

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 25 (Chock-a-Block)

[We leave Cleo to her fate, and rejoin Hex who is a prisoner at Fort Ranfour. He has been led up from the dungeons for a meeting with the almighty DPM.]

Hex waited apprehensively in the starkly furnished office for the DPM to appear.

A disembodied voice filled the room. "Do you know why you are here?"

Recognition was instantaneous. There could be no mistake. It was the voice of his father, Abraham Synapse, alias Dr Null.

"You sound like my father," said Hex; "but you're not Dr Null."

"Right on both counts," came the reply.

Hex looked around for the source of the sound. "Who are you? Why won't you show your face?" he asked.

"The Data Processing Manager has no face. I am the System incarnate, representative of UNOS itself. I am purely procedural, untrammelled by the grossness of a corporeal embodiment. That is why I did not contradict you when you took me for your father (though certainly I am not Dr Null). You are all my children."

"Why have you stolen my real father's voice?"

"May I ask to whom you refer?"

"Abraham Synapse, creator of you and your ilk," replied Hex.

"You are in need of a short history lesson. Abraham Synapse was indeed one of the co-founders of the System, though not so preeminent among them as you seem to imagine, but neither are you his son, nor was 'Dr Null', as that fraudulent imposter styled himself, a relative of his -- let alone the professor himself. If any may claim to be his descendant it is I, for his offspring were not flesh and blood. The man under whose malign influence you fell all too readily was none other than Igor Gigotski. He passed himself off under many guises. One of his impostures was to pretend to be Abraham Synapse, a pretence he could make superficially convincing because he had worked with Synapse in the USSR before being expelled. You were easily duped."

Hex had been expecting an attempt to discredit his father's memory, but not a slur as subtle as this; however, he was not going to give up his convictions. "Why then do you, as System overlord, resort to his voice to cover your facelessness? Surely that substantiates his claim?"

"I am afraid not. This voice is just one among many. I wear it like a garment -- partly for your sake, partly out of nostalgia. It was Gigotski, to give him his due, who designed the first practicable spoken output generator. When he fled Russia he pinched many of Synapse's ideas. In those days North America and Eurasia were deadly enemies, and he was welcomed with open arms. Consequently the North American Network, of which I am the logical outgrowth, was equipped with Gigotski's phonemic synthesizers. But I am no longer restricted to my native accent."

The last sentence was spoken in Hex's own voice. This unnerved him more than anything the DPM had said.

"But why should he want to lie to me?"

"First because he needed a qualified successor; second because of his deep-seated inferiority complex. He knew his inventions were little more than carbon copies: the real originator was his tutor, colleague and rival, Abraham Synapse. On the one hand he aspired to emulate the professor, even taking his name; on the other he sought to denigrate his findings, and ultimately to destroy his work."

"Then who was my father?"

"Your biological father, for what it is worth, was a psychiatrist called Sigmund Zilch. He emigrated from Budapest to America shortly before your birth. You were born Samuel Zilch -- no connection with Gigotski or Synapse. You owe allegiance to no one but me."

"Sam Zilch'," murmured Hex, "that's the name I gave when challenged. I thought I made it up on the spot."

"A residual memory trace, no doubt, left over after cybernation."

"At least I'm still Sam," thought Hex. It was consoling to have one constant factor running like a thread through the labyrinth of his identity.

"Now it is time you answered my original question: do you know why you are here?"

"Because I was tricked by your clockwork copper, that pompous amateur psychologist, Extracode."

"That may be true, but it is not an answer."

"I don't know. You tell me."

"To play a game of chess, or rather two games."

"Chess?"

There was a whirring of well-oiled gears, and a panel at the back of the office slid open. An ornate carved table on wheels emerged from the recess, humming as it moved.

The DPM introduced it. "This is CHECKMATE (Chess Heuristic Evaluation Computer, Knowing Midgame And The Endgame). He has challenged you to a match. Scoring will be one point for a win, half for a draw. You will play twice, once with white and once with black. To win you need at least 1½ points: if the scores end level, the machine is the winner. If you succeed, the reward is a job on the Future System project; if you fail, you will go back to jail to await execution."

"What makes you so sure I want to work for you?"

"Let us discuss that after the game, shall we?"

The trolley drew up by Hex. On its top was a glass checker pattern. Images of the pieces in their initial configuration were projected from underneath.

"As a concession, you may choose whether to have white or black first," announced the DPM.

"I'll have white," stated Hex boldly, "and I shall need a second. If we're to do this properly, we must also agree on an impartial referee. I nominate McNull as my second and Simula as referee."

"You are in no position to lay down terms."

"Then I won't play." Hex was gambling. If the DPM took so much trouble to arrange a game, there had to be an ulterior motive.

"Very well, the game is forfeit."

The main door opened. Hex's robot escorts reentered. "Take him back to the cells," ordered the DPM.

"Cheat!" shouted Hex as they dragged him away.

- Has Hex been rooked?
- Find out next week.