to follow the boy.' Abdulkader pointed to the narrow opening in the rock, a black fault in the featureless grey dolomite. 'In there. *Inshallah*, we must go in there.'

*Inshallah*. God willing. Of course. It could only be thus. Here, Allah endured, clung still to an ancient and fearsome power in the minds of men. Clay bowed his head. 'And what, my brother, if God wills it, will we find?'

Abdulkader dropped his hands to his sides, stood staring into Clay's eyes for a long time. Then he turned and started towards the gap in the rock and followed the kid into the fault.

Clay looked over at the old gunman, at the AK47 aimed at his chest. 'Nothing to it, is there?' he said to the old guy.

The tribesman's eyes flickered, hardened.

'Trust.'

The old guy raised his weapon, wedged the stock into his shoulder. Clay knew that look. Last chance.

Clay shrugged, smiled at him and followed Abdulkader into the Earth.



After twenty minutes of walking they reached an impasse. The canyon had widened slightly, but the way was blocked by an ancient rockslide. Boulders the size of freight cars tilted on end formed a wall of rock thirty or more metres high. There was no way over. They moved closer and hugged the north wall of the canyon. The kid turned to face them, slung his weapon, and crouched facing a small opening at the base of the slide. Then he lay flat on his stomach and, with a quick flick of his legs, disappeared into the hole. The older tribesman stood a few paces back, weapon ready.

'Go,' said Abdulkader.

Clay crouched down and peered into the hole. A twisting labyrinth illuminated by a thousand dusty beams led away into the geometric chaos of the slide. He looked back over his shoulder at his friend.

'*Allah akhbar*,' said Clay.

It took the better part of half an hour to navigate the rock maze. He was much bigger than the Yemenis, and by the time he emerged down-wadi his clothes were torn and he was bleeding from cuts to his shoulders, forearms and knees. It was like arriving late and underdressed in paradise.

The softer layers of rock at the base of the cliffs had been cut away, leaving a series of broad overhangs. Beneath, gnarled acacias, ancient ironwood and camelthorn reached their branches out towards the



light in every shade of green. The sound of running water echoed from the canyon walls. The air swirled with the smells of charcoal, fresh dung, cardamom, chlorophyll. A thin column of wood smoke spun up towards the overhang and dispersed in the cool current of air that flowed towards the lowlands.

Clay looked up at the narrow rail of blue high above. The opening in the plateau was a few metres across at most. No wonder the satellite images had not revealed vegetation.

‘It is a good place, no?’

Clay snapped his head down in the direction of the voice. A small man dressed in a tan *thaub* and clean black-and-white *keffiyeh* stood before them. The left side of his face was over-sized and misshapen, almost pre-human, with a dark, heavily lidded eye buried in a deep well of bone, black as a moonless night in the Empty Quarter. He was unarmed. The two gunmen had disappeared.

Abdulkader bowed and greeted the man in Arabic, touching the tips of his fingers to his forehead and chest. The man responded in the same way.

‘Come,’ said the man. He led them through the trees and up a rock ledge into a small open cave cut into the side of the canyon wall. The oasis spread still and green beneath them. He crouched beside a hearth of stone and bid them sit. ‘You are with the oil company?’ he said in English.

Clay nodded. ‘My name is Clay Straker.’

‘Clay,’ said the man. ‘This is an unusual name. It is not from your Bible.’

‘It’s short for Claymore.’

The man narrowed his good eye. The other floated there, unresponsive. ‘You are named for a weapon. A sword.’

When he was young, he’d liked his name, liked its meaning. Now he hated it.

‘Not my choice.’

‘It is an honourable name.’

Clay said nothing.

The man shifted back on his heels, brought his knees up close to his chest, narrowed his good eye. 'Do you know why you are here, Mister Claymore?'

Clay looked over at Abdulkader and back at the man. 'Not for a *brai* and a beer, I'm guessing.'

A hint of a smile twitched in the Arab's mouth, disappeared. 'No.'

'We have done you no harm, nor you us,' said Clay. Not yet. 'Please. Let us go. This can still be retrieved.'

'Retrieved, Mister Claymore?'

'Sent in another direction.'

The right side of the man's face twisted into a smile. He picked up a stick and poked the embers. Without looking up he began to speak. His voice was soft, like the sound of the water bubbling from the spring below, his Arabic an ancient chanting melody. After some minutes he fell silent and sat staring into the coals.

Clay had followed as best he could, gathering an occasional word, the fragment of a phrase. The language dripped violence; the mutant face was serene. He looked to Abdulkader.

'This man is from an old and important Hadrami family,' said Abdulkader. 'Three years ago he went to Sana'a with his father to ask the President for a share of the oil that was discovered here. Promises were made, he says. We have all heard these stories. Instead, President Saleh sent his secret police, the PSO. They killed his father. Now they want him.'

Abdulkader looked at the man a moment, paused, then turned to face Clay. 'He is called *Al Shams*. The Sun.'

Clay felt a cold spine of ice shiver through him, the coldest desert night. He knew that name. 'Jesus Christ,' he whispered under his breath. Clay stared into the deep well of the man's dead eye. And in that darkness he could see it all so clearly. It was a Friday, he remembered. He had decided to take the afternoon off to look around old Aden. Thierry Champard, one of the engineers who ran the oil-processing facility, had offered him a ride into town, had been on his way home after an eight-week stint. He was off to the airport, happy,

he told Clay, because he missed his two young daughters, happy because his wife would be waiting for him at the airport in Paris. He was planning on spending Christmas at the family's country cottage in Brittany. He'd shown Clay photos: a beautiful blonde in a bikini posing holiday-style in a summer rose garden, one hand behind her head, the other on an out-thrust hip, her mouth partially open, as if caught in mid-sentence, mid-sigh, at the start of a whispered kiss; two smiling children on the beach, their doll-like faces peering out from under nests of thick sun-bleached curls, the sky-blue eyes, the pouty red-plum lips, the dimpled high-boned cheeks, girlish copies of the woman in the roses. Champard dropped Clay in the centre of town, near the *qat* market. The streets were packed after morning prayers. They shook hands, agreed to meet up for a beer the next time they were both in country. Clay closed the car door, walked about twenty steps, turned, made eye contact, and smiled. Thierry waved. Clay was halfway through mouthing the words thanks and good luck when the silver Land Rover disappeared in a nova of orange flame.

That was six months ago.

The day after Thierry's death, Clay had been ordered home, as had many other contractors and non-essential personnel. The rest was a story he had heard only in fragments, mostly as rumour, third and fourth hand, since he'd returned to Yemen. The Yemen government had quickly blamed the murder on a group of suspected militants led by a shadowy figure calling himself 'The Sun'. A manhunt was launched by the Army and the PSO, but Al Shams and his men had vanished. Not hard, in this part of the world. As time went by, things calmed down, and soon Clay was back in the country helping Petro-Tex with environmental permitting for the new Kamar oilfield, one of the biggest discoveries ever made in Southern Yemen.

The Arab continued speaking, the tone harder now. Again he paused, allowing Abdulkader to translate. 'He says this oil is a curse. The people of Hadramawt see nothing. There is no money, no jobs, only soldiers, deep wounds in the land, and death.' Abdulkader scooped up a handful of sand from the ground and let it fall away

between his fingers. ‘Did you hear of the ambush at Katima last year? That was this man. They killed six government soldiers and took many weapons.’

He remembered reading about it. They had caught the soldiers in a pass in the mountains. They wouldn’t have had a chance. Thierry Champard hadn’t either. It was only luck – whatever luck was, the random collision of events, the probabilities of place and time and a thousand other variables – that had spared Clay that day.

‘He says they will kill more, until the government gives them what they want, or they close the oilfields.’

‘Retrieved, Mister Claymore?’ said Al Shams in English. ‘That time has long since passed. Too many have died. Still more, I am afraid, are destined to perish.’

Clay looked down into the cold pitch of Al Shams’ dead eye. He could feel the turbulence close by, that incipient buffeting at the margin of chaos, a fall coming. He stood, tried to push away from the edge. ‘I cannot answer for the government,’ he said. ‘I am a hydrologist, an engineer. My job is to talk to the people and to listen to them. I study the land and the water. I report my findings to the company so that it can protect the people and the environment. The company wants to help the people, even if the government does not.’

Before Abdulkader could start to translate, the man spoke in rapid terse English, looking straight at Clay. ‘If this is so,’ he said, ‘why does the company need the protection of soldiers?’

Clay opened his hands and held them palms up. ‘We have no protection,’ he said, ‘as you can see.’

‘Ah, but you are an oddity, my friend,’ Al Shams replied. ‘The Army is everywhere. Your Petro-Tex has been here for almost three years, and things only become worse.’

‘I can assure you that the company is committed to complying fully with all appropriate regulations ...’ said Clay, reciting from the company’s public engagement handbook. It was what he was paid to do.

‘Do not patronise me, Mister Claymore. You know as well as I do that the regulations in Yemen are weak, ineffective and readily by-passed.’

Clay continued: ‘... and to comply with best industry practice wherever possible. Petro-Tex is committed to minimising the environmental and social impacts of its operations on the people of the Hadramawt.’

Al Shams blinked. The good eye flashed. The other disappeared behind a veil of wrinkled skin, its opaque depth reappearing only slowly as the mangled tissue drew back. Then he smiled. ‘You do not believe what you say, Mister Claymore. I can see this.’

Clay said nothing, sat listening to the empty echo of his own words.

‘The company,’ spat Al Shams. ‘Petro-Tex. You speak as if this thing were human, one of Allah’s creations. It is not. It is inanimate, soulless, not of this world. It exists for one purpose only, as we both know.’ He stamped the ground with his foot. ‘To get the oil that lies beneath this land. Our land. It will do anything to get it. It will pay people like you whatever it must to placate the villagers, to assuage the regulators. It will bribe, and kill. It exists only to enrich its shareholders. Such a thing as this is incapable of caring.’

‘I can assure you ...’ Clay began, ‘... that the company ...’

Al Shams raised his hand. Clay fell silent.

The Arab was quiet for a long time. Then he looked up and brought his good eye to bear on Clay. ‘My people are dying. Your oil is killing them. What you must ask yourself, Mister Claymore, is if you care.’

And in those few moments, as he looked around at the riot of trees shot from naked rock, he asked himself just this question, and determined that yes, he should care – and even vaguely remembered doing so once – but that, in fact, right now, and for a long time now, he felt nothing at all.

Clay shivered and closed his eyes. Then he pulled himself back and looked into the Arab’s eyes and said: ‘I don’t make the decisions.’

‘Ah yes, only following orders. So much of your history is like this, is it not? Your people have lost their way, my friend. They worship things other than God.’ Al Shams looked away for a moment as

if contemplating some deeper meaning. 'But my question was not about power, Mister Claymore. I asked if you cared.'

Clay looked up. 'What I think doesn't matter,' he said. That illusion had been dead a long time, buried somewhere in the Angolan bush.

Al Shams narrowed his good eye. The other remained fixed, staring out at some distant point beyond the canyon wall. 'That is where you are wrong, Mister Claymore,' he said. 'And you are too young to be so wrong.'

Clay Straker took a deep breath. He didn't feel young. 'Look, Al Shams,' he began, his voice tight. He cleared his throat, sought a deeper octave. 'I may well be wrong. I've been wrong about a lot of things. But I can't help you. You've got the wrong people.'

Al Shams pointed the stick at Clay's chest, moved its charred tip slowly towards him, pushed it into the place where his heart was. 'No, Mister Claymore, we have exactly the right people. And with you, both of you, we are going to send a message to Petro-Tex. One they cannot ignore.' By now the gunmen had reappeared at the end of the ledge. Al Shams waved and they moved closer, levelling their weapons.

Clay pushed the stick away with his hand. 'Whatever your issue with Petro-Tex, it's got nothing to do with my driver. He has a family, sons. Let him go.'

Al Shams looked up at the thin blade of sky. He seemed to be searching the length of the precipice. 'War is coming,' he said. 'Much will change, *inshallah*. The sky will tear, the tombs will bust open. Then you will know yourself. These are the words of God.'

Clay considered this for a moment. 'I've seen those tombs, *broer*.' He glanced up at ramparts of broken rock, back at the deformed face. 'It's not knowledge you find.'

Al Shams rose, wiped his hands one upon the other. 'Without Allah's wisdom, Mister Claymore, there is no knowledge. Now you will excuse me. Do not attempt to leave.' Then he turned and strode towards the path that led down to the wadi floor.

The two gunmen moved aside to let Al Shams pass.

Clay scrambled to his feet. 'You asked me if I cared,' he called out. 'Do you?'

Al Shams stopped.

'Do you?' Clay repeated, louder this time.

Al Shams turned and faced him.

'What do you think, Mister Claymore?'

'I think you speak well.'

The muscles on one side of Al Shams' face contracted, forcing up one corner of his mouth, narrowing the good eye, brightening the skin of one cheek. But the mirror was flawed. Whether by birth or some horrible accident, the flesh of the other side remained slack and grey, unaffected by the brief spasm. The effect was hideous, destabilising. Al Shams looked down, up again. 'I speak, Mister Claymore, for the innocent.'

'Words.'

'More than words, Mister Claymore. Truth.'

'Truth, then: Abdulkader is innocent. Free him.'

Al Shams looked up to the sky. 'It is in the hands of Allah,' he said. And then he turned and disappeared into the green depths of the chasm.