

The Dome on the Rock

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The first sink-hole appeared around three years after the outside weather changed. Its appearance was entirely unexpected, and claimed six food technicians as their field suddenly vanished during the harvest season. The small community struggled to understand what it was that had happened; mourning for those that were lost, as well as the pending food shortages they would face.

The hole was over twenty metres wide, and over thirty deep. It appeared on the east side of the habitation dome, a steel and glass hemisphere a kilometre across that protected the small community from the hazardous environment outside. No-one could exactly remember who had originally built the dome, that story had become lost over the centuries with only a few garbled fragments of it surviving. All they knew was that it was their home, and that without it, they could not survive.

Outside the dome was death. A poisoned wasteland that was the legacy of a previous generation, who had been so caught up in conflict that mutual destruction was the ultimate result. What they had been fighting over was long forgotten, but the results of that struggle were something that the dome's population were faced with every time a crack appeared in the glass, or the air filtration system broke down.

Three years previously, the howling winds and dry dust that had rattled against the glass of the dome for as long as anyone could remember had suddenly stopped. The deafening silence had terrified every member of the community - even the more scientific members who were versed in the skills required to keep the dome operational. After several hours of silence it grew dark, and a new sound began to reverberate through the massive structure. Slowly at first, as if unsure of itself, came the sound of water hitting glass. It then became louder, as more and more water fell from the tortured sky above, and rattled against the glass of the dome. Eventually, the torrent of water became such that individual raindrops could no longer be heard, the sound becoming one long white noise.

Over time, this too faded in the minds of those within the dome. It became the norm, a comforting background noise that assured them that the dome, their protector, was there - shielding them from the elements. Life went back to normal, the processes of working the land, maintaining the dome and staying alive continued as before. The changes outside the dome were accepted, discussed and then ignored ... until now.

Using ropes, volunteers were lowered carefully into the hole that had appeared. Testing the sides and examining at the strata as it passed, they gradually descended to bottom - flash-lights in hand. It took them no more than a few minutes to realise that the ground they were standing on was solid. There were no caves, no passages, no obvious reason for the event that had claimed six of their number. Climbing back out, they reported their findings, the hole was fenced off, and life returned to normal once more.

It was almost a fortnight later that the discovery was made. Some children had climbed over the fence, despite their parents warnings, in order to look into the pit that had opened within their home. Moving carefully towards the edge, they looked down - expecting to see the earthen floor that they had heard the adults speak of.

Instead, they saw water. Clear unpolluted water, that seemed to be flowing across the base of the sink-hole.

Torn between telling their parents and facing possible punishment, or keeping quiet and something even worse happening to their community, they eventually decided to reveal their findings. Although few believed them at first, eventually their insistence was enough that a small group was assembled to confirm their findings. Surprise and shock greeted their confirmation that the children had been correct, there was water at the bottom of the hole, and it was flowing.

A few days later, the whole community gathered as samples of the water were taken and tested. When the ancient machinery revealed that the water was not tainted with the poisons so prevalent in the outside world, a stunned silence fell over them all. A silence that was marred by the sudden grinding crash that came from the opposite side of the dome. As they had all stood around the first sink-hole, another had opened. This time there was no immediate loss of life, but their main storehouse was gone - and with it the supplies they would need to make it through the approaching cold season.

As before, volunteers approached the hole - expecting to find it the same as the last. This time, however, it was different. The hole was only ten metres across, and at the bottom the water that had appeared in the first hole could already be seen - flowing across from east to west. The sides of the hole were concrete, and metal rungs could be seen running down the surface on the far side, before stopping alongside a small ledge situated below a door sized metal hatch.

It took them several days to reach a decision. What had started as a seemingly natural disaster had revealed to them something entirely unexpected. The dome that had been their home, and protected them from the elements, had been hiding a secret. As with the sink-holes, volunteers were found to travel down the ladder to the hatch - still attached to the surface with a rope as before. When at last they managed to open the hatch, the ropes were untied, the flash-lights were switched on, and they disappeared into the darkness beyond.

The discoveries they made shocked all the members of the small group. Beyond the metal door was a labyrinth of passages, low and dark, with conduit running along both walls. The volunteers had explored as far as they dared in multiple directions but had encountered no-one. They passed a few of the metal hatches, and upon opening them discovered nothing but hard packed earth beyond. This information was digested, and a decision was reached - a better equipped group would be sent to map out the tunnels, and discover exactly how far they ran.

The expedition, for that was what it was, left at first light the next morning - following the tunnel in a westerly direction. Not that the daylight penetrated the tunnels, their flash-lights and spare power packs would need to sustain them for as long as they were down there. They roughly measured the distance they had travelled, stopping as they realised they were going beyond the edge of the dome. Dispatching a member of their party back to report, they pressed on, and around three kilometers later discovered a stairwell leading down. Upon descending, they discovered they could go down no further due to the water that blocked their way - given they had travelled in a straight line they reasoned that it was the same water

that could be seen in each of the sink-holes back within the dome. Once more a messenger was despatched, and small group continued to follow the corridor.

It took them a further six kilometres, and in a few places they had to negotiate cave-ins, but eventually they arrived at another door. Unlike the others, this was of heavy construction - and it took all of them working together to swing it open. The space beyond was huge, they knew that instinctively from the way it seemed to suck the sounds they made away from them. Carefully stepping through, their flash-lights revealed an underground room almost the size of the dome they had so recently left. Sticking together, as though fearful of what they might find, they gradually made their way across the massive space - carefully watching for anything unexpected.

Their fears seemed groundless, and as they continued to be left to their own devices the fear gradually left them and they began exploring the vast space in earnest. It did not take long for one of them to find something, and his cry of fear brought the others running. Against one wall was a control booth of some description. Inside, still sitting in the main control chair, were the mummified remains of its last occupant. One of them, less squeamish than the others, made his way across and looked at the remains. Taking a deep breath, he silently lifted the body from the chair and set it down to one side. Holding his flash-light high he shone it across the control panel, and to his surprise realised that one of the buttons was still lit - a dull green glow appearing from behind it.

Cautiously, he reached out and pressed the button. They all waited, but nothing happened. Suddenly, one of them realised that the chair itself appeared to be a pressure plate. An argument followed, but eventually they reached some sort of agreement. The same man who had stepped forward to remove the corpse gingerly sat down in the chair, and after taking a deep breath, pressed the button once more.

For those around him, nothing happened at all, and when he stood a few seconds later with his face pale and drawn they registered nothing but confusion. Gradually he reached the point where he felt he could speak, and slowly began to tell them everything that had been imparted to him by the ancient machinery. The group then left the cavern, and returned once more to the dome. This time their news caused even more fear and consternation within the small community who inhabited the dome. Most of the older members of the community refused to accept what they were being told, those younger and less set in their ways felt nothing but a deep despair well up within them.

Over the next few years the small community dwindled. A few still made their way along to the cavern, that the truths may be revealed to them directly, but most simply gave up on life. No more were children born, for what was the point? Knowing what they now did it was an ultimately fruitless action. Eventually, almost seventy years later, the last of their number made his way into the cavern for the last time, sat in the chair, and pressed the button once more. He was the last to do so for almost four thousand years, till now.

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Calvin Neil stared at the report again. Still not entirely convinced he had managed to relay all of the incredible information that had been imparted to him such a short time ago. Staring out across the green rolling grassland beyond the hatchway of his small landing craft, he could just make out the remains of the dome he had so recently learned of. The last bastion of a once glowing civilisation that had once covered this entire planet.

The story was incredible, they had managed to develop cures for almost every illness they encountered. Had found incredible new sources of energy, and had overcome almost every obstacle they had encountered. All but one, the destructiveness of their own nature. As the science advanced, so did the weaponry the governments had at their disposal. Eventually the inevitable happened, global warfare. Each government was prepared for such an eventuality and had constructed large underground bunkers to protect key parts of their society from the attacks.

As the dust settled, the future inhabitants of the dome had enacted their survival plan. Breaching the surface, robotic machinery had constructed six of these domes, removed all the irradiated soil down to the bedrock, and replaced it with clean earth which had been previously stored underground. The inhabitants of the bunker were split between the domes, allowing them to live in what passed for daylight on the remains of their shattered world.

As they set up their lives within the domes, stage two of the plan swung into action. Within the massive central chamber, work was fast progressing on a large interstellar vessel capable of carrying the survivors to another planet, carefully picked by top scientists before warfare had even begun. It would be a one way trip, but would allow them a new start on an untainted world. A chance to begin again.

As the project neared completion - plans were finalised to move all the occupants of the domes towards the central chamber, back along the kilometres of tunnels carved by the machines for just that purpose. All was going well, until disaster struck - a tremor, the origins of which were unknown, shook the land. One of the domes collapsed completely - forcing the survivors to seal it off or face the toxic atmosphere that had claimed its occupants. Another dome, the one the machinery had told Calvin about, suffered from the earth shifting violently and blocking their entrance to the tunnel systems. They were completely cut off from the other domes.

Frantic digging commenced, but was eventually abandoned, there was simply too much debris between the domes occupants and the tunnels they needed to reach. With the launch imminent, they resigned themselves to their fate. Sure enough, a day later, they felt a rumble through the earth and watched the flames of the crafts propulsion systems propel it through the murky atmosphere over their heads, till eventually it vanished from sight.

Over the centuries that followed, those who had survived held onto the hope that a rescue party would one day return, and continued to live in the dome as if that had been the plan all along. Eventually, life in the dome became the norm - the rescue plan and tunnels all but forgotten. Until the rains took away the earth that had so long blocked their view of the tunnel system carved by their ancestors centuries before.

Calvin looked out at the remains of the dome once more. What had happened here had so nearly happened on Earth in the twentieth century, the story of the last survivors on this planet could so easily have been a parallel of humanity's own. Turning his attention to the screen once more, he concluded his report:

"... planet is habitable, although does show higher than average traces of background radiation, but nothing out-with prescribed limits. Recommending for immediate colonisation.

Further notes:

No indigenous intelligent life ..."