

# THE QUARRY

**Peter Dickison**

**Engines in Space**

It is the cold hour before dawn. I'm wedged into a deep rock crevice, high up the side of a cliff in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, and Gilly is whispering into my ear.

'They're coming,' he says.

The crevice opens out onto a gorge, steep cliffs rising above a pale river that churns and tumbles. The air around me is heavy with the smells of stone and dust. I'm hunched in a sitting position, sniper rifle across my knees, scanning the cliffs opposite, but I can see little in the darkness: a strip of sky with its glimmer of stars, the silhouettes of mountains. I've got dust in my eyes, blink rapidly to clear them, and squint through the Night Vision scope. The cave entrance springs into view in sparkling green illumination. I see no movement, hear nothing beyond the distant roar of the river, but I trust Gilly's instincts and continue watching. The minutes crawl by.

‘They’re here,’ says Gilly.

As if summoned by his words, stealthy figures emerge from the dark entrance, materialising like ghosts, drifting out onto the narrow ledge that serves as a path. They wear loose tribal clothing, flat woollen Pashtun caps, and carry a mix of Russian assault rifles, RPK and PKM machine guns. Pale motes of digital static seem to flicker across their clothing. Their bearded faces are obscure against the black cliff-face.

I whisper into my throat microphone: ‘You see what I see, Sierra Two?’

My earpiece buzzes: ‘*Can you get an ID, Sierra One? I can’t see shit.*’ I hear cursing drifting down from the ledge twenty metres above me, and picture Haddo wrestling with his NV goggles.

‘Wait one,’ I reply. I rotate the eyepiece of the scope, increasing the magnification to 12x. The six on the path enlarge into a pair, and then into a single figure that fills my vision. My heart beats faster, making the crosshairs twitch rhythmically. ‘Sierra Two: target confirmed. Just like the photo. Still limping from that drone strike.’

*‘What’s happening, Sierra One?’*

‘They’re moving—moving along the ledge.’

*‘Acknowledged. Let ‘em get well clear of the cave. Boys up top can’t get eyes-on with that overhang. Niner says we’re to engage. Target first—then the others. You initiate.’*

‘Yep. Got it. Sierra One out.’ I lean into the rifle, my left hand pulling the weapon tight against my shoulder and cheek, right hand working the safety before taking hold of the grip. The world around me fades: the rock walls, the cliffs, the cold, the night, the roar of the river, the empty hours of waiting—all seem to slip away to a place beyond my senses.

I feel calm press in upon me, as if the surrounding air has grown thicker. Gilly says something, though the words seem to come at one remove and I don’t catch them. I am listening to something altogether different, tuning into a subconscious mantra of checklists that play inside my head.

‘Use the Force,’ Gilly whispers, his voice close to my ear.

My body relaxes. I’m barely aware I’m breathing: slow, even breaths—each one

making the red-glowing crosshairs descend and climb the target. The bubble of perception within which I exist shrinks further, until it excludes even the awareness of my limbs.

And then I am alone. Alone within a sphere that contains only my consciousness and the circle of my scope—alone within a long, slow exhalation, the breath held half-out—alone inside this pause inside a world inside a point where two glowing lines cross, while everything on the outside stretches into infinite space.

And this—all of this—happens in seconds.

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They are seconds that begin hours earlier, when our patrol reaches the cliff-tops above the gorge. We cast around in the darkness, searching for our entry point: a near-vertical rock chimney spotted the week before by a ScanEagle UAV. A low whistle in the dark signals its discovery, and several of us assemble at the edge, preparing gear, eyeing the abyss. At the top, it is a wide crevice that cuts twenty metres in from the cliff-edge, the inside a series of rock ledges dropping into blackness, the side facing the gorge a tight fissure. We secure our ropes at the top and cast the coils into the void, listening to the *whupping* sound as they unravel.

I fit and adjust my NV goggles. My ragged breath in the cold mountain air fogs glass and I wipe a gloved finger across the lenses, fumble for the on-switch and twist it. Then darkness dissolves and the shadow-world is stripped from the naked outlines of mountains and tumbled rock, from a sky that is suddenly clear and brittle, where light-intensified stars form a glittering dome above a monochrome green landscape. The head harness is tight and I ease the straps until the goggles sit comfortably.

The shaft is an obstacle course of fallen boulders and ever-narrowing space, and we descend methodically, alternating between rope and braced limbs, passing or lowering equipment from boulder to boulder, ledge to ledge. The walls close in as we descend until every sound we make—every scrape of our equipment, every dislodged pebble that clatters away into the darkness, even our hard breathing—returns to us in a flat echo. We pause occasionally, listening, but the night is dark and silent, the only

sound beyond that of our exertions is the swelling roar of the river.

I leave Haddo on a ledge about twenty metres from the bottom of the shaft, my last sight of him in the darkness the twin, green haloes around his rubber eyepieces. The shaft bottoms out about halfway down the cliff, blocked by an angled slab of rock. Braced between the walls, I tie-off the rope and test the floor carefully, adding my weight one foot at a time until I'm satisfied it's solid.

I locate the fissure by the feel of the wind and a glimpse of stars above the cliffs. I kneel, leaning forward, holding on to an outcrop, turning my head left and right. Far below me, the river sweeps through the gorge, running pale over the rapids, dark in its swirling pools. And then I see it, an arched shape in the cliff opposite, so close I feel I could almost reach through the darkness and brush the dust from its ancient stones: the low-walled entrance to a cave.

There is a silent displacement of air and I feel Gilly appear behind me in the blackness. One moment, I'm alone, the next, his familiar presence fills the narrow space. A cold draught seeps through the fissure: night air down from the distant snows. I wait.

His voice, when it finally comes, is a whisper that floats above the noise of the river: 'What a hole.'

'Why don't you say what you really think,' I reply, keeping my voice low.

'All right then—it's an arse-crack. You've outdone yourself.'

I ignore him, and quietly lower myself until I am seated at an angle across the cliff-side opening, my back against one wall, feet against the other, knees bent. I flip up the NV goggles, and the world once more turns to shadow. Working mostly by feel, I unstrap from my pack a long padded case, from which I draw a scoped sniper rifle. The long descent from the cliff-top has worked up a sweat, and it begins to cool on my body. In the blackness behind me, I can hear the sound of breathing. I suppress an involuntary shiver and hunch into position behind the rifle.

I activate the scope illumination and the Night Vision adaptor. The cave entrance leaps into view, quartered by the red-glowing lines of the reticle. My back shifts against the rock-face as I begin to test and adjust my body position. I squirm a few centimetres sideways and sight through the scope, repeating the process until the rifle aligns without

effort. I check the safety, check the magazine, cycle the bolt to chamber a round, check the safety again.

Minutes pass, then an hour. The draught ebbs away until a stillness hangs in the air and the noise of the river invades the night. I focus on breathing exercises, on rehearsing the shot: a slow, repetitive process where I exhale, pause, visualise the sight picture while my hand squeezes down on the trigger and I imagine the crosshairs jumping and settling. More time passes. I force myself to keep still, despite the cold creeping into me. I watch the stars wheel across the narrow strip of sky. I wait.

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‘You ever use the Force?’ Gilly asks from somewhere behind my right shoulder.

‘What—?’

‘*Star Wars*, Episode IV. Death Star trench. Luke making the shot,’ Gilly continues, speaking softly in the dark. ‘You ever use the Force when you make the shot? You know, get all zen-like and zoned out, feel the Force flowing—where you don’t even realise you’ve pulled the trigger.’

‘You tell me. You were a sniper,’ I remind him.

‘Yeah, but not like *you*. How many you got now, thirty-eight? Thirty-nine? And that shot you pulled off in Chora, what was that, 1800? 1900 metres?’

I say nothing.

Gilly starts reeling off dialogue: ‘*Luke, you’ve switched off your targeting computer, what’s wrong?—Nothing. I’m all right.*’ A hollow chuckle reaches my ears.

‘Thought you only liked UFC and porn?’ I say.

‘I do. Just wanted to put the question in nerd-language, so you’d understand,’ says Gilly. ‘Still waiting for an answer...’ He begins to hum the movie’s theme.

‘We talking *Star Wars*, the book, or *Star Wars* the film?’ I ask him, trying to ignore the humming.

‘There’s a book?’

I sigh. ‘For those who can actually *read*, yeah, there’s a book. Lucas even wrote it. In the book Luke says “Nothing...nothing”, not “Nothing...I’m all right”. You were quoting the film.’

There is a long silence.

‘Nobody likes a smartarse,’ says Gilly, at length.

I lower my voice: ‘In the film, when Luke shuts off his targeting computer and uses the Force, he only closes his eyes—no indication he isn’t conscious of pulling the trigger—while the *book* says Luke “couldn’t remember touching the firing stud”. Anyway, this,’ and I wave my hand toward the opening in the wall and the darkness beyond it, ‘this isn’t *Star Wars*.’

‘You got that right,’ says Gilly. ‘This is way better.’

‘*Better?*’

‘More truthful.’

‘What do you mean, more *truthful?*’

Gilly does not reply. A cold draught brushes the back of my neck. I shiver.

‘You only have to look at the engines,’ says Gilly from the shadows.

‘What engines?’

‘The engines in *Star Wars*. Given that sound doesn’t exist in a vacuum, tell me, genius, if *Star Wars* is so truthful, then how come in the movie you can hear the sound of the engines—*In space?* And how about the guns—’

‘Blasters,’ I say, without thinking.

‘Yeah, those too,’ he says. ‘All that zapping and whooshing and shit? That’s screwed-up. Impossible physics.’

‘Artistic license.’

‘Impossible,’ comes the smug reply.

‘Story truth versus literal truth.’

‘Impossible.’

‘It’s true for the reality that exists in the film.’

‘Im-fucking-possible.’

‘Oh for fuck’s sake, *you’re* impossible!’ I snap. ‘You’re not even here—you *can’t* be here...I watched...I saw you...’ I turn sharply to look behind me—at the empty shaft and its empty shadows—and my anger burns itself out like a match.

Gilly’s voice comes at me from the dark, flat and without echo: ‘True,’ he says. ‘You did. Now *that* was one hell of an explosion, wasn’t it? *BOOM!*’

I try to block the memories behind his words. I think about the last time I saw *Star Wars*. Tarin Kowt? Definitely TK. A freezing hanger steeped in evening shadows and unwashed bodies, the Death Star erupting into motes of light that expand across the screen of a dusty Sony LCD, while Gilly laughs and fires orange plastic pellets at the TV from a toy pistol he’d stolen from a Dutch pilot.

*BOOM!*

I try to hold the image in my mind: the TV, those stupid pellets pinging off the screen.

*BOOM!*

I feel my heart thudding against my chest, a dizziness. I’m struggling to breathe and finally manage to draw breath—a breath full of cold and dust that sends me into a coughing fit. I shove my gloved fist into my mouth to muffle the sound, realise my hand is shaking and my earpiece is buzzing.

‘*Sierra One, you’re making a shitload of noise down there, what’s going on?*’ says Haddo.

I concentrate on sucking in oxygen. ‘Nothing,’ I tell him, ‘nothing.’

I take another slow, deep breath. I look up, but all I can see are the cold stars gleaming above the cliffs, the spaces between them devoid of starships. My temples ache.

‘They’re coming,’ says Gilly.

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The echoes of the shots roll away up the gorge and the bodies that haven't been swallowed by the abyss lie like shapeless bundles on the ledge. The unbroken sound of the river returns. I sit for a long time, tense, watching for any movement on the path while the avenue of sky overhead takes on a pale cast as dawn approaches. A fresh wind blows up the gorge, sends a draught slipping through the fissure to skin my cheek with cold. Finally, limbs heavy, I release my grip on the rifle and lean back, tilting my head upward to stare at the sky and the strip of fading stars running between the cliffs. I cover my face with my hands, then close my eyes to the growing light that creeps between my fingers.

'Gilly?' I call, the word echoing off the walls like a slap. My voice seems alien to me, the voice of a stranger. 'Gilly—Gilly, you there?' There is no answer. I press the heels of my hands into my eye sockets—I press hard, until it hurts, until my vision becomes red motes that flicker like stars against the blackness, and the blackness becomes a darkened theatre, where the sound of the audience is only white noise beating against the bubble of silence within which I sit, alone and untouchable.

'This is not *Star Wars*,' I whisper.

And I sit like this for a long time. A long time. Until the grim twilight beyond my hands becomes the fantasy, and the roar of the river becomes the impossible roar of engines in space.