2060 NY

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Chapter One · Free Preview

CHAPTER ONE

Rain hammered against Alex's thin coat. Ice cold water drenched his skin to the point where his teeth chattered violently. With an effort, he forced his teeth to stop chattering; he couldn't afford any distractions now. He looked up at the massive loading arm he was suspended from, United States Oil Corporation was branded across the top of the twenty-foot pipe. One end was locked to the dock. The other hung out over the gray water and the waiting ship.

He tried not to let the thought of what he had to do deter him from doing his job. Ignoring the steady drop of black crude oil added to the downpour of rainwater, he began to climb up the inboard arm, using the hook on his belt to help support his weight whenever he could. Within minutes he had reached the top of the arm; this was the easy part. He looked toward the outboard arm which was suspended in midair. If the contraption were to shut down, he would be crushed within the two arms; if the outboard arm couldn't support his weight, he would fall straight down into the water with the chance he'd never be seen again. Either way it didn't look good. His teeth had stopped chattering now — even the cold seemed to subside as he contemplated the task ahead of him. He took another deep breath and positioned himself to hang upside down from the outboard arm. Shutting his eyes, he let his whole body weight be supported by the outstretched arm. One second passed, two seconds passed. Three seconds. He opened his eyes. The arm supported his weight.

The moment Alex realized he was smiling, he stopped. “Come on,” he told himself, his voice barely audible above the noise of the rain, “finish the job now and celebrate later!” He began to move, sloth-like, further away from the dock to the head of the arm — the piece that was supposed to lock onto the tanker. His bare hands felt years of caked salt on the steel frame; he didn’t want to let go even with one hand for any longer than necessary. The clip at Alex’s belt hung useless.

After a few moments of careful climbing Alex was directly beneath the head of the arm; there was now the steady dripping of crude onto his jacket, mixing with the rain into some sort of thick gray liquid. He ignored this, and, withdrawing the wrench from his jacket, began to work on the rings of the head which were used to lock onto the tanker.

Two of the rings had been broken yesterday by poor handiwork of whatever crew had been on yesterday’s vessel; the loading arm had been locked on hastily and as a result two of the six rings were dented and unusable. What idiots could have made such a mistake? Had an error like this been done at the rig, whoever was responsible would be fired that day. Must have been foreigners, Alex thought savagely.

He had been equipped with six new rings in the case of all six having been bent out of shape; thankfully he only needed two. Gripping the arm with one hand as tight as he could, he reached for one of the rings hanging from his belt and unlooped the ring. He would need both hands for this. He clamped his clip to the outstretched arm and wrapped his legs around the frame for extra support.

With his two free hands he began to work on unscrewing the ring; it was not easy work. The ring had been there as long as the arm had been; if not for yesterday’s dent it would have been

impossible to unscrew it completely. Finally it came off, leaking oil in larger quantities than before, splashing Alex this time in the face as well as the torso.

He spluttered and spat, blinking rapidly to get the most out of his eyes. One down, one more left. Progress was progress — whatever the cost. He looked over at the waiting tanker; the ship's loading deck was now twenty feet away from him. He could make out two men standing on the deck waiting for Alex to fix the faulty lock so they could load up on their crude. If only the loading arm hadn't locked in midair, Alex could have fixed this from the deck in a few moments without the fear of losing any tools.

He screwed the new ring back in place, using his wrench and a couple of bolts to seal it in place. Once he was confident it was sealed tightly enough he began to work on the second and final ring; this one was unfortunately slightly rusty due to its more exposed placement. The rain was still falling heavily, but over the noise he could just make out voices, urgent ones. He looked over; it was the two men from the ship who were calling to him but he couldn't make out what they were saying.

"What?!" he called toward them as loud as he could, trying to decipher what they were saying to him; his voice was also lost in the noise. Alex looked back at his deck and his own colleagues; he could see his superior Cooper and his co-worker Williams looking out to him. They were also calling out something and because they were closer, Alex could make out one word. "Wave!"

A surge of panic overcame Alex. He looked past the tanker toward the iron gray waters, and sure enough a harbor surge was building — dark water heaped against itself, racing in under the storm, twenty feet of it and fast. Spray already stung his face; the rain turned sideways and cold. Alex pulled his body as close to the arm as he could. He felt the weight of his jacket lighten as tools and

bolts fell from his pockets into the water but he didn't care. He hung to the arm as though his life depended on it — which it did.

The tanker heaved first, then rolled hard in the surge, its hull groaning as the water slammed along its side and drove toward the dock. Cooper and Williams were backing away from the edge. Wham! The surge hit the pilings and climbed the dock face. The force of the water pressed Alex to the arm, cold and heavy, salt flooding his mouth — but that wasn't the worst of it. Whatever had been holding the arm still gave out under the sudden load, and the outboard arm swung wild left and right, the steel shrieking in its joint, Alex just barely holding on. The clip on his belt strained dangerously. There was water and salt in his eyes, ears and nose.

First the noise stopped. Suddenly the rain was audible once again. It took the sea water longer to leave his nose and longer still his eyes. When it did, he saw Cooper and Williams run over to the dock with looks of worry on their faces, worry that turned into relief at seeing Alex still suspended from the outboard arm.

The cold had returned; Alex could do nothing to stop the shivering now. With a loud horn, the tanker began to come closer to Alex and the loading arm, intent on letting Alex board. There was still a job to be finished. Alex had already unscrewed the bolts; the rest of the unscrewing process could be done by hand, but he had nothing to secure the ring back on. The second ring still wasn't sealed — but that didn't matter now. Alex saw Cooper run to the controls and bring the arm down onto the loading deck of the ship, which was now only six feet beneath Alex. Alex unclipped his belt to the frame and tried to climb down; his hand slipped on the wet steel and he fell onto the loading deck. The two men on the deck rushed toward him.

"I'm fine," Alex said shortly, sitting up before the two men reached him. He needed to be alone now; he did not need the help

of two strangers. Alex looked at his hand, the one that slipped, and was surprised to find it bleeding. “The last ring needs to be sealed,” Alex told the men, who were still looking at him with awe. “I would do it myself but I lost all my tools when the wave hit.”

Neither of the two answered him.

“Okay?” Alex pressed on. The two men nodded stupidly and Alex looked to disembark the ship.

“Great work, Bontari, you really saved all of our necks out there.” It was Williams. Alex was back on the deck and Williams rushed over to him, hitting him on the shoulder.

“The only person I saved was myself,” Alex responded shortly. Williams’ smile faded a little.

“Come on,” said Cooper, his usual serious expression was looking uncharacteristically cheerful and even a little proud. Cooper had been Alex’s supervisor at the oil rig, or as the employees referred to it simply as ‘the rig’ since day one of Alex’s employment at U.S. Oil Corp. “…you deserve some credit, you did good out there. Hit the steam room, Bontari. See you tomorrow.”

Alex spent a few moments longer than usual, wrapped in a towel back against the hot tile, letting the hot steam wash over him until he no longer felt cold. It was not the first time he risked his life here at work and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

And for what? Alex thought bitterly, a paycheck. No, it wasn’t that. Although jobs were scarce and the rig paid a handsome salary to all of its human employees, Alex wasn’t there for the money, he was there because he had nothing else. Alex was a mechanic by nature, he could fix things. That was all Alex Bontari could do.

He left the steam room in a pair of dry clothes, his work jacket hung in the locker room out to dry. The rain had subsided but the cold hadn’t, and without his usual thick jacket he was cold, though not nearly as cold as before. It was past six o’clock now; the clouds

had parted, the weak October sun was just visible, low in the sky, painting the whole rig golden. Most of the workers were leaving. Alex quickly scanned the crowd for his one true friend Gio Fiorelli but he seemed to have left already.

Alex waited another moment before leaving; he would miss this transport and would be forced to take the next one but it was worth it to commute alone. He stared out into the sea he so detested. There were currently no ships docked at the rig, and many of today's tankers were visible making their way across the Atlantic… Even further out, however, was The Rock. Alex had always been drawn to The Rock, for reasons even he couldn't explain. The Rock seemed to be a symbol of everything Alex hated, his job, the sea, the cold and the whole New Jersey now that he thought of it. More than this, however, The Rock was a symbol of oppression. A reminder of the day Earth went backwards, the day the asteroid storm began.

Although it was so far out, The Rock's magnitude was still evident. Alex wondered if it was really one thousand feet tall like he had heard people say it was.

Alex decided it was safe to leave now and made his way to the transport station. Alex climbed up the steps of the stop marked SANDY HOOK and awaited the next, empty A51 Uptown. By the time the transport touched down at WEST 135TH, it was nearly dark out.

Alex looked up as he always did on his way home, the bright billboards were the only thing that illuminated his short path home. The electricity shortage never seemed to extend to the big corporations responsible for the billboards advertising useless things no one needed.

The Manhattan skyline towered above him as he made his way in the near deserted streets until he reached his building. Alex lived

on the fifteenth floor and he made his way up, slowly and tediously just like he did every day. When he reached his floor he stared for a moment at the place where there had once been a working elevator and now was simply taped off with a sign which read Restricted by law. Even the sign was old. Alex had never been in an elevator.

Alex unlocked his apartment and before anything else made his way to the small fireplace and conjured a small fire, which despite its size warmed the small apartment immensely. Alex made his way to the pantry and took whatever food he could find before making his way to his old, moth-eaten armchair. This was the only chair in Alex's apartment. He moved it over to the window and began to eat, watching the sky darken.

It was a very clear night. As the sky grew darker, the lights shone brighter, transports making their way above the skyline, racers in their own lanes. The whole city illuminated ever so subtly by a yellow glow which came from the city's power grid. The biggest grid on the East Coast. The strained power source the government was so frantic to protect from running out.

The thing that drew Alex's eye the most, however, was the sky. On clear nights like tonight you could see the pale debris belt — quiet stretches of dark, then sudden shower peaks, fireworks without the noise. For a breath or two the peaks carried a purple glow, brief and beautiful, before the belt went still again. The whole picture tinted a dull yellow from the grid, with brighter smaller pricks of yellow which came from the windows of transports and the blurs of racers. The debris belt, the thing that had trapped Earth for over twenty years, was Alex's prison. The sky was also his only source of comfort. The idea that there was something beyond New York, beyond Earth for that matter, somewhere Alex's talent could be practiced outside the confines of the rig.

Alex squinted toward the sky and not for the first time wondered if Mars was visible from his apartment.

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