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## NORTHERN CHINA

The day that Kim Wut fell to his death seemed just like any other day to him as he transferred bundles of pipes from the supply base wharf onto the rig supply vessel *Kyang Xhu*. The pipes, Kim knew, were joints of marine riser pipe to be used in offshore oil well drilling. Kim was an experienced crane operator so had loaded similar pipes and other oilfield equipment hundreds of times since being promoted from wharf dogman six years ago. But he felt an uncharacteristic surge of excitement about today's job because these particular pipes were destined for Australia, a country he planned to visit with his family in a year or two. He had seen documentaries on television of Australia's beaches and wide open spaces, and heard that people who lived there were free to do whatever they wanted. It sounded too good to be true, so he and his wife decided they would see it for themselves.

Wharf crane operators were becoming well paid as oil prices climbed, and he and his wife, who worked in the wharf kitchen, were saving money faster than they ever imagined possible. They would soon be part of the new Chinese tourist class. The world was beckoning.

The *Kyang Xhu* supply vessel onto which he lowered the pipes was bound for the offshore drilling rig *Xang Hai 18* in the Bohai Strait of Northern China. Kim had never seen the *Xang Hai 18*, but he knew it was a Chinese copy of an American designed Pacesetter Class semi submersible drilling rig built in the Wang Lai shipyards of Yang Xi bay in the early eighties. The rig was part of a large fleet of Chinese rigs, most of which were idle for lack of wells to drill in China. But the *Xang Hai 18* was lucky. It had a new and energetic manager who had told everyone in the supply base that the rig was bound for Australia for a long contract of perhaps several years. It was due to leave China the next day bound for southern Australia, but first it would anchor off Balikpapan Indonesia for a crew change. Then it would wind its way through the Timor Sea past the islands of New Guinea, skirting the Great Barrier Reef down the north east coast of Australia, past Sydney and eventually to Bass Strait between Victoria and Tasmania. It would be a long journey of two months or more.

All of the marine riser pipes that Kim had loaded that day were slung together with wire slings into fifteen bundles, four pipes per bundle, each bundle identical in almost every respect. At fifteen metres long and a metre in diameter, each length of pipe weighed roughly three tons, so each bundle of four should weigh twelve tons.

But one bundle was heavier. Much heavier.

From eighty feet up in his cabin, Kim slewed the crane boom over the wharf to pick up the final bundle. A voice on the squawk box made him pay close attention. It was not his regular dogman's voice, it was a voice he did not recognize immediately. Then he realized it was the voice of the new manager, the energetic young rich kid who had just arrived from Hong Kong to supervise the loading and ride the vessel out to the rig where he would personally take charge of the rig and sail it to Australia. Hearing the new manager's voice on his radio surprised him, but the four words he spoke utterly baffled him.

'Switch to main hook,' said the manager. It was not a suggestion, it was an order.

Kim continued slewing as he shouted into the squawk box.

'Say again?' said Kim.

'Switch to main hook. Retract whip line.'

*Switch to main hook?* he repeated to himself. He understood the words, but not the sense of it.

His crane, like all oilfield cranes was equipped with two independent lifting lines. A fast *whip line* which was simply a single steel rope wound onto a diesel powered winch at one end, the other end being looped over a pulley on the outer tip of the crane's extended boom. The rope terminated at a metal sphere called a headache ball, below which the lifting hook was attached. The whip line was the preferred line for lifting loads less than twenty tons because it was fast and easy to operate. It was the line the operator had been using all that morning. The other line, the crane's main

hook, was for much heavier loads, capable of lifting over a hundred tons. But it was very slow to operate, about six times slower, because it gained its enormous mechanical advantage from a thicker steel rope looped through a series of twelve pulleys. Crane operators rarely used the main hook on the wharf because most loads were kept intentionally lighter than twenty tons to enable the rig based cranes offshore to handle them safely in the pitching rolling sea.

'Still one bundle left,' protested Kim, assuming the new manager had miscounted.

'Switch the fucking lines or I'll switch you – understand!'

'Yes, yes, understand. So sorry,' he shrugged, shaking his head in confusion, and lowering the main hook as ordered.

When the enormous main hook finally reached the ground, the dogman looped the sling of the last bundle onto it and radioed the OK signal to Kim. Kim engaged the clutch to commence lifting. The boom groaned in protest and the diesel engine stalled with a splutter.

'What the...?' said Kim to himself.

He restarted the engine and called to the dogman on the radio. 'Bundle jammed I think. Caught under something. Check it!'

There was a pause while the dogman inspected the load.

'No. Bundle all clear. OK to lift,' called back the dogman.

Kim frowned in more confusion. He revved the engine and engaged the clutch again, this time pressing the power pedal down hard. The engine roared, the winch groaned and the boom tension lines pulled taut as violin strings.

Slowly, laboriously, the bundle lifted. Kim looked out the cab window and watched the pipes appear above the stack of sea containers which had been obstructing his view of the lifting area for most of the day. The pipes shone white and gleaming in the afternoon sun just like the others, but these pipes were swinging more slowly than the others. He knew immediately what that meant. He glanced at the weight indicator and confirmed his suspicion. Instead of twelve tons, it read seventy five. He looked back at the load. The pipes looked identical to the others. He could not understand why they were so heavy. The bundle swung slowly around until the ends of the pipes were in his line of sight. The only obvious difference was that the end protector caps were painted red instead of white. Red usually meant they were damaged, but these were new pipes, recently arrived from a supply base in the north.

He shook his head and muttered something under his breath, then lowered the pipes onto the deck of the *Kyang Xhu* supply vessel where the deck hand directed them into a special cradle and unhooked the line.

Kim called over the radio. 'Someone should check pipes. Too heavy. Something inside, maybe.'

'No. Same as others. You make mistake.' It was the manager's voice again.

'No, no. Weight indicator say seventy five ton. Maybe something inside. Someone must check, or maybe rig crane will collapse trying to lift.'

There was a pause, then, 'OK, I'll take care of it.'

Kim spent the rest of the day loading the rig with welding equipment and steel girders which were to be used to

modify the rig for Australian conditions. His final lift was a large refrigerated food container which had been open for several hours while men loaded it with extra food, drinks and snacks for the long journey south.

Later that afternoon just before five o'clock, Kim lowered the boom into its storage cradle and shut down the diesel engine. The day's work was done.

High up in his cab Kim saw black diesel smoke belch from the *Kyang Xhu* exhaust stacks below him. The vessel had already been untied and her side thrusters were pushing it away from the wharf. In four hours it would be alongside the *Xang Hai 18* where the rig crane would unload everything from the boat onto the rig for its journey to Australia. Kim wished he was on it. As the boat turned, he could just make out the four red end caps of the riser pipes racked in their cradle along side the other cargo, and idly wondered if anyone had checked them.

*Not my problem any more*, he said to himself.

He stepped out of his cabin onto the ladder to begin the long climb down. As he put his foot on the fourth rung, the warehouse gave a long blast of its horn signalling it was five o'clock. The blast continued, lasting longer than usual it seemed. Kim turned and looked down to see if something was going on. A man was lying on his back on the roof of the warehouse pointing some kind of stick at him. The man was too small to recognize, but he was dressed in a smart business suit, just like the new manager's.

A white puff of smoke suddenly appeared close to the stick. At exactly the same instant he heard the sound of metal on metal near his elbow while a stinging sensation

shot up his left leg. The sting turned to excruciating pain, burning like acid. His leg buckled in agony. Only his quick reactions stopped him from falling. His hands gripped a rung of the ladder tightly while his legs dangled in open space. He tried to regain his foothold but only one foot found a rung. The other leg hung like lead.

'Ahhh,' he cried out, 'What the...?'. He looked down and saw a thin pink stick protruding through his trousers near his calf muscle. Blood was flowing along the stick soaking his trouser leg and dripping onto the ladder. He stared, trying to make sense of what he was seeing but his mind could not put it together for a moment. Then a wave of nausea hit him as he realized what it was. The stick was his leg bone.

Fear cramped his gut and nausea rushed to his throat. He dropped his head and vomited in the sheer horror of seeing his own leg bone, raw, exposed and bleeding through his trousers. Looking down, he saw the man on the roof still lying there watching him. He retched again and felt wetness in his boot. Blood was collecting there. He could feel it pulsing down the inside his trouser leg while his heart jack hammered against his ribs.

*He shot me!*

The bullet had punched bone through flesh and cloth before ricocheting off the ladder and falling into the harbour. More blood squirted from a ruptured artery. Cold shock and vertigo overwhelmed everything. His hands lost their strength and opened uselessly.

Kim Wut fell to the ground, his weak and pitiful cry lost in the noise of the warehouse horn. The horn was still blaring

when his lifeless body thudded on the concrete wharf three seconds later.