

A Map of the Mines of Barnath

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The Manager of the mines was a small, grey man named Carnarvon, wiry with muscle and as tough as old boots. A slight accent betrayed his off-world origins; one of the older colonies, I thought, or perhaps even Earth. He was sympathetic in a matter-of-fact way, as though my position was far from unique.

"What was your brother's name?" he asked.

"Martin Cavell. Do you remember him?"

Carnarvon shook his head, tapping into a terminal. "No, but his records should . . . yes. This'll tell us something."

I tried to wait while he read the file, but impatience soon got the better of me. "What happened?"

"It seems he took a three-day pass to the upper levels, then chose to continue deeper when the pass expired." Carnarvon skimmed through the file to the end. "Your brother died on the fifth level."

"How?"

"The exact details are unknown. There was no body, no witnesses, and no inquiry. Assumption of death is automatic under these circumstances."

"A pretty large assumption, I would've thought."

"Nevertheless."

He seemed quite content to leave it there, but ten thousand kilometres of travel prompted me to dig deeper.

"Would it be possible to see the place where he died?"

"Possible, yes, but . . ." He looked at me oddly. "You don't know the mines, do you?"

"No. This is my first time here."

"Nobody's said anything?"

"I only flew in this afternoon." It was my turn to look puzzled. "Is there something I should know?"

Carnarvon shook his head slowly. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"So show me. Or have me shown. You don't have to take me personally —"

"No. I'll take you. It's been a while since I went all the way." He looked around the office, eyes itemising the contents one by one until they finally came back to me. "If you want a Grand Tour, I'll give you a Grand Tour."

"Thank you." His capitulation was both unexpected and total; he made me feel slightly guilty for inconveniencing him. "As soon as I find out what happened to Martin, I'll be out of your hair, I promise."

"That could take longer than you think."

"I'm in no hurry."

He sighed and called his deputy into the office. "I'm going Down, Carmen," he told the woman. "You're in charge until I get back."

They shook hands gravely and I thought for an instant that she was about to say something. But she didn't. She just watched as we left the office, her eyes filled with something oddly like grief.

Carnarvon led me to an elevator shaft, handed me a hardhat and a dirty blue overcoat. He looked around the surface level — at the swarming clerks and technicians, at the administration buildings and bulk-transport containers — and shook his head a third time.

"Let's go," he said wearily, and hit 'Down'. The cage door closed and the floor fell away.

The Mines of Barnath are the biggest in known space, and rumoured to be inexhaustible. Discovered a century ago, they have turned our previously struggling, pastoral world into a major mineral exporter. The five thousand people — according to the unofficial tourist brochure — who work its seven levels are capable of extracting over a million tonnes of any given ore per month, plus the same again in refined materials, most of which is exported off-world.

Yet, strangely, the mines are completely independent of the rest of the planet, like a distant country or a very large corporation. Visitors are rare, especially to the deeper levels, and the flow of information to the world outside is often restricted, as it was regarding my brother's fate. But the official policy on the surface is to let the *status quo* remain. The fate of the planet depends on a constant if not large supply of Barnath metal — so, while ore comes out of the upper shaft, any situation, no matter how unusual, can be tolerated.

Carnarvon, if he was aware of his awesome responsibility, didn't let it show.

"We don't get many people here," he said, pausing to light a cigarette. "Usually from off-planet — those who have heard rumours and want to check for themselves. Most are satisfied with a few pamphlets and a quick tour of the upper levels."

"What about Martin?"

"He was an exception, like you."

I nodded, allowing him the point. "What about the other miners, then?"

"A handful — the ones called 'skimmers' — live nearby. Drifters and no-hoppers, usually. They only go as far as the third level, where we do the refining. More permanent miners work the deeper levels. The deepest ones never come Up at all."

"So some actually *live* down there?"

"Of course. They're the ones that work best."

My surprise was mild but genuine. This was a rumour I had heard and dismissed as unlikely. I had never been in a mine before, but the thought of crawling for any length of time along what I imagined to be cramped, poorly-lit tunnels made me feel claustrophobic.

"Why?" I asked.

Carnarvon looked me in the eye, studying my reaction with interest. "Surface people from 'round here, apart from the skimmers, don't work below ground because they're afraid of the mines. They're scared that if they go inside, they'll get caught."

"Gold fever?" I joked.

"No." There was little humour in Carnarvon's eyes. "*Caught*."

I waited, but he did not explain further. If he was trying to scare me off, or warn me, it didn't work. I had come too far to be deterred by vague superstitions.

The cage rattled to a halt. The doors swung open and Carnarvon waved me ahead. "After you."

I nodded, and entered the mines.

One & Two

The sparsely populated first and second levels are almost identical, and usually regarded as a single unit. These were what greeted the first settlers when they discovered the mines and sent the first of many expeditions into the depths of the planet. Carved from the bedrock, at five hundred and seven-fifty metres respectively, the two upper levels were found to be empty of ore and life, little more than half-submerged tunnels littered with rubble and dirt. That they had been fashioned by ROTH — Races Other Than Human — was obvious, however. Mankind had not been on Barnath long enough to begin such an ambitious project, let alone subsequently abandon it. Another species had therefore established the mines, emptied them of all valuable minerals and left. Or so it appeared at first.

When I arrived, new tunnels were being carved by skimmers in a half-hearted attempt to reopen the upper levels. The air was full of dust and the screaming of pneumatic and sonic drills. The weight of the rock above and around me was almost palpable — a feeling compounded by the stifling half-light. Flickering electric arcs swung from carelessly-looped cables draped along the tunnels. It was unexpectedly hot and uncomfortably damp. In some tunnels, it almost seemed to be raining.

Jean Tarquitz, the supervisor of the upper levels, greeted us as Carnarvon showed me around. She was an attractive woman, although filthy, grimed with moisture-streaked dust. When Carnarvon explained that we were heading on a Grand Tour, she looked surprised.

"Why?" she asked, as I had earlier, staring at us both with naked curiosity.

"I've been topside long enough," Carnarvon explained, "waiting for an excuse to come back Down." Even I, who had known him little more than an hour, could tell that his casual words hid a more complex reason. "I thought it was about time."

"And you?"

"Looking for my brother."

There was both amusement and pity in her pale orange eyes as she snorted disdainfully and waved us on.

My tour of the first level passed quickly. Tarquitz accompanied us to the second, which had little new to offer, and bade us farewell as we re-entered the shaft to the third. A load of processed ore climbed past us, deafening all those nearby with the sound of labouring machinery.

"The Director has been active in the lower levels," she said. "I've heard rumours —"

"I know," said Carnarvon wearily. "We'll be careful."

"If it comes for you," she asserted, "it comes regardless of care."

"I haven't forgotten."

"Who's the Director?" I asked, but Carnarvon shook his head and motioned me into the cage.

"Take your time," said Tarquitz.

"I will," Carnarvon replied, and the doors closed.

The lift fell, swaying gently from side to side, and although the first two drops had lasted little more than sixty seconds each, this descent took us at least ten minutes.

Three

The third level held the first of many surprises to greet the settlers. Its heart is an enormous chamber as large as five Old Earth cathedrals stacked one on top of the other, criss-crossed by ladders and pipes and startlingly well-lit — a brilliant contrast to the upper levels. Its walls are orange and thickly-veined. The air is full of the rumbling of machinery and echoing explosions. Huge ROTH artefacts, inactive for the most part, cling to the walls and ceiling; some are mounted like stalagmites on the 'floor', around which cluster the refineries brought Down a piece at a time by human settlers. Green-clad miners swarm like ants along the walls and walkways, issuing from the myriad tunnels that lead deeper into the earth.

"How many people work here?" I asked, left almost breathless by the sheer scale of the chamber. Too large to be fully comprehended in even a series of glances, it provoked a feeling of vertigo so powerful as to dull the mind.

"On this level, something like six thousand; most of them in side-cuts rather than the actual core. Your brother was one of them, for a while."

I shook my head. The figure didn't make sense. It was larger than the one I'd been given earlier for the

population of the entire mine, and there were still four more levels to go. But I chose not to pursue the matter then and there; I supposed that I'd misheard him through the constant noise echoing in the chamber.

I tried to imagine Martin working here, and failed. We had spoken briefly before his departure for the mines, but he had said nothing about intending to seek employment. Just a holiday, he had said, to satisfy his curiosity. I wondered what had happened to change his mind.

The lift ended halfway down the chamber.

We stopped there to procure water bottles, to exchange a handful of words with a taciturn attendant, and to admire the view. Huge ore-lifters floated past us — up, full; down, empty. Carnarvon informed me that protocol forbade us taking such a direct route to the base of the third level. Between the midway point of the third level and its rock floor were only ladders.

"Nothing else can truly do this place justice," he said, and I believed him.

By then I had an inkling that the Grand Tour was far more than a quick circuit of faces and off-cuts — hence Carnarvon's initial reluctance to take me. I was glad that I had noone waiting for me above ground.

It took us three hours to reach the base of the chamber and the first of many way-stations. We rested there for an hour or so, meeting a few of the deeper miners — called 'moles' — who were heading Upwards for a stint in the refineries and, ultimately, the surface. They were uniformly dirty, but only two thirds were pale-skinned. The rest were deeply tanned, which I found strange. All shared a peculiar dullness of stare, a strain of world-weariness which I later learned was called "miner's eyes". As though nothing more could surprise them, they regarded the world with patient, cynical scepticism.

I asked them about my brother, but received only quizzical stares in reply.

"Tourist," explained Carnarvon patiently. Some laughed openly; others touched my shoulder in sadness, and went to sit elsewhere.

"Why is everyone so . . . ?" I struggled for the word, but couldn't find it.

"Unconcerned?" suggested Carnarvon, a wry smile twisting his rubbery features. "If they are, it's because they know something you don't."

"Which is?"

"Don't ask now. You'll —"

"I know, I know. I'll find out later."

His smile broadened. "Exactly."

When we had rested, Carnarvon showed me some of the machinery that fills the third level. The purpose of the ancient ROTH mechanisms eluded me then, just as it has eluded human researchers for one full century.

Then it was time to enter the Shaft, the central column that plummets downwards through the four remaining levels. The cage was three times as large as the lift by which we had previously descended. Low benches lined two of the walls.

A crowd of miners spilled from the cage, dressed in unfamiliar white uniforms. They stared at us, but said nothing. When they had gone, Carnarvon turned to face me.

"The journey really begins here," he said, on the threshold of the cage. "If you want to turn back, it's not too late."

I shook my head. "I need to know what happened to Martin."

"Why?" He seemed genuinely unable to understand.

"Because he was important to me," I said. "Am I in danger?"

"Yes." His honesty was both dismaying and thrilling. "Everyone who enters the mines is at risk — and the deeper, the more so."

It was my turn to ask: "Why?"

But Carnarvon, waving me inside, refused to answer.

He stood silently by my side as the cage fell, not meeting my stare. Five minutes passed without a word spoken by either of us. If Carnarvon didn't want to talk, I wasn't going to make him.

Then, after fifteen minutes, the floor lurched, and I felt momentarily light-headed. Only then did Carnarvon speak, as though we had passed some unannounced barrier.

"The last time I passed this way was twelve years ago — heading Up from the fifth level, swearing that I would never come back." He took off his hardhat and slicked back his wiry, grey hair. "But part of me always knew I would, one day. And the same part knows that there's no going back this time. You only get out once. If you return, the mines have you forever."

I studied him closely. If this was a confession, then I failed to comprehend it. "Caught?" I asked, using his own word.

He laughed softly. "Well and truly. I hate this place, but I love it too. And the people that work here, mad bastards that we are."

His attention wandered back to his own thoughts. Reluctant to let the silence claim us again, I asked him a question that had been troubling me for some time.

"Why are we the only ones going Down?"

Carnarvon laughed again. "You noticed? Good. If you can answer that question, my friend, you'll be one step closer to grasping the truth about the mines."

And he would speak no more until the cage bumped to a halt and we stumbled from it.

Four

Imagine a grey plain at midnight, rippled in a series of low, undulating hills and valleys. The plain is in complete darkness, except for an area as large as a small town illuminated by powerful, white spotlights. In this lighted area sits an open-face mine, hacked into a hillside like a weeping sore. It is so dark in this place that nothing else can be seen: no stars, no horizon; just one patch of brilliant light and a slender line rising upwards into blackness. Now imagine the plain buried four thousand metres underground in a chamber so large that the walls and ceiling are invisible. This is the fourth level.

A faceless technician handed me a pressure-suit. A clumsy outfit of rubber and carbon-fibres, it stank of sweat and grease, as though worn by thousands of people in its lifetime. Puzzled, I followed Carnarvon's lead and shrugged into it, leaving my outer garments in a locker. I felt oddly light, and wondered if the air had a higher oxygen content than I was accustomed to. Carnarvon led me to an airlock and cycled the pair of us through.

"Poisonous atmosphere," he said via the suit radio, explaining the suits if not the sight that lay before me. I watched as cranes swung and powerful vehicles unloaded their burdens beneath the spotlights. The miners swarming across the face looked like dark animals in their grey suits — hence, I supposed, the nickname 'moles'.

"What are they mining for?" I asked.

"Here, iron ore," replied Carnarvon. "There are other faces nearby cut for strontium and uranium."

I hunted for a reference point, some means of guessing the size of the space around me, but failed. "How big is this level?" I asked, admitting defeat.

"Bigger than you think, I promise you."

We headed through the gloom towards a row of huts, where Carnarvon introduced himself to the level supervisor, a portly man called Stolle whose suit resembled a blowfish with stumpy arms and legs. Still dazzled by the strangeness of the fourth level, I was content to let them do the talking.

"I remember you," said Stolle to Carnarvon, squinting through his plastic visor. His voice was liquid with static. "Two years ago — three, maybe? — you worked here for a while."

"Twelve," corrected Carnarvon.

"Christ." Stolle winked at me dryly, as though sharing a joke I failed to understand. "Time flies down here."

"Any news of the Director?" asked Carnarvon.

"It's out there," said the Supervisor, shrugging. "Definitely out there. We've lost a few on this level, but not many. Usual story. That, and the rumours of an eighth level, are about the only things we can depend on down here."

He invited us to join him for a drink, but Carnarvon explained that we were tired. This wasn't a lie, as far as I was concerned; my watch told me that eight hours had passed since my arrival at the mines, and my eyes were thick with fatigue. So Carnarvon made excuses, and we bunked down in a crowded dormitory wing with a dozen off-duty moles, clipped by airhoses to a communal tank, our radios silenced.

Thus I spent my first night in the mines of Barnath: in a rubber suit, breathing air that stank of *human*, wondering what the hell I was doing. And when I dreamed, it was of Martin walking ahead of me along a dark, stone tunnel, forever out of reach.

A dull explosion woke me an unknown time later. When we stumbled out of the wing, a new hole had been added to the scarred hillside. The ever-present glare of the spotlights seemed brighter and the ceaseless activity of the open-face mine more feverish than before.

We dined on pre-processed slop in one of the few pressurised compartments of that level. The moles around us eyed us curiously, and a moment or two passed before I realised what it was that distinguished us from them. It was, quite simply, that we were talking. On the fourth level, where communication is only practical via intersuit radio, casual conversation is discouraged. Even in the mess-hall.

"How much further?" I asked Carnarvon, regardless. The night's sleep had left me irritable, rather than refreshed. I was impatient to make some progress on my quest to find Martin.

"Forever and a day, as they say." He glanced at me in amusement. "You still think you'll be leaving here in a hurry?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because these are the mines of Barnath, my friend. They're not like anywhere else. Where you come from, everything's the same — it never changes, it'll be there tomorrow, forever. But here . . . if the Director doesn't get you, then you're caught anyway."

I put down my spoon, appetite forgotten. There was a new strength in Carnarvon's eyes that bothered me, left me feeling like an intruder, unwanted. His stare was almost a challenge, defying me to unravel the riddle of the mines on my own.

"Who is the Director?" I asked, pacing my words deliberately.

Perhaps he saw the growing frustration in my eyes, and the anger that lurked behind it. Or he too was tired of his own guessing-game. Either way, he also put down his spoon and finally began to explain, after a fashion.

"The Director lives in the mines," he said. "Or else it's an integral part of them. Either. We don't know much about it, except that it can go anywhere, any time it wants to. We don't even know where it goes between appearances — I've never heard of it being seen topside — but we always know when it's been."

"It?" I asked. "I thought you were talking about someone in particular. Your superior, perhaps."

"No. One of the early explorers coined the name, for whatever reason, and it's as good as any other."

He paused, watching me closely, waiting for a response.

"So what is it? A machine?"

"That's certainly possible. The mines aren't human-built. The ROTH made them; the ROTH left them here for us to plunder. Maybe they switched on some sort of security system before they left, and the Director is its enforcer." He shrugged. "But few people really believe it's an alien artefact."

"Then *someone* must know about it, surely?"

"Just think for a second, before you jump to conclusions. It should be obvious. What if the ROTH *didn't* leave? What if they're still in here, somewhere?"

I stared at him. "Are you suggesting that the Director is an alien?"

"That's the most popular explanation. More than one ROTH, perhaps. No-one's seen it and lived. All we know is that it takes people working in the mines — usually the best, most talented. Those it comes for and doesn't take, it kills."

"You're kidding."

Carnarvon shook his head gravely. "It's no joke down here. Deeper still, it's positively morbid. Live in the mines for a while and the fact starts to get to you. You never know if it'll come for you, or if you'll be taken when it does."

"I never heard any of this before."

"Of course not. Word doesn't get out because hardly anyone who comes this deep leaves again. Those few who do leave hang around the surface for a while, and then go back Down. The Director is all part of the lure and the trap of Barnath, you see. No-one knows *where* it takes the ones it doesn't kill." He picked up his spoon and attacked his breakfast viciously. "That's why I'm here. The mystery has me hooked."

"And me? Why am I here?"

"To find your brother, of course."

"Did the Director take *him*?"

Carnarvon paused between mouthfuls. "If you meet it, you can ask it yourself."

I pushed my bowl aside and sealed my suit.

"Going somewhere?" asked Carnarvon, amused.

"Outside," I said. "I need to think."

I shouldered my way through a crowd of miners and headed out into the darkness. The face of the cut was hidden behind a low hill; the only light came from reflected haze and a crooked line of beacons

strung across the grey-green dust that served for a floor on the fourth level.

I squatted on my haunches and regarded the empty view for a long while. It was like sitting on the face of a starless moon. I didn't hear Carnarvon approach.

"Time to go," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Coming?"

I raised my head wearily.

"You say Martin disappeared from the next level?"

"Yes, the fifth. That's what the records said, anyway."

"Then I'm coming. At least that far."

Even through the visor I could see his sceptical smile, curled like a question-mark as though he doubted my motives.

"He's alive," I insisted. "I can feel him."

"If you say so."

"All I want to do is find him and take him home. Is that so difficult?"

Carnarvon helped me to my feet, and we trudged back to the Shaft building. I expected to don our old clothes, but we didn't.

"Pressure suits from here on," he explained, as we waited for the cage to reach our level. "Just in case."

The cage rattled to a halt and the doors opened. I regarded the interior with foreboding. Carnarvon didn't hesitate, however, so I followed reluctantly.

The cage dropped downwards. Again I felt that strange sensation of giddiness half-way, but this time my companion chose to remain silent for the rest of the journey, lost in thought.

Five

I was definitely lighter when I stepped from the cage. The disembarkation bay was an enormous room, sterile-white and brilliantly lit. Behind me, six identical airlocks opened into the wall; we had entered the chamber via the second from the right. A large section of the floor was transparent, and Carnarvon gestured that I should look down through it.

It took me a minute or so to find a sense of perspective. The view was surreal. Great blue sheets of energy slashed and hacked at something I couldn't quite identify. A hill, I thought at first; then a mountain. It wasn't until I realised that the dots drifting over the surface of the object were ore-lifters — themselves so huge they made men look like specks — that I guessed the incredible truth.

Trapped within the mines, orbiting slowly beneath my feet, was an entire planet.

"That's impossible," I breathed, as bolts of stupendous energy sheared free continent-sized chunks of rock. My vantage point was high — at least thirty thousand metres — and the view spectacular.

"I know," said Carnarvon. "But we're mining it anyway. And it's not that large, really — barely the size of Mars. Completely dead, of course, and metal-rich. It'll keep the mines active for a century or two at least."

My gaze wandered from the planet, across the roof of the incomprehensible chamber. Giant habitats clung to the naked rock of the "roof" like shellfish, upside down. Huge docking grapnels awaited ore-lifters ferrying material from the scarred surface below. Everywhere I looked were men and women in white pressure-suits, crawling like flies over an unimaginable carcass.

"How many?" I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Two and a half million," replied Carnarvon, and I swallowed. I had in mind the unofficial government estimate of five thousand, which now seemed ludicrous in the face of what I was seeing.

"Surely someone must have noticed?"

"To date, no-one has." Carnarvon unsealed his suit, crooking the helmet over his forearm like an old-timer. "As I said, people this deep rarely leave."

"But still, they had to come from *somewhere* —"

"Exactly. A few, like your brother, come from the surface, drifting down through the levels over the years, but that still leaves us quite a large number short of the real population of the mine."

"Where, then?" I had a vision of the miners raising families, which I immediately discredited. Only an idiot would have children in a place like this.

"We may never know the full answer to that question," Carnarvon said. "Some miners come Up from the deeper levels without ever having gone Down in the first place."

I studied him suspiciously, wondering if he was playing me for a fool. He wasn't. He was deadly serious.

But he had to be lying.

I too shucked my helmet and breathed the air of the fifth level. It tasted faintly electric, and of the population that had breathed it before me. I could still feel the weight of rock around me, defying the view through the window at my feet. A planet *within* a planet . . . ?

I turned away from the sight. It was too much.

"Come on," said Carnarvon. "We have to log ourselves in." He took my arm and led me along the bay, towards a corridor. The narrow passageway ended in a desk.

A clerk behind a computer terminal greeted us patiently. "Names?" he asked.

Carnarvon gave him mine and added, "Skimmer," when asked for my profession. The ease with which my identity had been redefined did not escape me: from quester to tourist to skimmer in less than two days. Had something similar happened to Martin? The clerk handed me a white, plastic ID card, which I

absently tucked into a ziplock pouch.

Then it was Carnarvon's turn. The clerk accepted the title, "Manager," with little sign of being impressed.

"When?" he asked, tapping at the keyboard.

"'45 to '55."

"We had your predecessor through here last year," said the clerk. "He lasted a month."

"Taken?"

"Killed." The clerk handed him a red card which Carnarvon stuck to the front of his suit. "You have a fortnight's grace, you and your friend, after which you'll have to find work."

"Of course," said Carnarvon, not at all fazed by the apparent insubordination. "Thank you."

He commandeered an electric cart and drove me deeper into the habitat. Occasionally we passed a circular window in the floor, reminding me that beneath my feet lay not the solid rock my apparent weight suggested, but empty space and then something far more remarkable.

"You'll probably be asking yourself the same questions I asked when I came here." Carnarvon smiled at me sympathetically as he drove. "I was a fusion technician from Earth, so the first thing I said when I looked out that window was, 'How do you pay your fuel bill?'" He chuckled self-depreciatingly. "It wasn't until two years later that I learned where the energy actually comes from."

"And where does it?" I croaked.

"Deeper still," he said. "The next level powers the entire mine. The ROTH were far more advanced than we are. All the equipment in this chamber and the sixth were just lying around, waiting to be used. So we used it. We didn't have to understand how it worked."

Memory prompted me to ask: "I thought there were seven levels?"

"There are," he said, but I could draw him no further on the issue of the last. Instead, he described life in the fifth: the way most of the mining on the planet is tele-operated; how the miners spend nearly all of their time in the ceiling habitats, only venturing to the surface to deal with circumstances that cannot be handled by automatics or remotes. The energy-lances are directed from a cluster of habitats in a segment of the level that has been designated North, coinciding with the magnetic field of the planet.

It was there, I learned, Martin had worked. When I asked to be taken there first, Carnarvon smiled grimly.

"You haven't grasped the scale yet, have you? It'll take at least three days to get there by cart; one if we can requisition a shuttle."

The corridor widened, became a busy thoroughfare. Miners in clean uniforms walked or drove by on unknown errands, and I watched them in silence, trying to remember what the surface — 'home,' I reminded myself — looked like. But I couldn't. It was too far away.

Carnarvon pulled us to a halt outside a small door.

"Clothes, food, and rest," he said. "And then we keep going."

I nodded numbly, and let myself be led inside.

Standard uniform on the fifth level is a white, cotton one-piece, fitted with numerous pockets and pouches. The outfits are comfortably simple — almost spartan. The food, however, is an order of magnitude better than that of the previous level, being the product of hydroponic gardens scattered across the 'roof'.

"The ROTH left them, too," said Carnarvon as we ate our way through real vegetables and soy-base steak.

"And the habitats?"

"Yes." Carnarvon smiled wryly. "They were more like us than we give them credit for, most of the time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everyone down here regards the Director as almost god-like," he said, "when it's probably just a ROTH that eats the same food as us, and stands only a little taller."

I finished my meal in silence, bothered by that thought. I put myself in the shoes of those first colonists, stumbling upon this tremendous cavern and its contents. What had they imagined they had found? And why hadn't research teams descended upon the mines from all corners of the inhabited galaxy?

I knew better than to ask for answers to these questions. All I could do was wait until the truth became clear on its own, however long that took.

When we had finished our meal, Carnarvon drove us to a transport dock, where we caught a shuttle halfway to the Northern quadrant. The stubby craft swooped low over the planet below, granting me an unequalled view of the mining operations taking place. From this angle, the sprawl of habitats above resembled a colony of small, white mushrooms suspended from a distant ceiling — or a world of sealed cities, turned inside-out.

As we left the shuttle, a party of miners came towards us through the airlock umbilical. One of them called for my attention as he approached.

"Cavell, you old bastard, where've you been? It's been ages, and you still owe me for Carole."

"I'm sorry," I said, staring at him. He was short, grizzled, and completely unfamiliar. "You must be thinking of my brother. We look the same."

"No," he said. "I remember you. We worked —"

One of his companions nudged him in the ribs.

"Oh, right," he said. "You're on your way Down." He reached out for my hand and shook it. "The name's Donahue, anyway. I guess I'll meet you later."

He entered the shuttle with his workmates. The doors closed on his smiling face, shutting out my confusion.

"What the hell?"

"It happens," said Carnarvon. "You'll get used to this sort of thing."

"I don't *want* to get used to it." Mental exhaustion — too many riddles in too short a time — was taking its toll. "I just want to find out what happened to Martin and get out of here."

"A little more patience." Carnarvon smiled: a mixture of amusement and sympathy. "Not far now."

We took another cart the rest of the way, through a network of evacuated tunnels that criss-crosses the roof of the fifth chamber. Like insects, we crawled for seven hours along this hollow web, inch by strange inch, while the world-within-a-world turned implacably below us.

Above the planet's North pole, vast forces crackle through the dust-filled vacuum. Enormous bolts of static electricity split the nether sky. The habitats echo with the thunder of mighty energies. Martin's old home, amidst all of this, trembles on the edge between stone and fire — just as many homes did, and still do, on this level.

A security officer showed us Martin's file. It stated that he had worked in the habitat for no less than two years.

"There must be some mistake," I said. "He's only been missing for six weeks."

She handed me a photo. "Is that him?"

I looked carefully. The man in the hologram was older than I remembered, but definitely Martin.

"Yes, it is," I admitted, grudgingly. "But how do you explain — ?"

"We don't," she said. "We just accept."

Carnarvon took the file from her, winking. "Come on," he said to me. "Let's go see where he was taken."

I followed him out of the administration building, hating the curl of amusement I saw in his profile. With the end of my quest in sight, the last thing I wanted to hear was more nonsense.

"This is crazy," I stated.

"Sure," he agreed pleasantly. "But blame the ROTH if you have to blame someone." We headed to a nearby building, where the files told us Martin had lived.

"He left his room at midnight," read Carnarvon. "Going to meet a lover, apparently."

We followed a series of corridors, all equally unremarkable, until Carnarvon brought me to a sudden

halt.

"The cameras tracked him as far as here, then lost him."

I looked around. The corridor was empty and featureless. There was no sign that anybody had passed this way at all, let alone died here.

"What else does the file say?" I asked, staring at the blank, polished floor.

"Not much. Martin turned a corner, walked four steps and vanished. The general consensus is that the Director took him."

"Where?"

"No-one knows." Carnarvon put a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

I shrugged his hand away. "I don't believe you're telling me everything."

"Of course not. But I don't know everything, do I?"

"Bullshit." His flippancy annoyed me, fuelled my growing frustration. "This has been one long smokescreen right from the beginning. You told me I'd understand when I saw the fifth level. Well, I'm here and I've seen it but I still don't understand. Why can't you just tell me?"

"I —"

"My brother's disappeared, for God's sake!"

"Look around you. Can *you* understand what's going on here? No-one can. Your brother was taken in full view of a security camera and it saw nothing. Four steps — zap — gone. Where? If I knew I'd tell you, I swear. We lose something like three hundred people a year under similar circumstances, and nearly triple that many are killed —"

"So why doesn't somebody do something?"

"Such as? What do you suggest? This has been happening for one hundred years; if something could have been done, we would have done it already."

"So close the mines."

"We can't. They're too productive. And the odds of the Director striking are statistically insignificant, anyway. You've more chance of dying on the surface."

I felt caged in, and wanted to strike something. "You're lying."

"Not at all —"

"You think you can palm me off with false records and insanities —"

"If you'll just calm down —"

"No! I refuse to believe that Martin is dead. He's down here somewhere and I'm going to find him."

I turned on my heel and angrily walked away.

"How?" Carnarvon called after me. "You're not the first to have tried, you know!"

I ignored him. Grief, anger and a sense of betrayal fought for control of my mind, clouding my thoughts and judgement. I knew that Martin was alive somewhere; I could feel it in my bones. I wasn't going to let the matter go so easily. Martin would have done the same for me, I was sure, had our roles been reversed.

I wandered the corridors, losing myself in the maze of the habitat, not caring if Carnarvon followed. Ten minutes passed before I regained my senses and realised that I was alone. When I did, I set out to begin my own investigation.

I was allocated a room near his and started asking questions.

No-one could give me hard facts about my brother. Few people remembered him, as though years had passed since his disappearance. One even went so far as to suggest that it *had* been years, but I dismissed her as a liar, part of the conspiracy keeping me from the truth, even though she insisted that she had been his lover.

My two weeks of grace passed quickly and fruitlessly, spent for the most part in mess-halls and recreation facilities, always asking questions. The citizens of the fifth level, although sympathetic, were victims of the same passivity to fate espoused by the security officer who had shown me Martin's file. I despaired of ever learning the truth, but for the wrong reasons: I wondered what Martin had done to warrant such a thorough white-wash of his sudden departure.

And always, everywhere I looked, was the strangeness of the mines, the sheer improbability of it all, from the planet below to the habitats above. I felt overwhelmed by odd details gleaned from the people I interviewed: the way power was beamed by maser from the south "pole" rather than sent along cables; the slag-pit, an apparently bottomless hole in the "ceiling" that was used to dispose of waste materials; the odd discrepancy between the mass of minerals extracted from the planet and that which arrived on the surface of Barnath, the latter being roughly one-sixth of the former; and the cluster of ROTH artefacts on the planet itself, which, although active, seemed to serve no other function than to send bright sparks of ball lightning hurtling around the sundered crust. But I refused to submit to the disorientation; I vowed that I would remain undistracted until I knew the truth. My life on the surface was waiting. I had to find Martin and bring him back, no matter how long it took.

So great was my blindness that I disregarded what was staring me in the face: that, in order to comprehend what had happened to Martin, I would first have to comprehend the Mines themselves, a task for which I was both physically and mentally unprepared.

It wasn't until I met a man called Azimuth, a well-tanned mole from the sixth level, that I learned what fate was really awaiting me.

I happened across him in a bar on the North-east quadrant of the fifth level — a dirty man, dressed in his stained undersuit from further Up. He recognised my face, and came to join me at my table.

"I remember you," he said. "You came here looking for your brother, right?"

"That's right. Do you know anything about — ?"

He laughed, anticipating my question. "No, no. I never met him. But I heard about you on the news circuits topside, before I came here."

I frowned. "When was that?"

"Well, let me see, now. I came here five years ago, and I'd heard the story six months before that. Five and a half years, then. Sure, that'd be about right."

I must have gaped at his words, for he laughed again at my confusion.

"You haven't noticed yet?" he asked. "Time is all fucked up down here. You arrived, what . . . ?"

"Fourteen days ago," I forced out.

"And I'm in my sixth year, with the Director's grace. Topside, it could've been centuries. You never know how long until you look."

Azimuth didn't stop there, but I hardly heard what he said. According to Martin's records, he had worked in the Mines for two years — a fact I had initially dismissed as ridiculous. If time really was askew deep in the mines — a possibility I could not discredit, given the other wonders I had already witnessed — then the obstacles facing me were greater than I had imagined. But there was still hope.

I forced myself out of my daze. "The newscast," I said. "What did it say?"

Azimuth hesitated. "You sure you want to know?"

I gripped him firmly on the arm. "Tell me."

"All I remember is the headline: 'Brothers separated, then reunited by death.' Very tragic. I don't know whether that helps you, or makes things worse, but there you go. You wanted to hear it."

I gaped incredulously. Reunited, I echoed to myself, by *death*?

He obviously interpreted my stunned silence as a sign of comprehension and barrelled upwards from his seat, chuckling deep in his belly. "Be seein' you, maybe."

When he had gone, I regarded my drink with despair, thinking dull, slow thoughts. The truth was like a heavy weight — the weight of miles of solid earth — settling upon my shoulders.

When my glass was empty, I wandered "home", alone.

That evening, I tracked down Carnarvon. He was still in the Northern habitat, easily reached by internal vidcom.

"I've been waiting for you to call," he said. "I knew you would."

I hesitated for a moment, balanced on the edge of total acceptance. When the words eventually came, it didn't sound like me speaking.

"Who did *you* lose?"

"My wife." His voice was even; his eyes reflected the sympathy I offered, unwanted. "It took me a month to realise I'd never find her by looking. When I tried to escape back to Earth, I ended up on Barnath, where I decided to stay. For all the years I've been Manager, I've been waiting for someone like you to bring me back."

"And here we are."

"Yes. Here we are. Looking without finding again."

The silence claimed us again. I had only one question left.

"Do you want to come with me?"

"Sure." He smiled. "The Grand Tour isn't over yet."

We met the next day and logged out of the fifth level. The Shaft accepted our pressure-suited bodies indifferently, and we dropped like stones into the depths of an impossible earth.

Six

The sixth level opens onto the fiery face of a sun.

Our period of grace had expired. I found work as an energy-scoop operator, and met the man called Donahue who had greeted me in the embarkation bay of the fifth level. He didn't remember me, of course, but we quickly became friends. He helped me adjust to the artificial gravity of B Station and taught me everything I needed to learn about my new job. He also introduced me to his sister, Carole. It wasn't long before my tan was as deep as theirs, and my acceptance of the impossible almost as automatic.

The sixth level does that to you. It overwhelms, it terrifies, it can even drive a person mad. But those who make it this far and stay for any length of time tend to have been a little crazy in the first place.

Carnarvon's time as surface Manager served him in good stead, even though the post was irrelevant to the deeper levels. He worked in administration, somewhere in the heart of the central gravity-platform. We met once a week to discuss our progress.

Progress where? It didn't matter. We were both marking time before the inevitable.

Then, six months after Carnarvon and I had entered the mines, he didn't show for our weekly meeting. I dug around for information and eventually learned that the Director had come for him during the week. His body was never found.

I waited a month before moving on. My link with the surface had been severed; there was no point

staying any longer than I had to. As though I had oscillated until then from a stretched rubber band, I suddenly found myself cut free. I started to fall.

The level supervisor was sympathetic.

There was only one way left to go, at the very end.

Seven

The cage opens and I float into a transparent sphere nearly one hundred metres across fixed to the base of the Shaft like a bubble on a straw. There is no-one present to watch or to censure me as I drift through the zero gravity, press my face against the surface of the bubble and stare outwards.

My eyes adjust eventually. Instead of darkness outside the bubble, I see stars.

Stars . . .

The Shaft ends here. There is no Downward path any more — only Up, and Up, and Up. Forever.

There appears to be no way to leave the bubble, but part of me wonders what would happen if I could. Could I travel through space and re-enter the mines from above, thus completing a strange loop of navigation?

Even here, it seems, there are no answers. There are only questions — and me, staring ape-like at the stars. What could be stranger than this? Like the first colonists, I have stepped into the alien Mines of Barnath and found everything I didn't expect: space beyond comprehension, time in disarray, resources without end, and . . .

I suddenly realise what *else* the first colonists found, what prevented word from spreading across the galaxy, and what halted the scientific jihad aimed like an arrow at the heart of the mines. Only one discovery could have been sufficient.

People. People have always been here, wandering twisted loops through time, crossing and recrossing, occasionally colliding. They greeted the first explorers of the deeper levels, and integrated them seamlessly into a pre-existing society. Later arrivals were likewise assimilated, lured by mysteries and wonders in abundance, by a curiosity so great that not even the threat of death deterred them.

Whether the mines themselves are from the future or from the distant past, or whether they exist entirely beyond time, doesn't matter. Nothing here is certain, except that humanity has moved in and has therefore been here forever, entangled in some unknowable cosmic scheme.

Maybe the ROTH never existed at all. Even the Director might be human, with a purpose of his own.

My skin crawls, as though across an incomprehensible distance I am being watched.

On the heels of that thought comes an impatience, a need to move — in any direction. Time is passing around me like the heavy surges of a deep sea. A minute here might be a million hours on the surface, for all I know; or a heartbeat a whole lifetime. I want to travel, to be taken further. *Now.*

But the Director will come, I remind myself, only when it comes. Not before. Of that I am reasonably certain, if nothing else.

My ghostly reflection stares back at me with Martin's face — the face of my other half, my twin.

A not-so-distant light in the alien starscape moves like a tear down the face of my reflection, and I sense that he is waiting for me, wherever he is.

Originally appeared in *Eidolon* Magazine, Issue 16, February 1995.

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