

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 32 (Trailer Block)

[Hex, Cleo and McNull are in the underworld. Hex has been given responsibility for a crucial stage in the animation of BOSS (Bionic Operating System Supervisor). This software is to be transferred from electronic equipment into living tissue via the genetic programming technique invented by Mike Rose -- a transformation that will turn the animal kingdom into a biological computing engine, rendering the Future System effectively immortal. It is the greatest amino acid trip since Genesis.]

Cleo moped about gazing at Rose's specimens, wondering how to avert disaster. McNull was still sitting cross-legged in a lotus posture underneath the antlers of a Canadian Moose, withdrawn from reality.

When Hex finished coding he began tapping the keys on Rose's apparatus. As he tapped, pulses shot down the twisted wire and released substances that shunted hydrocarbons into place, forming the building bricks for new life; but no change was visible.

The job was quickly done.

"Ready," he called to Rose. He was satisfied with his loader program as a piece of software, though he still doubted that its 'hard copy', the data-gobbling virus, would work as planned.

"Fine," said Rose. "We'll take it to BOSS for the down-line loading."

He made his exit with Hex. The door shut behind them and Cleo heard the key turn. She was locked in with Neddy and the still-senseless McNull.

Rose led Hex down to ground level. It was Hex's first chance to look around. To him it seemed a veritable cathedral of computation. The robots hurrying about were acolytes and junior priests performing ritual devotions in various side-chapels. Rose was the archbishop leading him to the fenced-off area on which all this computer worship focused -- the high altar of Data Processing. Even the cooling pipes at the far end of the cavern took on the appearance of an enormous church organ. The only ecclesiastical role he couldn't pinpoint was his own. Was he one of the annointed faithful about to partake of the sacrament, or was he a heretic being led to the stake?

At the electrified wire which surrounded the holy of holies Rose held up his wristband to gain access. Inside, they were confronted by a metal sphere about one metre in diameter with a reflective surface polished as smooth as a mirror. It floated just above head-height without apparent support.

"This is it," whispered Rose, "the Future System."

It glided wordlessly towards them. A section of its outer layer slid back. Rose held up the bottle and placed it inside. The panel closed again and the sphere took up its former station, hovering about two metres off the ground. It began to revolve, slowly at first but increasing in speed until it span too fast even to see moving.

They waited fifteen minutes. Then the floating orb stopped spinning and approached. The aperture re-opened. Rose's hands trembled as he reached up to take the bottle of juice.

"Is that all there is to it?" asked Hex, a trifle disappointed.

Rose just held one finger to his mouth. Once outside, he recovered his tongue. "Amazing, isn't it? Each droplet now contains a million megabytes in genetic code -- mutations that will change the face of the universe."

They returned to the lab. McNull was yawning and stretching. Neddy was using tongs to extract some surgical instruments from a sterilizing unit. Cleo looked forlorn.

"What's the next step?" Hex asked, eager to see results.

"The incubation period," replied Rose. He took the bottle over to where Neddy waited. Neddy handed him a syringe. He stuck it through the rubber bung and drew up some fluid.

"Until the computing virus is fully viable we need a living host. I was going to tell Neddy to volunteer, but this young girl has arrived at an opportune moment."

He walked towards Cleo. "Kindly roll up your sleeve and bare your arm," he requested.

"Is that necessary?" queried Hex.

"No. It's essential," Rose retorted.

McNull butted in. "Allow me to act as guinea pig," he proposed gamely. "I'm as human as the next man."

Rose looked him over like a farmer appraising a prize bull at market. "No," he said. "The girl's in better condition."

"Hold it," objected Hex, "you can't just treat her like a battery hen."

"Don't be sentimental. None of us will survive if this goes according to plan. It doesn't matter who goes first. In fact she is honoured."

"I refuse to cooperate," proclaimed Hex. "It's unethical."

"Big deal," responded Rose sardonically. "Your part in this is over. Next time you feel like being ethical, get your timing right." He turned to Cleo. Neddy held her left arm. She looked at Hex imploringly, too bemused even to struggle.

As Rose prepared to inject the virus into her veins, Hex bounded down the lab and clamped both hands round his throat in a vice-like grip. Rose shook sideways. His face began to go purple. A wheezing breath escaped his lips: "eliminu lin!"

With two strides Neddy was on him. He prised Hex's fingers from Rose's neck with no more effort than unfastening a zip and flung him bodily towards the door. Hex skidded along the floor and crashed head-first into it, knocking it open. Momentarily stunned, he lifted himself onto one knee. Neddy was bearing down on him: behind the ape's looming bulk he saw Rose, getting ready again to plunge the needle into a petrified Cleo.

There was no other recourse. From the depths of his memory he retrieved Dr Null's gigotic induction program, wiped his mind of all current processes, cleared the processor status word, disabled interrupts and executed an unconditional branch to location 0000H.

Neddy observed that the creature he had been ordered to destroy had sprung up like a startled deer and dashed out of the door. He gave chase; but Hex was possessed. Running with literally superhuman speed he raced down towards the floating ball that housed BOSS.

He beat Neddy to the protective cage and shook the grille violently with both hands. Instead of being electrocuted he drew new strength from it and seemed to glow with power. In a voice reverberating with Dr Null's Russian accent he called out through the fence: "what is the square root of minus zero?"

With a resounding crash the silver sphere dropped to the floor and fractured. Little coils of acrid smoke filtered out through the cracks. All the robots in the cave stopped dead.

Microseconds later Neddy pounced; but he was too late. He grabbed Hex but picked up only dead weight in his powerful arms.

Now the lights were fading. The electricity generators were running down. The vast hall was silent. All robotic activity had ceased. Humping the lifeless body over his shoulders he picked his way back to Rose's lab where a lamp was still shining.

Cleo was rubbing her arm. Rose himself lay prostrate on the floor. The half-empty hypodermic, its needle bent and blunted by his fall, slipped from his grasp. As Neddy entered he managed to utter three words. "Protektu la junulinon."

Neddy dumped his load and knelt solicitously over his fallen master; but he could not revive him. After a few more gasps life departed from Mike Rose.

Without further ado Neddy picked Cleo up under one arm and jumped onto the bench. He forced open the air vent through which she had originally plummeted and began to climb up it.

"Wait for me!" cried McNull, clambering up after them.

Neddy looked down at the figure whose lack of height prevented him scrambling clear and paused for thought.

"Please don't leave me here," begged the distraught human.

Neddy leaned down and hauled McNull off the table. The three of them clambered hastily upwards. They reached the mine tunnel after much effort and ran towards the daylight.

As they emerged into the open air, the mountain shook. Far below, the earth was racked by the awesome violence of the ultimate combinatorial explosion. The Future System was a thing of the past.

- Was Rose's unfinished job enough to infect her?
- We may never know.