The Sponge Diver

The diver is dropped to the bottom and stays down until he is pulled back up. The diving dress is lead-enforced so that the diver can walk on the ocean bed rather than float in the water. He walks against the current like a man leaning into a heavy wind. He wears a surface supplied copper helmet—it is connected via an air tube to a hand-operated oxygen compressor at the deck of the ship. While two crewmen handle the compressor, a third keeps an eye on the air bubbles that returns from the depth and turns an hourglass measuring the duration of the dive.

Once at the seafloor and adjusted to the low light, the diver performs a continuous act of pattern recognition. When he recognises a black sponge, he approaches it, and scratches its surface. If the black crust comes off like the skin of a peach, the sponge can be harvested. The work is monotonous—like a computer game with one simple mission: to gather. The longer you stay underwater, the more sponges you can gather, and the more you will increase the pay by the end of the season.

However, working too hard and staying underwater too long also enhance the risk of catching the feared and until the early 1900s unexplained black crust comes off like the skin of a peach, the sponge can be harvested. The work is monotonous—like a computer game with one simple mission: to gather. The longer you stay underwater, the more sponges you can gather, and the more you will increase the pay by the end of the season.

In October 1909 a specific sponge diving ship runs into a severe storm on its way home from Africa where its divers have been gathering sponges all season. It left the Greek shore soon after Easter with a crew of clean-shaven healthy and hopeful young men. Now, in October, they are exhausted from hard work and competition, poor food and dirty water, sleeping on deck, diving several times a day followed by anxious cigarette smoking. Co-divers and friends were buried on beaches or thrown in the water. Others are returning with stiff limbs, crippled for life. But the ship is loaded with dry sponges.

Here comes the storm. The ship’s captain decides to drop anchor off the island of Antikythera while waiting for the storm to pass. In the meantime, the crew is sent out to dive for more sponges along the coast. One of the divers gives a sudden signal to be pulled up and reports at the surface that he has seen a heap of decomposed bodes on the seabed below. Ghost-like but real and as if they too were lead-enforced.

The captain emerges on deck and the diver repeats his morbid vision. His face is pale. The captain assumes the diver is hallucinating, but he puts on a diving dress and jumps in the water to check what is going on at the bottom. What the captain sees below differs markedly from what the sponge diver saw. He sees the remains of a ship with a cargo of ancient art—marble and bronze sculptures.

The captain was right. The ship was Roman and sank in the first century A.D. But as the marble sculptures are salvaged, the sense of ghostliness lingers. Their surfaces are distinctively divided into areas that have been pressed by burial in the seafloor and areas which have been harshly exposed to sea life, eaten by sponges and other sea organisms and turned in to coral like structures. Smooth white marble skin is situated right next to a highly decomposed surface. One cannot help but think of petrified bodies.