



A TASTE OF TOMORROW

THE
DYSTOPIAN
BOXED SET

GAMELAND BOOK ONE SAUL TANPEPPER

THE MAN WHO ENDED THE WORLD JASON GURLEY

BLACK HULL JOSEPH TURKOT

AFTER THE CURE BEIRDRE GOULD

HALFSKIN TONY BERTAUSKI

THE TUBE RIDERS CHRIS WARD

ARTIFICIAL EVIL COLIN F. BARNES

CONTAMINATION ZERO T.W. PIPERBROOK

APOCALYPSE DRIFT JOE NOBODY

YESTERDAY'S GONE SEASON ONE SEAN PLATT & DAVID WRIGHT

SAND PART ONE: THE BELT OF THE BURIED GODS HUGH HOWEY

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the speculative fiction genres, I can think of none more dire, yet at the same time more hopeful than dystopian. To the uninitiated, this may seem illogical. After all, dystopian states are, by the very definition, deeply entrenched in despair, dysfunction, and desolation. Societies are fractured, governments totalitarian, and environments are badly degraded. Where in such worlds is there room for optimism?

The best dystopian literature succeeds not because it offers stark views of hopelessness, but because it provides us with hints that any one of us can—and do—rise above it. Its heroes are individuals just like you and me, credible folk fighting incredible odds to achieve that one thing we all desire: a better life for ourselves and others. This is what makes dystopian literature so popular—not the darkness it seems to embrace, but the celebration of light that comes from the triumph of human spirit over it. Their heroes become our beacons, and they help guide us from the shadows which shroud our personal day-to-day lives.

This collection includes some of the darkest—and brightest—dystopian fiction being published today. Eleven offerings by twelve authors, some already well-known, others rising in the ranks. But they all share one thing in common: they have extracted from our world the darkest, basest, vilest, and ugliest qualities and then asked their protagonists to overcome it all, despite what may seem insurmountable odds. By doing so, they have shown us the light.

And this gives us reason to hope.

- Saul Tanpepper

SAND: Part 1 - The Belt of the Buried Gods by Hugh Howey

PART ONE
THE BELT OF THE
BURIED GODS.

ARTIFACTS OF THE OLD WORLD.



FIG.1 TELEVISION DEVICE.

Sand.

hugh howey

Foreword

Dystopian stories often take place in the future, but they are almost always about the present and the past. I write optimistic dystopian stories. They are dark, sure, but they are meant to reflect how far we've come. We have made enormous progress as a people. But we have so much more work to do. The dystopian stories I value are those with a message of hope. Those with a warning. A call to action. In *WOOL*, I wrote about a society partly inspired by the totalitarian regime in North Korea. Here, the country is as cut off as a silo and disinformation and cruelty rule the lives of its people. In *SAND*, I decided to look at a different sort of failed state, one where lawlessness is widespread. There are many countries today that are largely ignored, where people suffer, and the rest of the world cannot seem to summon the courage or the backbone to act. It is partly because we have exhausted ourselves and our resources in other areas of the globe. But these people suffer nonetheless.

Starlight guided them through the valley of dunes and into the northern wastes. A dozen men walked in single file, kers tied around their necks and pulled up over their noses and 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 their peaks. There was the long way and there was the hard way, and the brigands of the northern wastes rarely chose 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 wastes 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 were 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 they 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 thrumming and 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 slithered and disappeared into its hole, as afraid of Palmer as he of it.

There were more sounds. The clinking of the heavy gear on his back: the dive bottles and diving suit, the visor and fins, his regulator and beacons, all the tools of his trade. There was the call of coyotes 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?

Beyond these myriad voices was the heartbeat of the desert sands, the thrumming that never ceased 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 rebellious bombs or the farting gods—whichever of the many flavors of bullshit one believed.

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 sand that revealed a wide path

of star-studded sky. Palmer scanned the heavens, eager to dwell on something besides his father. The ridgeline of the impassible Stone Mountains could be seen even in the moon's absence. Their jagged and daunting edge was marked by a black void 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 muffled by her 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 thinking 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, don't you 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 want to 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 even 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 every 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.

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 together, sand flying off with each violent embrace. The men stroked their long beards and swapped gossip and jokes as though they'd been apart for some time. Packs were dropped to the ground, canteens toppled from a barrel. The two young divers were 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 leaned 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 the logs 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 hardened shit warmed and stunk up homes, where piped gas would burn one day but then silently snuff out a family in their sleep the next. In the wastes, such things didn't matter. The scattered groves were there to be razed. The occasional animal to be eaten. Bubbling springs lapped up until they were dry.

Palmer wiggled closer to the flames and held out his palms. The sweat from the hike, the breeze, the thoughts of home had turned him cold. He smiled 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 bad feeling about this job.

To start with, he didn't know any of these men. And his sister had warned him of the savages he did know, much less those strange to him. Hap had vouched for the group, whatever that was worth. Palmer turned and watched his friend share a joke in the firelight, his face an orange glow, his arms in 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.

Beyond Hap, parked between two steep dunes, Palmer saw two sarfers with their sails furled and masts lowered. The wind-powered craft rocked on their sleek runners. They were staked to the sand but seemed eager to race off somewhere, or perhaps Palmer was projecting. He wondered if after the job, maybe these guys would give him and Hap a ride back into town. Anything to avoid the night hikes and the bivouacking in the lee of blistering dunes.

A few of the men who had hiked with them from Springston dropped down and joined the loose circle around the fire. Many of them 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 wanderers, of gypsies. Men who slept beneath the stars and toiled under the sun. Palmer promised himself he would never look like that. He would make his fortune young, stumble on that one cherished find, and he and Hap would move back to town as heroes and live in the shade. A dune of credit would absolve old sins. They would open a dive shop, make a living selling and repairing gear, equipping the unlucky saps who risked their lives beneath the sand. They would see steady coin from the fools chasing piles of it. Chasing piles just as he and Hap were right then.

A bottle was passed around. Palmer raised it to his lips and pretended to drink. He shook his head

and wiped his mouth as he leaned to the side to pass the bottle to Hap. Laughter was thrown into the fire, sending sparks up toward the glittering 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. Moguhn gazed down at him and Hap, his silhouette blotting out the stars.

“Brock will see you now,” he said. The brigand turned and slid into the darkness beyond the fire.

Hap smiled, took another swig, and passed the bottle to the bearded man at his side. Standing, he smiled at Palmer, an odd smile, cheeks full, then turned and spat into the flames, sending the fire and laughter higher. He slapped Palmer on the shoulder and hurried after Moguhn.

Palmer grabbed his gear before following along, not trusting anyone to watch after it. When he was caught up, Hap grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him aside. Together, they followed Moguhn down the packed sand path between the firepit and the cluster of tents.

“Play it cool,” Hap hissed. “This is our ticket to the big time.”

Palmer didn’t say anything. All he wanted was a score that could retire him, not to prove himself to this band and join them. He licked his lips, which still burned from the alcohol, and 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 he 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 invisible in the starlight, but came into relief against tents that glowed 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 dimmed, 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 looked from that swath of jewels to the dense band of frost fire that bloomed back into existence as the tent was closed. This band of countless stars stretched from one dune straight over the sky to the far horizon. It was impossible to see the frost fire in town, not with all the gas fires 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 middle of the wastes and the wilds. And not just the wilds of sand and dune but the wilds of life, those years in a man’s twenties when he shrugs off the shelter of youth and before he has bothered to erect his own. The tent-less years. The bright and blinding years in which men wander as the planets do.

A bright gash of light flicked across those fixed beacons, a shooting star, and Palmer wondered maybe he was more akin to this. Perhaps he and Hap both. They were going places, and in a hurry. Flash and then gone, off to somewhere new.

Stumbling a little, he nearly tripped over his own boots from looking up like that. Ahead of him Hap ducked into the largest of the tents. The canvas rustled like the sound of boots in coarse sand; the wind yelped as it leapt from one dune to the next; and the stars overhead were swallowed by the light.

The men inside the tent turned their heads as Hap and Palmer slipped inside the flap. The wind scratched the walls like playful fingernails, the breeze asking to be let in. It was warm from the bodies and smelled like a bar after a work shift: sweat and rough brew and clothes worn for months.

A dune of a man waved the two boys over. Palmer figured him for Brock, the leader of this bar who now claimed the northern wastes, an imposing man who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere as most brigand leaders do. Building bombs one year, serving someone else, until a string of deaths promotes a man to the top.

Palmer's sister had warned him to steer clear of men like this. Instead of obeying her, he now steered toward the man. Palmer set his gear down near 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 middle of the tent. A lamp had been hung from the center support; it swayed with the push and pull of the wind on the tent frame. Thick arms plastered with tattoos were planted around the table like the trunks of small trees. The tattoos were decorated with raised scars made by rubbing grit into open wounds.

"Make room," Brock said, his accent thick and difficult to place, perhaps a lilt of the gypsies south of Low-Pub or the old gardeners from the oasis to the west. He waved his hand between two of the men as though shooing flies from a plate of food, and with minimal grumbling, the two bearded men pressed to the side. Hap took a place at the waist-high table, and Palmer joined him.

"You've heard of Danvar," Brock said, forgoing introductions and formalities. It seemed like a question, but it was not spoken like one. It was an assumption, a declaration. Palmer glanced around the table to see quite a few men watching him, some rubbing their long and knotted beards. Here, the mention of legends did not elicit an eruption of laughter. Here, grown men looked at hairless youth as if sizing them up for dinner. But none of these men had the face-tats of the cannibals to the far north, so Palmer assumed he and Hap were being sized up for this job, being measured for their worthiness and not for some stew.

"Everyone's heard of Danvar," Hap whispered, and Palmer noted the awe in his friend's voice. "Will this lead us there?"

Palmer turned and surveyed his friend, then followed Hap's gaze down to the table. The four corners of a large piece of parchment were pinned down by meaty fists, sweating mugs, and a smoking ashtray. Palmer touched the edge of the parchment closest to him and saw that the mottled brown material was thicker than normal parchment. It looked like the stretched and tanned hide of a cayote and felt brittle as though it were very old.

One of the men laughed at Hap's question. "You already are here," he roared.

An exhalation of smoke drifted across the old drawing like a sandstorm seen from 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, Colorado." The men around the table stopped their chattering and drinking. Their boss was speaking. His finger found a star every boy knew. "Low-Pub," he said, his voice as rough as the sand-studded wind. But that wasn't the name of the star, as Palmer could tell him. Low-Pub was a lawless town to the south of Springston, an upstart town recently in conflict with

its neighbor, as the two wrestled over wells of water and oil. Palmer watched as Brock traced a line up the belt, his fingertip like a sarfer sailing the winds between the two towns and across all the contested land. It was a drawn-out gesture, as though he were trying to show them some hidden meaning.

“Springston,” he announced, pausing at the middle star. Palmer’s thought was Home. His gaze drifted over the rest of the map, this maze of lines and familiar clusters of stars, of arrows and hatch marks, of meticulous writing built up over the years in various fades of ink, countless voices marked down, arguing in the margins.

The fat finger resumed its passage due north—if those stars really might be taken to represent Low-Pub and Springston.

“Danvar,” Brock announced, thumping the table with his finger. He indicated the third star in the belt of great Colorado. The map seemed to suggest that that the buried world of the gods was laid out in accordance with their heavenly stars. As if man were trapped between mirrored worlds above and below. The tent swayed as Palmer considered this.

“You’ve found it?” Hap asked.

“Aye,” someone said, and the drinking and smoking resumed. The curled hide of a man threatened to roll shut with the rise of a mug.

“We have a good guess,” Brock said in that strange accent of his. “You boys will tell us for sure.”

“Danvar is said to be a mile down,” Palmer muttered. When the table fell silent, he glanced up. “Nobody’s ever dove half of that.”

“Nobody?” someone asked. “Not even your sister?”

Laughter tumbled out of beards. Palmer had been waiting for her to come up.

“It’s no mile down,” Brock told them, waving his thick hand. “Forget the legends. Danvar is here. More plunder than in all of Springston. Here lies the ancient metropolis. The three buried towns in this land are laid out according to the stars of Colorado’s belt.” He narrowed his eyes at Hap and the Palmer. “We just need you boys to confirm it. We need a real map, not this skin.”

“How deep are we talking?” Hap asked.

Palmer turned to his friend. He had assumed this had already been discussed. He wondered if the wage he’d been promised had been arrived at, or if his friend had just been blowing smoke. They weren’t here for a big scavenge; they were here to dive for ghosts, to dig for legends.

“Eight hundred meters.”

The answer quieted all but the moaning wind.

Palmer shook his head. “I think you vastly overestimate what a diver can—”

“We dug the first two hundred meters,” Brock said. He tapped the map again. “And it says here on this map that the tallest structures rise up another two hundred fifty.”

“That leaves . . .” Hap hesitated, waiting no doubt for someone else to do the math.

The swinging lamp seemed to dim, and the edges of the map went out of focus as Palmer arrived

at the answer. “Three hundred 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 were diving so deep, nor that they were helping more gold-diggers waste their time looking for Danvar. He had feared for a moment there that they were working for rebels, but this was worse. This was a delusion of wealth rather than power.

“Three fifty is no problem,” Hap said. He spread his hands out on the map and leaned over the table, making like he was studying the notes. Palmer reckoned his friend was feeling dizzy as well. It would be a record for them both.

“I just wanna know it’s here,” Brock said, thumping the map. “We need exact coordinates before we dig any more. The damn hole we have here is a bitch to maintain.”

There were grumbles of agreement from the men that Palmer figured were doing the actual digging. One of them smiled at Palmer. “Your mum would know something about maintaining holes,” he said, and the grumbles turned into laughter.

Palmer felt his face burn. “When do we go?” he shouted over this sudden eruption.

And the laughter died down. His friend Hap turned from the dizzying map, his eyes wide and full of fear, Palmer saw. Full of fear and with a hint of an apology for bringing them this far north for such madness, a glimmer in those eyes of all the bad that was soon to come.

Palmer lay awake in a crowded tent that night and listened to the snores and coughs of strangers. The wind howled late and brought in the whisper of sand, then abated. The gradual glow of morning was welcome, the tent moving from dark to gray to cream, and when he could no longer lie still and hold his bladder, Palmer squeezed out from between Hap and the canvas wall, collected his bag and boots, and slipped outside.

The air was still crisp from a cloudless night, the sand having shucked off the heat soaked up the day before. Only a few stars clung to the darkness in the west. Venus stood alone above the opposite dunes. The sun was up somewhere, but it wouldn't show itself above the local dunes for another hour.

Before it could beat down between the high sands, Palmer hoped to be diving. He relished the coolness of the deep earth, even the pockets of moist sand that made for difficult flow. Sitting down, he upturned his boots and clapped the heels together, little pyramids of scoop^u spilling out. Slapping the bottoms of his socks, he pulled the boots back on and laced them up securely, doubling the knots. He was eager to attach his fins and get going.

He checked his dive pack and went over his gear. One of the prospectors emerged from the tent, cleared his throat, then spat in the sand near enough to Palmer for it to register but far enough away that he couldn't be certain if it was directed at him. After some consideration, and while the man urinated on the wall of a dune, Palmer decided this ephemeral range of questionable intent was between four and five feet. It felt scientific.

A wiry man with charcoal skin emerged from Brock's tent: Moguhn, who looked less fearsome in the wan daylight. He had to be Brock's second-in-command, judging by the way the two men conferred the night before. Moguhn lifted his eyebrows at Palmer as if to ask whether the young man was up to the day's challenge. Palmer dipped his chin in both greeting and reply. He felt great. He was ready for a deep dive. He checked the two large air bottles strapped to the back of his dive pack and took a series of deep and rapid breaths, prepping his lungs. There was no pressure to get all the way down to the depths Brock was asking. His dive visor could see through a couple hundred meters of sand. All he had to do was go as deep as he could, maybe clip three hundred for the first time, record whatever they could see, and then come back up. They couldn't ask more of him than that.

Hap emerged from the tent next and shielded his eyes against the coming dawn. He looked less prepared for a deep dive, and Palmer thought of the people he'd known who had gone down into the sand, never to be seen again. Could they feel it in the morning when they woke up? Did their bones know that someone would die 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 tugging at his soul. Palmer thought maybe that's what he and Hap were doing at that very moment. Moving forward, despite their doubts and trepidations.

Neither of them spoke as they checked their gear. Palmer produced a few strips of snake jerky from his pack, and Hap accepted one. They chewed on the spicy meat and took rationed sips from the canteens. When Moguhn said it was time to go, they repacked their dive bags and shrugged on their heavy packs.

These men claimed to have dug down two hundred meters to give them a much-needed boost

Palmer had seen efforts such as these, and every diver knew to choose a site as deep as possible between slow marching dunes—but two hundred meters? That was deeper than the well in Springston, his baby brother hauled buckets out of every day. It was hard to move that much sand and not have it blow back in. Sand flowed too much for digging holes. The wind had many more hands than those who pawed at the earth. The desert buried even those things built atop the sand, much less those made below. And here he and Hap were banking on pirates to keep the roof clear for them.

If his sister were there, she would slap him silly and haul him over hot dunes by his ankles for getting into this mess. She would kill him for getting involved with brigands at all. That, coming from someone who dated their kind. But then, his sister was full of hypocrisy. Always telling him to question authority, as long as it wasn't hers.

“That all your stuff?” Moguhn asked, watching them. He kept his black hands tucked into the sleeves of his white garb, which he wore loose like a woman's dress. Stark and brilliantly bright, they flowed around his ankles and danced like the heat. Palmer thought he looked like the night shrouded day.

“This is it,” Hap said, smiling. “Never seen a sand diver before?”

“I've seen plenty,” Moguhn said. He turned to go and waved for the boys to follow. “The last two who tried this had three bottles apiece. That's all.”

Palmer wasn't sure he'd heard correctly. “The last two who tried this?” he asked. But Moguhn was sliding past the tents and between the dunes, and he and Hap with their heavy packs had to work to catch up.

“What did he say?” Palmer asked Hap.

“Focus on the dive,” Hap said grimly.

The day was young and the desert air still cool, but the back of his friend's neck shone with perspiration. Palmer shrugged his pack higher and marched through the soft sand, watching it stir in a low cloud as the first morning breeze whispered through the dunes.

Once they were past the gathering of tents, Palmer thought he heard the throaty rattle of a motor in the distance. It sounded like a generator. The dunes opened up and the ground began to slope down, the piles of sand giving way to a wide vista of open sky. Before them loomed a pit greater than the waterwell back in Shantytown. It was a mountain in reverse, a great upside-down pyramid of missing earth, and in the distance, a plume of sand jetted out from a pipe and billowed westward with the prevailing winds.

There were men down the slope, already working. Had to be a hundred meters down to the bottom. It was only half of what they'd been promised, but the scale of the job out here in the middle of the wastes was a sight to behold. Here were pirates with ambition, who could organize themselves for longer than a week at a time. The great bulk of the man responsible, Brock, was visible down at the bottom of the pit. Palmer followed Moguhn and Hap down the sand-slope, plumes of avalanche rushing before them, which the men at the bottom looked at with worry as it tumbled their way.

As Palmer reached the bottom, the sound of the blatting generator faded. He pulled his boots out of the loose and shifting sand, had 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 sand kicked loose by the traffic. Palmer didn't understand how the pit existed at all, what was causing the plume he had seen

how this was being maintained. Hap must've been similarly confused, for he asked Brock how the
was possible.

"This ain't the half of it," Brock said. He motioned to two of his men, who bent and swept sand from around their feet. Palmer was told to step back as someone lifted a handle. There was a squeak from rusted and sand-soaked hinges as a hatch was lifted. Someone aimed a light down the hatch, and Palmer saw where the other 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. Palmer peered into the fathomless black hole beneath them, that great and shadowy depth, and felt his knees grow weak.

"We ain't got all day," Brock said, waving his hand.

One of his men came forward and pulled the ker down from his mouth. He helped Hap out of his backpack and started to assist with his gear, but Hap waved the old man off. Palmer shrugged his own pack off but kept an eye on the man. His beard had grown long, wispy, and gray, but Palmer thought he recognized him to be Yegery, an old tinkerer his sister knew.

"You used to have that dive shop in Low-Pub," Palmer said. "My sister took me there once. Yegery, right?"

The man studied him for a moment before nodding. When he moved to help Palmer unpack his gear, Palmer didn't stop him. He couldn't believe Yegery was this far north, way out in the wastes. He forgot the dive for a moment and watched old and expert hands handle his dive rig, checking wires and valves, inspecting air bottles that Palmer had roughened with sandpaper to add the appearance of more dives to his credit.

He and Hap stripped down to their unders and worked their way into their dive suits, keeping the wires that ran the length of the arms and legs from tangling. Palmer's sister had told him once that Yegery knew more about diving than any ten men put together. And here he was, licking his oil-soaked fingers and pinching the battery terminals on Palmer's visor before switching the headset on and off again. Palmer glanced up at Brock and marveled at what these brigands had brought together. He had underestimated them, thought them to be disorganized and wishful treasure-seekers. He hoped they weren't the only ones that day who might more than live up to expectations.

"The hatch keeps the sand out of the hole," Yegery said, "so we'll have to close it behind you." He looked from Hap to Palmer, made sure both of them were listening. "Watch your air. We had a pump from something hard about three hundred or so down, small but steady."

"You can probe that deep?" Hap asked. He and Palmer were nearly suited up.

Yegery nodded. "I've got two hundred of my dive suits wired up here. That's what's holding the shaft wall together and softening the sand outside it so we can pump it out. We've got a few more days of fuel left in the genny, but you'll be dead or back by then."

The old tinkerer didn't smile, and Palmer realized it wasn't a joke. He pulled his visor on but kept the curved screen high up on his forehead so he could see. He hung his dive light around his neck before attaching his fins to his boots. He would leave the gear bag and his clothes behind, but he strapped his canteen tight to his body so it wouldn't drag—he didn't trust these men not to piss in the water while he was gone.

“The other two divers,” he asked Yegery. “What happened to them?”

The old dive master chewed on the grit in his mouth, the grit that was in all of their mouths, the grit that was forever in everyone’s mouths. “Worry on your own dive,” he advised the two boys.

The ropes pinched Palmer's armpits as he was lowered down the shaft. He descended in jerks and stops, could feel the work of the men above handling the rope with their gloved hands. The dive light illuminated the smooth walls of the shaft as he spun lazily this way and that. Hap drifted a few meters below him on his own line.

"It's fucking quiet," Hap said.

Palmer added to that quietude. He reached out and touched the wall of this unnatural shaft and felt with his fingers the unmistakable packed grit of stonessand^[2]. This shaft had been made. A chill spread across his flesh. He remembered Yegery saying something about two hundred suits. "The sand created this," he whispered.

He and Hap inched downward, spinning as they went.

"They're using vibes to hold this together. And to loosen the sand before they pump it." Palmer remembered the soft and slushy feel of the sand as they had worked their way down the crater.

"The bottom's coming up," Hap announced. "I can see the sand down there."

Palmer imagined the generator shutting off, or someone killing the power that held back this wall of sand, and all of it collapsing inward in an instant. It became difficult to breathe, thinking about the press of earth. He nearly turned his dive suit on, just in case.

"I'm down," Hap said. "Watch your fins."

Palmer felt Hap's hand on his ankle, steering him so he wouldn't land on top of his partner's head. The shaft was tight with the two of them on the ground. They worked the knots around the chests loose and tugged twice on the ropes like Brock had said. "I'll take lead," Hap offered. He pulled his regulator from his chest, checked the line, then reached over his shoulder to spin the air valve. He made sure it was locked before biting down on his regulator.

Palmer was busy doing the same. He placed his regulator between his teeth and nodded. Somehow, an odd calmness overcame him as he pulled that first deep breath from his bottle. Soon, he would be beneath the sand, the only place he had ever felt at peace, and all of this craziness around him would be forgotten. It would be just him and the depths, the calm cool sand, and the chance, however crazy, of discovering Danvar deep beneath their fins.

Hap powered on his suit by slapping the large button on his chest. Standing this close, Palmer could feel the vibrations in the air. They both set their homing beacons on the sand and turned them on. Palmer reached to his own chest and turned on his suit, then folded the leather flap over the switch so the journey through the sand couldn't accidentally shut it off and trap him.

Hap pulled his visor down over his eyes, smiled, and waved one last time. And then the sand loosened around his feet and 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 world went black, then gelled into a purplish blotch of shifting shapes. The air screwed with the sandsight, making it impossible to see. With the visor's headband pressed to his temples, Palmer thought about what he wanted the sand to do, and it obeyed. The suit around him vibrated outward

sending subsonic waves trembling through molecules and atoms, and sand began 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, sense of weightlessness and liberation, the power to glide any direction he liked. He directed his thoughts like his sister had taught him so many years ago, loosening sand below and pressing with the hardening of sand from above, keeping a pocket loose around his chest so he could breathe, diverting the weight of the earth around him to hold back the pressure, and taking calm sips from his regulator to conserve his air.

The wavering purple splotches were replaced with a rainbow of colors, the cool purples and blues of anything far away, bright orange and 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 white pulsing of the transponders was difficult to spot, but one beacon was as good as another. He looked 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 his jawbone. The two of them went straight down, letting the sand flow around them. The pushback of the suits grew, making the flow more strenuous the deeper they went, making it more difficult to breathe. Palmer calmed himself by thinking of this as a quick down-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 glance, 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 something.

You picking anything up? Hap asked.

Not yet. Palmer watched the depth gauge in his visor. The distance was fed from the transponder left behind. Fifty meters. A hundred meters. It grew more and more difficult to breathe, and it required more concentration to move the sand. The farther down they went, the more packed and heavy the column of sand above them. This was where many 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 you feel how small you are, just a grain of sand crushed amid 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 and into 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 scalp 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 he 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 of 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 as 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 above 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 deep. 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, and 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 sand was dense, the visor banging, 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 empty, 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 flow. 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 impossibly 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.

Hap reached the building before Palmer. It was a sandscaper that put all the sandscapers 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 little easier to move the sand—the sudden rush of willpower and desire helped—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 said. 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 scrapers, 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 visor 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 shimmer 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 loosening of the sand around that. His left hand twisted and turned inward the way it did when he concentrated, and he could feel himself sweating inside his suit despite the coolness of the deep sand. The ram was there. He made himself know the ram was there. And then he threw it forward, flowing the sand around it, losing control of the sand around his body for a moment, feeling it tighten everywhere at once like a coffin, his throat held fast by two great palms on his neck, chest wrapped with a wet and shrinking blanket, arms and legs tingling as the blood was cut off, and then the ram hit the building and dissipated, and Palmer had the sand flowing around him once again.

He took a deep breath. Another. It felt like pulling air through a narrow straw. But the flashes of light in his vision stopped their blinking. Palmer sank a little, but finally he righted himself. The view

before him had changed. There was sand inside the building now. He had shattered the glass. ~~wavering patch of purple told him that there was air in there. A hollow. Artifacts.~~

I'm going in, he told Hap.

I'm going in, he told himself.

And then the sandscrapper swallowed him.

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