

Lost secrets of The Core

The torch held high in Aykon's hand barely pierced the rich blackness that enveloped them as they made their way down the narrow corridor. Katie Keystroke kept close to the guide, followed in single file by her father, Professor Keystroke, with sturdy Jack Bitt bringing up the rear.

It had been ten years since the Professor had been back to this mystical site—the labyrinth of countless forked paths which made up the enormous ancient maze known to the locals as The Core. Its history was immersed in myth and rumour, but the Professor felt certain that somewhere in that folklore lay at least a kernel of truth.

At the heart of their mission was the search for the hidden location of the Holy Grail of graphics—the tiny sector which housed what was known simply as UCS. The Universal Color Space.

As they slowly worked their way down the path, there was a silence as quiet as a system freeze. Katie was sure she could hear her own heart beat. It gave her the opportunity to reflect—first on how fervently she hoped that her father might finally find the object of his life's work; then, more selfishly, how she wished Jack would stop treating her like some kind of little sister. True, he had known her since she was in pigtails, but now she was a woman, proud of her accomplishments in bioelectronic research. If only he would acknowledge me as an equal, she thought.

Suddenly, as they approached sector 64, Aykon came to an abrupt stop.

"Shhhhhh," he whispered. They all listened hard. A faint rustling sound was barely audible, coming from somewhere farther down the corridor.

"The Shadow," mouthed Aykon. "Not where it supposed to be. This way!"

Quickly they slipped into an adjacent passageway and carried on.

At sector 60, they paused again. This time the brilliant sporadic flashes of light

emanating from deeper down were obvious to all. Aykon looked puzzled.

"Ah, yes," murmured the Professor. "Not to worry, I've seen them before. Sonee lights, probably sparked by one of the Dudars."

They surreptitiously stole along the path, until the dark closed in on them once again.

For several minutes they continued in complete silence. Then Aykon cursed under his breath, as the others became aware of something sticky under their feet.

"Schuch!" swore Jack. They had inadvertently stumbled through a small swamp of Painterisms.

"Never mind," said the professor. "Harmless enough—but this tells me we're headed in the right direction! We must be down to sector 56, at least!"

Stopping only long enough to clean the muck from their boots (except Aykon, of course, whose bare feet continued to leave multi-colored tracks in the dust), the foursome plodded on, moving ever deeper into the bowels of The Core. Katie began wondering if their guide was following a chosen route or just his instincts. But she knew her father's total trust in Aykon's lead was based on their mutual experiences a decade earlier, when the Professor, not yet familiar with the terrain, had ventured too close to a library of unstable fonts. It was only Aykon's quick thinking that had saved him from almost certain death when the whole folder fell.

Now they were nearing sector 40. A translucent cloud of weird, unworldly shapes and colors was filling the chamber in which they stood. Jack began to cough.

"Damn artists!" he bellowed. "I've seen this crap before. Take a deep breath and move as quickly as you can until we're by!"

Katie paused to take her father's arm and steered them both to safety. As the noxious fumes subsided they stopped again to catch their breath.



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in the short time we had."

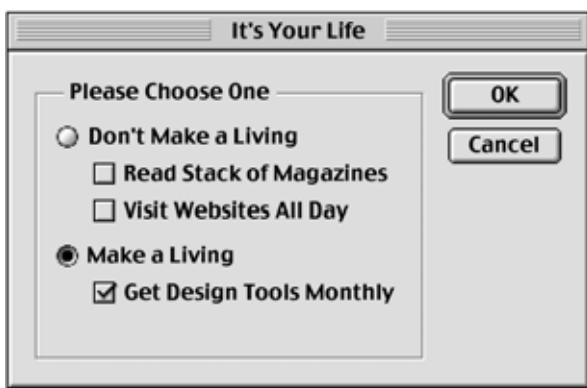
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At that exact moment, a muffled crash could be heard which seemed to be coming from around sector 34. It was followed by a hissing noise, then a loud pop, then a distinct kchung.

"Quick!" yelled Aykon as he turned to his left and ran full speed down the tunnel. The others hurriedly pursued him.

"Bad place," he remarked. "Not safe. Chaos. Madness. Spirits talk of new world order, but this just bad combo platter. Stay far away." They moved on cautiously, as Jack periodically checked over his shoulder.

A small whooshing sound froze them in their tracks. Aykon looked down at the sharp blades which had appeared from invisible sheaths built into both walls. Both his legs now sported creases just below the knee, but he was otherwise unharmed.

"Hmmmm," he said, "knick shin, danger ahead."

Sure enough, as he held the torch out as far as he could, they realized they were right at the edge of a high precipice.

"Bottom line too far to climb," he advised. They doubled back to another passageway which they had just seen at sector 28.

Farther and farther into The Core they edged. At last they found themselves at what appeared to be a dead end. On the face of the wall in front of them were faint markings that resembled the letters B and C.

"Allow me," said the Professor.

Pulling himself up to his full height, he took a deep breath and let out a hideous scream.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Within seconds the wall began to shake, and as it shook it slid open on hidden tracks dug into the floor.

"Read that trick in an old e-book," he chuckled. "But look! Sector 24! I think we must be very close!" Katie could hear the excitement in his voice.

They were now approaching sector 16, very close to the centre of The Core. The path grew steeper, and Jack held onto Katie's shoulder as she clung to her father's arm. They turned yet another hairpin, and suddenly on the Professor's face a smile began to spread like dot gain on an old platen press.

For before them, down another incline, they could plainly see a large fresco on the wall facing them. It showed a seated sharp-nosed character reaching out to what appeared to be a stylized computer screen.

"The Lost Chronicles!" the Professor cried. "I've waited all my life to find these! This points to the secrets of the Universal Color Space, the unlocking of the full reproduction spectrum!"

He began to do what might have been interpreted as a jig.

Katie turned to Jack, and their eyes locked. Taking one long step, he swept her up in his arms and held her in a full-bodied bear hug. She was no little sister any more, she thought to herself.

Aykon stood there without expression. At last, he cleared his throat and let out a deep sigh.

"Happy, boss," he said, his voice devoid of emotion. "Only one problem. Never been down this far before. Which way out?"