

WINDHAMMER PRIZE
FOR SHORT GAMEBOOK FICTION

FROGMEN

AN ENTRY IN THE 2015 WINDHAMMER PRIZE FOR
SHORT GAMEBOOK FICTION

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Your Background as a Salvage Diver

You have no diving credentials or certification. You took no courses, not even swimming lessons or first aid. You didn't join the military or any divers' groups or affiliations, so you lack decoration and any record of logged dives. You received no training from qualified instructors or diving officials. You don't have a blog or pictures of yourself on any website. As with all professions, workers must buy such endless increments. Your friends in the black market call them permission slips.

To play this dystopian diving adventure, record any two equipment skills:

head mount lights: an additional light source.

guide line: penetration line reel for quick backtracking.

hand-held sonar: for underwater imaging and navigation.

oxy-fuel torch: for cutting submerged metal.

redundant air supply: start with 5 extra Air points.

Also choose two diving skills:

frog kick: conservative swim technique for open water diving.

finger walking: non-silting propulsion for wreck diving.

buddy diving: you communicate well with other divers.

helicopter turn: air conservation during complex rotations.

controlled breathing: calmness in frightening situations and emergencies.

Skills can save Air by reducing exertion or the time needed to complete underwater tasks. Whenever you see "Consider your skills", try to choose the task applicable with your skills.

You have enough Air supply for many dives, but no treasure:

Air: 40

Pay: 0

Turn to 1.

1

The screams of frustration had carried for a kilometer over the water. Now, you haul the frigid woman from the Maritime sea and set her on the deck. Panting and shivering, she finally throws off her life jacket. It lies there like another person, forming a second puddle. They'll stay put for a while, barely drying in the morning mist and scant sun aboard *Fantasies*. Some never quite return after near-death, once the ocean's had its way with them.

You squat beside her, and both your knees pop.

"Tea or rum?" you ask.

"Both," she says.

The water and wind battle over her hair. Somewhere in that frizz, you see an older trauma. She looks too young for laboring off the coast of Nova Scotia. The real ride happened far from these waves.

You enter the cabin and fix her something. Your eyes do their rounds out the bulletproof windows of *Fantasies*, Jay Mervyn's militarized ring netter. No police out there this morning, just bobbing flotsam the size of rafts. The woman got herself into, or out of, something big.

Mervyn, your business partner, scans even harder. He'll only talk when the land disappears. You return to the young woman. At least she sat up to stare elsewhere.

"So what happened to your boat?" you ask, handing her two teacups.

"It blew up," she says into her drink.

You gaze seaward at the flotsam.

"Good thing I had some work to do on deck," she says. "The blast threw me. Frigging launched. No jets, drones, no other boats, nothing. *Seahorse* just exploded and sank."

You know the vessel. The *Seahorse*, a ferry catamaran, often housed a squatter or two. Dissidents fleeing the tyranny inland would get their feet wet there. Work always came along. Though anchored, stripped, and derelict, she had some investment—hammocks, sleeping bags, buckets of peat moss and seaweed for growing food.

"Torpedo from a sub," you say, fixating on the twin machine gun barrels mounted to *Fantasies*' roof. They look alive, like antennae. "At least *Seahorse* bore the blast. Her bulk saved your life, Miss..."

"Amanda."

"A toast to the brave horse." You take her shaky wrists and clink the teacups together.

You learned to stop fearing the waves, then the hurricanes, then the community of seafarers forced to live out here. The police don't even net much with their amphibious stings. It amounts to overfunded posturing. But now they have a nuclear submarine to decimate ships, even one housing inlanders.

You zone out even more than Amanda with her seaweed hair. For the first time in years, the lapping waves intimidate. That submarine can torpedo *Fantasies* too, and everyone else on this last bastion of freedom. They'll die here, never returning to the overregulation on land.

"I suspect you travel alone, Amanda," you say. They never go catatonic with crewmates still adrift.

"Yes."

"Not anymore."

You enter the cabin and recount her story to Mervyn. Even the happiest news angers him. The bulletproof vest doesn't help his new Canadian image.

"Democrats," he says scathingly.

Jay Mervyn. A scowling aging black man from the now broken-up States. You've learned to just agree with his political diatribes. Of course, he never admits the snake has two heads, that both US parties constitute the same ruling class. Nor does the retired vet care that the southern two-party system doesn't apply to Canadian waters.

"I'll bet those Dems have subs all over the coast. Frickin' socialists."

"Yeah," you say.

Really, you figure the Canadian Coast Guard patched up one of its deteriorating nuclear subs. She'll putter around near Halifax Harbor for emergency dockings. The broke US Navy wouldn't bother meddling in hickville.

You'll slip this to him in little packets over the course of the day.

Already, vengeance brews in Mervyn's eyes. He had partnered for your services as a reputable salvage diver, someone who can raise a sunken hull in pieces if necessary. But you probably won't hit that easy wreck off Guysborough as planned. His frown lines suggest a course change. Jay can't handle a much bigger dog out here.

"Say," Mervyn says, "If I get us close enough with sonar, could you sink her? We'd get the whole wreck to ourselves for a change."

"Jeez, Merv," you say. "I'll have to think about this one."

You don't have to think long. After so many dangerous dives, this one gig could mean retirement somewhere besides the seabed.

"We'd need more TNT," you say, "and another lookout."

"She'll do."

He finally glances at Amanda a second time.

"Alright, Merv, I'll attempt a sabotage. But I need a say in where we go to finance it."

"Fine."

"Fifty-fifty like before. And we split on the salvage three ways if Amanda joins, after the submariners get rescued. No one has to die with what I have in mind."

"As long as she sinks, partner."

"She won't leave the water, we'll put it that way. Of course, it could all go sideways for both of us."

"Hey, I fought for a whole damn country..."

...*that went sideways*, he won't say.

Later, Amanda leaves the tiny washroom. She has changed into a loaned set of Mervyn's army clothes. It sets the tone for what you intend to ask her.

"Merv and I decided to knock over a few wrecks...and the sub," you say. "If you want in on the last score, we could use a lookout and diver's attendant. Three-way split."

"How do you intend to stop a nuclear submarine?"

"I'd rather not discuss what I do."

"Can you discuss what you do?" She smiles. "Ok, so you need someone to watch up here while you...cut a submarine in half or something?"

"Pretty much. Merv can't shoot and watch his back at the same time."

"Ok, I'll watch."

"Remember, I walk if it gets tricky. And you wouldn't get a cut then. No extortion, no blackmail, no blabbing from your end. No other partners, no crews. We do this, or the offer never happened."

"Alright," she says.

-Teach Amanda about diving so she doesn't feel so lost on board (3).

-To reduce her timidness, have Mervyn demonstrate *Fantasies'* capabilities (5).

Chapter 4: The Spin

The days blur into one gray sky. Mervyn made his rendezvous and spent your profits on TNT. He also covered *Fantasies'* turret with tarpaulin to snoop close to Halifax Harbor. Additionally, he's hired help to escort any captured submariners back to land. Knowing Merv, they'll have to swim the last kilometer naked.

The wind slams your face like any other day. You wear scuba gear 24-7 and take shifts watching the sonar. Amanda crept off to land and hasn't returned. The job must go on. Mervyn yells "Look!" and the pits of his temples clench. The sub on screen looks like an iron pill the harbor swallowed.

"Can you really do this?" Mervyn asks. It took him all these days.

"I don't do capers," your voice booms from the mask.

You dive head first this time. No more thoughts, daydreams, or nightmares—just the job.

The massive black bow of the submarine rams into view like a faceless whale. You thrust your arms forward and flutter kick for it. Two divers, possibly more, appear clinging to the portside hull at a circular muzzle door. Flickers of blue light give away their work; the fools intend to weld shut the torpedo tubes.

Betrayal and the loss of surprise add to your mental pressure. Amanda. She made some hasty plans...and pals. It all sinks in together. They assume you will fail to cripple the submarine. But these amateurs can only cause a delay, one return trip to the harbor. Technical divers can fix those muzzle doors in an afternoon. Weapons systems will detect a problem quickly.

-Identify the divers (4).

-Ignore them (6).

Listening to your diving lessons, Amanda slowly revives from catatonia. Divers must constantly review their training anyway. Remember the applicable hints below. These skills will save Air in the following circumstances:

Frog kick, when swimming *long* distances.

Finger walking, for traveling along the seabed or in *cramped* spaces.

Buddy diving, during *interactions* with other divers and their gear.

Helicopter turn, for work involving *circular* movements.

Controlled breathing, in particularly *fearful* situations.

Amanda shouldn't learn too much now. The lure has killed many amateurs. You enter the cabin, feeling guilty already. The girl looks so callow. Mervyn points to the big map with targets marked on it. He paid well for those coordinates.

-Journey to a submerged building with little Air requirement, but unknown loot yield (20).

-Target a wreck that will cost more Air, but net you more treasure (21).

4

Most color dies down here; the ocean wants truth. You can only identify Amanda's big hair. Another diver beneath her holds the welding fuel tank. They cling awkwardly to the muzzle door, looking like drowned mice so close to it. Bubbles rumble from their masks, and your wetsuit fills with sweat. Lose 1 Air.

Turn to 6.

5

You lower your voice at Mervyn. "Show her what this ring netter can do."

He gets on the radio. His face earned some sinking and sagging, a little of both. Hopefully, revenge won't consume Amanda as it did Mervyn. But the mission, and maybe the whole coast, needs her. As *Fantasies* tears away on a new course, you check your own equipment. Remember the applicable hints below. These skills will save Air in the following circumstances:

Head mount lamps, to work with *tiny* or *scattered* objects.

Guide line, when exploring *enclosed* areas.

Hand-held sonar, to find *distant* or *moving* things.

Oxy-fuel torch, for quickly destroying *barriers*.

Redundant air supply compensates for mistakes.

You glance up and see a low-flying plane with no windshield—a government drone. Mervyn's connections knew just where to send him.

"Watch," Mervyn says, bringing up the large crosshairs on his monitor. A pixelated blob wobbles into the center. With a button press, the machine guns outside emit a roar.

The pixel shape breaks into three smaller parts and falls down the screen. Likewise, the drone outside hurtles into the waves. Its wings break off in the plummet.

"Wow," Amanda says, watching the distant spray cloud settle. In seconds, the ocean erases the metal crumbs.

"Two million dollar drone," Mervyn says. "See Amanda? That only took a box of bullets. They can't pour money into the ocean forever."

"And we don't wallow in defeatism out here," you say.

You look around the cabin, perhaps to burn off guilt. Amanda looks so callow. Mervyn points to the big map with targets marked on it. The nearest choices involve safety versus profit.

-Journey to a submerged building with little Air requirement, but unknown loot yield (20).

-Target a wreck that will cost more Air, but net you more treasure (21).

6

You kick forward, ignoring the divers. Years of swimming make it automatic. Their tinkering will only hurt your schedule if the captain turns back.

One diver looks up and sees your human form darting past. You glide around the advancing sail planes, then tuck and spin 180 degrees. Now swimming forward with the submarine, you look back to dodge the rudder.

The submarine almost passes, but your legs dolphin kick to match its lumbering velocity. You swim alongside the seven-bladed propeller and study its timing. The discharge current would hurtle back anyone caught behind it.

With a final lunge, you seize the leading edge of one blade and thrust both knees forward. The

powerful magnets on your right knee pad and left elbow pad clamp audibly onto the blade face. The magnets cling hard, despite the drag. The whole universe now spins around this airfoil surface.

Stuck to the blade, you reorient yourself to face the hub. Dizziness takes flight. Should the welders stay and watch, they will only see your spinning light beams.

You activate the cutting torch and begin tunneling into the mountainous hub. Slag tumbles into the sea in meaningless directions. As the worksite rotates, cooling globs periodically smack your mask. They ding the glass. Metal marbles fly out like bubbles in the propeller's slipstream.

Your eyes close in the struggle to stay conscious. Muscle and memory will have to suffice. The starvation diet Mervyn kept asking about has paid off. By now you can only dry heave from motion sickness. The world becomes clenched fingers and elbows with a spine lost in space.

The base of your bomb has a powerful magnet for attaching it inside the tunnel. No screwing around. You slap it on and kick off from the propeller while gripping the switch box.

The sub now tows you. Unexpectedly, the hub begins coiling the wire, reeling your body closer.

-Get reeled in and untangle the wire (9).

-Press the button (11).

7

Every plank second counts. Every tissue explodes for air. You can only wait and busy yourself getting dead. Surely, the seawater has some oxygen trapped inside. It must. The ocean takes your body, and it becomes like flotsam.

The blackout lasts a few minutes. Your body reawakens at the surface, held afloat by the bobbing rescuers. You look past them at the ocean. All the waterfalls end up here. And they all become nothing.

Epilogue

The submarine could still ascend without a propeller. Selling her contents only took a few weeks. The Rig boomed. Legends of the heist spread like the exported nuclear missiles. Returning to land with your share in gold, you don't know if the hull got chopped for scrap or if Elly bought it for business space.

You shivered hard during those weeks. Every wave crashed into your nightmares. Wealth and waves. The near-death experience means no more diving, ever. Who knows what Amanda and Jay Mervyn did with their immense profits. The question of their stability remains murky. Can such feral types manage anything in that crazy sea?

You wonder if Amanda will turn sour like Mervyn. Men can wear the hate mask forever. Women can become as men. They carry their hate like luggage on the face. It tills in.

The blackout took something away, but sweet normalcy awaits. On land you retire rich in the conformist society, where a blue law gets made every minute. The great and costly investigation begins to identify the saboteur diver responsible. The feds merely need a paper trail to catch their man or woman.

You have no diving credentials or certification. You took no courses, not even swimming lessons or first aid. You didn't join the military or any divers' groups or affiliations, so you lack decoration and any record of logged dives. You received no training from qualified instructors or diving officials...

8

They finish cutting and heave off the mighty blade. A minute later, you all bob together somewhere in the Atlantic. The ocean spans to all horizons, the biggest background on Earth. With your rebreather whisked off, everything smells briny. *Fantasies* looms close, as always.

Jay Mervyn has never looked happier, or happy at all. Only when he sinks a cop boat do his frown lines bend a little. When everyone boards, he strolls over and slaps you on the shoulder hard enough to flush water from your ears. Amanda twirls in celebration and loses balance.

Epilogue

The submarine could still ascend without a propeller. Jay spent his share on a bigger boat to carry the submarine's nuclear missiles. He called numerous governments and threatened to destroy the coast if more attacks occur at sea. The crazed vet even read off the launch codes over radio after cracking the safe. Mervyn later travelled South, descending further in rancor. Some heard him grumbling a scheme to get a nuke further inland. No one heard from him lately. Amanda got *Fantasies* out of the deal.

You live in the emptied submarine now latched permanently to the Rig. They call it the biggest catch. Its giant propeller, raised and roped together, decorates one wall of Elly's pub. Finally, life presents real choices: continue diving, teach it, run a business, or retire.

One day Elly visits, and you both look up at the Rig. The water does get dull after a while.

"So who tends to the bar?" you ask in jest.

"I hired someone part-time. Business has picked up. Lots of new faces. Young and dumb livers. But mostly geezers who see me to die. Some really need a pine box. Useless from the head down...until their bitter families chuck them in a nursing home."

"Better here than out there." You don't have to nod landward. It has become rude around here.

"Amanda said 'Hi.' She's travelled plenty in *Fantasies*. And not one jostle with the coastguards."

"They'll come back," you say.

But they don't.

9

The wire reels you in, allowing another "landing" and a desperate attempt to uncoil it. Familiarity with lines will help.

If you have: guide line—lose only 1 Air.

head mount lights—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You spring off again, gripping the freed wire. Turn to **11**.

10

You know they'll never cut the propeller blade in time. The rescuers have little buoyancy control, no redundant breathing gas source, and can't reach your mouthpiece for air sharing. If only your cylinders had more air. At least you'll become a legend out here. Knowing Mervyn, he will threaten to destroy the coast with the submarine's nuclear missiles. The seafaring community will become a nuclear nation, and the attacks will stop. Amanda will buy a big boat with her portion of the salvage.

Your breathing quickens. Deafness and a headache settle in from hypercapnia. It all feels somehow calmer than expected. You close your eyes and rest for a while.

11

All your dives have led to this. With one button press, the propeller flies off through a massive white cloud. The explosion hurtles you into cartwheels. The other divers will never have to watch a ninja movie again.

The propeller slams you and pins your body to the seabed. The magnets had something to do with it. Thanks to the muck down here, your bones and rebreather stay intact. However, only one arm can free itself from beneath the blade. Damage to the propeller depends on how much TNT Mervyn bought.

Turn now to the section equal to your Pay.

12

The whole propeller stayed intact. "Dr." Bobcox will have to find someone else to tap the Pictou wreck. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will see Techno pointing a shotgun at them from his seaborne chicken coop. Mervyn offered him 50% of the submarine's rations. Techno's wife gets the other 50%.

The adventure flashes by: the closeted dead diver, the frogman who slapped on your court bracelet, Krischan ensnared without his friends. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the welders arrive: Amanda, Bobcox, and Krischan. Eager to begin wreck diving, Krischan had shaved his head. But will Bobcox ever shave those wispy mutton chops? He looks like a puff of smoke in a wetsuit. You pass them your torch. Together, they try separating the blade to slide it off.

How much Air remains?

- Less than 24 (10).
- 24 to 27 (7).
- 28 or higher (8).

13

One blade snapped off. Mervyn will have to find another diver to tap the cruiser. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will see Techno pointing a shotgun at them from his seaborne chicken coop. Jay offered him 50% of the submarine's rations. Techno's wife gets the other 50%.

The adventure flashes by: the closeted dead diver, the gray-bearded frogman who plays with his prey, Krischan ensnared without his friends. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the welders arrive: Amanda, Elly, and Krischan. Elly does owe you for sinking the cruiser. Eager to begin wreck diving, Krischan had shaved his head.

You pass them your torch. Together, they try separating the blade to slide it off.

How much Air remains?

- Less than 23 (10).
- 23 to 26 (7).
- 27 or higher (8).

14

Two blades snapped off. "Dr." Bobcox will have to find someone else to tap the Pictou wreck. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will see Techno pointing a shotgun at them from his seaborne chicken coop. Mervyn offered him 50% of the submarine's rations. Techno's wife gets the other 50%.

The adventure flashes by: the closeted dead diver, the frogman who slapped on your court bracelet, *Theodore Too* pinning your legs. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the four white-sided dolphins shoot by in a neat line. The divers from earlier, Amanda and Bobcox, follow them here. Will Bobcox ever shave those wispy mutton chops? He looks like a puff of smoke in a wetsuit.

You pass them your torch. Together, they try separating the blade to slide it off.

Then, you experience a nitrogen narcosis flashback. Our Guy swims over, slithering along the seabed, and holds a picturesque hamburger to your mouthpiece. A voice from nowhere arrives everywhere.

“Our Guy. For You.”

How much Air remains?

Less than 22 (10).

22 to 25 (7).

26 or higher (8).

15

Three blades snapped off. Mervyn will have to find another diver to tap the cruiser. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will see Techno pointing a shotgun at them from his seaborne chicken coop. Mervyn offered him 50% of the submarine's rations. Techno's wife gets the other 50%.

The adventure flashes by: the closeted dead diver, the gray-bearded frogman who plays with his prey, *Theodore Too* pinning your legs. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the four white-sided dolphins shoot by in a neat line. The divers from earlier, Amanda and Elly, follow them here. Elly does owe you for sinking the cruiser.

You pass them your torch. Together, they try separating the blade to slide it off.

How much Air remains?

Less than 21 (10).

21 to 24 (7).

25 or higher (8).

16

Four blades snapped off. “Dr.” Bobcox will have to find someone else to tap the Pictou wreck. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will meet Cliff's Ghost pointing a shotgun at them from his shabby boat.

The adventure flashes by: the shrunken heads, the frogman who slapped on your court bracelet, Krischan ensnared without his friends. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the welders arrive: Amanda, Bobcox, and Krischan. Eager to begin wreck diving, Krischan had shaved his head. But will Bobcox ever shave those wispy mutton chops? He looks like a puff of smoke in a wetsuit. You pass them your torch. Together, they try separating the blade to slide it off.

You experience a nitrogen narcosis flashback. Our Guy swims over, slithering along the seabed, and holds a picturesque hamburger to your mouthpiece. A voice from nowhere arrives everywhere.

“Our Guy. For You.”

How much Air remains?

Less than 20 (10).

20 to 23 (7).

24 or higher (8).

17

Five blades snapped off. Mervyn will have to find another diver to tap the cruiser. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will meet Cliff's Ghost pointing a shotgun at them from his shabby boat.

The adventure flashes by: the shrunken heads, the gray-bearded frogman who plays with his prey, Krischan ensnared without his friends. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the welders arrive: Amanda, Elly, and Krischan. Elly does owe you for sinking the cruiser. Eager to begin wreck diving, Krischan had shaved his head.

You pass them your torch. Together, they try separating the blade to slide it off.

How much Air remains?

Less than 19 (10).

19 to 22 (7).

23 or higher (8).

18

Six blades snapped off. The one still attached to the hub has pinned you. "Dr." Bobcox will have to find someone else to tap the Pictou wreck. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will meet Cliff's Ghost pointing a shotgun at them from his shabby boat.

The adventure flashes by: the shrunken heads, the frogman who slapped on your court bracelet, *Theodore Too* pinning your legs. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the four white-sided dolphins shoot by in a neat line. The divers from earlier, Amanda and Bobcox, follow them here. Will Bobcox ever shave those wispy mutton chops? He looks like a puff of smoke in a wetsuit. You pass over your torch. Together, they try separating the hub to slide off the blade.

Then, you experience a nitrogen narcosis flashback. Our Guy swims over, slithering along the seabed, and holds a picturesque hamburger to your mouthpiece. A voice from nowhere arrives everywhere.

"Our Guy. For You."

How much Air remains?

Less than 18 (10).

18 to 21 (7).

22 or higher (8).

19

All seven blades snapped off. Still, Mervyn will have to find another diver to tap the cruiser. At least upon resurfacing, the submariners will meet Cliff's Ghost pointing a shotgun at them from his shabby boat.

The adventure flashes by: the shrunken heads, the gray-bearded frogman who plays with his prey, *Theodore Too* pinning your legs. They all warned you.

Miraculously, the four white-sided dolphins shoot by in a neat line. The divers from earlier, Amanda

and Elly, follow them here. Elly does owe you for sinking the cruiser.

You pass them your torch. Together, they try bisecting the blade to lift it off.

How much Air remains?

Less than 17 (10).

17 to 20 (7).

21 or higher (8).

20

Chapter 1: She Never Talks About the Ocean

You study the big pinned-up map and face Mervyn.

“Let’s hit that flooded score, Merv. It’ll save my gas for the big gigs later.”

Mervyn takes *Fantasies* closer to land. Some kids in football gear have gathered on a green field. Oddly, everyone sits on the grass for their team huddle. Close behind them looms a giant high school. In it they live, sleep, dress, eat, learn, and ask permission to walk shoreward.

You don your wetsuit, closed circuit rebreather, back inflation buoyancy compensator, sidemount cylinders, full-face mask, backup regulator, three dive lights, weight belt, stiff paddle fins, depth gauge, compass, dive bag, underwater explosives, and tool belt containing a crowbar, hacksaw, bolt cutters, diving knife and net cutters. After a pre-dive check, all looks good.

An entire wing of a building broke off the eroded coast during a storm. According to GPS and Mervyn’s associates, it floated seaward and sunk here. You jump overboard and become a particle in the ocean. Everything feels clear and honest down here. Like a perfect glass of cold water, the coolness spreads.

Ten meters below the waves, a flat rooftop expands into view. Another diver, presumably, cut a square hole to the interior. You take advantage and dive through it. Stacks of mattresses nearly fill the hallway beyond. They confirm your suspicions: scavengers had to bypass the barred windows of this nursing home. At least the inmates enjoyed an ocean view before evacuation.

You remember the history, how the inevitable recession led to a horror show. Today, the elderly head seaward. Labor improves their health, or they die happily in the salty air and ride of the waves.

While swimming around the ceiling—the hallway has little room—you find several rum bottles strung on a rope. The other end ties to an empty cloth sack. Bootleggers will often toss their cargo overboard when the coastguard approaches. The salt bag sinks the bottles. Later, the clever boaters can reclaim the stash when the salt dissolves and the lighter-than-water alcohol resurfaces. But here, one salt bag sunk through the roof hole. The bottles now bob along the ceiling.

You gather them and return to *Fantasies*. **Add 1 Pay**. After passing the liquor to Amanda, consider your skills for best exploring the institution.

-Crawl along the mattresses close to the ceiling (22).

-Swim outside and cut some window bars (24).

Chapter 1: Sunken Memories

You study the big pinned-up map and face Mervyn.

"Let's hit the deepest wreck, Merv. I doubt anyone's tapped it yet."

He nods and takes *Fantasies* along the coast. On land you see a giant billboard of Marilyn Monroe in black and white, the picture of her posing on a grate with air blowing up her dress.

"I don't get it," Amanda says. "Don't we have a thousand porn stars who outmatch her in every way?"

She gazes into the gray. A few kilometers on, another billboard shows Elvis Presley in a glittering white costume. The next billboard shows Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue. Later, The Beatles. You don't see any buildings.

You don your wetsuit, closed circuit rebreather, back inflation buoyancy compensator, sidemount cylinders, full-face mask, backup regulator, three dive lights, weight belt, stiff paddle fins, depth gauge, compass, dive bag, underwater explosives, and tool belt containing a crowbar, hacksaw, bolt cutters, diving knife and net cutters. After prebreathing the unit for three minutes, everything looks ready.

Mervyn stops over the wreck site. Soon, three ragged shapes emerge from the mist: a boat, a shack, and an old fisherman. You can't tell if the shack and boat belong together, or if one fell on the other. Above a yellowing beard, the old man's bottom lip alone holds up his pipe.

"Oh, don't tell me," Amanda says. "Cliff's Ghost."

"What?" Mervyn asks, leaning for a better look.

"The guy thinks he'll die at sea any moment. Cliff never heard of benign cancer."

The bent man on deck looks ancient, more like a wisp of white. He could use some new boots, and a new body.

"He spent the last nine years puttering alone, wanting to die a true seaman," Amanda continues. "Sometimes, Cliff will show up and help stranded people, then disappear into the muggiest weather. They call him Cliff's Ghost because no one knows for sure if the guy died yet."

"Then he'll part with merchandise for cheap," Mervyn says.

"Just don't try convincing him to get help. I heard it makes him shotgunny."

The three of you step outside. The two boats almost graze each other, and Amanda calls out.

"Ahoy, Cliff's Gho—um. 'Cliff's got great deals,' they tell me."

"Who told you that?" Cliff asks. If ashtrays could talk, they'd sound like Cliff. "I have things, but I need 'em. Too many fools out here getting into trouble."

"So buy something from us then," Mervyn calls.

"No need. I've made my bed on the ocean floor, and she's got quite a big blanket down there."

He's just about settled it, and the boats drift apart.

"I could use one thing, though—explosives. Before the cancer kills me, I'd like to kamikaze my boat into the sheriff's and blow it all to raindrops and sawdust."

"You get 'em good, Cliff. They'll never suspect fire." Mervyn then mutters to you, "Dammit, *we* need explosives."

-Ask Cliff if he wants to help with the submarine heist (23).

-Tell him that a true seaman should do some trading before he dies (25).

22

You return to the mattresses stuffed in the hallway and swim over them. Apparently, the staff stored everything here as rooms gradually flooded. It makes for a claustrophobic crawl.

If you have: finger walking—lose only 1 Air.
 guide line—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

The mattresses finally end. You back fin, though, and squeeze into a room labeled KITCHEN. Other divers probably missed it. Seaweed washed in here and clumped onto everything. It stuffs the sinks, rots on the counters, and even fills the huge pots. The floor lies awash in purple sludge.

Somehow, all the cupboards got packed with seaweed too. Only now do you notice that every bundle has a string wrapped around it with a price tag. Canada reintroduced the penny into its economy.

In a drawer, you find a purse with some wedding rings stolen from patients. **Add 3 Pay.**

Further down the hall, a huge sea turtle almost bumps into your mask. The startled creature swims through another hole in the ceiling. It stirs up enough silt to occlude the way forward. You escape through the opening as well, for the silt out needs time to resettle.

-Ascend to the sunnier water above (26).

-Wait just outside the building (28).

23

"Cliff," you shout, "we could use your help with something much bigger than the sea sheriff."

"Bah! A trick!" Cliff snatches his pipe and jabs the air with it. "You all want me to go along back to the hospital."

He fumbles the pipe, trying to mime a rubber glove sliding over his free hand. At least you presume this from the wiggle of those gnarled fingers.

"We wouldn't help *them*, Cliff," Mervyn declares. "See those guns on my roof? Anyway, we need those explosives to fight the fed. How about it? Put in for the cause and die a hero."

"Well...in that case...I can get a whole crate of TNT. Meet me at the Rig at 12 noon Friday."

"We'll buy what we can," Mervyn says.

Cliff vanishes into the fog. Mervyn checks the GPS in the cabin and gives a "go" signal. You jump overboard and regret it. The coldness practically knocks your teeth out and reinserts them. After a moment of adjustment, the ocean pulls all sensation down.

Mervyn modified his ring netter's cranes for salvage operations. You take a rope to the bottom, 40 meters below the waves. Down here, a set of deck chairs slowly dissolves. Your muscles reheat at the prospect of finding treasure.

Spiraling from the descent point, you soon find the large sailboat. Years ago, however, a submarine landslide half-buried her from bow to stern. She lies sideways with the hatch sealed by mud. Consider your skills.

-Swim the length of the sailboat looking for scrap metal to separate (27).

-Search for valuables among the debris scattered outside the wreck (29).

24

You swim far along the brick wall and find a window with nicely corroded bars. It will still take some cutting.

If you have: frog kick—lose only 1 Air.
oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.
both skills—no Air loss.
neither skill—lose 2 Air.

After removing the bars, you carefully break the glass and squeeze through. The room beyond looks spacious enough to have echoed. Tall hospital machines enshrine a bed from *Star Trek*. Plasma screen TVs adorn the walls. A skeleton lies in the bed, smiling as they always do. He has ten blankets.

A literal pile of treasure sits at the foot of his bed. Silver coins, gold-plated necklaces, pearls, and rings flaunt themselves in an ivory chalice. Once, every patient would receive a goblet. It made them feel important, granting some vague medical benefit covered by the state. Then, the money ran out. You bag the treasure. **Add 3 Pay.**

The locked door opens from the inside. Another door across the hall reads TV LOUNGE. You only look in, because the room contains nothing but water. A padlocked metal cage, small enough to hold a fire alarm bell, protrudes from the concrete wall. But this cage holds an iPhone.

Further down the hall, a huge sea turtle almost bumps into your mask. The startled creature swims through another hole in the ceiling. It disturbs enough silt to occlude the way forward. You escape through the opening as well, for the silt out needs time to resettle.

-Ascend to the sunnier water above (26).

-Wait just outside the building (28).

25

"Cliff," you shout, "if you want to become part of the water out here, you better get used to trading. No Maritimer dies without some dealing."

He grins. "Respecting a sailor's last wish, eh? Well name the merchandise, then. I know just about everyone above and below who can get it."

"We need all the TNT you can get," Mervyn shouts.

Cliff scowls.

"Do you plan on causing trouble around here, Jay?"

"For sure. Face it, Cliff, you only have a *chance* to encounter the coastguard. We plan on going right up their nose."

Cliff looks over your diving cylinders on deck.

"Well...in that case...I'll get a whole crate of TNT. Meet me at the Rig at 12 noon Friday."

"We'll buy what we can," Mervyn says.

"And here!" Cliff lobs a trimix cylinder into the water, and Amanda hauls it on board. Add 3 Air.

Cliff vanishes into the fog. Mervyn checks the GPS in the cabin and gives a "go" signal. You jump overboard.

The ocean wastes no time. She fills you in with cold markers. A dim day like this can kill the adrenaline fast.

You take a rope to the bottom, 40 meters below the waves. Mervyn modified his ring netter's cranes for salvage operations. Down here, a set of deck chairs slowly dissolves. Your muscles reheat at the

prospect of finding treasure.

Spiraling from the descent point, you soon find the large sailboat. Years ago, however, a submarine landslide half-buried her from bow to stern. She lies sideways with the hatch sealed by mud. Consider your skills.

-Swim the length of the sailboat looking for scrap metal to separate (27).

-Search for valuables among the debris lying outside the wreck (29).

26

In the warmer water, you lose less body heat from convection. Lose only 1 Air. The silt resettles, and the treasure hunt resumes.

The next room contains dozens of bare-bones aluminum bed frames. You shine your flashlight around their mattresses. Light bounces off the sleek plastic coatings. Each mattress has a saucer-sized hole through its center and straps (with wrist and ankle restraints) sewn onto the four corners. A bucket sits beneath the hole in each bed. Budget cuts.

You later find the sturdiest door in the place. Your crowbar thinks otherwise. Sadly, another diver already entered this janitor closet. He never left, either. His body sits in one corner like a depressed copy of yourself. Judging by the scattered lock picks, the man could only handle one side of the door—the type of door that closes on its own.

The diver scratched “I love” on the door. Maybe he meant to add a name, or just a period.

You conserve air by taking only one of the diver's accessories. His head mount lights have a complicated battery wire and strap setup. Removal requires getting gruesomely close to a decayed comrade of sorts. The lock picks lie scattered around the closet. He tossed them in a panic before death. Consider your skills.

-Remove the head mount lights (30).

-Gather the lock picks (32).

27

The deck looks green and grim. After sweeping past her length, you find the anchor and its chain. Without a cutting torch, your simple hacksaw will make the work arduous.

If you have: frog kick—lose only 1 Air.

oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

The railing has corroded beyond worth. But the anchor will sell, and you tie its bundle of chain to *Fantasies'* rope. **Add 1 Pay.**

You shine your light over the blue mud. A patch of the hull shows itself, flat like a frozen pond among hills. The sloop held herself together despite bearing a landslide. These creatures don't always sleep so well.

Consider your skills.

-Blast the hull open with a small bomb (31).

-Cut a circular opening to enter (33).

28

You wait and watch the seaweed tango. Lose 2 Air. A half-buried tire stands upright in the silt, trying to impress. Everything wants your help with ascent. The silt resettles, and the treasure hunt resumes.

Beyond a door labeled SHOWER you find a room with an old-fashioned water wheel. It sits in a large slot in the floor and has buckets on the outside rim. Beneath the outmost upturned bucket rests a sturdy chair bolted to the floor. The armrests have straps, of course. Manhandling costs less than nurses.

Later you find the sturdiest door in the place. Your crowbar thinks otherwise. Sadly, another diver already entered this janitor closet. He never left, either. His body sits in one corner like a depressed copy of yourself. Judging by the scattered lock picks, the man could only handle one side of the door—the type of door that closes on its own.

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-Remove the head mount lights (30).

-Gather the lock picks (32).

29

You explore the sediment, looking for luxuries that fell off the deck. Some boaters flaunt more than they sail. The wreck hangs in your peripheral vision, slowly oxidizing into the sea.

If you have: hand-held sonar—lose only 1 Air.
 finger walking—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You find a knee-high statue of a pregnant goddess. She has too many breasts to count right now. In a few minutes, her bronze neck has a noose that leads to *Fantasies*. **Add 1 Pay.**

You shine your light over the blue mud. A patch of the hull shows itself, flat like a frozen pond among hills. The sloop held herself together despite bearing a landslide. These creatures don't always sleep so well.

Consider your skills.

-Blast the hull open with your TNT (31).

-Cut a circular opening to enter (33).

30

The wetsuit held together. The diver didn't. Under the rubber, you feel jellied flesh yielding to every touch.

If you have: controlled breathing—lose only 1 Air.
 buddy diving—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You bag the lights. Add **head mount lights** to your skill set. In some way, this diver will help save the seafarers.

Swimming back to the main hall, you spot many big arrows painted along the wall. They point to one padded door with no locks. Beyond lies a soundproof room with cement walls. Only two objects occupy this place, a stool and a short steel bar protruding from the wall at head level for a person sitting there. The bar has a handgun welded to its end. The padded door reads EXIT in truly huge letters. But the room has no other doors or windows.

You leave quickly.

The roof in the hallway ahead collapsed years ago. Your gentle approach disturbs silt on all surfaces. More crumbles down and billows up as a frogman zooms past the opening. You turn off all dive lights.

Seven more shoot past like headlights in the night. The force probably arrived for a training exercise via submersible. They all wield amphibious assault rifles. You know how you'll die if discovered. With the military so rampant now, some frogmen have websites boasting their kills. Fortunately, that sea turtle from earlier delayed your journey.

You cannot simply backtrack and sneak out. With so many frogmen darting about, they will use the whole perimeter. Only two options seem plausible, so consider your skills.

-Keep low and rig a chain of explosives in the dark. Then, detonate them to create a massive silt out, and swim for *Fantasies* (34).

-Hide in the janitor closet and spy until the frogmen leave (36).

31

You never wanted to learn explosives. But stagflation on land necessitated more extreme methods of salvage. The once common "9 to 5" became just an old, old country song.

Within minutes, your bomb sits rigged and ready on the encrusted hull. You detonate the TNT from a safe distance. A giant bubble expands and breaks into a billion small ones. The mud cloud flexes and spins. It blossoms and dies. It jumps and dives in itself and makes many aged faces. But it doesn't settle. At least the landslide hid the sailboat from other treasure hunters.

You wait. Lose 1 Air.

Finally, the mess has a hole in it. The silt resettles, so you swim inside the wreck. The sideways cabin feels familiar with its confinedness, hard interior, and jungle of durable chairs. Somehow, the backwardness makes sense.

You can think better down here. In such perfect silence, memories flood in...

Your grade four class looked like a Gary Larson cartoon: broad backs, big necks, and cheeks just starting their big bang. A guest speaker arrived one day. His business suit shaped him into a 400 pound top. Those pink hands and pumpkin face almost resembled...ham. But the ham talks came later in the curriculum.

"Today I wanna talk about paa," he said.

Of course, *paa* meant *pie*. He had an accent, and you'll never forget it.

"When I walked in here today, I saw those skinny smokers outsaad. Actin' all cool! But none of them get enough paa. How many of you kids think you get enough paa?"

Hands went up. You threw yours in the lot to avoid getting singled out.

"Oh don't you lie to me, kiddo." His face locked on you. Those eyes. Those bulging, porcine eyes. "I

know *you* don't get enough paa."

He stomped over. You swore the off-limits jungle gym outside vibrated in your peripheral vision. The pinkening ham man pounded his hands on your feeble desk. Weird growths on his neck protruded like hog nipples.

"DON'T YOU SIT THERE AND FIB ABOUT PAA TO THESE UNDERNOURISHED KIDS!"

Waves of hot breath hit your lowered face.

The memory stops. A gleam of cutlery cuts it away. You disturbed some sand, revealing silverware—fancy enough to have silver plating. Swishing away the silt and pebbles uncovers more. Also, the three walls not buried in sediment have tribal artifacts hung everywhere. The beautifully carved masks frown upon this world from the next. Consider your skills.

-Sift through the silt to gather the cutlery (35).

-Go deep in the wreck and collect all the artifacts (37).

32

You turn in all directions to collect the tiny lock picks.

If you have: helicopter turn—lose only 1 Air.

head mount lights—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You struggle to even grasp the bitty tools with your gloves. Picking locks underwater would take lengthy training. Consideration must wait until after the submarine heist. Even then, simpler tools can destroy most locks.

Time to press on. The roof in the hallway ahead collapsed years ago. Your gentle approach disturbs silt on all surfaces. More crumbles down and billows up as a frogman zooms past the opening. You turn off all dive lights.

Seven more shoot past like headlights in the night. The force probably arrived for a training exercise via submersible. They wield amphibious assault rifles. You know how you'll die if discovered. With the military so rampant now, some frogmen have websites boasting their kills. Fortunately, that sea turtle from earlier delayed your journey.

You cannot simply backtrack and sneak out. With so many frogmen darting about, they will use the whole perimeter. Only two options seem plausible, so consider your skills.

-Keep low and rig a chain of explosives in the dark. Then, detonate them to create a massive silt out, and swim for *Fantasies* (34).

-Hide in the janitor closet and spy until the frogmen leave (36).

33

You hover above the hull and turn 360 degrees while cutting it.

If you have: helicopter turn—lose only 1 Air.

oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

The rising silt stirs up something inside you. Your rebreather air, though tasteless, tastes extra sweet. Somehow, the bubbles from the cutting bring back childhood memories...

You remember sipping your soda in class, mostly to fit in. Then, the man in the grey suit with angelic curls arrived. He had short, silver hair with perfect curls all the same length—a halo head. And his whole face nearly cried with each word.

“Someone in this classroom has *not* stood up against gun violence,” said the man in the grey suit. “I think one of you—and only I know who—still accepts Kids. Getting. Shot. Dead.”

On the teacher's desk, now the guest speaker's desk, sat a clear punch bowl of gun-shaped objects. Pens, markers, cell phones, lipstick, candy bar wrappers, anything rectangular or barrel-shaped filled the bowl. The man in the grey suit never looked at any one student. Never. He gave no hints.

“I will not give up on kids,” he said to the windows. “I will stay all through recess, and next class, through lunch, as long as it takes for you all to come around.”

He lied. Only five minutes after the bell rang, he marched to your desk. The whole class watched in awe. Fidgeting, you looked up.

“Come on!” he begged. “Everyone stood up and threw away their toy guns. But every classroom has that one kid who likes guns and shooting and violence and death and graveyards.”

The teary-eyed man poked an index finger through the opening in your pop can. He pointed that same finger at you like a gun. The empty can looked like a cartoon suppressor on his fingertip. Tomorrow everyone would bring the larger, flask-shaped cans to class.

“*BANG!*” he screamed, thrusting the can to your chest. “You diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie!

You diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie!

You diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie!

You diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie!

You diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie!”

The memory stops. A circle of corroded hull falls into the wreck with a bang. You put your tools away and swim inside. The aluminum disk has swept away the silt, revealing a silver-plated fork. More cutlery lies scattered and buried. Also in the sideways room, on the three walls not yet buried in sediment, hang many tribal artifacts. The beautifully carved masks frown upon this world from the next.

Consider your skills.

-Sift through the silt to gather the cutlery (35).

-Go deep in the wreck and collect all the artifacts (37).

34

You like having organs more than the visuals down here. These guys can knife fight blind, upside down, and without air. Everything must go.

Crawling in darkness, you reach up and set small bombs on windowsills. They all connect to your one switch box.

If you have: hand-held sonar—lose only 1 Air.

finger walking—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You crouch in a corner. With a button press, the hallway rumbles and fills with muck and noise. Your whole body shudders. It feels good to tremble from shock waves instead of fear, if only briefly.

Your hand clutches one remaining bomb. If an arm grabs you in the dark, it will end quickly for yourself and that arm.

Totally blind, you thrust yourself into the plumes above. The explosions continue to heave years worth of particulate deposits into a billow. It engulfs all gear readings. Your inner ears still vibrate, throwing all orientation out to sea.

You swim upward for what feels like 10 meters. Everything looks like ashes until *Fantasies* bobs into view. The frogmen must sit and wait for the silt out to settle. Otherwise, they risk knifing or shooting each other. Or, some could resurface, in which case your guts will feed the crabs.

You finally grasp the lowest rung on the ladder and holler to Amanda.

"Frogmen! Get the bejesus out of here!"

Mervyn hits the engine and tows you half a kilometer. Once on board, your gear looks somehow cleaner. Turn to 38.

35

You pick through the sand, hunting for silverware. Disturbing the silt will reduce visibility and prolong the task.

If you have: finger walking—lose only 1 Air.
 head mount lights—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You gather handfuls of cutlery. **Add 2 Pay.** In the tedium, high school memories wrestle their way in here. The heating didn't work except for the kids' breath. Fluorescent lights cooked your eyes. The hallways felt crowded, squashed in, just like down here. Lockers lined the whole damned place. And between the lockers...posters.

Today's future brings yesterday's tomorrow.

This poster showed a kid pouring a box of cereal on his face, forming a tall cone on his mouth.

Go young, go old. Go with the growing.

This one had a girl plucking candy from outer space. The universe had candy for stars.

Always look forward before you go back...

Finally, one that made sense...at least the top part.

...for with the up and the down, you become yourself in between.

It showed a boy bellyflopping into a kiddie pool sized bowl of pudding.

You tried so hard to forget this one:

*The world, big or small, has evokes,
elicits, expunges for all.*

It showed a kid pole-vaulting with a giant spoon.

Flowers, trees. Arachnophobia, if you please.

—a hipster posing with plastic-wrapped wieners as nunchucks.

But you remembered it wrong. Your memory gave the high school a lovely finish. In reality, the ceiling had no fixtures. The light came from candy and soda vending machines, not lockers, that lined the hallways.

Focusing on the now, you explore the entirety of the sailboat. Too little bottom time remains to collect the artworks. The washroom, though, has a gold-plated toilet and a fallen cabinet of shrunken heads. The faces somehow stare with their stitched-up eyelids. Both collection items will sell. However, the rope can only handle one more prize.

-Take the cabinet of shrunken heads (39).

-Take the toilet (40).

36

You swim into the janitor's closet and hold the door ajar to peek out. There remains nothing to do now but stay calm and predict when the frogmen will finish their exercise.

If you have: controlled breathing—lose only 1 Air.
hand-held sonar—lose only 1 Air.
both skills—no Air loss.
neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Now, you hear only your breathing. The dead diver once again has company. His thoughts reach through the silence. Maybe the man roots for your survival. In total blackness, through the wall of water, who can say he doesn't turn his skull and speak?

"Maybe Amanda never talks about the ocean for the same reason you never talk about land. We've seen what it does."

The lights dashing by outside stop. Time to go. You ascend through the gaping roof in the hall and return to *Fantasies*. Amanda gets in your face as diver's attendants do. Never has dryness felt so refreshing.

"Did you find any treasures?" she asks.

"I found them all."

Turn to 38.

37

You must rotate in each room to gather the crafts. One wall has even become the ceiling with the sailboat turned sideways.

If you have: guide line—lose only 1 Air.
 helicopter turn—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Add 2 Pay for bagging the artworks. The contorted faces remind you of classmates. And all the bone daggers point to the past...

They put you in special ed. On your first day, the teacher wrote "Poultry" on the chalkboard. She resembled a giant egg in overall shape. Those upper arms looked over easy. She muttered into that little space behind her front teeth.

"Now today, I'd like to teach you about *poultry*. I want you all to call the number on your Poultry Pal if your parents don't feed you enough *poultry*."

The Poultry Pal: a white photocopied cutout of a cartoon chicken waving hello. It looked almost as pale as the teacher.

"Can anyone give me an example of *poultry*?"

"Eggs!" shouted the little girl next to you.

"Yes. Make sure you get at least five daily, though."

"Chicken!" giggled the boy behind you.

"Yes, chicken. And what about *you*?"

Oh no.

"Turkey?" you said.

She scowled. "No! The Canadian Healthy Heart Institute considers turkey a low source of your saturated and trans fats. Without your trans, you fill up on water. And what happens when someone drinks all that water?"

The little girl next to you couldn't restrain herself. "Peeeeeeee!" she yelled.

The class laughed. Later, they would laugh at you. The teacher stood over your desk with bent wrists on her hips. She looked like the Poultry Pal, if the bastard didn't wave.

"So if you don't want to become like our little pee-pants here, you'll always ask for extra chicken."

Focusing on the now, you explore the entirety of the vessel. Too little bottom time remains to dig for the silverware. The washroom, though, has a gold-plated toilet and a fallen cabinet of shrunken heads. The faces somehow stare with their stitched-up eyelids. Both collection items will sell. However, the rope can only handle one more prize.

-Take the cabinet of shrunken heads (39).

-Take the toilet (40).

As *Fantasies* speeds away, you spot the football team far ashore. The players haven't budged from their seated huddle. They all tap mobile phones, helmets bent down with investment. The kids will play "football" all day, and maybe their whole lives.

"Got to love the roar of the wind," Amanda says. She squints, and her hair refutes everything. Though your diving hood muffles the sound, you hear it louder than ever.

Mervyn pulls up to a fishing vessel with a towering chicken coop on deck. The smell of manure carries over the sea. A morbidly obese man throws a tether line to *Fantasies*. He wears bib-and-brace overalls, a straw hat, and nothing else. Acne crackles over his shoulders. The missus peeks out the cabin window. The enormous pasty arm in there makes her dress look like an apron. Someone could rub that face with just the right knife and pick up margarine.

On *Fantasies'* deck, Amanda holds the armload of rum bottles you recovered. Mervyn steps outside and calls over.

"Alright, Techno, we've got your bottles here. Tell us who sells the TNT and you get them all."

Techno shouts back. "That information costs money, Jay. I'll take my bottles back for now, though."

"You think the bottles just jumped aboard? We already paid to recover them. You said on the radio —"

"I said *my* bottles, Jay. You don't own 'em to hold 'em."

"Should I put them back where we found them? You can hire a diver...or just tell us the name of the TNT dealer."

"Not if you steal my stash right in front of me. Things cost money, Jay."

"You said clear as a lake on the radio, the bottles for the info—"

"*You lied!*" Amanda screams.

She hurls two of the bottles. They smash on Techno's hull. The chickens spread gossip.

"Jesus, lady," Techno says. He almost knocks his hat off.

"*I will eat the bones!*" Amanda mocks in a booming voice. She throws another bottle. It christens the boat better than the last two.

Techno simpers. "That'll cost you more now, miss."

"No deal," Mervyn says. "You've wasted our time. Watch the torpedoes out there, Bud."

"Wh—what? Did he say 'torpedoes?'"

Mervyn hurries to his controls and starts the engine. Amanda throws the tether overboard. A whip made of water jumps up. The chickens cluck madly.

"Wait," calls Techno. "I lost a boat yesterday. What happened?"

"*Cue the tuba music!*" Amanda hollers. She almost falls overboard as *Fantasies* rocks forward. "Oh wait! Their arms can't reach each other to dance to it!"

She opens the last bottle, takes a swig, and wipes away a grimace. **Lose 1 Pay.**

Fantasies pulls away. Techno's eyes gobble up what they can on deck: a chained rack of cylinders, a wide sheet of metal for testing explosives—it looks like a launch pad by now—and you in full scuba gear. Bobbing in the fishing boat, Techno cups both hands around his mouth.

"Why do you have a clearance diver, Jay?! Whyyy doooo yooooooou haaaaaaava a..."

"Wasting my freakin' time," Mervyn says to the horizon.

You lean by the controls next to Mervyn. He just made the information swap over radio. An appointment with the TNT dealer will go down in a few days. At sea, folk reconcile fast. Amanda stays outside. The wind out there will cool anything.

"We shouldn't take her along," Mervyn says. "Not after that outburst."

You look at the heaving waves and fanning wake of the engine.

"A crew of two sounds harsh," you say.
 "Your call. If you think we need her, then keep her."

-Amanda can stay if she keeps cool (41).

-Amanda must leave during the final heist (43).

39

You pick up the cabinet, thankful for your full-face mask. The shrunken heads jiggle and roll. Their agony looks so familiar...

You remember when a 400 pound pinkish guest speaker arrived again, this time in the gymnasium. Kids got force-marched here routinely to sit on dinged bleachers. Their little faces jiggled and rolled. Jeez, did someone chew the nets off those basketball hoops?

"I wanna talk to you all about Jesus. But first, I wanna talk about ham. You all know about Value and Freshness."

Yes, you saw the posters. Some of them get a bit racy.

"But none of that matters when it comes to ham. Because...HAM IN A CAN! Say it with me:"

"HAM IN A CAN!!!" the students screamed.

"Not all of you said it. Come on! HAM IN A CAN!"

"HAM IN A CAN!!!"

"HAM IN A CAN!!!"

"HAM IN A CAN!!!"

The memory resurfaced for a reason. Value and Freshness work as a team. For what Value remains without Freshness? The organic heads have deteriorated after years of soaking. No one will buy these jelling baseballs. As gold never corrodes, you drop the cabinet and return for the toilet. Lose 1 Air, and turn to 40.

40

You wrench the toilet off the floor and carry it to the hull opening. **Add 4 Pay**. In the struggle to push the treasure outside, your wetsuit tears on a jagged edge. Biting water floods in. It feels like an ice bath.

Even more chillingly, the tangle of deck chairs by the rope brings back more memories. As you tie up the toilet, ghostly classmates appear seated in the gloom. They stare at your shivering hands. All physicality goes numb, and the cerebral takes over again...

You'd had enough. English class forced everyone to worship Shakespeare's plays, yet no one had even learned comma use. Today, it ends.

"Class," the teacher said, "today you will read your poems out loud. Remember, no one can use elements of dark and light because of our diversity laws. Any offensive words will result in a trip to the principal's office."

It came time for your reading. With shaky hands, you cleared your throat and began:

In the blackness of the darkness I see a shadow of the night.
 'Tis the blackness of the darkness that brings us to a fright.

In the brightness of the lightness I see a glimmer of the day.
 'Tis the brightness of the lightness that shines just like a ray.

The class roared with laughter, and they didn't get to hear about the boldness of the coldness. You emphasized the of's by raising an index finger and eyebrow each time. But the teacher wouldn't hear your analysis.

Later, the principal sat you down and stared accusingly into your eyes for 40 seconds.

"I really hate this job sometimes," he said.

"I hate it all the time," you replied.

You got expelled. This started your path on uncertified diving.

And now, you finish tying the gold-plated toilet to the line and begin a controlled ascent. This requires some decompression stops. The gelid water in your wetsuit circulates with the eternal Atlantic. A spare awaits on board, probably hot by the window.

The cold becomes excruciating. Lose 2 Air. The slack rope swishes in a current above, obscuring the boat's location. You could proceed with the decompression schedule and cope with the extreme shivering. Or, locate *Fantasies* and hurry straight for her. Consider your skills.

-Wait and risk hypothermia (42).

-Ascend to *Fantasies* and risk decompression sickness (44).

41

You join Amanda on deck.

"What did you do aboard *Seahorse*?" you ask.

"Oh, you know. This and that. We did things. Stuff. You know."

She looks afar. You leave her alone and do likewise. Something appears in the west. But then it goes. Things become blobs of sun and dark on the water.

"Sometimes, just the right musicians come along," you say. "They form the right band for the era. It spawns from the mess. That Mervyn...he's got vengeance ironed on his face. Someone must have told a little boy to 'stand up for what you believe in,' even when completely wrong."

"Do you consider this sub hit wrong?" Amanda asks.

"I'd call it too vindictive. But...maybe preventative." You glance at Mervyn's shadow in the cabin's bulletproof window. Amanda looks hopeful. Not everyone does. "We don't need another drummer, understand? No more slip-ups, or I walk."

After this talk, Amanda will work faster as a diver's attendant. She will shut off your rebreather sooner after each dive, thereby saving air. Add 1 Air point to represent future savings.

You gaze westward. No one can see the land out there, and Jay probably feels your silent gratitude for that. For across that land, most citizens institutionalized themselves in two hundred ways. Gradualism works. Amanda can't even look. She keeps facing east. An understanding settles on board, as it always does, even among bitter strangers.

Turn to 46.

42

It all gets colder, like rain on glass. While waiting, you try to reduce the shivers. Muscle contractions consume air. A cutting torch can heat the water around your body.

If you have: oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.

controlled breathing—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Turn to 45.

43

You join Amanda on deck. Mervyn stays in the cabin. He scowls at the horizon, ready to shoot down...anything.

"I've never seen anything prettier than a sky," Amanda says.

"I take a piece of it with me on every dive." She already knows what comes next. "Amanda...I need partners with total control and stability. Discipline."

"Oh, like Captain Politics over there?"

You suppress a snicker, but only briefly.

"Merv and I will give you a cut. But you'll have to disappear for the last job. I can't have things going wrong up here. The Rig will have work for you."

"Yeah. I've got options. But all signs point to suck."

You'll have to dive smarter for when Amanda leaves. While underwater, some choices say "Consider your skills." But in the absence of that prompt, consider the *physics* of the situation instead. Also, try to save 20 Air for the heist as a contingency. Turn to 46.

44

You look once more at the sailboat below—a lively wreck today, a crushed depressed thing forever when company leaves. She gave relics to take back, so some part of her can toss in the skies again. Every ship longs for that usefulness. They surrender toys to mankind, a story of better days.

Shivering, you begin the emergency ascent. A direct swim to *Fantasies* will minimize air consumption.

If you have: hand-held sonar—lose only 1 Air.

frog kick—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Smart divers use decompression tables that overshoot for safety. Your dive plan allows so much room for error, the previous stops will suffice. You suffer no ill effects. Turn to 45.

45

Daylight above envelopes a huge dark shape. A yacht has jostled close to *Fantasies*. While reboarding, you hear high drama on the low seas.

"He won't shoot us all," shouts a man to an audience on his deck.

"Naw, just the boat," Mervyn shouts back.

You see Mervyn standing stiffly with a massive scoped rifle. Amanda grips an AK-47 and watches a dozen plump men in tuxedos on the yacht. The captain wears an open bath robe, his proud beer belly on display. Their hands don't get dirty, and their feet don't get sore. They'll have coffins shaped like cookie jars.

"Buddy," the captain calls, "you won't dare put one shot into this beauty. Wait until the boys in blue arrive. They'll take you, pajama girl over there, and your diver away in legcuffs. You have no authority to carry arms in these waters."

"Socialist parasites," Mervyn grumbles as you walk by in dripping gear. "I'd hate to miss them and hit a perfectly good yacht, actually." He resumes shouting. "Look, if the cops show up, guess whose yacht I'll use for cover?"

You hurriedly operate the crane. A motor powers it, and the rope tightens. Distantly, Mervyn tries to pacify the instigators. But he will snap if any loudmouths threaten him. If they get political, he'll sink

the yacht.

The passengers have a llama tethered to the yacht's rail. The upper class keeps these big puffy animals to create a soothing atmosphere. This one looks seasick and has eye infections. Nonetheless, it stares at the *Fantasies* crew like an artist at his greatest work. Maybe the cuddle beast will cast some magic one last time. Maybe if you raise the treasure fast enough, Mervyn can leave without the stench of gunpowder ripping through the calm.

The weight rises through the waves. Almost there...

"Alright, we won't do it again," Mervyn yells. "Good day, and happy boating."

Unbelievable. Mervyn yielding? You expected at least 10 warning shots by now. He has crates upon crates of ammo with a sleeping bag rolled on some of them.

"All of us called the coastguard already," the captain yells back.

The pear-shaped men raise their cellphones in unison. Mervyn yawns and checks his wristwatch.

"*Pajama girl?!?*" Amanda hollers.

You see new lines on her face. She open fires on the llama. Twenty rounds knock over the pale camelid and slide it overboard. It all looks like a granted wish. The creature swings on its leash like an anchor made of meat, and it christens the yacht with blood. The deck got a bullet spray too, by accident or angst.

"*Everyone strip and throw everything overboard,*" Amanda screams. "*Or else!*" She holds aloft the assault rifle with a wavering arm. Yachtsmen get naked fast.

"Jesus H. Christ, Amanda!" Mervyn yells. "Go start the engine and take us out of here!"

Amanda walks backwards to the cabin screaming, "*You all better shove your cell phones up your asses without help, or I'll kill everyone! I mean it!*"

"Ready," you say tiredly, watching the toilet break in half on the deck. It will still sell. "Let's go."

You don't know if anyone heard through your mask.

Many kilometers from the scene, you lean by the controls. Amanda stays outside. The wind out there will cool anything.

"We shouldn't take her along," Mervyn says. "Better drop her off at the Rig."

You look at the heaving waves and fanning wake of the engine.

"A crew of two sounds harsh," you say.

"Your call. If you think we need her, then keep her."

Amanda walks in.

"Captain Jay," she says, "I still feel I need a gun. Maybe just a pistol if I promise to keep it concealed?"

"Look Amanda," Mervyn says. "Keep the machine gun, alright? We don't have to ask permission like on land. Just don't kill anymore farm animals, and leave negotiations to me."

"Ok! Lye lye lye lye," she sings.

-Amanda can stay if she keeps cool (41).

-Amanda must leave during the final heist (43).

46

That evening, Mervyn docks at the community's floating storage oil rig. Its greenhouses and shops dwarf the nest of boats latched to her hull. Frayed rope lies everywhere, knotted forever, draped with drying seaweed. Amanda watches *Fantasies*, Jay pawns your salvage, and you ask around for better TNT deals. No need for discretion on the Rig.

"Wear this," Mervyn says, handing you a frayed red armband. "You'll fit in."

You wade into the human foliage of Elly's pub where a Celtic band tears up the night.

*Well the Viking men fall over, and the trees they keep on bending.
The birds flew North with the feeders, and the gazebos don't look pretty.
The wind will take your accent, and no one hears this shindig.
Goddamn, Halifax gets windy!*

Elly, a tall organic hourglass of a barwoman, serves mostly seniors...wrecks in the making. Her walk looks like a dance.

*Whip my face with salty wind, and the hair of Cindy.
Goddamn, Halifax gets windy!*

Girls dry hump the air.

*You roll a spliff ten times as fast or else it leaves the city.
Goddamn, Halifax gets windy!*

Drug addicts and chain smokers tap the tables and get skinnier. You once thought these folk had psych problems. It turns out they all have human chromosomes.

*I'll never find less patio wine, no matter where you send me.
Goddamn, Halifax gets windy!*

You ask them all for TNT.

*And everyone in Halifax has litter charges pending.
Goddamn, Halifax gets windy!*

You mistake at least one patron for a log of driftwood with a hole in it.
"TN—what?" says the hole.

*In the winter time I stand on ice and see just where it takes me.
Goddamn, Halifax gets windy!*

His mouth and hands try to cooperate and light a smoke. He has two brain cells in search of each other.

*Hoods, umbrellas, and long-haired fellas will never become trendy.
Goddamn, Halifax gets windy!*

They all lack the connections. Worse, everyone gives you this ridiculous "sea legs salute." It requires twirling the hand three times, saluting, then another three twirls to finish.

You may stay here or risk learning a new diving skill which costs 2 Air. The skill must later get used 3 times for a net gain.

-Learn a skill (48).

-Keep asking for TNT (49).

Minutes pass. Water pours into the dome through the grate. The two stoner divers reluctantly gear up. Dr. Bobcox opens his waterproof kit and fumbles out a battery-powered saw and more tubes with needle ends.

"Keep your arm still while I insert these," Dr. Bobcox slurs.

But the rising water forces you both to lift your arms higher each second. Dr. Bobcox bites off one of the pump's tubes and holds a wad of IV lines in his mouth. He somehow jams four tubes into the severed one, fashioning a four-way splice. Slowly, the doctor inserts the four needles into major vessels in your forearm. The sea creeps above hip level.

Perhaps you only hallucinate Dr. Bobcox balancing the pump on his head. He then ties a knot in one of its other tubes.

"Will that clamp it?" you ask.

"Eh. Maybe."

The carny crosses his arms and leans on the dome, watching. Incredibly, the two stoned-out-of-their-minds divers let you and the doctor stand on their backs. It grants more height and time. One of them holds the buzzing saw barely above water level. Dr. Bobcox snatches the tool when it starts bubbling.

"Time until your court appearance?" he asks.

You check your watch. "Three seconds."

"Well, I...um...better turn on the pump then, eh?"

He presses a switch on the pump. The saw buzzes away in his other hand. You feel numerous stings under the bracelet. Needles inject their cyanide into scanned veins. The transfusion pump remains silent, however. It doesn't work. Cyanide runs through vessels toward your heart.

Then, the tubes redden with your blood. The pump works; you just couldn't hear its motor over the saw. All the cyanide mixed in the blood siphons through the jumble of tubing.

"I may as well cut the bracelet off now," Dr. Bobcox says.

He does so.

"That should do it," Dr. Bobcox says hastily. He rips out all the tubes in your arm with one yank. "I think."

The water rises to chest level, past the collarbones for Dr. Bobcox. You ignore the pounding stings in your wrist and start hoisting on gear. Ice-cold water floods the wetsuit. It adds pounds of squishy torture. The gear gets on, purely by intuition. But the doctor fumbles and hyperventilates. His mouthpiece dangles in the water. No bubbles; he didn't even open the valve yet.

You grab his armpits and hold him up. Your faces press into the shrinking pocket of air at the dome's apex. Meanwhile, the skinny guy curled under your fins begins to wobble. Dr. Bobcox gasps on the stale air, baring his crooked teeth. Here, he flossed. There, he didn't.

"Dammit Bob," you say, "How do you get asthma on the high seas?"

Eyes bulging, he yells, "Kiss me, you fool!"

-Force a lungful of air into him via mouth-to-mouth so he can function (70).

-Try to get his rebreather working and mask positioned in the last seconds (72).

Chapter 2: Under duh Sea

That evening, you practice trim and maneuvers in the moonlit sea by the Rig. Deduct 2 Air, and record one of these skills: **frog kick**, **helicopter turn**, or **controlled breathing**.

Five frogmen suddenly close in from the black water. They point amphibious rifles at your softer areas. You go compliantly with them to their speedboat.

In the supreme shade by the Rig, their CO makes you remove one sleeve at gunpoint. He clamps a thick plastic bracelet over your wrist.

He reads your rights in a whisper, then explains the court bracelet. If you fail to appear in court by 8 AM tomorrow, cyanide injects into your vessels. Death occurs in seconds. Tampering with the bracelet results in death.

The shadowy figures release you back to the water and speed landward. Even their outboard motor sounds stealthy. Fortunately, they didn't confiscate your gear. Hyperregulation affects frogmen too. These covert operations cost so much that criminal processing became streamlined.

In any case, you got "fished."

The bracelet hasn't even warmed on your wrist when you barge into Dr. Bobcox's clinic. He works in a cluttered backroom at the Rig. The bookish little man looks up from his "desk," a legless tabletop propped up with cardboard boxes stuffed with paper. Above his bald pate, a lone light bulb provides the minimum lighting needed to set mousetraps.

"Ahh—come in!" His startled mouth becomes a smile between gray mutton chops. "No appointment? No problem. When can I book you?"

He fumbles open a dusty ledger.

"Right now," you say.

"Ah."

"Can you remove this?" You show him the bracelet. "Without removing my arm?"

"Y—no."

"You *can*?"

"No. Well. Not really."

"What do you mean, 'not really?' Name your price, and get your staff on it."

Staff. He doesn't have any judging by this squalid shed he labeled an "office" on the door. Looking about, you see near-empty jars of medical supplies on grimy shelves. Some of the powders changed color around the edges. Dr. Bobcox leans into his clasped palms, hiding his nose and mouth.

"You work with Jay Mervyn, don't you?" he asks, peeking upward.

"Yes."

"And I see you have a rebreather."

"Yes. Where do you want to go, doctor?"

Dr. Bobcox sinks all the way into his hands. After many long sighs, he mumbles through shaky fingers.

"I know of a wreck."

You finish for him, "...and the wreck has enough payoff to get you restocked."

He nods slowly, still cradling his face.

"No one else will take me that close to Pictou," he says.

"Deal," you say. "I only have until 8 AM. Cut the bracelet, and you got an expedition."

Dr. Bobcox slumps onto the table and covers his entire head.

"I need a transfusion pump to siphon out your blood as the bracelet injects its load of cyanide." Dr. Bobcox's voice reluctantly booms in the chamber of his arms. "I don't have one. We have to go somewhere else to get it."

"Where?"

He raises one finger and twirls it downward.

"A hundred meters that way," he groans.

Dr. Bobcox nearly falls on his face while boarding *Fantasies*. His wispy mutton chops flutter in the wind. Amanda looks at you both kind of funny.

"Handle that one with care, dearie," Dr. Bobcox says as Amanda takes his suitcase inside. "If that rotor saw dies, so will your salvager."

You explain everything to Mervyn and Amanda. Meanwhile, Dr. Bobcox paces on the deck, his gray suspenders flapping in the permanent wind. He glances overboard and covers his mouth in fear. Port and starboard give him the same reaction.

"The sea doc can remove my bracelet," you conclude. "But the equipment belongs to some carry who runs The Hangout. If I don't resurface, you'll have to get some torpedoes of your own."

Dr. Bobcox took all night borrowing scuba gear. That left 10 minutes to discuss the dive plan and decompression algorithm.

"We can expect some nitrogen narcosis," Dr. Bobcox says through his mask. He looks more frog than man. "Daredevils go this deep for the hallucinations. Do *not* remove your mouthpiece to kiss mermaids."

"Right," you say. "I'll see you downstairs."

"Come back with a dive story!" Amanda yells.

Dr. Bobcox makes a bigger splash than yours. Descending along the Rig's anchor chain, you feel giddy, then euphoric. Divers call this the martini effect. A descent of 30 meters simulates drinking one martini. Every 10 meters below that adds another drink...until death at around 90 meters for some. Of course, this crude analogy can't explain everything...

An anchor suddenly descends before you. A tall extra-white man in slacks and a white dress shirt stands on the anchor, gripping the chain. Though overweight and mostly bald, he maintains a charismatic smirk. His free hand extends a hearty hamburger. It brushes your mask.

The man sinks through the blackness, and you hear a soft voice from everywhere.

"Our Guy. For You."

You stare at Dr. Bobcox. He shrugs.

You close your eyes and eventually reach the seabed. Dr. Bobcox points repeatedly to a distant light. It looks like a sunken star. Consider your skills.

-Ensure you can retrace your way back here (50).

-Just use your compass and reach the light quickly (52).

Chapter 2: The Rig

Night passes. The pub looks more like a nursing home without laundry facilities. Male hags nurse their psych wounds with whatever Elly has in stock. She eyeballs the grizzled drunks who keep her business alive. They buy death juice for half-ounce silver rounds.

This morning's highlight: old gramps takes a whiz. Elly cleans it with a sickly mop.

You doze off and wake up to the sight of beer foam tilting from side to side with the churn of the sea. Behind the bar, Elly stares at the room with petrified eyes. The woman has hasn't blinked or else tears might emerge. She poured herself a shot some time ago and hasn't touched it. A drunkard walks by and downs it.

Mervyn rushes in and pulls you outside to a vantage point behind the pub. Fifty meters west, a gray

cruiser tows the Rig shoreward. Frogmen snuck aboard overnight and attached hawsers to the Rig's bow. Within hours, they'll reach Halifax Harbor and confiscate...everything.

"You've got to set them back," Mervyn says, "scare them into retirement."

With the Rig's capture, the community will dissolve. So will your profits. You both race back to *Fantasies*. On deck, Amanda watches the boathouses latched to the Rig dragging behind it.

The steel cylinders sat outside overnight. You feel their cold even before putting them on. To puncture the cruiser hull, Mervyn hands over his Vigilance .50 BMG semiautomatic in a waterproof rifle bag. He removed the scope and stand to lighten it. It still feels like an anchor slung on your back.

You jump in the sea. This time, it feels hot. Swimming near the cruiser keel helps avoid sonar detection. The route leads past a meter-wide hole carved from the hull via cutting torch. Watertight subdivision will save the cruiser, but also alert the crew. A boy diver leans out the mousehole, startled by your appearance.

-Show him your red armband (51).

-Give him the sea legs salute (53).

50

Without the right equipment, you must trudge in the sand to mark the trail.

If you have: guide line—lose only 1 Air.
 hand-held sonar—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Somehow, the tall plants flourished down here. Dr. Bobcox gets lost in the jungle, probably roaming off to hunt hippos. You knew he would.

As you part a curtain of reeds, Our Guy swings down on a vine. He whooshes past and slips a burger between your nearly clasped hands. His deceptive but likable smirk flies by in a glorious escape.

You look at the burger lodged in your hands. It screams pickles. It drools ketchup. It's onions shine. A summit of lettuce breaks everyone's backs. A soothing voice travels around the equator and stops here.

"Our Guy. For You."

Screaming, you throw the burger aside. Dr. Bobcox deserves a smack on the back of his head. He said mermaids would come over to party. Didn't he?

You soon discover a treasure chest wrapped in chains. It lies half-buried in silt, next to a long trail of cash. Consider your skills.

-Pluck the cash from the silt (54).

-Cut the chains all around the chest to open it (56).

51

You display your bicep and point to the red armband. But the boy retreats, vanishing into the cruiser. In these murky optics, the red cloth looks gray. The kid could have perceived a Navy SEAL flashing an emblem.

Entering might frighten him into attacking. You linger, gripping the edges hard. Deduct 2 Air. But the scavenger doesn't return to his mousehole. He will, though. The kid's only got a side-slung open-circuit bailout pony cylinder. Your bullets will pass far above him at the surface.

Having resolved the moral dilemma, you swim to the bow and unshoulder the rifle. Servicemen peering down won't even see this close to the hull.

You simply float there and shoot the passing hull between waves. The shots, neatly spaced, punch holes of unknown end through layers of metal. Your shoulder gets a strange massage.

Some would call this evil for defying the majority's will. Destruction feels too easy, monotonous even. Your fins maintain a point blank range. The entire sea puts herself behind you to absorb kickback. Surely, sinking the cruiser does less evil than towing away people's livelihoods.

-Ponder the meaning of evil while you shoot (55).

-Hum a tune while reloading clips (57).

52

Dr. Bobcox swims alongside you.

If you have: frog kick—lose only 1 Air.
 buddy diving—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

The overweight guy you saw earlier rockets by, gripping a small submersible with one hand. Incredibly, his other hand thrusts a hamburger at Dr. Bobcox's face. The sea doc doesn't see him coming, but grabs the burger instinctively.

They guy zooms away in a streak of bubbles. Dr. Bobcox removes his mask. Wet mutton chops float wildly like those of a strange rock star. Liberated, he takes a big bite of the burger. The ecstatic doctor then jumps high enough to never return. You'll have to remove the court bracelet by yourself. A voice with perfect grit rolls through the loneliness.

"Our Guy. For You."

You soon discover a treasure chest wrapped in chains. It lies half-buried in silt, next to a long trail of cash. Consider your skills.

-Pluck the cash from the silt (54).

-Cut the chains all around the chest to open it (56).

53

You salute the boy, twirling your hand three times before and after. He recognizes the drunken gesture and passes a bundle through the opening—forty grenades in a net.

You pull out the stolen cache and hold it while the boy egresses. He collects his loot, waves energetically, and swims for the Rig. With such a heavy haul, only the buoyant force helps keep him afloat.

Deduct 1 Air. You swim to the bow and unshoulder the rifle. Servicemen peering down won't see this close to the hull.

You simply float there and shoot the passing hull between waves. The shots, neatly spaced, punch holes of unknown end through layers of metal. Your shoulder gets a strange massage.

Some would call this evil for defying the majority's will. Destruction feels too easy, monotonous even. Your fins maintain a point blank range. The entire sea puts herself behind you to absorb kickback.

Surely, sinking the cruiser does less evil than jailing seafarers for selling kale.

-Ponder the meaning of evil while you shoot (55).

-Hum a tune while reloading (57).

54

Bundles of fiat paper. Worthless.

If you have: finger walking—lose only 1 Air.

frog kick—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You try repeatedly to scoop up the cash, but it turns to sand.

Soon, the seabed becomes a desert. The night glows out here, and mirages of distant lakes persist. Our Guy parachutes to the blue sand, landing before you without having to roll. The ropes and nylon fall beside him to avoid dropping on his blissful burger. Smirking, he offers it. A familiar voice reverberates from every grain of sand.

“Our Guy. For You.”

Dr. Bobcox arrives from nowhere and points at your hands now choking a bra. You throw it back in the mud and follow him.

But Dr. Bobcox breaks in half and disintegrates like an antacid tablet. The bubbles hatch into a thousand tiny catmen. Half of them go to war; the remainder form a conga line. Consider your skills.

-Face the hallucinations all around to overcome the fear (58).

-Follow the tiny catmen (60).

55

You discover the meaning of evil, ironically, while shooting the highest caliber rifle. Evil has no mirror. It can only look outward. The servicemen want hegemony, civilians to control. Evil precipitates as the simple desire for servants. A spectrum of evil exists, with tyrants who want a world of serfs, down to the vain who have petlike butlers. Could a billionaire, then, do the most good by cleaning his own dishes?

You keep your rebreather on for a quick retreat below. Lose 1 Air for thinking too hard; the brain uses 20% of bodily energy.

The ship tilts now. Decorated fools flee in lifeboats. For some profit, consider your skills.

-Sink a lifeboat for valuables (59).

-Loot the cruiser via the mousehole (61).

56

You maneuver around the chest, cutting corroded chains. They stir up wisps of green crud.

If you have: helicopter turn—lose only 1 Air.

oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

The severed chains fling off, and the lid opens. The chest floor lies four feet below the sand. Our Guy stands inside, smirking as usual. He extends the burger so close you smell onions through your mask. A familiar voice emits from the chest.

“Our Guy. For You.”

You scream, gripping your crowbar and cutting tool. Dr. Bobcox approaches gingerly. Where did he come from? And where did the chest go? What happened to Our Guy? Perhaps the doctor should resume lead.

However, Dr. Bobcox transforms into a demonic army of mermaids. He (or she) also becomes an expandable water toy that works in reverse. You gaze upon 1000 shrunken Bobcox merfolk. Consider your skills.

-Face the hallucinations all around to overcome the fear (58).

-Follow the tiny Dr. Bobcoxes (60).

57

No need to dodge much out here. The ocean bobs and weaves for you. Perhaps good needs some aggression, a sizable amygdala, to fight evil.

While shooting their hull a hundred times, you almost picture the navy men thumping their chests, desperate for quests and glory. Maybe they fight because your community prospered too much. Humankind *wants* a starving world, whole nations of underlings for steady, casual comparison. Even the poorest can look down on someone poorer and feel uplifted. The more suffering, the more pompous everyone else feels.

The cruiser tilts now. Servicemen flee in lifeboats. For some profit, consider your skills.

-Sink a lifeboat for valuables (59).

-Loot the cruiser via the mousehole (61).

58

You recall your “triple A” diving philosophy: accept and adapt. No one can change the ocean. Divers must take whatever she gives.

The energy wasted here depends on training. Skills now work by rote. You spin repeatedly and find yourself surrounded by giant seahorses. Someone impaled them all on brass poles, Vlad Tepes style. Angry and bug-eyed, they circle in for your blood.

If you have: helicopter turn—lose only 1 Air.
 controlled breathing—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Embarrassingly, you mistook this merry-go-round for giant sea monsters. The only danger here comes from vomiting into your rebreather after a dizzying ride. What a relief.

Our Guy sails by riding one of the seahorses. He passes repeatedly and holds out a mouthwatering burger. After contemplating your death by vengeful seahorse, the thought of drowning over lunch seems mild. You laugh and swear loyalty to veganism.

But...if no one else eats that burger, then surely Our Guy will. He'll drown trying. Society mustn't lose him. The merry-go-round may keep spinning, but will the world? You hear a velvety voice through

the circus music.

“Our Guy. For You.”

To save the universe, you swim after the mount and clamp both hands over Our Guy's mouth. Your eyes apologize, but his bulge.

Dr. Bobcox stands there looking cross. Your hands, for some reason, grapple with his head and mask. He smacks them away and drags you by the leg.

Eons later, you reach a risen metal platform five meters wide. Behind this sits a short silo, some kind of deep-sea machine. A big light, the beacon from earlier, shines on top. Three dark figures appear on the circular platform. One obese diver looks like the carny who owns this ride. He scrutinizes some shiny coins with his wrist lamp. The other two much slimmer divers sit cross-legged in their new wetsuits.

Dr. Bobcox swims to the carny, pulling you along. The doctor fumbles open a fanny pack and hands over six one-ounce silver bars. The carny deposits them somewhere under his beer belly. After pushing the gut down, he gestures to the platform. All may enter The Hangout.

According to your dive watch and frolicking brain, you have 15 minutes to remove the bracelet. The carny floats like a rain cloud to a big lever in the floor and pulls it. A thick glass dome descends over the five occupants. The silo outside hums, pumping water out and air in. The highly pressurized air prevents barotrauma.

As the last meter of water funnels down a grate, everyone but the carny strips their gear to the waist. You do likewise, confirming the reality of this situation by not drowning. The two trim divers open a dive bag of paraphernalia and begin snorting cocaine right away. One of them, a woman, looks pretty enough to produce steam from the air. Dr. Bobcox brought a bigger bag of life-saving tools. But he collapses into a fetal position and mutters the periodic table of elements into the grate.

-Double-check your diving gear (62).

-Ask the carny about the air situation here (64).

59

You swim under a lifeboat, keeping up with the rowers, and puncture the underside quickly.

If you have: frog kick—lose only 1 Air.
oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.
both skills—no Air loss.
neither skill—lose 2 Air.

The lifeboat sinks, and the servicemen above swim to another one. You catch two machine guns that don't make it. **Add 1 Pay.**

Swimming away, you catch a glint of another diver. He wears a Kevlar wetsuit. The cruiser took the anti-frogman route of defense. Consider your skills.

-Hide under one of the lifeboats facing away from the cruiser (63).

-Dive deep and watch for his lights to pass (65).

60

You and Dr. Bobcox bumble along the ocean floor. He transforms continuously, but you focus on him (or her) anyway.

If you have: head mount lights—lose only 1 Air.
 buddy diving—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Swimming high into outer space, you reach for the North Star. It grows and nearly sails into your grasp. Its power blinds Dr. Bobcox, for no one has ever swam this close to a star. Fingers... almost... brushing... Then, Our Guy lowers the big flashlight. His other hand offers a juicy hamburger.

He pushes the tower of meat patties ever so gently. The burger glides through the cosmos toward your mouth. You scream and flail in zero gravity. But the stars seem too distant to help.

You swim from the nightmare toward a risen metal platform five meters wide. Behind this sits a short silo, some kind of deep-sea machine. A large beacon, the “star” from earlier, shines on top. Three dark figures appear on the circular platform. One obese diver looks like the carny who owns this ride. The other two much slimmer divers sit cross-legged in their new wetsuits.

Dr. Bobcox swims to the carny, pulling your numb body behind him. You wonder if the wetsuit manufacturers simply dipped the huge proprietor in a vat of black rubber. The doctor fumbles open a fanny pack and hands over six one-ounce silver bars. The carny deposits them somewhere under his beer belly. After pushing the gut down, he gestures to the platform. All may enter The Hangout.

According to your dive watch and frolicking brain, you have 15 minutes to remove the bracelet. The carny floats like a rain cloud to a big lever in the floor and pulls it. A thick glass dome descends over the five occupants. The silo outside hums, pumping water out and air in. The highly pressurized air prevents barotrauma.

As the last meter of water funnels down a grate, everyone but the carny strips their gear to the waist. You do likewise, confirming the reality of this situation by not drowning. The two trim divers open a dive bag of paraphernalia and begin snorting cocaine right away. One of them, a woman, looks pretty enough to produce steam from the air. Dr. Bobcox brought a bigger bag of life-saving tools. But he collapses into a fetal position.

You shake him, and he sits up.

“Do you mind?!” he screams. “I can't remember the noble gases!”

-Double-check your diving gear (62).

-Ask the carny about the air situation here (64).

61

You find the kid's mousehole again and pull yourself through it. Your depth gauge drops two meters during the squeeze.

The holes through the hull lead to a slanted hallway. You drift into metal rooms, daring yourself onward. One hold, which only generals see, contains a six foot mountain of Victoria Cross medals. Men love the pinball point system.

You bag a bundle of medals—someone will later fence these on eBay—and retreat out the hull. **Add 1 Pay.**

If you have: guide line—lose only 1 Air.
 finger walking—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Swimming away, you catch a glint of another diver. He wears a Kevlar wetsuit. The cruiser took the anti-frogman route of defense. Consider your skills.

-Hide under one of the lifeboats facing away from the cruiser (63).

-Dive deep and watch for his lights to pass (65).

62

You quickly shut the valve to conserve trimix. If oxygen depletes inside The Hangout, your rebreather can take over. Meanwhile, the woman stoner hugs her meaty thighs, hungry for attention. She melts through the floor. Maybe she'll cook hell.

You open the pouch on Dr. Bobcox's belt and take the remaining five silver bars. He doesn't notice.

"We need your transfusion pump," you say to the carny.

He holds the mouthpiece a centimeter from his mouth to say, "Why?"

You thrust the silver into his black glove.

"Because."

The carny untwists the top off a water-tight canister slung over his back. He flushes out a metal box. A mess of clear tubes sprouts from various sides. Dr. Bobcox recognizes the machine and takes it. You assume druggies may overdose on combined substances, and the owner, not wanting to lose customers, would administer emergency intravenous treatments...or something. Thankfully, the pump looks unused. The doctor, however, drools on it while struggling to stand.

"Hrmmmm," Dr. Bobcox grumbles as he tangles both hands in the tubing. "Xenon, neon, radon, argon...ouch. Why does this one have a needle?"

"What do the noble gases have to do with this?!" you holler.

"Well, nothing, come to think of it."

Strangely, Dr. Bobcox took charge in the deadly sea, your world, and saved the mission. Yet here, in his world of open air, you have all the control. The giddiness and hallucinations cram aside. Everything has reversed down here. The sea doc even starts gasping in the stuffy atmosphere.

Judging by Dr. Bobcox's pressure gauge, he'll need his remaining trimix for ascent. Asthma and exertion ate up half. You must help him breathe with your supply.

Consider your skills.

-Press your mask on his face and tell him to get to work (66).

-Teach Dr. Bobcox a good breathing method with your rebreather (68).

63

You half-cling to a lifeboat, moving yourself along with some upside down finger walking. The sea becomes adrenaline. Frogmen can spot a clam whisper.

If you have: finger walking—lose only 1 Air.

controlled breathing—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

When it feels safe to flee, you resurface and spot *Fantasies* just 40 meters away.

The frogman breaches the surface one wave ahead of you. Having removed his mouthpiece

underwater, he instantly speaks through a dripping gray beard.

"Move and I'll drain you in six places." He lifts a combat knife just above the crest of a wave, then submerges it. "Why don't you test me, wimp? I've trained eight times annually in underwater knife fighting. I could teach it. Can't have dish rags like yourself sinking ships and living. I wonder, should I disembowel you now or use you to bait the others?"

-Raise both hands and beg (67).

-Point out *Fantasies* and exaggerate its capacity to hunt him (69).

64

The air gets thick and muggy. Already, condensation fogs up the dome. The male stoner draws crude pornography on it with his fingers. You've never seen caricatures like those.

"Can this space handle a full crowd?" you ask the carny. "Do we have enough air?"

The carny removes his mouthpiece.

"Don't know," he says.

The carny replaces his mouthpiece.

"Hail to the H.O.!" yells the stoned woman. She has narcolepsy and curves.

You may need your rebreather here (which has slowly leaked money into the dome; lose 1 Air). Turn to 62.

65

You flutter kick deeper and watch for lights overhead in all directions.

If you have: hand-held sonar—lose only 1 Air.

helicopter turn—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Rebreathers emit no bubbles for him to track. When it feels safe to flee, you resurface and spot *Fantasies* just 40 meters away.

The frogman breaches the surface one wave ahead of you. Having removed his mouthpiece underwater, he instantly speaks through a dripping gray beard.

"Move and I'll drain you in six places." He lifts a combat knife just above the crest of a wave, then submerges it. "Why don't you test me, wimp? I've trained eight times annually in underwater knife fighting. I could teach it. Can't have dish rags like yourself sinking ships and living. I wonder, should I take your innards out now or use you to bait the others?"

-Raise both hands and beg (67).

-Point out *Fantasies* and exaggerate its capacity to hunt him (69).

66

Your mask has got to help him. The gear took lineages, a thousand inventors, to conceive. Lose 1 Air as you and Dr. Bobcox have a staring contest.

The male stoner has a cocaine Chaplin mustache, if Chaplin grew old. After seeing his reflection, he raises both eyebrows and marches with fins turned out. His diving buddy cackles. She lolls on the grate, doing gecko stuff. You can't escape the curves.

Bobcox looks depressed, like he ate a whole pie. You forget everything from the waist up. That concept makes little sense now, but it sure did three seconds ago.

Turn to 47.

67

You raise both hands high, remembering how dutifully Amanda watches with her binoculars. Hopefully, she will see your predicament. The frogman grins.

"Well," he says, "I think I'll cut your fingers off while you flail a bit. Why not catch some practice, eh? I'll keep your ears from washing ashore. Seagulls won't eat what they used to. Too much cartilage. But please, struggle."

A chunk of his head explodes. A second later you hear the echoing roar of a rifle shot. Mervyn got your signal. The frogman bobs lifelessly, head bent to face the reddening water. On a swaying boat with a bobbing target, either expat or providence made that shot.

Fantasies approaches fast. You take the frogman's cylinders and let the body drift away. Add 3 Air. His combat knife tumbles into the Atlantic cemetery.

When the boat arrives, you climb aboard. Mervyn holds a scoped rifle. He peers overboard to investigate the kill. Amanda frantically looks for other frogmen with her binoculars in one hand. She claws at the strap with the other.

"Thanks guys," you try to say casually. It comes out quivery.

"I'll make a fortune off the salvage," Mervyn says. "And you got to live. We'll call it even."

Like Amanda did once, you just stare at the seawater pooling beneath your fins. Everything will look pretty for a while. A long while.

Mervyn and Amanda see your blanched face and leave. You sit and watch the fog. Far away, all the Rig's business owners stand outside. They've cut the hawsers and watch cruiser sink. The sea eats it, and the wind sighs. Commerce will improve here with the anchor dragged closer to land.

At this depth, salvaging the cruiser would deplete your air. You consult the nautical chart.

-Choose a wreck that will test your diving skills (73).

-Pick a site that will mostly test knowledge and reasoning (74).

68

With some coaching, Dr. Bobcox will use your air responsibly.

If you have: buddy diving—lose only 1 Air.

controlled breathing—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

The male diver snorts a line and waits for the drug to carve up his brain. The woman sits by the dome making all kinds of pretty faces.

"I molested the controls really hard," she says, drawing buttons on the fogged-up dome. "But I still can't drive this thing."

Dr. Bobcox pokes your forearm hard. You wonder if the needle touched bone.

Turn to 47.

69

"My partner has the guns," you say, looking over the frogman's head. "He's got sonar too, and more gas than you've got air. If I don't reboard, those guys in the lifeboats can't protect you."

The frogman turns briefly to spot *Fantasies* speeding closer. Hopefully, he's noticed the turret. The sadist eats his mouthpiece and vanishes under the next wave.

You wonder if he'll puncture your lungs at some oddball angle down there. The knife could rocket through the diaphragm, slide under the ribs, and roam a neighborhood of timid organs. *Fantasies* arrives after ten lifetimes.

"What did he want?" Amanda asks as you tensely climb aboard.

"To kill me," you say. "For fun."

"He would have gotten away with it too," Mervyn says, leaving his cabin to scour the sea. He clenches a huge rifle. "Those navy men outgun us."

"Yeah," you say.

You avoid Mervyn and stare at the mask in hand, a crystal dripping more crystal. The sea dribbles off your statuesque gear for some time. Amanda does her vague things all around. Far away, the waves climb the cruiser's hull. Eventually, they take her.

All the Rig's business owners stand outside. They had cut the hawsers and watched the cruiser sink. Now, their laughter shakes the waves. Commerce will improve with the anchor dragged closer to land. At this depth, however, salvaging the cruiser would deplete all your air. You consult the nautical chart.

-Choose a wreck that will test your diving skills (73).

-Pick a site that will mostly test knowledge and reasoning (74).

70

You kiss Dr. Bobcox, pushing air into his lungs. He sees only beautiful sea wenches and responds accordingly. The carny watches your horrible, horrible mistake.

This will never pass. Although the invigorated Dr. Bobcox gears up in time, you must forever live with this experience.

Turn to 71.

71

The dome fills to the top. The glass ceiling lifts, ending the machine's vibrations. The ocean pressure stomps in at infinite angles, like you drank many martinis at once. A hundred-meter sea of hallucinations await.

The carny claps. Silt rises everywhere. The stoned divers check their pressure gauges, look surprised, and swim off. Dr. Bobcox chases their silt cloud. The stoners progress fast, probably from their adeptness at nitrogen narcosis trips and...

"Cocaine bonus," says the carny. But maybe you only hallucinated that.

You swim to Dr. Bobcox. Your body feels like rubber, then like chewing gum in a squid's mouth. The doctor left his stretchy arms back at The Hangout. He reels them in through force of will and awaits instructions from the mothership.

Luckily, Dr. Bobcox knows how to time the decompression stops, because you forgot.

Somehow you breach the waves alive, almost climbing the air itself. Nearby, Amanda towers over the deck of *Fantasies*. She throws a life preserver overboard, having anticipated problems. But common sense returns in small sips, and your limbs automatically swim for the boat. The doctor, exhausted, hugs the flotation device and gets pulled in. He looks like a big fish vomiting on a toilet seat or perhaps sleeping there afterwards. Why couldn't these good visions happen below?

The floor of the cabin feels cold and gritty. Someone should sweep. They must have dragged your corpse here and stripped off the gear. You only remember Amanda grimacing at the diluted blood washed over your forearm. Seawater had spilled from the wetsuit, springing another surprise at her.

"Um...yeah," she had said.

Dr. Bobcox enters to bandage your forearm after sterilizing it with vodka. Just the smell of it adds to the drunkenness—one last martini to overcome. Amanda and Mervyn then chat with him outside. After recovering from nitrogen narcosis, you crawl up and join them on deck.

Life got serious while you slept off a ten-ton high. Dr. Bobcox has combed his mutton chops down. The "medicine bag" left in the cabin (a shaving bag, actually) has a little black comb. Also, he wears spectacles now. Those could have helped below.

The airy world up here still blurs somewhat. So do sentences. Amanda says the two stoner divers swimming away gave her multiple thumbs up. This quelled some tension, as she didn't know if you and the doctor had drowned. Dr. Bobcox chuckles about all the stupid things he saw and did below. Talk then turns to interpreting your hallucinations.

"You don't remember the Our Guy commercials?" Dr. Bobcox asks. "They bought out all the fast food chains with that dude. Talk about suppressed childhood memories. *Everyone* knows Our Guy."

Even Mervyn nods. You wonder if Dr. Bobcox has overcome his fear of diving. "Alright, Bobcox, what do we owe you?" Mervyn asks.

"Nothing. I'll get rich removing court bracelets with the transfusion pump."

"I'll send them your way, Bob," you say. "When can I use my hand again?"

"You can't use it now?"

"No, Bob. Vodka worsens the pain when you rub it inside someone's body."

"I see. Well, um, how about a shot...of something?"

"Bob, how did you get through 16 years of med school?"

"I didn't," he says. "I just like collecting jars of things."

He returns to the Rig. The next day, you feel reborn. One more dive should yield enough loot for the explosives.

-Choose a wreck that will test your diving skills (73).

-Pick a site that will mostly test knowledge and reasoning (74).

72

You get his rebreather working in expert time. Outside, an army of Our Guys surrounds the dome. Each Guy holds up a perfect hamburger in a blur of shirts and smirks. Dr. Bobcox waves goodbye to the Stygian women only he can see. Now you'll have a story for Amanda.

You swim in solid ice, waiting for fate to catch up. The water erases bad poetry from the dome's condensation. You'll never know what those knocked up i's and ballooned l's meant.

Turn to 71.

73

Chapter 3: A Private Matter

You plan your next target: a recently crashed private jet. Shallow water makes a terrible runway. Amanda stands still in the drizzle.

"You don't talk enough," she says.

"The world has hardened me."

Amanda slips you a waterproof mobile device.

"Here," she says. "If you get bored, go ahead and read my e-diary. It survived my little spill in the ocean. I prefer total openness with you and Jay."

The sun crawls under the sea, ending man's toil in the Maritimes. Your readied gear still glistens in the dark. The waves pester the hull. The ocean seems envious tonight. After reading several entries on Amanda's diary, you turn it off and shudder.

After sleep and sunrise, you eat plenty from the coolers strung over the side. A long dive looks into your eyes. Mervyn takes *Fantasies* near a busy beach dotted with single moms and first aid kits. They wait to see what the sun will do. Amanda sits on a ladder rung, filing what stubby nails she has left. A little fish swims up to her dangling feet and hurries away.

"Check this out," Amanda says, looking through the binoculars.

Far ashore, you see 50 middle-aged men performing some outdoor theater. They wear costumes of storm troopers and other characters from *Star Wars*. Everyone gathers around two guys dressed as Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi. The two wave plastic light sabers at each other.

"LARPing?" you ask, hauling on your wetsuit.

"No," Amanda says, "a reenactment. I guess the franchise hasn't had enough fame and attention yet."

"Well don't get too absorbed. I need you to watch for cops."

"Oh, don't worry," she says, rising to help you don the cylinders. "They won't distract me."

"Bad performance?"

"No, quite the opposite. You'll see what I mean when you return. Bring back lots of treasure."

Mervyn nudges *Fantasies* closer to the crash site. After double-checking your gear down to the fins, you wave to Amanda and jump overboard. The world goes dark, and coldness clamps down.

Below, you notice a beautiful girl standing by the tilted jet. She wears a skimpy bathing suit and minimalist diving setup—one cylinder, open system, regulator, and a mask. Sand swishes over her toes. The mermaid-like diver ejects bubbles and swims away, hair flowing.

You crowbar the passenger door and find a safe just beyond. The crash rolled it close. Mervyn learned the last two combination numbers (out of three) from the owner who will buy the contents back. He couldn't recall the first number, though.

-Try all numbers in sequence combined with the two you know (75).

-Blast open the safe with some TNT you brought (77).

74

Chapter 3: Theodore Must Die

The journey takes a day. Amanda skips breakfast—fluids and fun for her.

"Cops!" she yells.

Mervyn checks with the binoculars. Adrift in the nowhere bobs the famous *Theodore Too*, his smoke stack bright-eyed and smiling. You thought the children's tour boat, a full-size replica of *Theodore Tugboat* from television, had a museum built around it.

"She has a knack for binoculars," you tell Mervyn.

He glares outside. *Theodore Too* smiles back. Without looking down, Mervyn presses the fire button. The turret discharges overhead, vibrating your teeth.

A hundred incendiaries punch through the famous smoke stack. *Theodore Too's* face bleeds soot.

Sparks rain on his deck, igniting small fires. Amanda raises a fist, steadying the binoculars with her other hand. You swear Mervyn aims for the cartoony eyes.

Amanda's grin disappears when *Theodore Too* comes to life. The red cap turns to face *Fantasies*. He barrels forward, fire erupting from both giant eyes.

"*Theodore Tugboat* will kill us all!" Amanda yells. "Aim low!"

"I don't have time!" Mervyn hollers.

The smiling face charges *Fantasies* for a game of chicken. Spooked, Mervyn turns the boat and barely stays ahead of the pursuing fireball. But after a short chase, the four policemen hiding in the tour boat must stop and jump overboard. You all watch *Theodore Too* become a pillar of flame, a black finger in the sky. Like everything else, the wind will wipe it away.

Tilted skyward, *Theodore Too* still wants to work and jiggle on the waves. The brim of his red hat salutes the sun as the last part to sink. You know he'll retain that look below.

Mervyn joins you on deck to watch the column of bubbles. Amanda looks more rueful than usual. Maybe she liked the TV show.

"We'll anchor here," Mervyn says. "You know what to do."

The huddle of officers bob in the sea. It looks more awkward than a high school dance. Invoking the power of scorn, they try to identify you through your gear.

"You have the right to remain silent!" screams the sea sheriff.

"They still call keeping your mouth shut a right," Mervyn says. "Anyway, keep looking up. Something might sink."

Taking a rope, you plunge into the morning waves. Your fins splash out giant footprints.

It feels too early for a dive. The world pulls hard today. It grabs the diving weights, then your body. Gravity takes everything down and down and down. You feel goddamn China.

You swim to *Theodore Too's* charred eyes. Bubble strands bleed upward from the wreck, something divers rarely see. He looks fresh and alive as ever, but paralyzed.

While swimming around the wreck, something bites both your calves. The boat has tilted over, and its rail pins you to the seabed. It clamps hard like a mousetrap sprung in slow motion. Sometimes, they land precariously.

You struggle, but the rubber wetsuit on metal makes a high coefficient of friction.

Readying your tools, you notice a commotion under *Theodore's* hat—an unbelievable sight. A pod of four Atlantic white-sided dolphins dart around the sideways smokestack, as if playing tag. Most people believe the creatures went extinct. Rarely, a diver will describe one akin to a unicorn sighting. Here, a whole family circles about joyously. Could dolphins have resurged with the decline of the region's fishing industry?

You don't know how much cutting will free both legs. Should the ocean claim your life, however, at least she provided an extraordinary show.

Consider your skills.

-Scare the dolphins away from this dangerous place by banging the rail with your crowbar (76).

-Start cutting the rail immediately (78).

75

You begin dialing. The girl returns to watch. She brought more recreational divers: two muscular surfer dudes, a lanky guy with a giant blonde Afro, and another girl wearing what she wears to bed. Bored with your work, they consult their submersible handhelds. They'll know cats and storm troopers from here out.

Dialing past number 28 sends a shiver up your arm. You had read something about it on Amanda's e-diary...

Dear diary,

Today I met Captain Jay and a mysterious diver who only talks in heist jargon. I think Capt. Jay wants to kill all the fish in the ocean. I mean, he looks damned pissed. He put together a bed for me by sliding some crates together...crates of ammo. Not even kidding. How does a girl sleep on that much death? I suppose everyone sleeps on death when they live on the sea.

I still love it out here. Back home, I wanted to buy a metal detector and maybe maybe maybe, maybe maybe maybe sweep a beach. But you can't even walk on the sand without litter law awareness certification. You need grade 28 to buy anything at a hardware store! 28!!!! Yes, dearest diary, on land you stay in high school forever.

To learn the first combination number, you try each one in sequence. This requires dialing the second two for each attempt. So much spinning take several minutes, but it works. Lose 2 Air. The safe contains a jumble of pewter D&D miniatures, mostly elves. They all have plus one million with longbows and longswords. **Add 2 Pay.**

In the cabin's maze of chairs, several manikins in French maid outfits lie knocked over. They reach out forever with washrags and dusters. Their plastic heads express disgruntlement, bitterness, and even agony. You had hoped the sea of scowls above would never follow your journeys below.

A toppled bookcase also lies nearby. To avoid entanglement, you swim far above a mess of wires that had burst through the floor. Consider your skills.

-Search all the manikins for potential valuables (79).

-Skim over the books for collectables (81).

76

The noise has the opposite effect as planned; it attracts the dolphins. They zoom over to investigate, poking your armpits and equipment with their snouts.

One swims around your head trying to bite its tail. The others give it a try. You put the tools away to avoid losing them in the roiled water. After many prods and flips, the crazy animals circle closer...almost like they want to help.

You reach out and grab a dorsal fin with each hand. If this fails, at least touching two dolphins will grant the experience of a lifetime. The two pull hard. The others seem to encourage with strange chirps. Incredibly, they draw your legs from under the rail and swim skyward.

You release their fins, and the dolphins swim off. Lose 1 Air. You'll *never* see dolphins again.

Swimming inside *Theodore Too's* cabin, you find a safe. Its bottom shows the first two combination numbers (of three) written in marker. However, the third number smudged off.

-Try all numbers in sequence combined with the two you know (80).

-Blast open the safe with some TNT you brought (82).

77

The girl returns to watch you set the bomb. She brought more recreational divers: two muscular surfer dudes, a lanky guy with a giant blonde Afro, and another girl wearing what she wears to bed. Bored with your work, they whip out submersible handhelds and join the world of lolcats and memes. Little will happen on Earth for a generation or two.

Their devices remind you of Amanda's e-diary. Its images almost appear in your mask, fresh as yesterday...

"Dear diary," Amanda wrote. *"My hero diver might find this interesting."*

You watched the video beneath, posted by coolchillicemax. It showed a wrestler in a poorly arranged scuba setup. He stomped toward the camera in slow motion, somehow unimpeded by his fins. A wall of fire erupted behind him.

"Don't even think of going to the beach," a gritty voice warned.

A bikini model bobbed in the waveless sea, flaunting both armpits while (somehow) staying afloat. The diver rose from behind and pulled her under. Screams became bubbles. This move, of course, required someone pulling the wrestler's legs down or monumental diving weights.

"Don't even go outside..."

The diver rose from what looked like a darkened swimming pool. He pointed a silver flamethrower at the camera and launched a red fireball.

"The lifeguard has fled out of reach."

Grainy stock footage of the Canadian seal hunt appeared. The clobbered creatures bled onto snow. The diver stood green-screened there in the same (uninsulated) wetsuit. He hoisted two chainsaws into the arctic air and screamed. They dubbed his voice with a Reb Brown scream.

"And no one escapes the high tide."

The diver stood (somehow) on the back of a great white shark. Screaming, he fired a minigun at the camera.

"DEATH DIVER!" the narrator boomed.

You watched the diver stoically heil a four-story computer-generated flaming swastika. A close-up showed two blazing swastikas reflected in his full-face mask.

"If you see Death Diver..."

Swim.

For.

Your.

Life."

Each word accompanied a quick shot: underwater swastika shuriken, the US president gripping a phone, crossed katanas getting drawn with swastikas engraved all down the blades, and ten more swimsuit models running from a tsunami.

A speedier voice said, *"Contact authorities if you see this person."*

A clip then showed a real diver, of indeterminable sex, looking about in the waves. You recognized all your gear, even the frayed red armband.

Now, a whisper: *"Death Diver."*

Lose 1 Air. You detonate the humble bomb. The safe contains a jumble of pewter D&D miniatures, mostly elves. They all have plus one million with longbows and longswords. **Add 2 Pay.**

In the cabin's maze of chairs, several manikins in French maid outfits lie knocked over. They reach out forever with washrags and dusters. Their plastic heads express disgruntlement, bitterness, and even agony. You had hoped the sea of scowls above would never follow your journeys below.

A toppled bookcase also lies nearby. To avoid entanglement, you swim far above a mess of wires that had burst through the floor. Consider your skills.

-Search all the manikins for potential valuables (79).

-Skim over the books for collectables (81).

78

You work fast on the rail, just sipping air. The dolphins entertain themselves with *Theodore Too's* nose.

If you have: oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.
 controlled breathing—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Once freed, you swim inside the cabin and find a safe. Its bottom shows the first two combination numbers (of three) written in marker. However, the third number smudged off.

- Try all numbers in sequence combined with the two you know (80).
- Blast open the safe with some TNT you brought (82).

79

You become the hundredth customer to violate the manikins. Maybe you'll win a prize.

If you have: helicopter turn—lose only 1 Air.
 guide line—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Your knife does most of the work. Stripping the manikins, you find a ruby-studded bra. **Add 4 Pay.** Nearby, a gym bag hides under a tangle of chairs. It contains 20 Batman and Spider-Man costumes, all baby-sized. The mission needs funding, and these will fence. According to Amanda's e-diary, they only manufacture superhero brands of baby clothes now.

- Carry the gym bag to *Fantasies* (83).
- Bring a rope down so the crane can lift it (85).

80

You dial the first two numbers. Finding the third simply requires pulling the handle at each number in sequence. The safe opens, revealing two ounces of hash. Once dried, it will sell fast. **Add 5 Pay.**

In the stillness, you recall Amanda's longing glances at your cylinders on the chipped deck. It happens for many that way. They see the cared-for tanks of pressure and life sitting on a grubby boat. Aspirations pull them down, and some only swim up for more air.

Yes, in so much calm, you can almost read the minds of the hyper cats above.

- You suspect Amanda will lose stability again and hamper the mission (84).
- With more experience, Amanda may adapt and become disciplined enough (86).

81

Floating over the bookcase, you begin the search. Certain skills will hasten your reading.

If you have: head mount lights—lose only 1 Air.
 finger walking—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You extract a book with a golden spine and covers. Its gilded pages have text on the right-side foil and illustrations on the left. They depict artifacts and locations across medieval Europe. Pictures of longbows, armor, and even flagons document the story's historicity.

You flip to the title page: *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* by J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien University published 500 gold copies for the Tolkien Museums and Tolkien Chapels. According to Amanda's e-diary, 18% of North Americans have had hair transplants to the tops of their feet. To your horror, the bookshelf contains only cheaper copies in various translations.

After bagging the gold version (**add 4 Pay**), you find a gym bag hiding under a tangle of chairs. It contains 20 Batman and Spider-Man costumes, all baby-sized. The mission needs funding, and these will fence.

-Carry the gym bag to *Fantasies* (83).

-Bring a rope down so the crane can lift it (85).

82

You never envisioned tapping wrecks this fresh. Pirates don't even do this. Did the submarine dirty the water out here, or did Jay Mervyn?

The TNT you set detonates into a simple pale orb. The ocean heals herself in two seconds, shrinking the blossom back to seed. The safe contains two ounces of hash. Once dried, it will sell fast. **Add 5 Pay**.

You exit, wondering what Amanda would think seeing the iconic face of this frozen wreck?

Hello Theodore. Don't crave the toil up there. The waves took so many bites without your noticing. You knew it couldn't last forever. After all, they never painted your eyes closed, not for a day. But down here, miracles happen my dear. They will close. In time, silt closes everything.

Yes, in so much calm, you can almost read the minds of the hyper cats above.

-You suspect Amanda will lose stability again and hamper the mission (84).

-With more experience, Amanda may adapt and become disciplined enough (86).

83

Gripping the bag handles, you exit the jet and seize *Fantasies'* ladder in decent time. The load feels surprisingly light because of the buoyant force. **Add 2 Pay**. Amanda takes the gym bag with both arms.

"Did you see any signs of the submarine down there?" she asks.

You just stare through your dripping mask.

"She kids," Mervyn says, approaching to help haul the bag aboard.

But she sounded hopeful. You let go of the rung, and your doubts about this mission, and return to the jet. Lose 1 Air.

Exploring the cockpit, you find a poster of Betty in June. The girl has no straight lines, only straight fans. Maybe she crashed the jet.

Reality feels extra thick underwater. The controls look stiff and imposing. Someone messed up here and almost killed the beach. In contrast you remember Amanda's e-diary with its childish interface. The world had settled on cartoon icons: a pyramid, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Statue of Liberty...

You had tapped the Statue of Liberty. The icons bounced away, and cuter ones rolled in: Super Mario's head, a cat, a toy airplane, a film reel.

Digging deeper, you poked the film reel. But the internet only had thousands of versions of *Citizen*

Kane, millions of reviews of *Citizen Kane*, children parodying *Citizen Kane*, spoofs, clips, merchandise, and memes of *Citizen Kane*.

Leaving the cockpit, you notice the lanky German diver with the giant blonde Afro. He flails, entangled in wires from the cabin floor. The kid entered without a stand-by diver. Consider your skills.

-Cut the wires with your tools (87).

-Untangle him with his cooperation (89).

84

Far above your world, a rescue helicopter arrives. It brings wind and sound, and a chain ladder for the waterlogged policemen. During the economic crisis, Canada sold its CH-149 Cormorant helicopters and dusted off the decrepit CH-113 Labradors for search and rescue. The yellow clunker wobbles through the sky, threatening to bellyflop.

Amanda cries, "Cops! Shoot it!"

Mervyn aims for the back dual rotor, an easy target as the helicopter lowers over a rippling patch of sea. The barrels atop *Fantasies* blaze again, hardly cooled from before. The rotor flings apart like thrown Lego. The Labrador twirls an ugly ballet before collapsing on the waves. Blades chop into the ocean and hurtle randomly. The rescuers tumble from the sinking husk. Scrambling, they inflate their rubber dinghy faster than the economy back in 2016.

The crew fastens plastic oars together and collects the bewildered policemen. The entire lot rows landward. Amanda stares agog. She finally looks at Mervyn and cackles.

"Yes!" she squeals, "They totally deserved that! *Seahorse* avenged!" She stumbles into a corner, clenching her gut. "Did you see that guy trying to keep his rifle dry holding it over his head? Then—they all got sprayed—by the—by the—"

She keels over in a fit of laughter. "Conqueror types, soaking their diapers!"

Of course, you can't know the exact events above, just like your comrades can't know the adventures below. But a helicopter does sink. The silt cloud has barely resettled when you enter and find an underwater cutting torch for rescue operations. Add the **oxy-fuel torch** to your skill set. Nearby rests a locked trunk with a red cross emblem.

-Cut a hole big enough for your arm (88).

-Cut a bigger hole (90).

85

You resurface by *Fantasies* and signal for rope with a lassoing arm motion. Amanda suppresses a laugh. While she fetches the coil, your doubts about the mission creep in. Far ashore, the day brightens with an orgy of light sabers and no cops.

Amanda chucks the heavy coil too short, and you swim to collect it.

"Sorry!" she yells.

Mervyn quickly tests the crane and waves. The return dive goes as planned; deduct 2 Air. You descend, tie up the gym bag, pull the rope three times, and watch it rise. Many know the magic trick. Few profit from it. **Add 2 Pay**.

Reentering the jet, you see the lanky German diver with the giant blonde Afro. He flails, entangled in wires from the cabin floor. The kid entered without a stand-by diver. His struggle looks so familiar...

"Dear diary," Amanda wrote. "The most popular video ever made. I can't believe it."

You started the video below. It showed, from a bird's-eye view, a middle-aged man with Down syndrome wearing a tortured expression and a tie-dyed jumpsuit. He lied on his back flailing all limbs in a seizure-like dance. The man rotated as if lying on an invisible turntable. The background, or floor, showed neon explosions and psychedelic glowing goop swirling down an infinite toilet. The music sounded like squirts of gastric juices and stomach growls sped up. The video cut to a flailing man with Williams Syndrome in the same predicament.

You shuddered. Someone made a fortune exploiting the most vulnerable.

Amanda had watched over your shoulder. You noticed when a night wind flung her hair in the way, mercifully.

"Amazing how they overcame their disabilities to perform," you said, searching for a grain of decency.

"Oh, none of them have disabilities," Amanda said. "Most people on land look like that."

You vow to save this one youth from such a dance. His life seems secondary. Consider your skills.

-Cut the wires with your tools (87).

-Untangle the diver with his cooperation (89).

86

Far above your world, a rescue helicopter arrives. It brings wind and sound, and a chain ladder for the waterlogged policemen. During the economic crisis, Canada sold its CH-149 Cormorant helicopters and dusted off the decrepit CH-113 Labradors for search and rescue. The yellow clunker wobbles through the sky, threatening to bellyflop.

Mervyn aims for the back dual rotor, an easy target as the helicopter lowers over a rippling patch of sea. The barrels atop *Fantasies* blaze again, hardly cooled from before. The rotor flings apart like thrown Lego. The Labrador twirls an ugly ballet before collapsing on the waves. Blades chop into the ocean and hurtle randomly. The rescuers tumble from the sinking husk. Scrambling, they inflate their rubber dinghy faster than the economy back in 2016.

The crew fastens plastic oars together and collects the bewildered policemen. The entire lot rows landward.

"Jay!" Amanda hollers. "That had innocent people aboard!"

"Not so." Mervyn glares all the way to land not even visible. "They picked the wrong side."

"You could have killed them!"

"They look lively to me."

Amanda consults her e-diary web, the ultimate decider of all things. But not out here.

"They only have two rescue helicopters for the whole coast," she says, raising her mobile device like a badge.

Mervyn hates pink.

"Maybe they'll leave us alone when I sink the next one. The guns don't sit there for show."

"Unbelievable," Amanda says. "The ocean doesn't belong to you or anyone."

"So true. Stay out of this war, then, Amanda. I hear most people like the gulags these days."

Of course, you can't know the exact events above, just like your comrades can't know the adventures below. But a helicopter does sink. The silt cloud has barely resettled when you enter and find an underwater cutting torch for rescue operations. Add the **oxy-fuel torch** to your skill set. Nearby rests a

locked trunk with a red cross emblem.

-Cut a hole big enough for your arm (88).

-Cut a bigger hole (90).

87

The diver spins, entangling himself more. Your net cutters could free him, or...

If you have: oxy-fuel torch—lose only 1 Air.

buddy diving—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air.

Once freed, the youth swims to a closet door you overlooked and opens it. A locked metal trunk falls out and pins his fins to the floor. This time, he rescues himself. A piece of tape on his back-mounted cylinder reads "Krischan."

Artwork emblazons the trunk with clownish superheroes who sprint, pose, brood, and squat press the air. Hauling it out will burn plenty of trimix, even with help. Krischan seems to know this too. He produces a cutting torch from behind his cylinder and eagerly hands it over. You take it, wondering how the loot divide will work. Maybe the kid just wants an experience. He's broken 18 desecration laws already.

-Cut a hole in the trunk big enough for your arm (91).

-Cut a larger hole (93).

88

When the metal cools, you scoop out the syringes and vials from the trunk. Lose 1 Air, and **add 2 Pay**. In the quiet, you wonder what Mervyn would think, seeing his destructiveness this close?

Hello helicopter. No son, you can't go back. Nothing should ever look down on the ocean, except maybe a flying fish, and then only for a glimpse. Giants can fall in this well all day, and she never fills up. Just sit and think of your smallness.

The ruckus above dumps its dead down here. And here, everything rests in cold glass. You can practically see the future in all this stillness.

-Mervyn will remain bitter for life (92).

-Mervyn may forgive and move on one day (94).

89

The diver mummified his legs in wiring. You must turn him six times just to untwist the fibreOP.

If you have: head mount lights—lose only 1 Air.

buddy diving—lose only 1 Air.

both skills—no Air loss.

neither skill—lose 2 Air

Once freed, the youth swims to a closet door you overlooked and opens it. A locked metal trunk falls out and pins his fins to the floor. This time, he rescues himself. A piece of tape on his back-mounted cylinder reads "Krischan."

Artwork emblazons the trunk with clownish superheroes who sprint, pose, brood, and squat press the air. Hauling it out will burn plenty of trimix, even with help. Krischan seems to know this too. He produces a cutting torch from behind his cylinder and eagerly hands it over. You take it, wondering how the loot divvy will work. Maybe the kid just wants an experience. He's broken 18 desecration laws already.

-Cut a hole in the trunk big enough for your arm (91).

-Cut a larger hole (93).

90

After some lengthy cutting (lose 2 Air) you collect the syringes and vials from the trunk. **Add 2 Pay.** A grey fish arrives to watch, until its memory resets and it swims away.

The ruckus above dumps its dead down here. And here, everything rests in cold glass. You can practically see the future in all this stillness.

-Mervyn will remain bitter for life (92).

-Mervyn may forgive and move on one day (94).

91

The bubbly cutting renews your enthusiasm to Krischan's heights. Here, all the life and death stuff gets done. When the rim cools, you reach inside and feel some large books. They won't squeeze out. Lose 1 Air, and turn to 93.

92

Far above, a game of cops and rubbers plays out with the police in their rubber dinghy. As they row, Mervyn aims casual machine gun bursts at the oar paddles. The men move three meters a minute with perforated oars. The fun either begins or ends as a stray bullet punctures the raft.

Amanda keeps looking over her shoulder. "Making it rough for them, Jay?"

But Mervyn ignores her and brews in his thoughts. They'll make it ashore, by losing a few pounds.

The raft descends by the helicopter. It startles you like a giant dead jelly fish. The scenario above plays in your head, but did it happen like that? Maybe one day over drinks and stories, the truth will emerge.

With several minutes of dive time left, you reenter *Theodore Too*. A thorough search reveals a case of 12 vodka bottles. It cost five million dollars to confiscate, but Elly might only pay three silver rounds.

-Carry the huge case to *Fantasies'* rope (96).

-Fetch the rope and bring it here (98).

93

After some lengthy cutting (lose 1 Air), the rim cools from orange to black. The trunk contains binders of silver-plated Pokemon cards. All the characters wear diapers now, perfect for grown men on

land. **Add 1 Pay.**

In gratitude, you decide to educate Krischan on wreck diving. Consider your skills.

-Teach him how to locate treasure quicker (97).

-Leave the jet quickly and resurface to give advice (99).

94

Far above, Mervyn counts the oars dipping in unison. Too many. The police will reach shore quickly, kick in a cottager's door, and make a phone call. The whole coastguard will flock here.

"Man, I hate to do this," Mervyn says, "but they picked the wrong side."

Mervyn aims the rifle, and with a tear in his eye, fires a shot through the dinghy. It deflates in seconds. The rescuers and police spill into the cranky sea. Jay rests his head on the gun and utters a prayer for the helicopter crew. They have life jackets, and a strong enough group to swim ashore. They'll make it, by losing a few pounds.

The raft descends close to the helicopter. It startles you like a giant dead jelly fish. The scenario above plays out in your head, but did it actually happen like that?

With several minutes of dive time left, you reenter *Theodore Too*. A thorough search reveals a case of 12 vodka bottles. It cost five million dollars to confiscate, but Elly might only pay three silver rounds.

-Carry the huge case to *Fantasies'* rope (96).

-Fetch the rope and bring it here (98).

95

You picture the sheriff thrashing in the waves, venting anger. But more waves come. He unshoulders his rifle and grips it hard to prevent any slipping. So what if the barrel contains water? So what if the waves throw off the shot? And to hell with the kickback on the slippery life jacket.

The policemen swarm the sheriff and wrestle the rifle from him. Now, he can only scream at the black man's looming boat. The men know those machine gun barrels can annihilate them. Heck, the diver could butcher everyone from below. The riffraff out here love toying with troopers. After ten years of this peril, the county should allocate more tax money to the Sheriff's Department.

They toss the rifle into the sea. It prevents their slaughter. Nonetheless, after crawling ashore, the sheriff will scold his men and force everyone to work overtime. No one will dry their socks. It probably happens differently than your imagination dictates. But the sheriff's rifle does sink, and you collect it.

Add 1 Pay.

Returning to *Fantasies*, you can taste her lingering gunpowder like a big plate of sulfur. Turn to 2.

96

You haul the case to the rope and tie it well. Because of its lower density than water, the liquor practically carries itself. Lose 1 Air, and **add 3 Pay.**

Double-checking the knot, you wonder what tangled mess of laws allowed all this. Why do men risk their lives and *Theodore Too* to capture some booze? Don't they already tax the liquor store?

You picture the sea sheriff as:

-A spoiled thug (95).

-A victim of indoctrination (100).

97

You demonstrate the essentials of pilotage for penetration diving.

If you have: hand-held sonar—lose only 1 Air.
 buddy diving—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

For your lessons and saving his life, Krischan gesticulates for you to keep the **oxy-fuel torch**. Record it, if needed.

You return to *Fantasies*, and Krischan to his “friends” who let him nearly drown.

You haul yourself on board and peel off your gear. Amanda carries it to the cabin, leaving a trail of water. The sunlight feels soothing, especially after a long dive.

On the grassy shores, the iconic *Star Wars* characters wave their plastic light sabers at each other. Squinting, you detect the actors posing *exactly* as they did before the dive. Every step and nudge of the glowing toys matches the movie to perfection. They break character to back away and restart the confrontation.

“Still dorking out pretty hard over there,” Amanda says.

The fans redo the same scene, then redo it again. And again. Surely, they utter perfect lines before the sea of storm troopers.

“Told you,” Amanda says as Mervyn readies the engine.

She smiles at them, a smile they’ll never notice. By the time they master the rhythmic breaths of Darth Vader, Mervyn takes you ten kilometers off McNabs Island. Turn to 2.

98

You swim to the helicopter and back to bring the rope. Lose 2 Air, and **add 3 Pay**.

Double-checking the knot, you realize that the real wrecks drift on the surface, enveloped in flesh and problems.

You picture the sea sheriff as:

-A spoiled thug (95).

-A victim of indoctrination (100).

99

If you have: frog kick—lose only 1 Air.
 guide line—lose only 1 Air.
 both skills—no Air loss.
 neither skill—lose 2 Air.

You return to *Fantasies*’ ladder. Krischan follows, eating triple the air. He needs a pull-up bar and groceries.

“Wow, a bonafide sea wizard,” Krischan says. He clings to the ladder while Amanda removes your gear.

“Thanks for the fuel,” you say, handing his torch back. “And get some new friends too.”

“Keep the torch. I’d prefer someone actually use it. I mainly use my welding torch. Hey, do you have any diving advice? I want to go beyond my little-league lifestyle.”

“Get some new friends.”

“Besides that. I need to borrow money from them to buy some nice funeral clothes.”
 “Iron out what you have.”
 “My family won't like that.”
 “Screw 'em.”
 “They might withhold my college fund, though.”
 “Screw 'em.”
 “They said I have to meet certain conditions or—”
 “Tell them to hand it over or shove it up their ass.”
 “Yeah, but I owe a lot on my credit cards.”
 “Toss 'em.”
 “My girlfriend wants me to keep buying her things, though.”
 “Then stop.”
 “But what can I do for the people on land I leave behind?”
 “Nothing. Let them go.”
 “Well, I like to visit my grandfather. He has dementia and got institutionalized last year.”
 “Consider him dead.”
 “What, from the dementia or the nursing home?”
 “Either.”
 “Ok, but...I already take SSRIs for depression.”
 “Get off those. Take the depression.”
 “Who will look after my budgie birds?”
 “The wild.”
 “Alright. Hey, thanks for the diving advice.”
 “See you around, Krischan.”

Record the **oxy-fuel torch** if needed. Turn to **2**.

100

You picture the sheriff thrashing in the waves to keep warm. The burdensome rifle unslings from his shoulder, adding to today's debacle. He catches the gun underwater. Will it even fire now? Can a shot sting true in the hoist and heave of these waves? How will a wet life jacket handle the recoil?

The sheriff's men huddle around him asking what to do. He gazes at the black man's armored boat. Those machine gun barrels can annihilate the squad. Heck, the diver could stalk them from below. Nothing has ever succeeded out here. Men protect these waves like precious soil. Ten years of sunken tax money has accumulated in this...fiasco.

The sheriff lets go. His rifle sinks like an anchor. Today, after crawling ashore, he will retire. These humiliated men will get an austere look encouraging them to do likewise. It probably happens differently than your imagination dictates. But the sheriff's rifle does sink, and you collect it. **Add 1 Pay**.

Returning to *Fantasies*, you can taste her lingering gunpowder like a big plate of sulfur. Turn to **2**.