IN PORTOPALO di Capo Passero, on the southeastern tip of Sicily, a handful of men still adhere to a fishing style called messina, which involves a net of nets, schools of bluefin tuna, and a tradition that stretches back to the Bronze Age. Here's how it works: the tuna, seen into ever-tightening “rooms,” are anchored to the seabed. The tuna enter and swim from room to room, seeking an exit, until they reach the final, narrow chamber — the death room. As the fishermen laboriously pull the tuna, they beat the tuna with bashed gloves in the small pool of the net, and with the fish thrashing about, the water hobbled red.

“Like a bell in the sea,” Sicily harbors another ancient species of fisherman: the swordfish hunter. These fishermen search for days in their small boats, trying to spot swordfish as they traverse the shallower sills of the Strait of Messina, then speer them with hand-thrown harpoons. The swordfish are few and fewer these days, due to commercial overfishing, and because catches are rare, only sixteen boats still operate between Sicily and Calabria. The tenor, too, face extinction: Atlantic purse seiners have all but emptied the Mediterranean of its tuna stocks. “I wasn’t necessarily seeking disappearing men,” Pietro says. “But wherever I went, things seemed to be ending.”
RUSSIA

NO HARBOUR MASTER in Europe will let them ashore. True, they are only fishermen, but they are considered to be in some ways the pirates of today’s high seas, men of a dangerously glamorous and maverick breed. On their fleet of unregulated Russian Klosdyks — huge, bagged, old-equipped maxi-trawlers,” as Florio puts it — they catch and process thousands of tons of haddock a week, hinting fishery stocks with the walkof an atom bomb. For months at a time, these outcasts never set foot on land and smell nothing but dead and dying haddock. Florio found them working the waters near the Shetland Islands of Scotland, or the fish-streaked junctions of the Atlantic Ocean, the Norwegian Sea, and the North Sea; she had to hire a boatman to take her out to a trawler for her two days aboard. For all their ruinous work, Florio found herself “completely charmed” by the pariahs she encountered. “There were poted plants everywhere,” she says, “filled with earth. This was the mud of Russia carried out to sea. These were men who couldn’t get ashore anywhere but who carried their motherland with them in small pots.”
GERMANY

The Warriors

Their motto is, "Learn to suffer without complaining. And suffer they do." The combat divers of the Kampflosenwerksanleitungsverband — Germany's counterpart to the U.S. Navy's SEALs — undergo some of the most merciless training of any military unit in the world.

"They have to learn to walk, run, sit, and lie underwater," says Peter. To that end, high-diving practice, for instance, is done blindfolded to erase the distinction between air and water; a related exercise has the divers leap into a pool from a thirty-foot tower, wearing lead-weighted suits. When they reach the pool's bottom, they are required to "walk" its fifty-meter length — an endless, two-minute hike.

A more treacherous exercise involves entering and existing deep-sea submarines through the sub's torpedo tube. The divers wedge themselves in, two at a time; once the hatch is closed, the cramped tube is flooded and the divers wait, sealed in the claustrophobic, cold pitch black, for the pressure to slowly stabilize. "It's a nightmare of a thing to do," says Peter. But you won't get any complaints from the divers.

A diver performs a landing exercise; right, entering the torpedo tube of a U-boat submarine.