



The Glittering Caverns

by

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"... but there's no darkness in our lives," Lee said. He held a knife in one fist. Now he opened his other hand flat on the bar top and began to thump the knife's point into the spaces between his fingers.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Brox murmured. He fiddled with his glass and peered upwards, searching the cavern ceiling for a time display. There was still an hour to wait for the day's big event, the opening of the Complex at the centre of the Earth.

His eyes were drawn back to the walking blade. Lee was a good friend, but sometimes his moods were claustrophobic.

At last, inevitably, the blade stabbed towards the knuckle of Lee's middle finger. Brox jumped - but the metal seemed to hit a casing a hair's-breadth from the flesh. The knife slid sideways and clattered to the bar surface.

A couple at a nearby table looked up from their languid conversation. Lee glared at them, and they turned away. Brox felt deeply embarrassed.

Lee put away the knife. He tapped out a code on the bar top and two frosted glasses were extruded from the surface. "There's my point exactly," he said.

"See?"

"See what?"

"Two million years ago some pre-man must have sat under the stars and played exactly the same game with a chip of flint. But since he wasn't encased by a nannyish machine, the game had a bit of spice -"

Brox sipped his drink. "But that pre-man would have been lucky to survive his teen years. His life was an ordeal, full of toil and danger ... The cross to the new universe, the transformation of Earth, the quality of our lives are the fruits of a hundred thousand generations of such toil. You should be grateful ... I'm sorry. I'm getting a bit pompous, aren't I?"

Lee smiled. "I don't mind your lectures, my friend. But I don't feel grateful. That pre-man with his bit of flint had a dark sky above him that made the dawn welcome. Above us there is only a roof painted with reassuring slogans. I ... envy him."

Brox cradled his drink. Like Lee he was barely twenty - but to him the world seemed a huge and interesting place, and he was baffled by Lee's restlessness. "So what are you going to do?"

Lee avoided his friend's eyes and made a cage of his fingers. "I'm going outside," he said.

Brox laughed. "Outside? No man's been on the surface of the Earth for a million



years. You're crazy."

"Right," Lee said. "Crazy." He slammed his glass to the bar and stood up. "Come on. It must be nearly time for that opening." And he stalked off; Brox had to gulp down his drink and hurry to keep up.

Behind them the bar top dilated and the glasses sank out of sight.

* They made their way towards one of the cavern's principal down-stations. The footpath beneath them stirred like a snake, sensing their intentions, and was soon sweeping them along.

They joined a throng. There were couples and family groups, all bright clothing and excited chatter, and here and there floated leisure units, head-sized spheres encrusted with food and drink dispensers. The box-like down-station grew to accommodate the crowd; Brox saw entrances opening like mouths. He was thinking over Lee's plan, trying to work out why he found it so troubling.

"I've done some investigating," Lee said. His grin flashed and he pushed back his tousled hair. "The old machinery's still there. Elevators to the surface ... just think of it."

They reached a down car. The fat cylinder was quite full, but they found two seats together next to a window. Soon the car sank through the floor and began its journey to the centre of the hollowed-out Earth. They wafted down through cavern after cavern, living space for a billion billion people. Brox stared at gardens and cities that rose past them like clouds. "You romanticise about this subhuman," he said, "but even if you made it outside you wouldn't see the same sky that he saw."

Lee shrugged and looked bored.

"The Earth was moved between universes, a million years ago. It was man's greatest technical achievement. In this universe the laws of physics are subtly different from those in Earth's birthplace; this universe is infinite and eternal, without beginning and without end."

"And without interest."

"That's just childish. Here man will endure forever ..."

"Oh, stop pontificating."

The last few floors flapped upwards like wings, and they burst into the chamber at the core of the Earth. The pull of gravity died away; in the lightness passengers left their seats, and Lee and Brox pressed their noses against their window.

The chamber's far side was a thousand miles away and lost in a blue mist. Clouds scudded through the light-filled air; trains and cars threaded their way across the cavern.

And the heart of it all was the new Complex. It was a dodecahedron. The car swept them past edges a dozen miles long; they saw sculptures, theatres, concert halls, all scattered like bubbles through the crystalline interior. People moved on vein-like carriageways.

Other passengers gasped; but after a few minutes Lee turned away and resumed his seat.

Brox seemed to see the Centre through Lee's eyes. It was really nothing more than a bauble, he thought, gaudy and disappointing.

Lee twisted his fingers together. Brox sat beside him, and in the silence that followed he felt his unease grow. He said finally, "Look, Lee, your plan is really scaring me. Why has no-one been out to the surface for so long? Perhaps there's some ancient danger - suppose the automatic safeguards don't work any more? Don't throw your life away on this ... jaunt."

Lee bunched his fists up and thumped them against his knees. "But I can't bear



this world," he said. He turned to Brox. "Help me escape."

The elevator to Earth's surface had not been used for millennia.

There was a layer of dust on the floor. And as the machinery began its ascent there was a moment of hesitation, a grinding.

Brox and Lee clutched at each other's arms, their eyes wide. They had never in their lives heard a machine make a noise.

The journey took many minutes. A muscle in Lee's jaw worked, tense. Brox turned inwards to the worry nagging at him. The night sky in Earth's universe had been dark, cold - but quite safe. What would the sky be like in this eternal universe? How would it be different?

The elevator door slid upwards. The two men walked into a large, pyramidal room. Jarringly bright panels covered the walls. At the centre of the room was another elevator, a small and simple affair.

Brox sneezed. "More dust," he murmured. "What a fantastic place. How many generations since anyone walked here?"

Lee looked around. "Look at the decor. All shrieking colours, sharp angles - warning signals, but expressed in a simple, ageless language."

"So maybe we should observe the warnings and go back," Brox said.

Lee walked to the second elevator. At the entrance he paused and turned. "You shouldn't worry, my friend."

Overwhelmed by his unease Brox reached out. Lee half-smiled and stepped into the elevator. The door slid down, swallowing him.

Brox pressed his hands to his temples. Think, think. Why was Earth's old sky dark?

The elevator rose with a jerk. Lee set his shoulders and faced the door, his heart pounding.

Bits of a skimmed education tumbled into place in Brox's mind. That sky had been dark because its universe had been of a finite age. Light from the more distant stars hadn't yet had time to reach Earth ...

The elevator stumbled to a halt. Lee edged back, pressing his fingers against the wall. Like a living thing light squirmed under the rising door.

But in an eternal universe starlight would have time to fill space. The sky would be as hot as the surface of a star; Brox pictured the Earth, a blasted ball rotating slowly in that glare, its cargo of life sheltering within ...

As the light roared in Lee threw his arm over his eyes and screamed. But it was a scream of release.

The elevator descended empty.

Brox waited for many hours, but at last he turned away and began his return to the glittering caverns.

