Sand by Hugh Howey To those who dare to help. Part 1: The Belt of the Buried Gods 1 • The Valley of Dunes Starlight guided them through the valley of dunes and into the northern wastes. A dozen men walked single file, kers tied around their necks and pulled up over their noses a nd mouths, leather creaking and scabbards clacking. The route was circuitous, but a direct line meant summiting the crumbling sand and braving the howling winds at its peaks. There was the long way and there was the hard way, and the brigands of the northern wastes rarely cho se the hard way. Palmer kept his thoughts to himself while the others swapped lewd jokes and fictitious tales of several kinds of booty scored. His friend Hap walked farther ahead, trying to ingratiate himself with the older men. It was more than a little unwise to be wandering the wa stes with a band of brigands, but Palmer was a sand diver. He lived for that razor-thin line between insanity and good sense. And besides, these braggarts with their beards and foul odors were offering a month's pay for two days of work. A hike into the wastes and a quick dive wer e nothing before a pile of coin. The noisy column of men snaked around a steep dune, out of the lee and into the wind. Palmer adjusted his flapping ker. He tucked the edge of the cloth underneath his goggles to keep it in place. Sand peppered the right side of his face, telling him th ey were heading north. He could know without glancing up at the stars, know without seeing the high peaks to the west. The winds might abate or swell in fury, but their direction was as steady as the course of the sun. East to west, with the sand that rode along lodging in Palmer's hair, filling his ears, stacking up in curving patterns of creeping dunes, and burying the world in a thousand meters of hellish grit. As the piratical laughter from the column died down, Palmer could hear the other voices of the desert chorus. There was the moaning of the winds, and a shushing sound as waves of airborne sand crashed into dunes and raked across men like gritpaper. Sand on sand made a noise like a hissing rattler ready to strike. Even as he thought this, a wrinkle in the dune beside him turned out to be more than a wrinkle. The serpent slither ed and disappeared into its hole, as afraid of Palmer as he of it. There were more sounds. There was the clinking of the heavy gear on his back: the dive bottles and dive suit, the visor and fins, his regulator and beacons, all the tools of his trade. There was the call of cayotes singing to the west, their piercing wails uniquely able to travel into the wind to warn neighboring packs to stay away. They were calling out that men were coming, couldn't you smell them? And beyond these myriad voices was the heartbeat of the desert sands, the thrumming that never ce ased and could be felt day and night in a man's bones, day and night from womb to grave. It was the deep rumbles that emanated from No Man's Land far to the east, that rolling thunder or those rebel bombs or the farting gods—whichever of the many flavors of bullshit one believe d. Palmer homed in on those distant grumbling sounds and thought of his father. His opinion of his dad shifted like the dunes. He sometimes counted him a coward for leaving in the night. He sometimes reckoned him a bold sonofabitch for setting off into No Man's Land. There was something to be said for anyone who would venture into a place from where no soul had ever returned. Something less polite could be said about an asshole who could walk out on his wife and four kids to do so. There was a break in the steep dune to the west, an opening in the s and that revealed a wide patch of star-studded sky. Palmer scanned the heavens, eager to dwell on something besides his father. The ridgeline of the impassable Stone Mountains could be seen even in the moon's absence. Their jagged and daunting edge was marked by a black vo id where constellations suddenly ended. Someone grabbed Palmer's elbow. He turned to find that Hap had fallen back to join him. His friend's face was underlit by the dive light dangling from his neck, set to dim. "You aiming for the strong and silent type?" Hap hissed, his voice m uffled by ker and wind. Palmer hitched his heavy dive pack up his shoulders, could feel the sweat trapped between his shirt and the canvas sack. "I'm not aiming for anything," he said. "Just lost in thought." "All right. Well, feel free to cut up with the others, huh? I don't want them t hinking you're some kinda psycho or nuthin." Palmer laughed. He glanced over his shoulder to see how far behind the next guy was and which way the wind was carrying their words. "Really?" he asked. "Because that'd be kinda boss, dontcha think?" Hap seemed to mull this over . He grunted. Was probably upset he hadn't come up with it first. "You're sure we're gonna get paid for this dive?" Palmer asked, keeping his voice down. He fought the urge to dig after the sand in his ear, knowing it would just make it worse. "I don't wanna get stiffed like last time." "Fuck no, these guys have a certain code." Hap slapped him on the back of the neck, sand and sweat mixing to mud. "Relax, Your Highness. We're gonna get paid. A quick dive, some sand in our lungs, and we'll be sipping iced drinks at the Honey Hole by Sunday. Hell, I might eve n get a lap dance from your mom." "Fuck off," Palmer said, knocking his friend's arm away. Hap laughed. He slapped Palmer again and slowed his pace to share another joke about Palmer's mom with the others. Palmer had heard it before. It got less funny and grew more barbs eve ry time. He walked alone in silence, thoughts flitting to his wreck of a family, the sweat on the back of his neck cooling in the breeze as it gathered sand, that iced drink at the Honey Hole not sounding all that bad, to be honest. 2 • The Belt of the Gods They arrived at the camp to find a tall fire burning, its beating glow rising over the dunes and guiding the men home in a dance of shadows. There were manly reunions of slapped backs and shoulders held, sand flying off with each violent embrace. The men stroked their long beards and swapped gossip and joke s as though they'd been apart for some time. Packs were dropped to the ground, canteens topped from a barrel. The two young divers w ere told to wait by the fire as some of the others ambled toward a gathering of tents nestled between steep dunes. Palmer was thankful for the chance to sit. He shrugged off his dive pack and arranged it carefully by the fire. Folding his aching legs beneath him, he sat and l e a ned against the pack and enjoyed the flickering warmth of the burning logs. Hap settled down by the fire with two of the men he'd been chatting with during the hike. Palmer listened to them argue and laugh while he gazed into the fire, watching t he lo gs burn. He thought of his home in Springston, where it would be a crime to fell a tree and light it on fire, where coals of hardened shit warme d and stunk up homes, where piped gas would burn one day but then silently snuff out a family in their sleep the next. in th e waste s, such things didn't matter. Th e scattered groves were there to be razed. The occasional animal to be eaten. Bubbling springs lapped up until t hey were dry. Palmer wiggled closer to the flames and held out his palms. The sweat from the hike, the breeze, the th oughts of home had turned him cold. He sm iled at an eruption of voices that bravely leapt through the tall flames. He laughed when the others laughed. And when his twisting stomach made noises, he lied and said it was because he was hungry. The truth was that he had a very b ad feeling about this jo b. To start wit h, he didn't know any of these men. And his sister had warned him of the savages he did know, much l ess those strange to him. Hap had vouched for the group, whatever that was worth. Palmer turned and watched his friend shar e a joke in the firelight, his face an oran ge glow, his arms a blur of enthusiasm. Best friends since dive school. Palmer figured they would go deeper for each other than anyone else across the sands. That made the vouch count for something. Beyo nd Hap, parked be tween two steep dunes, Palmer saw two s arfers with their sails furled and masts lowered. The wind-powered craft rocked on their sleek r unners. They were staked to the sand but seemed eager to race off somewhere, or perhaps Pal mer was projecting. He wond ered if after this job, may be these guys wo ul d give him and Hap a ride back into town. Anything to avoid the night hikes and the bivouac king in the lee of blistering dunes. A few of the men who had hiked with them from Springst on drop ped down and joined the loose circle around t he fire. Many of the m were old, in their late forties probably, more than twice Palmer's age and about as long as anyone was meant to last. They had the leather-dark skin of nomads, of desert wande rers, of g ypsies. Men who slept beneath the stars and toil ed under the sun. P almer promised himself he would never look like that. He would make his fortune youn g, stumble on that one cherry find, and he and Hap would move back to town as heroe s and live i n the shade. A dune o f credits would absolve ol d sins. They would open a dive shop, make a living selling and repairing gear, equipping the unlucky sa ps who risked their lives beneath the sand. They would see steady coin from the fo ols cha si ng piles of it. Chasin g piles just as he and Hap were right then. A b ottle was passed around. Palmer raised it to his lips and pretended to drink. He sh ook his head and wiped his mouth as he leaned to the side to pass the bottle to H ap . La ugh ter was thrown into the fire, sending sparks u p toward the glitterin g heavens. "You two." A heavy hand landed on Palmer's shoulder. He turned to see Moguhn, the black brigand who had led their march through the dunes. Mo guh n gazed down at him and Hap, his silhouette blotting out the stars. "B roc k will see you now," he said. The brigand turned and slid into the darkness bey ond the fire. Hap smiled, took another swig, and passed the bottle to the bear ded m an at his side. Standing, he smiled at Palmer, an odd smile, che eks full, then turned and spat into the flames, sending the fire and laughter hi gher. He slapped Palmer on the shoulder and hurried after Moguhn. Palmer grab bed his gear before following along, not trusting any one t o watch after it. When he caught up, Hap grabbed him by the elbow and pulle d him aside. Together, they followed Moguhn down the packed sand path betw een th e firepit and the cluster of tents. "Play it cool," H ap his se d. "This is our ticket to the big time." Palmer didn't say anything. All he wan ted was a score that could retire him, not to prove himself to this band a nd join them. He licked his lips, which still burned from the alcoho l, a nd cursed himself for not drinking more when he was younger. He had a lot of catching up to do. He thought of his little brothers and how he'd tell them, when h e saw them again, not to make the same mistakes he had. Learn to dive. Learn to drink. Don't burn time learning wasteful stuff. Be more like their sister and less like him. That's what he would say. Moguhn was nearly invisib le in the starlight, but came into relief against tents that glowe d from the throb of flickering lamps. Someone threw a flap open, which let out the light like an explosion of insects. The thousands of stars overhead di mmed, leaving the warrior god alone to shine bright. It was Colorado, the great sword-wielding constellation of summer, his belt a perfect line of three stars aimed down the path as if to guide their way. Palmer lo oked from that swath of jewels to the dense band of fro s t fire that bloomed back into existence as the tent was closed. Thi s band of countless stars stretched from one dune straight over the sky to the far hori zon. It was impossible to see the frost fire in town, not with all the gas fi re s burning at night. But here was the mark of the wastes, the stamp overhead that told a boy he was very far from home, that let him know he was in the m iddle of the wast es and the wilds. And not just the wilds of sand and dune but the wi ld s of life, those years in a man's twenties when he shrugs off the s helter of youth and before he has bothered to erect his own. The tent-less years. The b right and blinding yea rs in w hich men wander as the plane ts do . A bright gash of light flicked across those fixed beacons, a sho oting star, and Palmer wondered if maybe he was more akin to this. Perhaps he and H ap both. They were going p laces, and in a hurry. Flash and th en gone, off to somew he re new. Stumbling a little, he nearly tripped over his own boots from lo oking up like that. Ahead of him, Hap ducked into the largest of the tents. The canvas rustled like the sound o f boots i n coarse sand, the wind y elp ed as it leap t from one dune to the next, and the stars overhead were swal lowed by the light. 3 • The Map The men inside the tent turned their heads as Hap and Palmer slipped ins ide th e flap . The wind scr atc hed the wa lls like playful fingernails, the breeze asking to be let in. It wa s warm from the bodies and smelled like a bar after a work shift: sweat and rough brew and clothes wo rn fo r months. A dune of a man waved the two boys over. Palmer figured him for Brock, the l eader of this band who now claimed the northern wastes, an imposing man who had appeared seemingl y out of nowhere as most brigand lead ers do. Buildi ng bombs one year, serving someone else, until a string of deaths pro motes a man to the top. Palmer's sister had warned him to steer clear of men like this. Instead of ob eying her, he now steered toward the man. Palmer se t his gear down n ear a stack of crates and a barrel of water or grog. There were eight or nine men standing around a flimsy table set in the mid dle of the tent. A lamp had be en hung from the center support; it swayed with the push and p ull of the wind on the tent f rame. Thick arms plastered with tattoos were planted around t he table like the trunks of small trees. The tattoos were dec orated with raised scars made by rubbing grit into open wounds. "Make room," Brock said, his a ccen t thick and difficult to plac e, p erhaps a lilt of the gypsies south of Low-Pub or the o ld gardeners from the oasis to the west. He waved his han d b et ween two of the men a s though shooing flies from a plate of food, and with minimal grumbling, th e tw o beard ed men pressed to the side. H ap took a place at the waist-high table, and Palmer j oined him. "You've heard of Danvar," Brock said, forgoin g int roductions and formalitie s. It seemed like a question, but it was not spoken like one. It was an assumption, a declara tion. Palmer glanced arou nd the table to see quite a few men watching him, so me rubbing their long and knotted beards. Here, the men tion o f legends did not elicit an eruption of laughter. Here, grown men looked at hairless youth as if sizing them up fo r dinner. But none of these m en had the face-tats of the cannibals to the far north, so Palmer assumed he and Hap were being sized up for this jo b, being me asure d for their worthiness and not for some stew. "Everyone's heard of Danvar," Hap whispered, and P almer noted the aw e in hi s friend's voice. "Will this lead us there?" Palmer turned and surveyed his friend, then followed Hap's gaz e d ow n t o the table. The four corners of a large piece of parchment were pinned down by meaty fists, sweating mugs, and a sm oking ashtray. Pa l mer touched the edge of the parchment closest to him an d saw that the mottled brown material was thicker than normal parchment. It looked li ke t he stretched and tanned hide of a cayote, and felt brittle as though it were very old. One of the men laug hed at Hap's questio n . "Yo u already are here," he roared. An exhalation of smok e drifted across the old drawing like a sandstorm seen f ro m up high. One of Brock's sausage fingers traced the very constellation Palmer had been staring at dizzily just moments before. " The belt of the great warrior , Colora do." The men around the table stopped their chatteri ng and drinking. Their boss was speaking. His finger fo un d a star every boy knew. "Low-Pub," he said, hi s voice as rough as the sand-studded wind. But that wasn't the name o f the star, as Pal mer co u ld tell him. Low-Pub was a lawless town to the s outh of Springston, an upstart town recently in conflict wit h its neighbor, a s the two wrestled ove r wells of water and oil. Palmer watched as Brock traced a line up the belt, h is fingertip like a sarfer sailing the winds between the two towns and ac ross all that contested land. It was a drawn-out gesture , as though he was trying to show th em some hidden mea ning. "Springston," he announced, pausing at the mid dle star. Palm e r's tho ught was Home. His gaze drifted over the rest of the map, this maze of lines and familiar clusters of stars, of ar rows and hatch ma rks, of meticulous writing built up ov er the years in various fades of ink, coun tless voices mark e d dow n, arguing in the margins. The fat finger resumed its passage due north—if those stars really might be ta ken to r epresent Low-Pu b a nd Springston. "Danvar," Brock announc ed, thumping the table with h is fin ger. He indi ca ted the third star in the belt of great Colorado. The map s eemed to suggest that that the buried world of the god s was laid out i n acc ordance with their heavenly stars. As if man were trapped betw een mirrored worlds abo ve and below. The tent swayed as Palmer considered this. "You've found it?" Hap asked. "Aye," someone sai d, and the d rink ing and smoking resumed. The curled hid e of a map threatened to r oll s hut with th e rise of a mug. "We have a good guess," Brock said in that str ange accent of his. "You boys will tell us for sure." "Danvar is said to be a mile down," Palmer mutter ed. When the table fell silent, he g lanced up. "Nobod y's ever dove half of that." "Nobody?" someone asked . "Not even your sister?" Laughter tumbled out of beard s. Palmer had b een waiting for her to co me up. "It's no mile down," Brock t old t hem, waving his th ic k hand. "Forget the legends. Danvar is here. More plunder than in all of Springston. Here lies the ancient m etropolis. The t hree buried towns of this land are laid out a ccor ding to the sta rs of Colorado's belt." He narrowed his eyes at Hap a nd then Palmer. "We just need you boys to confirm it. We need a real ma p, n ot this skin ." "How deep are we talking?" Hap asked. Palmer turned to his friend. He h ad assumed this had already been discussed. He wonder ed if the wage he'd been promise d had been arrive d at, or if his friend had just been blowing smoke. They weren't here for a big sc avenge; they were here to dive for ghosts, to dig for legen ds. "Eight hun dred meters." The answer qui eted all but the moaning wind. Palmer shook his head. "I think y ou v astly overestimate what a diver can—" "We dug the first two hundred meter s," Brock said. He tapped the map again. "And it says here on this map th at th e tallest structures rise up anothe r two hundred fifty." "That leaves ..." Hap hesitated, waiting no doub t for someone else to do the math. The swinging lamp seemed to dim, and the e dges of the map went out of focus as Palmer arrived at the answer. "Thre e hu ndred fifty meters," he said, feeling dizzy. He'd been down to two fifty a few times on twin bottles. He knew people who'd gone down to three. His sister, a few others, could do four —some claimed five. Palmer hadn't been warned they we re diving so deep , nor that they were helping more gold-diggers was te the ir time looking for Danvar. He had feared for a moment there that they were worki ng for rebels, but this was worse. This was a delusion of wealth rather t han power. "Three fifty is no problem," Hap said. He spread his hands out on t he map and leaned over the table, making like he was studying the notes. Palmer r eckoned his friend was feeling dizzy as well. It would be a record for th em both. "I just wanna know it's here," Brock said, thumping the map. "We need e xact coordinates before we dig any more. The damn hole we have here is a bitch to maintain." There were grumbles of agreement from t he men that Palme r figured were doing the actual digging. One of th em sm iled at Palmer. "Your mum would know something about maintaining holes," he sai d, and the grumbles turned into laughter. Palmer f elt his face burn. "W hen do we go?" he shouted over th is sudden eruption. And the laughter died down. His friend Hap turned from the dizz ying map, his eyes wide and full of fear, Palmer saw. Full of fear and with a hint of an apology for bringi ng them this far north for such madness, a glimmer in those eyes of all the bad that w as soon to come. 4 • The Dig Palmer lay awake in a crowded tent that nigh t and listened t o the snores and coughs of strange rs. T he wind howled late and brought in the whisper of san d, then abated. The gradual glow of morning w as welcome, the tent moving fr om dar k to gray to cream , and when he c ou ld no longer lie still and hold his bladder, Palmer sq ueezed out from between Hap and the canva s wall, collected his bag and boots, and slipped ou tside. The air was stil l c ri sp fro m a cloudless night, the sand having sh ucked off the heat soaked up the day before . Only a few stars clung to the darkn ess in the west. Venus st ood alone above th e opp osite dune s. The sun was up somewhere, but it wouldn't show itself above the local dunes for another hour. Before it could be at down between th e high sands , Palmer hoped to be d iving. He relished the coolness of the deep earth, even the pockets o f moist sand that made for difficult flow. Sit ting down, he upturned his boot s a nd clopped the heels toge ther, little pyr amid s of scoop1 spilling out. Slapping the bottoms of his socks, he pulled the boots back on and laced them up securely, doubling the k not. He wa s eager to attach his fins and ge t going. He checked his dive pack and went ov er his gear. One of the prospectors emerged from the tent, cleared hi s throat, then spat in the sand near e nough to Palmer for it to register but far en ough away that he couldn't be certain if it w as directed at him. After some consideration, and w hile the man urinated on the wall of a dune, Palmer decided th is ephemeral range of questionable inte nt was between four and five feet. It felt sci entific. A wiry man with charcoal skin emerge d fr om Brock's tent: Moguhn, who looked les s f ears ome in the wan daylight. He had to be Brock's second-in-command, judging by the way the two men conferred the night before. Moguh n lifted his eyebrows at Palmer as if to ask wheth er th e young man was up to the day' s chal lenge. Palmer dipped his chin in both greeti ng and reply. He felt great. He was ready for a deep dive. He checked the two large air bottles str apped to t he back of his dive pack and took a serie s of deep and rapid breath s, prepping his lungs. Ther e was no pressur e to get all the way down to the depths Brock was as king. His dive visor could see through a coup le hundr ed meters of sand. All he had to do was go as deep as he could, maybe clip three hundred for th e first time, recor d whatever they could see, and then come back up. T hey couldn't ask more of him than that. Hap e merged f rom the tent next and shielded his eyes against the coming dawn. He looked less prep ared for a deep dive, and Palmer tho ught of the people he'd known who had gone down into the sand, never t o be seen again. Could they feel it in the morni ng when they woke up? Did their bones know that someone would d ie that day? Did they ignore that feeling and go anyway? He thought of Roman, who had gone down to look for water outside of Springston, never to be found and never to return. Maybe Roman knew that he shouldn't go, had felt it right at the last moment, but had felt committed, had shaken off the nag t ugging at his soul. Palmer thought maybe that's what he and Hap were doing at that very moment. Moving forw ard, despite their doubts and trepidations. Neither of them spoke as they checked their gear. Palmer produced a few strips of snake jerky from his pac k, and Hap ac cepted one. They chewed on the spicy meat and to ok rationed sips from their canteens. When Moguhn said it was time to go, they repacked their dive bags and shrugged on the heavy packs. These men claimed to have dug down two hundred meters to give them a much-needed boost. Palmer had seen effor ts such as these, and every diver knew to choose a si t e as deep as possible between slow marching dunes—but two hundred meters? That was deeper than the well in Springston his bab y b rother hauled buckets out of every day. It was hard to move that much sand and not have it blow back in. Sand flowed t oo much for dig ging holes. The wind had many more hands than those who pawed at the earth. The desert buried even th ose thi ngs built atop the sand, much less those made below. And here h e and Hap were banking on pirates to keep the roof c lear for them. If his sister were there, she would slap him silly and haul him over hot dunes by his ankles for getting in to this mess. She would kill him for getting involved with brigands at all. That, comin g from someone who dated their kind. But then, his sister w as full of hypocrisy. Always telling him to question authority, as long as it wasn't hers. "That all your stuff? " Mog uhn asked, watchin g them. He kept his black hands tucked into the sleeves of his white g arb, which he wore loose like a woman's dress. Stark and brilli antly bright, it flowed around his ankles and danced like the heat. Palmer thought he looked like the night shrouded in day. "This is it," Hap said, s miling. "Never seen a sand diver before?" "I've see n plenty," Moguhn said. He turned to go and waved for the boys t o follow. "The last two who tried this had three bottles apiece. That's all." Palmer wasn't sure he'd heard correct ly. "The la st tw o wh o tried this?" he asked. But Moguhn was sliding pa st the tents and between the dunes, and he and Hap with their h eav y packs had to work to catch up. "What did he say?" Palmer asked Hap. "Focus on the dive," Hap said grimly. The day was you ng a nd th e desert air still cool, but the back of his frie nd's neck shone with perspiration. Palmer shrug ged his pack higher and marched through the soft sand, watching it stir into a low cloud as the first morning breeze whispered through the d une s. On ce they were past the gathering of tents, Pal mer thought he heard the throaty rattle of a m otor in the distance. It s ou nded like a generator. The dunes opened up and the ground began to slope down, the piles of sand giving way to a wi de vis ta of open sky. Before them loomed a pit gre ater than the waterwell back in Shantytow n. It was a mountain in re verse, a great upside-down pyramid of missing earth, and in the distance, a plume of sand jetted out from a pipe and b illo wed westward with the prevailing win ds. There were men down the slope, a lready working. Had to be a h undred meters down to the bottom. It was only half of what they'd been promised, but the scale of the job out her e in the middle of the wastes was a sight to behold. Here were pirate s with ambition, who could orga nize themselves for longer than a week at a time. The great bulk of the man responsible, Brock, was visible do wn at the bottom of the pit. Palm er followed Moguhn and Hap down the slope, plumes of avalanc he rushing before them, which the men at the bottom looked at with worry as it tumbled their way. As Palmer reach ed th e bottom, th e s ound of the blatting genera tor faded. He pulled his boot s out of the loose and shifting sand, ha d to do so over and over, and saw that the others were standing on a sheet of metal. The platform was difficult to see, as it was dusted from the sa nd kicked loose by the tr affic. Palmer didn't underst and how the pit existed at all, what was cau s ing the plume he had seen, how this was being maintained. Hap must've been similarly confused, for he asked Brock how this was possib le. "T his ain't the half of it," Brock said. He motioned to two of his men, who bent and swept sand from ar ound their feet. Palmer was told to step back as someone lifted a handle. There was a squeal from rusted and sand-soaked hinges as a ha tch was lifted. Someone aimed a light down the hatch, and Palmer sa w where the othe r hundred meters lay. A cylindrical shaft bored straight down through the packed earth. One of the men uncoiled a pair of ropes and began flaking them onto the sand. Palme r peered into the fathomless black hole beneath t hem, that great and sh adowy depth, and fe lt his knees grow weak. "We ain't got all d ay," Brock said, waving his hand. One of his men came forward and pulled the ker down f rom his mouth. H e h elp ed Hap out of his backpack and started to assis t with his gear, but Hap waved the old man off . Palmer shrugged his own pack off but kep t an eye on the man. His beard had grown long, wispy, and gray, but Palmer thought he rec ognized him to b e Yeg er y, an old tinkerer his sister knew. "You used to have that dive shop in Lo w-Pub," Palmer said. "My sister took me the re once. Yegery, right?" The man studied him for a moment before nodding. When he mov ed to help Palme r unp a ck his gear, Palmer didn't s top him. He couldn't believe Yegery was this f ar north, way ou t in the wastes. He forgot the dive for a moment and watched old and expert hands handle his dive rig, ch ecking wires and valves, insp ecting air bott les that Palmer had roughen ed with sandpaper to add the ap pearance of more dives to hi s credit. He and Hap strippe d down to their unders and worked their way into their dive suits, keeping the wires t hat ra n the length of th e arms and legs from tangling. Palmer's sister h ad told him once that Yegery k new more about diving tha n any ten men put together. And here he was, licking his old fingers and pinching the battery terminals o n Palm er's visor bef ore switching the headset on and off again. Palmer glanced up at Brock and marveled at what these brigan ds had b rought to gether. He had underestima ted them, thought them to be disorganized and wishful treasure-seekers. He hope d they weren't the only ones that da y who might more than live up to expectations. "The hatch k eeps the sand out of the hole," Yege ry said, " so we'll have to close it beh ind you." He looked from Hap to Palmer, made sure both of them were liste ning. "Watch you r air. We had a ping fro m something hard about three hundred or so down, small bu t steady." "You can probe that deep ?" Hap as ked. He and Palmer were near ly suited up. Yegery nodded. "I've got two hundred of my dive suits wired up he re. That's what's h olding the shaft wall together and softening the sand outside it so we can pum p it out. We've got a few more days of fuel lef t in the genny, but you'll be dead o r back by then." The old tinkerer didn't smile, and Palmer realized it wasn't a joke. He pulled hi s visor on but kept the curve d screen high up on his forehead so he coul d see. He hung his dive light a round his neck before att aching his fins to his boo ts. He w ould leave the gear bag and his clothes behind, but he strapped his canteen tight to his body so it wouldn't dr ag—he di dn't trust these men not to piss in it while he was gone. "The other two d ivers," he asked Yegery. " What happened to them?" The old di ve master chewed on the grit in his mouth, the grit that was in all of their mouths, that was fore ver in everyone's mouth s. "Worry on your own dive," he advised the two boys. 5 • The Dive The ropes pinched Pa lmer's arm pits as he was lower ed dow n the shaft. He descended in jerks and stops, could feel the work of the men above handling the rope with their glove d hands. The dive light illuminated the s mooth walls of the shaft as he s pun lazily this wa y and that. Hap drifted a fe w meters b elow hi m on his own line. "It's fucking quiet," Hap said. Palmer added to that quietude. He reached out and touche d the wall of this unnatural shaft and felt with his fingers the unmistakable packe d grit of stonesan d2. This sh aft had been made. A chil l sprea d across his flesh. He remembered Yegery saying something about two hundred suits. "They created t his," he w hispered. He and Hap inched downwar d, spinning as they went. "They'r e using vibes to h old this tog ether. And to loosen the sand b efore they pump it." Palmer remembered the soft and slushy feel of the sand as they had worked their way dow n the c rater. "The bottom's coming up," Hap a nnounced. "I can see the sand dow n there." Palmer i magined the generator shutting off, or so meone killing the power that held back this wall of sand, and all of it collapsing inwa rd in an instant. It became difficult t o breathe, thinking about the press of e arth. He nearly turned his dive suit o n, just in case. "I' m down," Ha p said. "Watch your fins." Palm er felt Hap's hand on his ankle, steering him so he wouldn't land on top of his partn er's head. The sh aft was tight with the two of them on the ground. They worke d the knots around their chests loose and tugged twic e on the ropes lik e Brock had said. "I'll take lea d," Hap offered. He pulled his regulator from his chest, checked the line, then reach ed over his shoul der to spin the air valv e. He made sure it was locked before biti ng down on his regulator. Palmer was busy doing the same. H e placed his r egulator between his teet h and nodded. Somehow, an odd calmness overcame him as he pulled that first de ep breath from hi s bottle. Soon he would be beneath the sand, the only place he h ad ever felt at peace, and all of this craziness around him woul d be forgo tten. It would be just him and the depths, the calm cool sand, and the chance, however crazy, of discoverin g Danvar deep be neath their fins. Hap pow ered on his suit by slapping the large butt on on his chest. Standing this close, Palmer could feel the vibra tions in the air. They both set their homing beacons on the sand and turned them on. Palmer reached to his own ches t and turned on his suit, then folded the leath er flap over the switch so the journey throu gh the sand couldn't accidentally shut it off and trap him. Hap pu lled his visor do wn over his eyes, smiled, and waved one last time. And then the sand loosened around his feet a nd seemed to suck him downward—and Hap disappeared. Palmer turned off his dive light to save the juice. He pulled his visor down and switched the unit on. The wo rld we nt black, then gelled into a purplish blotch of shifting shapes. The air screwed with the sandsi gh t, making it impossible to see. With the visor 's headband pressed to his temples, Palme r thought about what he wanted the sand to do, and it obeyed. The suit around him v ibra ted outward, sending subsonic waves trembling through molecules and atoms, and sand b eg an to move. It began to act like water. It flowed around him, and down Palmer went. Once the sand enveloped him, Palmer felt the exhilaration a dune-hawk must feel in flight , a sens e of weightlessness and liberation, the power to glide any direction he liked. He directed his th oughts like his sister had taught him so many years ago, loosening sand below and pres sing with a hardening of sand from above, keeping a pocket loose around his chest so he c ou ld breathe, diverting the weight of the earth around him to hold back the pressure, an d taking calm sips from his regulator to conserve his air. The wavering purple splotches were rep laced with a rainbow of colors, the cool purples and blues of anything far away, bright ora nge an d red for anything hard or close by. Glancing up, the shaft above him glowed bright yellow. It glowed like only the sand hardened by a suit could glow. It was so bright that the whit e pulsing of the transponders was difficult to spot, but one beacon was as good as any ot her. He loo ked down and found Hap, a spot of orange with green edges. His new visor worked great, had a much better seal to keep the sand out and far better fidelity than his last pair. He could clearly make out Hap's arms and legs where once he would've seen a single blotch. Diving down after his friend, he spoke in his throat to let Hap know he had a visual on him. I hear you, Hap responded. The sound came from behind and below Palmer's ears, vibrating in his jawbone. The two of them went straight down, letting the sand flow around them. The pushback on the s uits grew, m aking the flow more strenuous the deeper they went, making it more difficult to breathe. Palmer calmed himself by thinking of this as a quick do wn-and-up. No need to scavenge. Just one of those braggart dives where you go hard and fast as deep as you can , take a gla nce, come back up. A dive like his sister warned him about. But this wasn't for ego; this was for coin. This was a job, not him proving s omething. You picking anything up? Hap asked. Not yet. Palmer watched the depth gauge in his visor. The distance was fed from the tran sponder left behind. Fifty meters. A hundred meters. It grew more and more difficult to breathe, and it required more concentrati on to move the sand. The farther down they went, the more packed and heavy the column of sand above them. This was wh er e ma ny divers panicked and "coffined," or let the sand freeze stiff. His sister had pulled him out of a coffin twice while training him on some of her old gear. When the desert wraps its great arms around your chest and decides you won't breathe anymore, that's when y ou fe el h ow small you are, just a grain of sand crushed among infinite grains of sand. Palmer kept his mind clear as they drifted through one fifty. He hit two hundred meters. This was about as deep as he liked to go. He calmed his mind, ignored the bit of sand getting past his visor an d in to his ears, the sand at the corner of his mouth as it filled that gap between lips and regulator, the sand crunching between his teeth, and just concentrated on the flow. The batteries on his suit were strong; he'd doubled them up a few dives ago. His gear and mind were good. He felt that serenity that hits him when he's able to hold his breath for minutes at a time, that complete feeling of peace, the sand cool on his s calp and neck, the world drifting further and farther away. Two hundred and fifty meters. Palmer felt a surge of pride. He couldn't wait to tell Vic— Shit. Shit. Shit. The words rattled through his teeth—Hap must be shouting in his throat. Palmer looked down at his friend, and then h e saw it too. A bright patch. Something hard. Something huge. Where's the ground? Palmer asked. No fucking clue. What is that? Looks like a cube. Maybe a house? Quicksand got it? Quick don't go this deep. Fuck, it goes down and down. Palmer could see that now. The square o f bright red glowed into orange as they got closer, and he could see how the hard edges of the structure faded through to greens and blues a s it went down. It was a square shaft of some sort, buried beneath the sand, sitting vertical and massive and deep. Getting hard to breathe, Hap said. Palmer felt it as well. He thought it was this strange object in his sandsight making it difficult to breathe, but he could feel how much more packed the sand was, how much harder to make it flow. He could still sink, but rising up would be a test. The weight of all that sand a bove him could be keenly felt. We turn back? Palmer asked. His goggles said two fifty. It was another fifty or so down to the structure. With the two hundred meters they'd cheated from the dig, they were technically at four fifty right then. Damn. He had never dreamed of diving so de ep. Only two fifty of it was him, he reminded himself. But still, his sister had told him he wasn't ready to go even that far. He had argued with her, but now he believed. Goddamn, was she ever wrong about anything? Gotta see what it is, Hap said. Then we go back. The ground must be a mile deep. Don't see an end. I see something. More of these. Palmer wished he had Hap's visor. His own was digging into his face, pushing on his forehead and cheekbones like it might smash right through his skull. He worked his jaw to lessen the pain, strained downward, an d then he saw something too. Bright blues down there, more square shafts, and another to the side a little deeper, just a purple outline. And was that the ground down there? Maybe another three hundred meters down? I'm getting a sample, Hap said. His words came in loud. The sa nd was dense, the visor bands transmitting the words from throat to jawbone louder than usual. Palmer remembered Vic telling him about this. He tried to remember what else he'd heard about the deep sand. He was sucking so hard to get a breath now that it felt like his tank was e mpty, but the gauge was still in the green. It was just the tightness around his chest, which was growing unbearable. It felt like a rib might snap. He'd seen divers taped up before. Seen them come up with blood trailing from their noses and ears. He concentrated. Told the sand to flo w. He followed Hap, when his every impulse was to get out of there, to turn and find his beacon, to push the sand up as hard and as fast as he could, pile of coin be damned. Hap reached the structure. The walls appeared perfectly smooth. A building. Palmer could see it now—an im possibly tall building with small details on the roof, some so hard and bright that they must be solid metal. A fortune in metal. Machines and gizmos. Something that looked like ducting, like the building used to breathe. This was not built by man, not by any man Palmer knew. This was Danvar of legends. Danvar of old. The mile-deep city, found by a bunch of smelly pirates, Palmer thought. And discovered by him. 6 • Danvar Hap reached the building before Palmer. It was a sandscraper that put all the sandscrapers of Springston to shame, could swallow all of them at once the way a snake could eat a fistful of worms. The top was studded with goodies, bright blooming flashes of metal untouched by scavengers: threads of pipe and wire and who knew what else. Palmer could feel his skin crawl, even with the sand pressing him so tight. I' m taking a sample, Hap said. Normally they would grab something loose from the ground, an artifact or scrap of metal, and rise up with it. Palmer pushed deeper and watched Hap scan the vast landscape of the building's roof. The adrenaline and the sight of such riches made it a lit tle easier to move the sand—the sudden rush of willpower and desire helped as well—but breathing had become an effort. Nothing loose, Hap complained, exploring the roof. The top of the building had to be as large as four blocks of Springston. I'll break something free, Palmer sai d. He was now as low as Hap. Lower. His competitive spirit had driven him down past the edge of the building, dipping well past three hundred meters. The concept of breaking a personal record was lost in the rush of such a discovery. Such a monumental discovery. He worried no one would believe them, but of course their goggles would record everything. They would store the entire dive, would map the shapes beneath them, those great pillars reaching up like the fingers of a deity long buried. And now the palm of this great god, the ground between the sc rapers, was dimly visible. It was studded with bright metal boulders that Palmer recognized as cars, all preserved in great shape, judging by the signal bounce. But it was hard to read the colors this deep. He was in unfamiliar territory. As if to highlight this, the air indicator in his vis or went from green to yellow. One of his tanks had gone dry, a dull click as a valve switched over. Not a problem. They weren't going any deeper. This was halfway. And he would use less air going up. Fuck, they were going to get out of here. They were going to do this. Just needed to look for something to break loose, a souvenir. He probed for any sand that might be inside the building, sand he could grab and flow toward himself in order to breach the scraper and grab some small artifact. The flat wall before him had the signal bounce and the wavering shim mer of colors that screamed glass. Hollow, he told Hap. I'm ramming it. Palmer formed a sandram with his mind, pictured a hardening of the sand in front of him and a loosening of the sand around that. His left hand twisted and turned inward the way it did when he concentrated, an