

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 28 (Ivory Tower Block)

[Cleo's exploration of the disused mercury mine has led her deep into trouble. She has fallen through the ventilation shaft of an experimental laboratory hewn out of the rock.]

She looked around her. The place was fitted out like an alchemist's den. A stuffed crocodile hung on two chains from the ceiling. Its sharp teeth glinted in the pallid artificial light. Round the walls, like a big game hunter's trophies, were mounted the heads of various exotic species, mostly herbivores such as elks and antelopes, though she spotted a black puma and a snow leopard among them. Here and there on the shelves she could see, pickled in jars of yellowish preservative, what she took for animals' brains. The foetid smell of formaldehyde pervaded the air. She had upset a bottle when she landed and the liquid was oozing across the floor.

At the far end of the laboratory, to her right, an android had put down the retorts and phials he had been busy with and was eyeing her with curiosity.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, turning off his Bunsen burner. "Just what I want for my cross-breeding experiments -- a human female of childbearing age!"

Cleo didn't like what she heard.

He began walking towards her. She noticed first his style of dress. Eschewing the lab worker's sterile white coat, he was garbed as the epitome of trendiness. His pale lemon kaftan was patterned with intricate arabic calligraphy, and unbuttoned at the top to reveal a grizzled expanse of chest hair. Against this virile mattress some sort of runic pendant hung on a leather thong round his neck. Hip-hugging jeans clung modishly to his middle-aged spread.

He stopped before he reached her and opened a refrigerator. In amongst the racks of biochemical specimens was a six-pack of beer. He pulled out two cans and handed one to Cleo.

"Here," he said, popping open his can, "have one yourself."

Cleo gratefully gulped down the ice-cold lager. He took a couple of swigs and then asked: "who are you? I'm Mike Rose, Director of the Meta-Physical Laboratory."

"I'm Cleo Calculus."

"Well Cleo, if you will just finish off your drink and come this way, I'll show you what you have to do. It shouldn't take long; and it won't hurt a bit."

His polished bedside manner was at once so affable and avuncular that it had a mesmeric quality. She found herself involuntarily following him. He led her down to the other end where there was a little cubicle with a curtain which he drew aside.

"Just step in here and take off all your clothes. I'll be back in a minute," he told her.

Meekly, without question, she went inside, almost watching herself as a spectator. His steps gradually receded. There was the sound of a latch being lifted.

Cleo peeped out. At the other end of the lab, Rose was holding the door open to let in his assistant.

"Piltdown!" she exclaimed in surprise and delight, running out though she was half naked.

"You're acquainted, then," remarked Rose mildly.

"Of course," she replied, "it's Piltdown. But he can't be. Piltdown's dead."

"Actually this is Neddy (short for Neanderthal), Piltdown's clone," explained Rose. "We always keep a spare copy."

Cleo gazed up at him. Piltdown's face was etched indelibly in her memory. This certainly was the spitting image. He smiled down, hardly seeming a stranger.

"Now then, shake hands," Rose said. "Cleo meet Neddy Bigfoot. Neddy, this is Cleo."

"Pleased to meet you," said Cleo.

"Bonan tagon," replied the ape.

"He still speaks Esperanto," said Cleo. "Why don't you teach him English?"

"Too illogical," explained Rose. "He's more at home in pure third-order Predicate Calculus anyway; but I find it hard to keep up with him. Esperanto is a concession to my frailty: it's the least systematic language I can permit him to learn without polluting his mind with human values."

"But I can't talk to him," complained Cleo.

"Oh you'll get along fine without talking, I can see that," Rose answered, "which is a pity in a way because I shall now have to abandon my plan to form a hybrid by mating human with Sasquatch."

Cleo listened with relief. Rose was beginning to seem eminently reasonable.

"Yes," he continued. "I'm afraid you're no use to me. You're pregnant already."

"What?!"

"Don't worry. I can tell before you can -- less than seven days after the event. I only need one look."

"Impossible!" she expostulated.

"Wait and see," he replied calmly. "I'm the world's leading expert."

"But, I mean.... I thought androids couldn't...."

Rose raised his eyebrows. "An android father, eh? Now you've got me interested again. Some of us can, you know. In the old days all they kept for cybernation was the brain and spinal cord; but modern thinking is that it's more economical to leave most of the vital organs intact."

Cleo blushed deep scarlet.

"You'd better go and put your clothes on again," suggested Rose.

While she was in the cubicle dressing, Rose called over: "Bigfoot will show you around while I decide what's to be done with you."

When she emerged the great ape beckoned and she went out through the door after him. She found herself on a metal balcony rivetted into the rock. They stood at the edge of one of the catwalks that crossed and criss-crossed the vast subterranean cavern. She looked down at a hive of industry beneath. Automata of all descriptions (finite, deterministic, non-deterministic, pushdown and linear-bounded) scurried purposefully to and fro across the floor of the cave like ants, bathed by arc-lights from the vaulting roof. The whole place buzzed with the drone of incessant activity.

"Granda, jes?" enquired her guide.

"Granda," she replied, "yes." Her mind was not on the busy workers scuttling below. She was thinking of the unborn child in her womb, wondering whether it would ever see the light of day, and, if so, how she would cope.

- Is this new burden too heavy for her?
- Back to Hex next week.