

# Descent

M Neuffer

Sea surges rocked the *Vale II* as it sailed beyond quay walls into the gulf, cutting into the morning off-shore breeze. Harrison leaned against tank racks on the deck to steady himself against the rhythmic rolls and dips of the dive ship as he inspected the tether reels his life depended on. Looking up, squinting at the seabirds wheeling overhead, he cursed the flyers who crapped all over the deck every time the ship left port. He cursed himself for waiting four months before coming back to work after Susan died, just as he'd cursed the sad, covered casseroles delivered by those he barely knew. This morning, he cursed the wind.

Today is the start of a two-day run to *Star Spar 146*. The company was contracted to detach the pipeline from the wellhead before the platform lifted off the seafloor. Harrison had been to *146* years before, even then it had been a barnacle-encrusted hulk pumping out quality crude. He remembered support columns seeming to be more weld bead and wound cable straps than original metal, surprised it hadn't collapsed. Surprised he gave a shit about it.

"Whatcha fer lunch?"

The voice raised him from visions of the cold deep. Turning to Jacques, he asked, "Choices?"

"Poke chop an shrimp creole."

"How long's the creole been simmering?"

"Couple few hours."

"Not long enough. I'll have the chops. Just one."

Jacques stuck thumbs in the waist of a grease-cruste d apron. "Weather's gone be good."

"Spouse so," said Harrison. "Send David up. Get his nose outta that phone, get some hard work under his belt."

"He up to the wheelhouse, chattin' the skipper."

Harrison spat. "Never shoulda vouch ed for him." His sister-in-law pleaded with him to take on her son before a wrecked life buried him, before he wilted into a useless walking corpse. Disgusted, he tossed the grease gun on a tarp and headed for the dive shack.

Orange shifted to red, then deepened as the sun passed below the liquid horizon. Another day of breathing in and out, thought Harrison, another day standing at the rail. Another day closer. A spark from far aft caught his eye. Who the hell's smoking on deck? Then he knew when the darkened silhouette moved. David. Taking a wrench, Harrison marched toward the young man, intent on shaking him up, giving him a god almighty shock.

Coming from behind, Harrison swung the wrench, banging it on the rail next to David's hand. The boy jumped, dropping his lit cigarette into the water.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Harrison demanded. "Are you fucking stupid?" He wanted to do more than kick him in the ass, more than scare him. He wanted to toss him over the side and might have if the boy didn't share Susan's blood.

Dive master Devers sat on the edge of the moon pool at the ship's center, testing shackles that married the hoist cable to the tool basket, readying it for lowering. Along the wide deck snaked the first hundred feet of umbilical to the air tanks and tether gear. Hook up

to the suit would be conducted just before Harrison dropped below the waterline.

“Channel?” James asked Harrison.

“Six.”

“Confirm topside,” James said as he checked the dive hood straps.

“Comm check,” said Harrison. His voice was heard two hundred feet above on the platform and in James’ headset. Receiving confirmation, he took his last gulp of free air.

“Connecting primary,” said James.

“Check,” said Harrison.

“Connecting secondary,” said James.

“Check.”

“Permission to dive,” said James into his mic.

“Dive authorized,” came the anonymous voice.

The dive flag was hoisted. Using hand signals to the man in the crane cab, Devers supervised the basket swing-out and lowering preceding Harrison’s dive. The hoist reel squealed as it always did, familiar to those on deck. Ten minutes after the basket touched down, Harrison was lifted and positioned over the center of the moon pool. Thumbs-up was sufficient permission to dip him into the salty dark.

Every fifty feet of cable play was called out over the radio with a check response from Harrison and the operations observer at the edge of the rig platform. At one hundred feet, Harrison switched on his helmet lamp. At three hundred, he saw light from the gear basket on the muddy bottom. The spot where surface light fades, the turnover point, was called the big squeeze. It’s here, divers mentally

separated from those above, constrained in a harsh world holding no mercy for the reckless or desperate.

As the cable played out the slow-motion free fall, the only sound in Harrison's ears was from the air manifold on his back, regulating air in and bubbling air out, maintaining a balance between good and bad, life and death, sanity and otherwise. He flexed gloved fingers and scissored his legs to ward off the chill, getting ready for landing.

On the bottom, Harrison radioed, "Slack twenty feet."

"Twenty feet," said James.

Over decades, an accumulation of tools and scrap, dropped from above, cluttered the bottom, jutting from the mud like broken teeth. His dive light captured an exercise bike.

As slack was given, Harrison trudged through the muddy dark to the tool basket, fetching a hammer, impact wrench, and six-foot pry bar slung underneath a negative buoyancy bladder. He scanned the bottom, finding the closest concrete base. The beveled corner pointed his way to the wellhead further into the dark.

"Moving," Harrison said.

"Check," James confirmed.

Harrison followed a tension cable that ran from one pylon to the opposite corner, knowing it would cross the rig centerline. Pulling a tether, walking was a process of labored breathing, leaning forward, taking a step, then repeat. He counted steps. Sixty or seventy should get him there. He tasted creole sauce in the back of his throat, burning. When that spiked word came to mind, he despised its emergence. Susan had burned in the wreck. "Sonofabitch," he muttered, eyes flaming more than his throat.

"You okay?" asked James.

“Halfway,” said Harrison.

Ten minutes later, he radioed, “Wellhead.” Communication with topside was a well-practiced economy of words. He and James had been an efficient team for almost ten years. He’d crashed at James’ place for two weeks when Susan kicked him out after a spat eight years ago. Susan had forgiven him.

“How’s it look?” asked James.

“Shitty.”

“Time?”

Harrison examined each flange bolt between two hydraulic valves and scraped sea muck to check the valve position indicators, confirming both were shut. “Eight bolts. Forty-five,” he said.

“I’ll give you an hour. Gonna call a break every fifteen.”

“Check.” Harrison appreciated James being a stickler for procedure.

When the last bolt dropped to the seabed, the flanges remained joined by corrosion and caked mud. Jamming the pry bar in the gap between flange faces, he gave an all or nothing heave. The coupling broke free, issuing a few gallons of raw black into the slow current.

Moving back ten feet, he called, “Haul away.”

“Roger, haul away,” said the topside voice.

As the flexible pipeline lifted, Harrison craned his head back as far as possible. There would be no reason for anyone to come down to this spot again, his private territorial waters. Up there was life without Susan. Down here was opportunity for clemency. Harrison switched off his light.