

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 16 (Rock Around The Block)

[Up in the mountains Hex and company are still trapped inside their crater. Time is running out for them, however, because the System now knows where they are.]

Night fell as they were trying to find an exit. They worked their way anticlockwise round the rock face, using Ascii's headlights for illumination. They had never fully explored it, so had some hope of discovering a fissure or another tunnel like the one that had led them in. But they were disappointed. The encircling walls were almost sheer, and where they deviated slightly from the vertical it was as likely to be an overhang as a backward slope.

They were about halfway round when they were given an unexpected reminder of what an inhospitable place their former refuge had become. Cleo had just suggested trying to weave a rope, which the others dismissed by pointing out that the only vegetation was moss, when there was an ominous rumbling behind them. This was quickly followed by a plosive hiss and a violent bang from the middle of the crater, whose shockwave could be felt at the edges. Ascii spun around and the whole party saw, framed in the rays of his headlamps, a towering plume of spray rising from the centre. Then the column of mud and water collapsed, splashing them even where they stood.

It was a geyser. The aerial bombardment carried out in Hex's and Cleo's absence, which had burned down the tree and turned the moss brown, had aggravated a structural weakness in the earth's crust and triggered off a geological chain-reaction. The volcanic crater, quiescent for centuries, had been shaken into renewed activity. This was why the central pond had been growing steadily hotter. There was no predicting where it would end. They were standing on a volcano about to erupt.

Piltdown had paid less attention to this natural phenomenon than the rest of them. He had kept on the search. Now his voice called to them from some distance into the darkness.

"Jen! Mi estas trovinta elvojon."

"What's that about?" asked Zap.

"He says he's found a way out," said Lambda.

They rushed to catch up with him; but what looked like a way out to a Sasquatch didn't look like a way out to a human or to three androids or to a canine machine. What he had re-discovered was his own entrance way -- a 'chimney' in mountaineering parlance. He had already braced his back against one side and was trying to show them how to sidle upwards.

"Tell him we can't do it," Hex requested Lambda.

"Ni ne povas fari tiele," she said, adding mournfully: "if we had a rope he could take it to the top and lower it to us."

There was no rope, and no material for making one.

"Mi portos vin el la kratero," said Piltdown. "Tio estos tre facila por mi."

"He's offering to carry us out," Lambda told them. "He thinks it will be easy."

Hex got Ascii to shine his lights upwards. The crevice seemed to extend more or less regularly to the lip of the crater, allowing a skilled climber a fair amount of purchase -- but one carrying another body? Five times? It wasn't possible.

There was another rumble, and the waterspout shot up a second time. Clearly they had to do the impossible.

"Does he realize he's got to do it six times?" asked hex of Lambda. "I'm not leaving without the black box."

But the prospect of six trips up the precipice didn't deter him at all, so they decided on an order. The first to go would be Cleo, then Lambda, Zap, Hex, Ascii and finally the box. Hex would have taken it himself -- so highly did he now value it -- but it was clear he'd need both hands just to hang on while Piltdown ferried him up.

Piltdown wedged himself at the foot of the chimney and Cleo pulled herself onto his ample midriff, clasping her arms round him. "We have lift-off," she declared as the ape started upwards. They kept Ascii's lights trained on the two forms until they lost visual contact about halfway up. For a nail-biting few minutes they saw and heard nothing, bar a falling pebble. Then Piltdown reappeared, clambering down on his own at a smart pace. It had taken less time than they had feared.

However, when Piltdown arrived on the ground again, Hex saw there was no cause for elation. The journey had taken more out of him than his lighthearted approach to the task had suggested. He was sweating profusely and drinking the air with long panting gulps. It did not bode well for the later passengers.

Lambda took off next and was soon out of sight. This time the period out of touch seemed, and was, longer. When Piltdown alighted again he was literally soaked in sweat. Hex wanted to ask him to pause and take a breather, but now they had lost their translator.

Zap was next, then Hex. Despite Zap's tallness he was no great load, being uncommonly thin. His lift went without a hitch. It seemed to Hex when Piltdown returned that he had got a second wind. He looked less distressed by the exertion than before. Hex climbed on, grabbed two handfuls of fur, and turned to face the rock.

"Wait for the ape to come back," he told Ascii.

It was embarrassing to stare at the driver in such an intimate mode of transport, but poring over every vein in the cliff face a few centimetres from his nose was very boring. When Hex did look, Piltdown's visage was contorted with strain. Each heave cost him not just effort, but pain. His shoulders were bleeding from friction against the stone. To take his eyes off this suffering Hex, unwisely, looked outwards into space. That was the last he knew of his ride. A wave of vertigo swamped his faculties.

- Is this the all-time cliffhanger?
- Hang on for more suspense.