

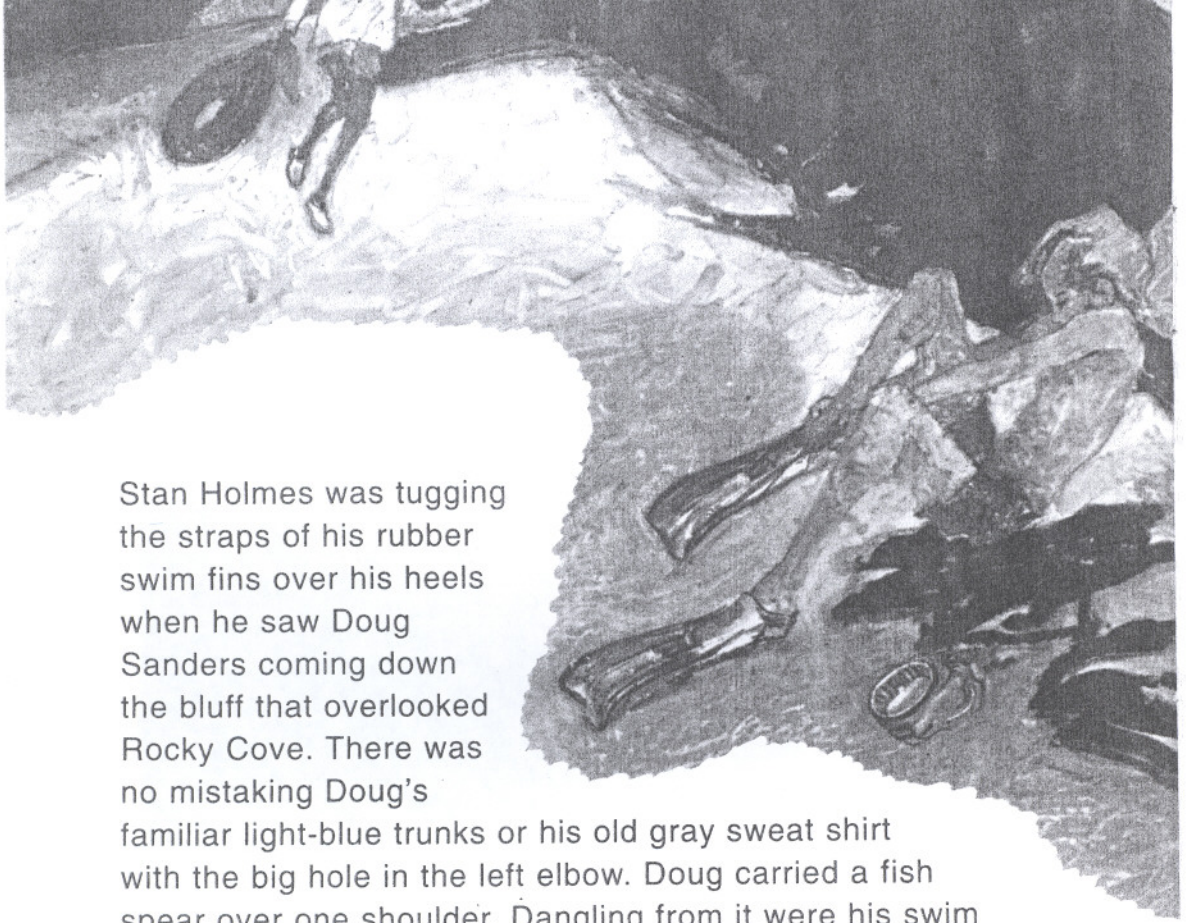
Danger in the Deep

Written by Charles Coombs



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Stan Holmes was tugging the straps of his rubber swim fins over his heels when he saw Doug Sanders coming down the bluff that overlooked Rocky Cove. There was no mistaking Doug's familiar light-blue trunks or his old gray sweat shirt with the big hole in the left elbow. Doug carried a fish spear over one shoulder. Dangling from it were his swim fins and a diving mask. In the other hand he carried an inflated inner tube with a gunny sack tied to it.

"Hi," said Doug as he dumped his diving gear on the sand beside Stan. "You down here alone today?"

"Guess it's too cold for the others," Stan said. "But I kind of like it this way."

Stan wondered if the other boy's real reason for being here was the same as his own. Although Stan really liked to skin-dive, it was a summer sport. On a chilly September day like this he would much rather have been home reading a good book. But the season in which it was legal to catch lobsters was nearly over. Most of the commercial lobstermen had quit and gathered up their lobster pots. It was late in the season, and the lobsters seemed scarce.

Doug stripped off his sweat shirt and began to put on his diving gear. "I sure hope I can find some lobsters today," he said. "Not many around, though, I guess. The fish markets in Seaview are really paying a good price for lobsters. And I can use a little money. I've got a chance to get a paper route. But I've got to have a bike to do it. Bikes cost money."

Stan didn't mention how badly he, too, needed spending money. School was about to start again. What clothes he hadn't outworn during the summer, he had outgrown. At the age of thirteen he seemed to be growing faster than Iowa corn in July.

Any other year his parents would have bought school clothes for him. But since his father's accident at the factory, the family seemed to have just enough for food and rent. Later his father would be well and back to work. But right now things were pretty crucial in the Holmes household. Stan knew that it would relieve his parents of a big worry if he could earn enough money to buy his own school clothes this year.

in the sand and picked up the inner tube with the sack.
"Shall we go out together, Stan?" he asked.

Stan knew the rule that a skin-diver never should go out alone. A fellow never knew when something might go wrong and he'd need help. But he also knew Doug's reputation as one of the best young divers at the cove. If they went down together and there were any lobsters around, Doug would probably get to them first.

"I—I guess not," Stan said. "I'll follow you out in a few minutes. I want to try over on the other side of the point."

He felt Doug's eyes on him. "OK, Stan," Doug said. "But be careful. I hear there are quite a few moray eels hanging around those rocks. They can give you a nasty bite."

"I'll be careful," Stan said, thinking of some of the teeth marks other divers had on their hands and arms. Of course, if you didn't go reaching into places where you couldn't see, you didn't have much to worry about.

Doug waded out through the rolling surf and then swam out into the cove. He pushed the rubber tube ahead of him. Stan watched him make a couple of dives, but both times Doug came back to the surface empty-handed.

"Boy, I hope I have better luck than that," Stan said to himself as he strapped his sheath knife to his leg. He slipped on his face mask. Carrying his own inner tube, and waddling like a duck because of the rubber fins on his feet, he took to the water.

surfaced, he shook the water from his face. "Sure don't seem to be many lobsters down here," Doug said. "Saw one big one, but he was over the legal size. All of the others seem to be too small."

Legal-sized lobsters were between ten and a half and sixteen inches. Smaller or larger than that, they had to be left alone or tossed back. The West Coast spiny lobster is actually a large sea crawfish. It has no dangerous pincers like the Eastern lobsters. But when a fellow was ten or fifteen feet underwater, trying to wrestle one out of a rock crevice, he had a job on his hands—especially since the diver had only a short period of time to work before having to surface for air.

"I'm going to try off the point," Stan said. But he didn't ask the other boy to go with him. If Stan found any lobsters, he needed them for himself.

Arriving at his chosen spot, Stan let go of the inner tube. Taking a couple of deep breaths, he jackknifed his body and disappeared beneath the surface.

He was immediately thrilled by the beauty of the bluish-green underwater world. No matter how often Stan dove, he never got over the sights below the surface. Schools of small, brightly colored fish swam leisurely around him. The seaweed swayed gently in the currents. The ocean bottom was covered with giant boulders that were encrusted with spiny sea urchins and all kinds of razor-sharp shells. Nothing there to bother a diver if he kept his feet off the bottom. A giant crab scurried into a crevice. To Stan's

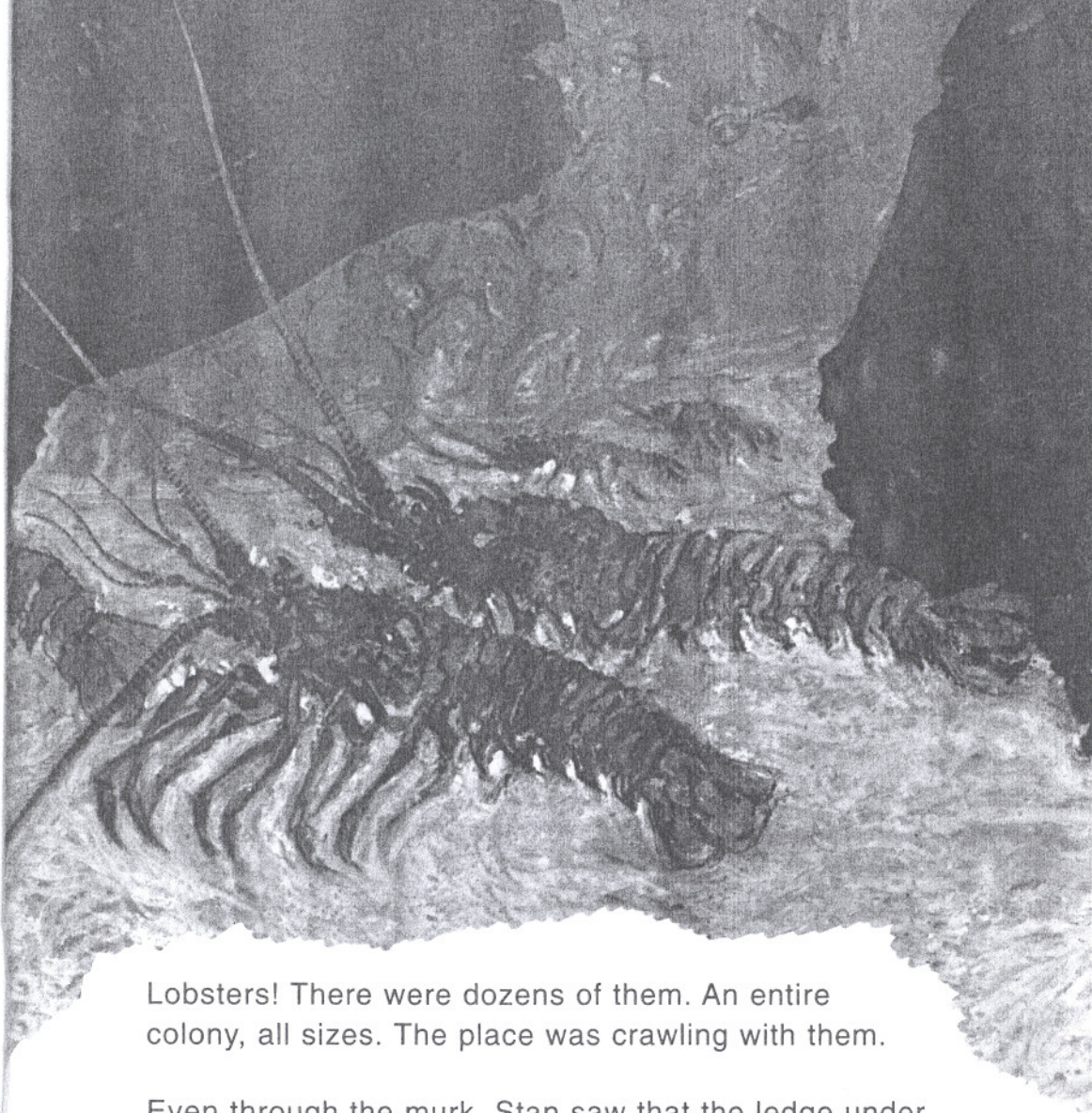
there were no lobsters.

Then, just as the breath was beginning to pound in his chest, Stan saw the dark form of a lobster duck into a shallow hole. Marking its location in his mind, Stan fluttered his swim fins and shot back to the surface.

Stan refilled his lungs several times. Then he nosed under for his next dive. Diving downward, he quickly spotted the lobster, which had come back out of its hole. Stan eased up to it and was just about to make his grab. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he saw the snakelike head of a large moray eel watching him from under a ledge. He knew that if he made a grab for the lobster, the vicious eel would make a grab for him. The rows of needlelike teeth in the eel's open mouth were anything but inviting.

"That's one lobster I don't want," Stan decided quickly. He shifted direction, following an undersea canyon through the rocks. Having made many dives at Rocky Cove and other inlets, Stan knew that he must be nearly twenty feet down, just about as deep as he had ever gone. Older, more experienced divers thought little of thirty- or even thirty-five-foot dives. But twenty feet was plenty deep for Stan.

Careful to keep his hands off the rocks, he threaded his way along the underwater canyon, pushing against the current. He had just decided to start back for the surface when a sudden flurry of motion directly ahead caught his attention. A cloud of sand fogged the water. But through it, Stan was able to make out the cause.



Lobsters! There were dozens of them. An entire colony, all sizes. The place was crawling with them.

Even through the murk, Stan saw that the ledge under which they scurried was shallow. They should be easy to catch. Making a quick mental note, he stroked back to the surface.

Stan to get it and then it drifted over and up
had seen the lobsters.

"Any lobsters?" Doug called to him from fifty yards away.

Without answering, Stan held up his empty hands. Doug could figure it out for himself, he thought.

"I'm about to give up," Doug went on. There was no mistaking the disappointment in his voice. Stan wondered how Doug would get a bike now. Newspaper routes were not easy to get. "Kind of hate to leave you out here alone, though," Doug said. "It's not a good idea. Besides, the tide's due to change before long."

"Oh, I'll be all right," Stan assured the other boy, although he knew it was against all rules of the sport to be out in the water alone. "I'm only going to make a few more dives anyway."

"Then I'll stick around awhile," Doug said. "We don't want anything to happen to a fellow skin diver."

"Suit yourself," Stan called back. Then, anxious to get at the lobsters, he started back down. He was halfway to the bottom when a shadow suddenly passed above him. Spinning quickly in the water, Stan looked up—straight into the face of a shark!

For an instant his blood chilled with terror. But, knowing that fear is a diver's worst enemy, Stan quickly calmed himself.

seemed just as wary of Stan as Stan was of it. Besides, no man-eating sharks of any size had ever been seen along this part of the coast, especially this close to shore.

Once again in full control of his nerve, Stan flailed out wildly. With a quick flip of its tail, the shark spurted away. It turned and watched from a safer distance.

Stan smiled confidently to himself and went on. Approaching the ledge from a blind angle, he reached down and grabbed a lobster before it or the others knew what had happened. It would probably measure about fourteen inches. A beauty.

Even as he grabbed it, Stan realized what a gold mine of seafood he had discovered. There were so many lobsters that getting his limit would be no problem. In fact, he could come back day after day until the season ended.

He swam back to the surface with the lobster clutched firmly in one hand. Stan felt well rewarded for coming to the cove when most of the other divers had quit for the season.

But Doug hadn't given up either. His flippers were once again disappearing as Stan reached the surface. Quickly, before the other boy came back up, Stan swam to his floating inner tube and dumped the lobster into the sack hanging beneath it.

Stan took a couple of deep breaths and went down for another lobster. He repeated the performance several times.

And each time, he managed to drop it into the floating sack while Doug wasn't looking.

Doug called over, "I think I'll call it quits. I've got two pretty good ones. But all of the others seem to have gone south for the winter or something. Let's go in. It's getting cold. Tell you what. I'll give you one of mine. Then neither of us will be empty-handed."

"Th—thanks," Stan called, "but I think I'll stick around a little longer."

After all, he thought, it would be nice if Doug did go on home. If Doug wasn't on the beach, Stan wouldn't have to explain anything when he finally came in dragging his own heavy sack of lobsters. Yes, it would be better if Doug did go.

Doug seemed to shrug. He pushed his face mask up onto his forehead. Leaning on his inner tube and propelling himself with his rubber-flippered feet, he started easing toward shore.

It was then that a feeling which had been building up in Stan—almost without his knowing it—boiled over.

Doug had always been a friend. Maybe not a close friend, but maybe that had been Stan's own fault. Doug had always been such a good athlete and diver that Stan never felt in his class. Just like today, Stan thought. He hadn't wanted to dive with Doug because he had been afraid that the other boy might hog all of the lobsters. And now

maybe more—had offered to share his own two with Stan. While all the time, right down beneath Stan, there were plenty of lobsters for both of them.

“Hey, Doug,” he called suddenly. “I’ve found a whole nest of them down here. Come on.”

The other boy stopped and looked back. “OK, Stan,” he said, grinning. “If you don’t want to be left alone, I’ll stick around a few minutes longer. But snap it up, huh?”

It didn’t help Stan’s feeling of guilt much when he knew that Doug had been sticking around for the past twenty minutes just to be on hand if Stan needed help.

“No kidding, Doug,” he called. “They’re down here. Lots of them. Come and look in my sack.” Stan reached down carefully, pulled one out, and held it up for Doug to see.

A strange look passed over Doug’s face. Then, just as quickly, it was gone. “Wow!” he cried, swimming over to Stan. “Where’d that come from?”

Stan told him about his underwater discovery.

“Well, let’s go down and have a look,” Doug said. Then he peered closely at Stan. “You sure you want me to have some of them?”

“I—wasn’t sure a few minutes ago, Doug,” Stan said honestly. “But—well, I am now. Besides, I don’t own the ocean, do I?”

Doug -
They pulled their diving masks over their faces, filled their lungs, and started down. Stan led the way to the lobsters. Many of them had ducked into crevices. But there were still plenty to be had for the taking. Each boy picked off a good one and took it back up with him.

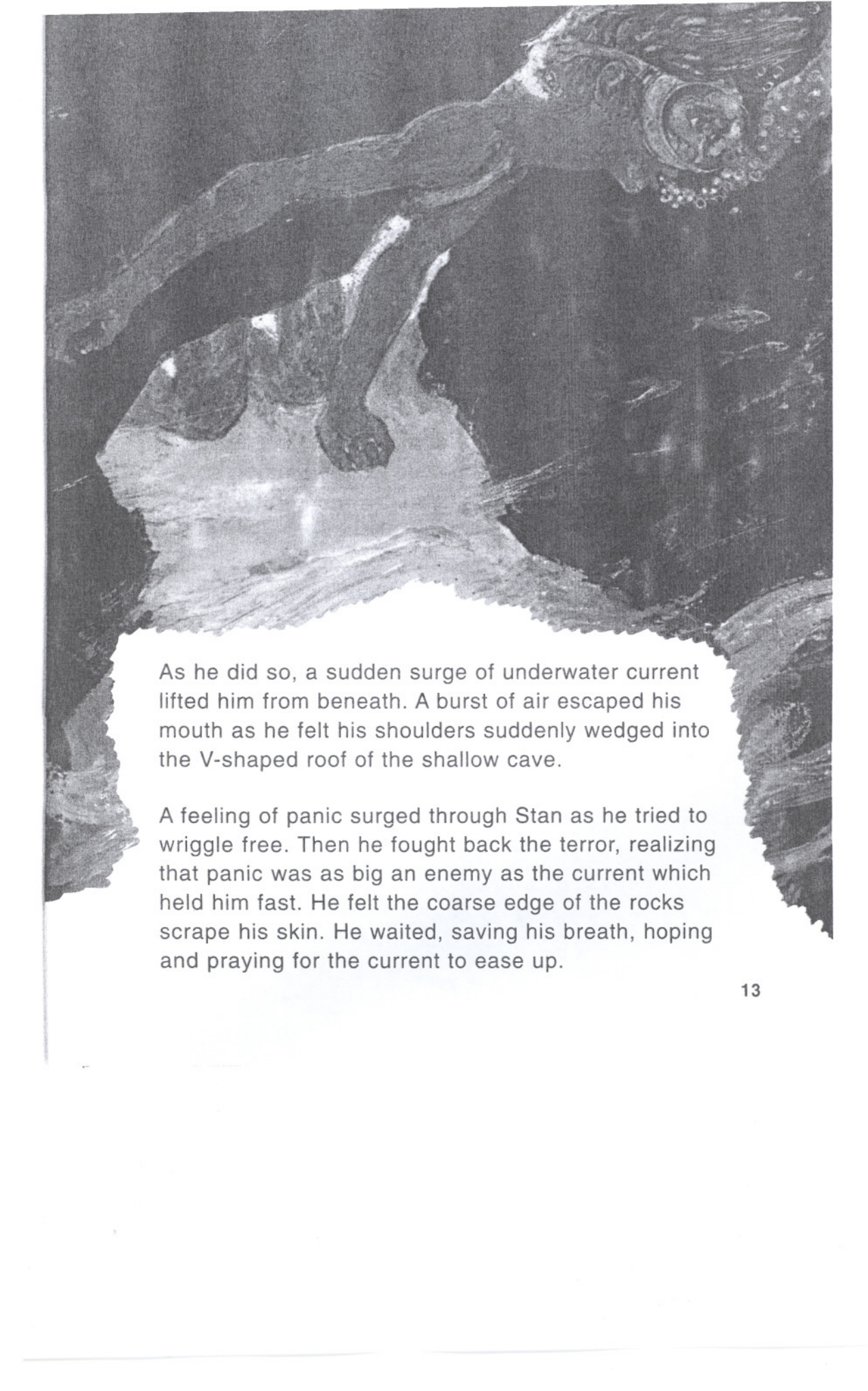
"Boy, you weren't kidding, were you?" Doug said, grinning as he dropped his catch into his nearly empty sack. "How many more do you need for your limit?"

"Just one," Stan said. "I'll get it this trip and then wait for you to finish out yours." Without waiting for the other boy, Stan headed back down.

A small school of scarlet fish swam in front of him. They glistened brightly against the pastel green of the water. Rounding a rock, Stan startled a small octopus. Shooting a stream of ink, it pulled its eight tentacles together and propelled itself quickly out of reach. Since no octopus ever grew to any threatening size along this part of the coast, it was another sea creature that gave no fear to an experienced skin diver.

Arriving once more at the underwater ledge, Stan was just in time to see a big lobster back quickly into a grotto. Stan hadn't noticed the cave before, but he imagined that it must be full of lobsters.

Not considering how careless he was being, Stan poked his head and shoulders into the cave.



As he did so, a sudden surge of underwater current lifted him from beneath. A burst of air escaped his mouth as he felt his shoulders suddenly wedged into the V-shaped roof of the shallow cave.

A feeling of panic surged through Stan as he tried to wriggle free. Then he fought back the terror, realizing that panic was as big an enemy as the current which held him fast. He felt the coarse edge of the rocks scrape his skin. He waited, saving his breath, hoping and praying for the current to ease up.

was coming in. It was the pressure of the tide that had pinned his shoulders so tightly to the roof of the cave.

Stan's lungs were crying for air. Rockets were beginning to explode in his head, when he felt something suddenly grasp his ankle.

The first thought that flashed into Stan's mind was the shark. Maybe if it saw something struggling, it would become brave enough to attack. But then Stan realized that the grip had no teeth. He knew that it was two hands—Doug's two hands.

Stan's thoughts spun wildly. He realized that there was just time for one good effort. He braced his hands against the top of the cave. As he felt Doug's downward and outward pull, he shoved with all his waning strength.

And he came free!

Immediately he kicked upward. Numbly, he felt Doug shove him from beneath to help him surface faster. Up, up he went. Moments later Stan was clinging weakly to his inner tube, and Doug's head broke the surface at his side.

"Looked like you were in a bit of trouble down there, chum," Doug said, smiling. "Don't you know that you're not supposed to go poking into—"

Boy, if you hadn't—" A shudder passed over Stan. He couldn't help wondering what might have happened if Doug hadn't arrived down there to give him a hand. He couldn't help realizing what might have happened if he hadn't called Doug over to share his find of lobsters.

"Well, pal," Doug said, "you look a little tired. Besides, we should get some iodine on those scratches on your shoulders. Shall we call it a day?"

"I'm for that." Stan managed a weak smile. "We—we can come back tomorrow when there's no tide running. Doug, there are still plenty of lobsters down there—enough for your bike and my school clothes. And—well, maybe we could even save one for ourselves. You know, have a little feast together."

"Swell idea, Stan," Doug grinned. "Maybe we can do a lot of things together, huh?"

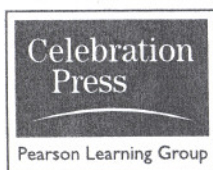
"Yeah," Stan said happily. "Together."

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