

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

=====

[An epic in 32K words]

Copyright (c) 1978, Richard Forsyth.

Block 11 (Physical Block)

[Hex and Zap are still up in the mountains awaiting Cleo and Lambda, unaware of their plight; and now Ascii has disappeared.]

"Ascii's gone!"

Hex's shout woke Zap.

"Cool it, will you?" shouted Zap.

"But we're in trouble. We've got to do something."

"We always were. What do you suggest?"

"We'll have to go and find him."

"How?"

"By radar."

"You mean he won't maintain radio silence? Then we're better off without him," stormed Zap. "He'll lead the whole pack onto us."

Hex was infuriated by Zap's defeatist attitude. There were times when he clearly regretted leaving the security and logicity of the System to work alongside a bunch of crackpots. However on this occasion Hex had to admit he had a point.

"We could follow his tread marks," ventured Hex lamely.

"And what happens when Cleo and Lambda arrive to find us gone?"

The exchange had gone badly for Hex, and he knew it. He took stock. His one really dependable ally was lost. The two girls were probably in dire straits, perhaps even in the hands of the Error Squad. Zap was subject to bouts of cantankerousness, and apparently believed that with their limited resources they could hope to achieve little more than a token Kamikaze mission. On top of this, they had neither offensive nor defensive weapons; and needless to say had yet to decide on a strategy. The outlook was undeniably bleak.

At that moment a small lump of earth, dislodged higher up the tunnel, rolled down and hit Hex in the back. He sprang up like a startled deer. From beyond their view came the sound of muffled footfalls.

"Anyone at home?" echoed a tentative greeting.

Hex recognized Cleo's voice. His feelings were too strong and too mixed even to experience without perplexity, let alone to express. It was left to Zap to answer the call.

Shortly afterwards Ascii entered. Cleo followed, limping and supported by her sister.

"Sorry we're a bit late," said Cleo.

"Ascii scented us," added Lambda. "He came down to help us with the final ascent.

Hex could see that Cleo's knees were covered by two discs of caked blood, but her spirit was undimmed.

"I could do with a bath," she proclaimed. Hex led her, hobbling, down to the pool in the centre of the crater.

She dipped a toe in the water. Immediately she recoiled. "It's hot!" she exclaimed. "It was freezing last time."

Hex immersed one finger, then his right hand. It was distinctly warmer than the previous morning when it had been lukewarm.

"We've got a warm spring," he replied. "I noticed it yesterday, but today it's a bit hotter. It could be medicinal. Go on, take the plunge!"

Before she could reply Zap and Lambda had joined them, bent on horseplay, and moments later all four were splashing around in their private heated swimming-pool like children, with Ascii barking excitedly on the water's edge.

After their dip, they made plans. As night fell they were engaged in deciding how to strike their first real blow against the Network. Hex favoured adapting Dr Null's concept and equipping Ascii as a gigotic de-stabilizer, to exploit the System's vulnerability to gigotic induction; but Zap had his own ideas.

"What do you know about gigotic processes?" began Hex.

"We had a lecture from Igor Gigotski himself in my first year at Brainstorm College," replied Zap. "He told us about the standard counter-measures."

"But Gigotski perished in detention in Russia in 36 N.C."

"Well, he looked in good shape to me."

This not only undermined Hex's fundamental premiss, it eroded his faith in Dr Null's last confession. While he tried to reconcile it with what he knew, Zap got into his main theme.

"The only way to blow the System's collective mind is with LSD."

It sounded like a blast from the past. "With what?" Hex queried.

"LSD -- Large Scale Disintegration. I've thought it all out. The System depends on the integration of astronomical numbers of incredibly tiny components, all based on wafer-thin slices of a silicon substrate. It is literally built on sand. Dissolve that, and you break up the System."

"A hardware solution?" was Hex's reaction. It didn't appeal to him.

"The hardware they come, the hardware they fall'," said Zap, misquoting Dr Null.

"But what do we dissolve it in?"

"The most powerful solvent known to the mind -- Leibnizian Syllogistic Acid, the only substance that can be transmitted along wires in monadic form and re-materialized by a signal pulse."

"Don't blind us with science," commented Hex. "You're saying you're going to drug the entire System."

"Like they've never been zapped before."

"Can we make this stuff?" asked Lambda.

"We don't need to," stated Cleo, before Zap could reply.

They turned to look at her. When she had their undivided attention, she continued.

"There's a vat of it at Sprocket's Hole. They used to press mushrooms and ferment the juice. I think that's what got them banished in the first place."

"Right, that's settled," concluded Zap. "We get down there and pump it into the Network's arteries. Let's have a show of hands."

Only Hex's arm did not rise. In vain he tried to persuade them that the effects would not spread fast enough and could be localized, unlike a gigotic field. Their minds were made up.

"Now all we need do," said Zap, "is pick a name for ourselves to go down in history. How about 'the Circuit Breakers'?"

Cleo suggested 'the human rights movement' but got no support. After some disputation Hex proposed 'the gang of four & a half'.

"I see," said Cleo: "four people and a dog."

"No," chorused the three androids in unison, "four automata and a human," and burst into laughter.

The insult hurt Cleo deeply. The convivial atmosphere suddenly changed. In the semi-dark cave Hex reached out and put an arm round her shoulder to comfort her. Before he knew it, he was kissing her full on the mouth.

- Could this be the start of something?
- Oh yes.