

Long Dark

in the Monarch Mine

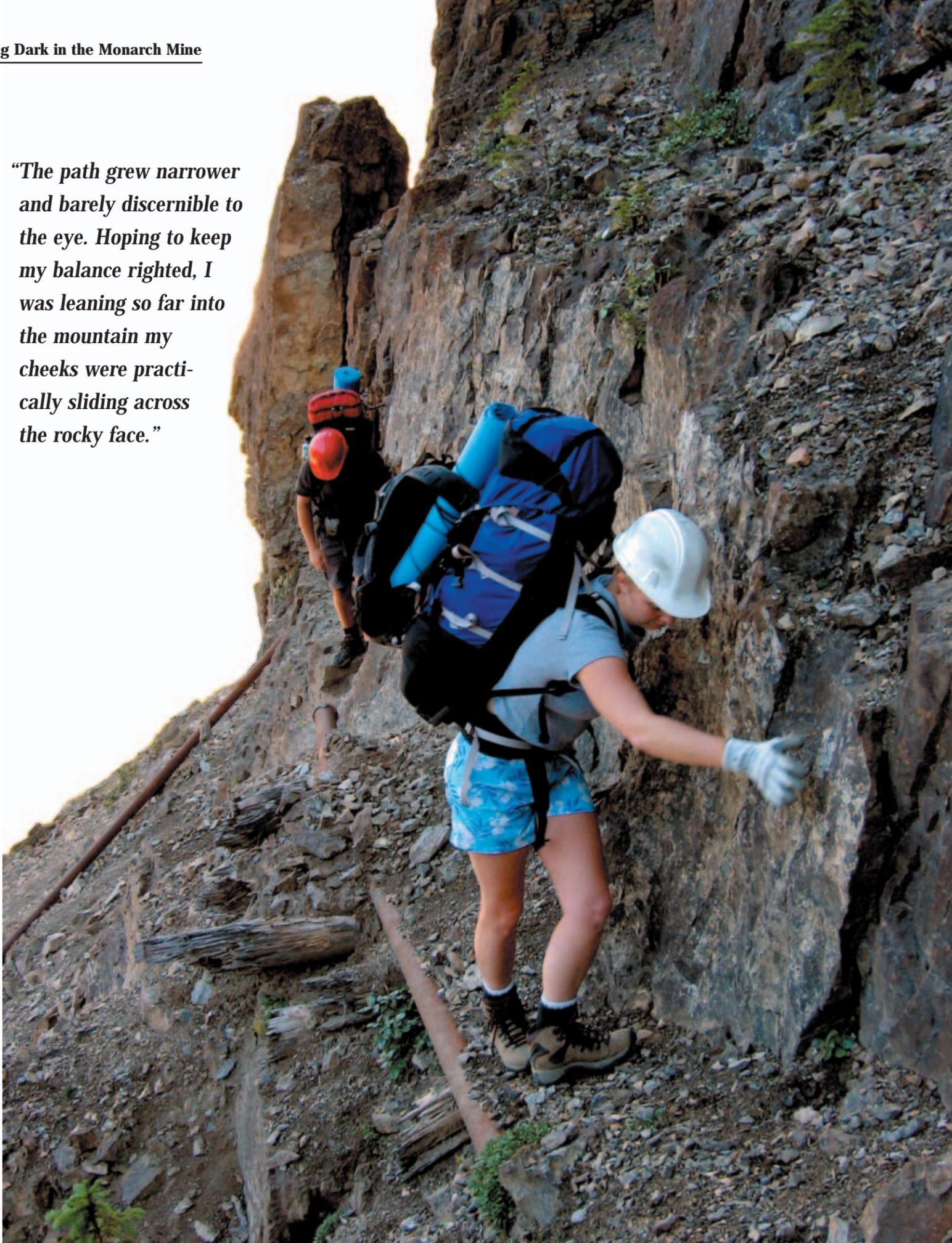
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Photos by Reduxzero
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I stood at the base of the mountain, craning my neck up to see the three tiny white 'sticks' in the rock face that marked the mine entrance. This time last year I had convinced myself I couldn't make the ascent, and dropped out at the beginning. The heavy pack needed for the planned overnight trip was going to make today's climb a lot more difficult, and any confidence I had in my abilities was quickly waning. But somehow, I had to do it, if only to prove to myself that I could.

Naos and Reduxzero were my allies on this trip, and they seemed unwilling to allow me to drop out this time. As we started off, I tried to share in their enthusiasm in order to allay my building apprehension. We crossed the highway and scrambled up a small slope to the base of the trail. The large ruck sack on my back was putting me off balance, and I quickly had to teach myself how to maintain my footing on the sliding rocks. I knew the precipitous ledge section far above us would certainly require cautious balance.

The scree proved difficult to maneuver across; footings that seemed quite stable at first frequently gave way; sending down mini avalanches of jagged rock. Thankfully, there was no one directly below me to receive the rocky cascade. With our heavy backpacks, we trudged along the tree line, pausing occasionally to rest. The closer we got to the area where the trail met the rock face, the more apprehensive I became. I knew we would have to snake along a ledge, hugging the rock, and my stomach cinched into knots at the thought.

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I have a fear of heights, and I had warned Naos and Redux that I was going to find this climb particularly challenging. I also knew, despite my fear, that I had a limitless amount of trust in the two of them, and they would be able to talk me through whatever conditions came up ahead.

The path grew narrower and barely discernible to the eye. Hoping to keep my balance righted, I was leaning so far into the mountain my cheeks were practically sliding across the rocky face. Three points of contact, I kept repeating in my mind, and with each step I looked for those points. The sick feeling in my stomach grew more intense each time a hand hold I was trusting crumbled in my grip. I quite literally closed my eyes and kissed the side of the mountain as a form of good luck; what could it possibly hurt?

Redux was ahead of me on the trail and I intently watched where he put his feet, trying to mimic his sure footed steps on the talus ledge. His constant chatter kept me focused and guided me along; although I didn't join him and Naos in delighting at the stunning scenery. Fear gripped me so tightly at times that my breathing became very forced, making me stop dead, close my eyes, and listen to my companion's voices telling me I could do it and to just keep moving. I worked my way onward, feeling both foolish and overwhelmed at the same time. But eventually, with white knuckles and weak knees, I made it to the first gated-off entrance. I was more than relieved when, minutes later, we made our final ascent up a small scree slope, into the overhang that formed the mouth of the mine entrance.

A steady breeze of icy air greeted us, blowing from inside the mountain. First inviting us in and politely drying the sweat off my brow with its cool breath, it quickly chilled me with the reminder that beyond this barrier awaited a whole other world.

Immediately, we changed into our cave attire of durable coveralls, gloves and toques, and securely affixed head lamps onto the hardhats we had worn on the climb up. We took one last look at the valley below, bathed in the late afternoon sunlight's warm golden glow, before passing through the small entrance and taking our first steps into the old mine.

The air inside the mine was thick and moist. I was only a few feet away from the lingering warmth of the entrance opening when I started seeing my breath inside the perpetually frigid depths of the mountain. My eyes slowly grew accustomed to the dim as I looked around, getting a feel for the barren environment I would be calling home for the next 24 hours. To my left was a solid contoured block of yellowed ice, the trapped remnants of a frozen stream that appeared to never completely thaw. The roar of highway traffic in the valley far below was now muffled, replaced by the soothing sounds of unseen water sporadically dripping from the rocky ceiling.

Our first task was to make our way to the large cavern that had been dubbed The Cathedral; Redux claimed it would be the most habitable place to set up camp. We strapped the heavy packs on again, and Redux led the way; pulling out his photocopied map even though he already knew the route.

The darkness of the mountain consumed us. The headlamp I often used that gave off a significant amount of light, was hungrily lapped up and swallowed by the deprived mined walls. I resorted to using a setting that allowed me to see the immediate floor instead of trying to illuminate the mine's infinite depths. I trained my eyes on the tunnel's abandoned line of track, whose rails had been long since pulled up, leaving only the ties embedded in the ground. I looked at the walls for signs of instability, and hoping to uncover any secrets left to discover. The steady sound of our footsteps faded dully as we traveled up the rock tunnel.

We trudged up the long, slow grade until we reached a ladder, which had a wooden slide running along its side. I felt that none of the ladders would be completely trustworthy; taking my time and trying not to solely rely on them was in my best interests. In this particular section several ladders were stacked top to bottom, four or five lengths in total. The wooden rungs were well worn, but for the most part looked sturdy. My mind wandered, and I imagined all the work boots that must have



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traversed up and down these wooden rungs during the many years when the mine was operated. How many more times would the rungs bear weight before finally giving up was a question I didn't want to explore too intently. I slowly climbed them one at a time, squeezing sideways partway up to clear some beams, and soon I reached the unknown above.

Standing at the top of the ladder looking around, words escaped me. I felt as though I had landed on the moon; except somehow I was inside it. The massive room ahead reached far beyond my flashlight's beam; walls of jagged rock in all directions, as far as we could see. Three enormous rock pillars held the mountain high above our heads. The rocky floor was uneven, with sporadic dark areas indicating a dip or a hazardous, deep pit hiding from sight in the shadows. Daylight coming in from the window openings was near blinding in its intensity, and glinted off the asperous ground. We scrambled down a ladder to the Cathedral's floor, eager to explore the mammoth room and take advantage of the fading light to set up camp.

We dropped our gear close to a sheltered window, and studied the surroundings, looking for an appropriate place to sleep. The light streaming in from outside was nice, but the elements were unpredictable, so setting our sleeping bags slightly back from the openings seemed the best idea. The floor of the cavern was much too rocky to sleep on, and would be very cold and damp. A hasty plan was devised to build a makeshift bed for the three of us, on a platform just above the ground. We gathered together suitable planks from nearby piles of old mining debris, and went to work making a large enough platform to accommodate three sleeping bags.

After we'd made a place to sleep, supplies were brought out to create a warm meal. A small stove in combination with two pots, water and army rations, and soon supper was underway. I felt famished, although I had certainly eaten my fair share that day. Steaming food from a foil package soon warmed my hands as I sat crouched on the rocky floor eating, in awe of the surroundings. The whole scene had a surreal aura about it. Through a rocky window, I could see the setting sun's light over the valley outside. We cleaned up our supper garbage, and prepared to explore the mine.

Our first objective was to find the alternate exit at the very top of the slope coming up the mountain; which would allow us to avoid today's treacherous path when we left tomorrow. With maps in hand and a much smaller back pack containing just water bottles and a snack, we left our cameras in the camp and went for some simple exploring.

The map indicated two possible connections from the West Mine (that we were in) to the almost separate East Mine (more extensive in terms of tunnels and offshoots) that had the alternate route to the outside. There appeared to be a passageway leading off from the Cathedral that connected East with West, but our attempts to find it failed. We were lead into a series of dead ends; a downfall of using a two-dimensional map to navigate a three-dimensional space. Undaunted, we continued on, exploring all possibilities on all the different planes.

Along the rock passages were old bits of mining equipment, some of which had been tagged by the Department of Parks and Recreation for historical purposes. Mine carts in various degrees of decomposition appeared to have simply been left at the end of the shift, leaving behind loads of crumbled ore. Shaft downspouts occasionally sprouted from the walls above our heads, blocked by rocks and debris. Larger shafts, jutting in from various directions, were climbed and explored as was possible. Modern wooden partitions constructed inside the tunnels had doors that, when unlatched, were thrown open by gusts of cold wind. Wind seeping around the same wooden doors, when closed, occasionally created ghostly sounds of rumbling or groaning. Thoughts describing the possibility of a cave in crept into my mind, but I pushed them aside. The mine felt alive and hostile in its suffocated breaths- would it turn spiteful toward uninvited guests?

We found fantastic rooms, with walls that sparkled in a combination of chalcopyrite, dolomite and quartz. Some floors were smooth, with round splattered white patches where water droplets landed; depositing traces of calcium. The brightness of the white calcium deposits in contrast to the red-brown rock surroundings almost had me convinced they were luminescent on their own. Stopping to admire the features on the walls, and consulting the maps, the cold quickly caught up to me; numbing my fingers and nose, and compelling me to move on. I began to notice fatigue setting in, and while stopped to catch my breath I wondered about the air quality and how thin it might be.

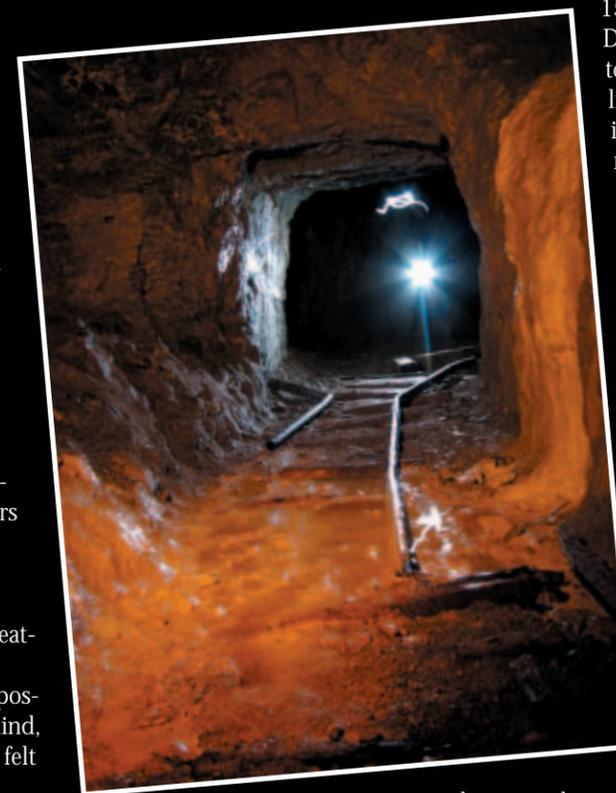
In some areas, the rock walls were coated in a thick, wet brown paste that my fingers could easily trace words into. There were sections set aside with graffiti on them, both new and old; all of it telling a tale of others before us. Indications of some sort of game of hide and seek were present. Entire tunnel corridors were littered with old hand tools used by the miners; pick axes, discarded spools, crumbling old crates, large drill bits and rusting barrels (some filled part way with unknown liquids). The occasional glove and work boot were spotted. Pop cans new and old were strewn in some areas, as well as discarded food packaging and cigarette packs.

We walked until we had exhausted all possible side tunnels, finding a couple impassible ones, and one that was deemed too flooded to follow. There was also the Never Ending Ladder, named for the fact that it is an estimated 150 feet tall and quite dodgy. Descending it was a possibility, but due to the poor air and exhaustion from earlier in the day I wasn't compelled to try it, and the others conceded it might not be a wise decision. We took another route toward the Cathedral, this time walking the entire length of it; giving me a true impression of just how large it is.

There are some very interesting features in the Cathedral. We passed a massive chute about halfway through, stopping to admire the decayed wooden slide that ended in a deep pit. There was also the balcony area; accessible by a steeply rising, carved spiral pathway of rock, which also served as the supporting base for the ceiling above. Ledges chiseled from the rock lined the side walls along many portions of the space.

I kept wondering what everything would look like in the morning; and my mind would begin to imagine until I reminded myself that any hour might as well be the next. The depths of this mine never see natural sunlight; it wouldn't ever see light aside from the occasional rays from an explorer's headlamp or torch. Deep inside the mountain, this mine lived, breathed and existed in total darkness.

We made it back to our camp, and checked the time- it was well after one o'clock in the morning. We had been exploring for several hours, the time slipping by unnoticed. Standing beside a window in the Cathedral, the outside air felt warm in comparison to the mine's depths. I changed out of my dirty clothes, and prepared myself for a good sleep. As I undressed I looked out the chain link window, and was dazzled by the myriad of stars that had appeared in the sapphire sky. Traffic on the highway far below seemed to move slowly, oblivious to the fact it was being observed from the lofty perch. In the distance



I could hear the rumbling of an approaching freight train as it was nearing a tunnel at the base of the mountain. I felt as though I had to pinch myself, was I really here? There was something completely humbling about the experience.

We climbed into our sleeping bags, pulling a tarp overtop to keep us dry from errant drips throughout the night. My mind continued to drift for a while after the others had already fallen off to sleep. Hearing more trains in the valley below, I nervously stared at the craggy rock ceiling. What if a chunk of rock came loose and fell on us during the night? Eventually, I realized there was no point in worrying, there was nothing I could do about the situation. I snuggled into my bag, and went to sleep.

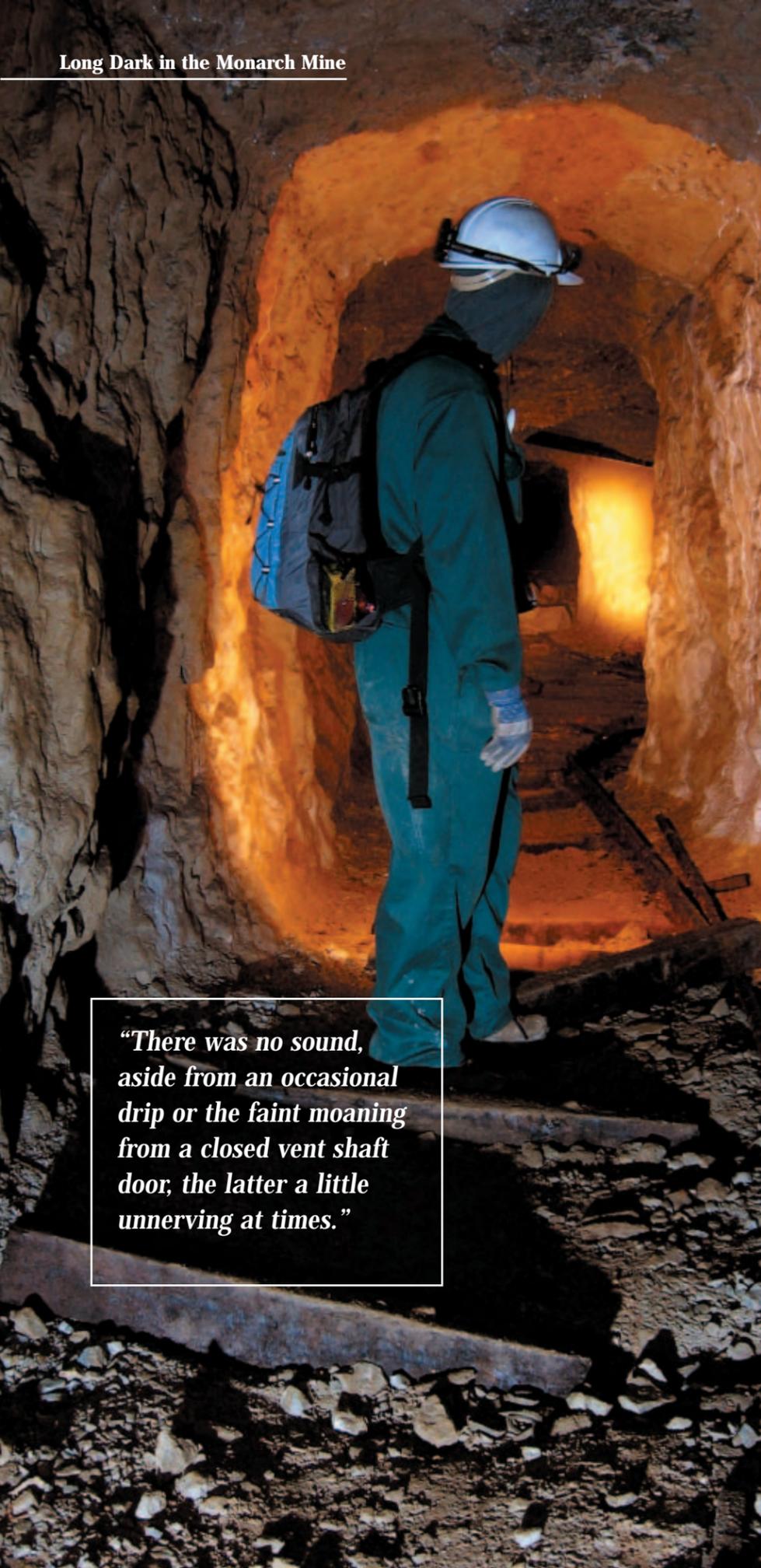
I woke up many times in the morning, drifting off and waking repeatedly. I felt very warm, but discovered that it was thanks to the sleeping bag as I watched my breath turning into a frosty cloud as it escaped my lips.

As the new light of the morning first started to filter in, I saw the cave and still couldn't quite believe my eyes. The ceiling was completely foreign; I studied the carved patterns, admiring the beauty in the rough stone. Rolling over, I looked into the cave, first studying the enormous, rusty discarded shovel a few feet away, then a rock column that was further in. The shape of the Cathedral made it seem as though I was staring into the mouth of a giant, giving me the impression I was sleeping on his tongue. Off to the right, just in front of one of the windows was a small patch of grass, the only vegetation I had seen since entering the mine.

Naos and Redux soon woke, and we all stretched our stiff limbs. Lying in our sleeping bags, we took turns guessing what time it was, but we were all way off- it was almost eleven in the morning. Looking at our makeshift table, Redux noticed that there had been visitors during the night: An apple that had been left out had many tiny bite marks taken out of it, and the rodent had left droppings scattered about. I was amazed at the determination that it must have taken to find the food so far away from anywhere that resembled habitable terrain. We cooked up more army rations and ate breakfast before grabbing our camera gear and going for another round in the mine.

With mental notes of areas we wanted to revisit, we began methodically photo-

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graphing these spots. The stopes and tunnels eventually started to blend together in a blur of dark images. We paid special attention to the larger rooms, notable features like the tramway entrance, and large chutes.

By early afternoon, the environment was starting to wear on me. There was no vegetation, no light, the air seemed like it was lacking substance. Constant damp vapor clung all around with the cold, chilling my body in minutes if I wasn't moving around. There was no sound, aside from an occasional drip or the faint moaning from a closed vent shaft door, the latter a little unnerving at times. Sometimes it was just dead, muffled silence. Time was meaningless, hours seemed to dissipate the moment we started moving around. My senses were deprived, making me feel like a mole, somewhat sluggish and slightly confined. I had been on long drain missions before, and although somewhat similar, this was very different.

After hours of photos, we stopped once again at our camp to recharge in the warm light and have a snack. Just beyond the safety of the smaller window in the Cathedral was a ledge on the face of the mountain that afforded a seat for the daring. Redux sat out on it, taking in the view, and convinced me to join him. It made me nervous, but I was too intrigued to say no. The view was incredible, although I couldn't quite completely relax knowing that one false move would see me plummet 1621 meters into the valley below. After a few photos, I happily climbed back inside to safety.

After one last walk through and a few more photos, we decided to break camp and head down the mountain, in order to take advantage of the fading light during the descent. We repacked our bags, taking all of our garbage with us, and dumping the remaining water which was no longer needed. We had brought enough food and supplies that we could have made it through another night, but we all agreed that the long dark of the mine was more draining than we had originally anticipated. With heavy packs on our backs once again, we took one last look around at our temporary camp. The makeshift bed platform was left in place for others to use, as well as the table by the window. Naos left a sealed bottle of water, knowing it would likely be used by someone else before it ever saw winter.



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Everything went in reverse. We went down the ladder and the tunnels to the entrance, climbed out, and stripped off coveralls and headlamps. The sun welcomed our return, enveloping us with fresh air and light, as the mountain hissed frigid wisps at our backs. I began to feel free again and not confined.

My apprehension of navigating down the mountain's face returned. The first scree section was the part I was least looking forward to; I knew to expect my feet to slide, but having faith the slide would be controlled and eventually stop before reaching the sheer drop wasn't easy. Repeatedly, I found myself slipping too much and falling hard onto the sharp stones. We walked in the same order on the descent as we had on our way up, and again I tried my best to follow Redux's footsteps on the narrow ledges. My knees were still very shaky, and I was still scared, but I knew each step was taking me closer to terra firma.

Reaching the large scree field on the final plunge downwards, my fears had subsided considerably when Naos, crossing the scree above me, accidentally set loose a large boulder. I wasn't able to maneuver away on the loose rock, and the boulder rolled down the hill and cleanly struck my calf with a heavy thud. Luckily, I was still able to walk, but I still fell a few more times in my haste down the slope. Various spruce trees and shrubs lashed and tore at my bare legs and arms as we entered the reaches of the pine forest; but I knew the worst was over and that I had made it.

Back down at the campsite, I counted 36 bruises, and found more scrapes than I was able to tally. We were all dirty and tired, but a sense of satisfaction gripped us. We had spent just over 24 hours inside the confines of the dark mine, longer than anyone else we knew of. I looked up at the mountain, trying to make out subtle features that were almost invisible now, but an hour before had been the path I'd climbed down.

My first long dark, I thought, as I finally turned my back on the now-familiar rocky cliff. Looking up at the next mountain, I carefully examined various mine entrances scattered across its face. What could I possibly tackle next? ◇