

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

=====

[An epic in 32K words]

Copyright (c) 1978, Richard Forsyth.

Block 30 (Building Blocks)

[Cleo has accidentally stumbled on the Future System in its huge underground cavern beneath the Sierra Nueva: Hex has been sent there deliberately by the DPM -- who has forced him to rethink his ideas on his own ancestry. His task is to bring the Future System live ahead of schedule, now that the System is in the throes of a gigotic epidemic.]

Neddy the Sasquatch, Piltdown's clone, conducted Cleo around the plant, describing each new wonder to her in Esperanto. She paid little attention. Rose's diagnosis of pregnancy had shaken her. He might be wrong; but he had nothing to gain by making it up, since it spoiled his plans for her. She cast her mind back on Hex and on the single night of passion in the Inter-Block Gap which had landed her in this predicament -- and, she realized, effectively ruined their friendship. While it remained platonic their relationship had been harmonious: as soon as a physical aspect crept in it had deteriorated.

Perhaps it was too much to expect an android and a human to get on in that sense; but at the time he had seemed very special -- an android who had not forsaken his humanity. Then she had believed him capable of leading them into a brave new world. Now the romantic mist had dispersed and she saw him for what he was, an out-and-out opportunist.

She was a little disappointed with Neddy too. He seemed to have less of Piltdown's spark of humour, and none of his defiance. Whereas Piltdown had broken loose to roam the world, Neddy had stayed at home to assist his Frankenstein-creator. Although they were identical twins, they clearly differed in temperament.

When she returned to Rose's lab she was none the wiser. Rose was again at his workbench, hunched over a microscope. He looked up as they came in.

"So you've finished your semi-conducted tour," he observed wryly.

"Yes, thank you."

"Neddy pointed out all the highlights, did he?"

"Yes. But I didn't understand a word."

"All Greek to you, I suppose."

"Greek I can manage," she replied. "Esperanto's the language barrier."

"Hmmm. Well, you can't stay."

"Can I go back to the surface?"

"No. You will have to be disposed of."

There was a pause. Cleo waited for him to spell it out.

"I'm handing you over to my superiors," he concluded at length.

"I thought you were in charge."

"Here, yes. But you're not wanted here. I'm packing you off to Fort Ranfour. Come this way. There's a subway link."

He led them out again. They threaded their way among the bustling automata down several flights of stairs. They came to a massive steel bulkhead which swung open noiselessly on his approach. Passing through, they entered the terminus station.

"This is our link with the outside world," said Rose. "We're in luck: there's a train coming. Neddy will accompany you on the journey. Then the DPM can decide your fate."

He spoke a few sentences in Esperanto to the apeman. Then the railcar arrived. McNull stepped out, followed by Hex.

"Who are you?" demanded Rose.

Hex and Cleo gaped at each other open-mouthed.

"I said: who are you?" he repeated.

McNull answered first. "It came to pass in the last days of the System that a great pestilence raged over the land. And in those days travelled the chosen android and his disciple, from the heart of the Old System unto the birthplace of the New...."

"We've been sent by the DPM," interrupted Hex, emerging from his trance. "I am the Hexadecimal Kid and this is the Wizard of Os. We're software consultants. We've come to help you get this thing off the ground."

Rose's eyes narrowed. "Where are your credentials?"

"We haven't any. There wasn't time," explained Hex. "The System is going gigotic."

"What? I've heard nothing of this."

"All data communication has been cut in an attempt to stop it spreading," Hex replied. "We must get the Future System running before it's too late. Lead us to the command console: there's no time to lose."

Rose laughed. "I like it: two jokers calling themselves consultants turn up with some half-baked story and not an ID-card between them demanding to go straight to Mission Control. I have to admire your effrontery."

Hex saw they were getting nowhere. As a last resort he tried the cryptic pass-phrase which the DPM had instructed them to use: "two years' Cobol experience".

Rose's expression changed. "Now that's quite another matter," he said deferentially. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? Come with me and I'll show you what to do."

When they were all back in his lab he asked Hex: "How much do you know about the project?"

"Only that the Future System is called BOSS, for Bionic Operating System Supervisor."

"I'd better begin at the beginning then," responded Rose. "Originally I was a neurophysiologist, but I got bored with gouging brains out of monkeys. I wanted something more creative."

"Such as putting brains into monkeys," Cleo suggested, glancing at Neddy.

"Exactly. I started messing about with electronics. But you'll notice that Neddy is not an ordinary android: he has no electronic parts. You see, I grew convinced that silicon-chip technology had neared its limits. I sought a purely biochemical alternative. There's more organizing ability in one protein molecule than on a whole slab of silicon. I turned from microprocessors to microorganisms. In short, I began to dream of the self-reproducing computer.

So when the System was recruiting for the Advanced Systems Group they selected me. I joined, and eventually became director. Now I am the only one left, apart from robotic functionaries. The development phase is being wound down: it has almost reached its conclusion. We have made the ultimate biotechnical breakthrough."

He turned round and picked up a flask of clear fluid.

"Look," he declaimed, "a programmable virus! There's enough information in its DNA to turn an elephant into an IBM 360."

"Not the other way around?" queried Cleo innocently.

- What witch's brew has he concocted?
- Next week the cauldron boils over.