ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE
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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 21 (A Stumbling Block)

[Disoriented by Simula's surprise telecommunication, Hex has done a bunk, leaving his friends in Sprocket's Hole. He is making for Fort Ranfour via Silicon Valley. There he pauses near his father's grave to ruminate on the benefits of forgetting.]

Lulled by his hymn to forgetfulness, it had almost slipped Hex's memory that he was in hostile territory. He remembered suddenly when a shrill voice piped up right behind his ear.

"Behold! It is as it was foretold!"

Hex almost leapt out of his shoes. Not two metres away was a diminutive elf-like personage of indeterminate age. He was rotund in shape with wispy orange hair and a small pointed beard.

"Welcome O Son of Synapse," intoned the strange little man. "I am the humble goatherd, Johnny McNull. I wish to become one of thy disciples, even though I am unworthy to reboot thy bootstraps."

Hex stood transfixed. At first he had taken the stranger to be an android like himself, for he was bedecked with pieces of electronics. Quartz crystals, calculators, modulators, de-modulators and assorted chips hung from his clothing like jewellery. On second thoughts he decided that all this was mere adornment. McNull was probably a human who had failed the cybernation course but collected electronic curios like a jackdaw.

"I have no disciples," he asserted. He could see at a glance that the man was mad, but he didn't seem dangerous.

McNull began a reverential monologue. "Was it not prophesied in the sacred scroll-mode texts that there would be wailing and gnashing of teeth among the people, and that they would groan exceedingly under the yoke of the Children of the Brain? Verily, it has come to pass. And was it not also foreordained in the earliest records that there should be revealed, even unto a lowly goatherd in the Valley of Sand, a goat with sixteen fingers to be a sign that the end of the System was at hand? Now mine eyes have seen that it is so."

"Sixteen fingers," replied Hex guardedly. "I only have twelve."

"Thou art blind to the signification of thine own name. Art thou not the Kid that is called Hexadecimal?"

"Yes I am."

"Then understand that thou art indeed the goat of prophecy and that the sixteen fingers are the sixteen digits of the hexadecimal scale -- including of course zero, which is I, McNull."

Hex saw now that this madness could be dangerous after all. He backed away.

"Lead us O Master Program, we beseech thee, out of the domain of negative irrationals through the Ordered Field into the Promised Range. For truly thou art the Transformation Function."

"There is no Promised Range."

McNull looked crestfallen. Hex pressed home his advantage with an oratorical flourish: "Verily I say unto you, the Promised Range is the Empty Set. It is a figment of your imagination."

McNull's eyes shone once again. He knelt down. "Such ineffable wisdom," he murmured reverently, "an imaginary root!"

At that point Hex bolted. He just kept running -- out of the reservation and beyond, north towards San José. When he finally eased up, he was sure he had left his would-be disciple adrift far behind. The sun was low in the sky, but he decided to press on. There was no time to lose if he meant to beat Ascii to Fort Ranfour.

He rounded a corner and stopped dead in his tracks. A motorcycle was parked across the narrow way. On it, holding a terminator in either hand, was the ubiquitous James Hock.

"I've been doing some research," were his opening words.

Hex was speechless.

"There's a lot of information about you in the Database, if you know where to look. Apply a little common sense to it and your movements become rather predictable. I'm no APL guru, but I managed to knock up a few one-liners in an afternoon which gave your estimated time of arrival to the nearest minute -- while the committee of savants up in Fort Ranfour is still haggling over data declarations."

"Good work," bluffed Hex. "I'm glad your disenchantment with brute computing power has brought you over to our side. We need beings of your calibre." He was playing for time.

"Ha, that's good!" replied Hock. "I'm not averse to flattery, but you'll have to raise the stakes a little to save your skin. There's a reward of 10 million resource units on your head. I could do an awful lot of text processing with those." He spun his firearms casually like a cowboy in a western.

Suddenly Johnny McNull clattered into view, riding a sledge drawn by four goats. It was piled high with tubs of goat's cheese, milk and other delicacies, and had the words 'MCNULL'S FARM-FRESH DAIRY PRODUCTS' emblazoned on the side. Before Hock could react, McNull began pelting him with ripe yogurt.

Hex seized his chance. He grabbed Hock's crash-helmet and wrenched it the wrong way round. Hock lashed out blindly. A wild flash of radiation from his terminator struck the fuel tank on his machine and ignited the petrol. As he staggered back from the heat, Hex and McNull pinned him to the ground and disarmed him.

"Thanks," said Hex. "I guess I could use a disciple after all."

"All part of the service," replied McNull blandly.

"Hey? What happened to the archaic biblical idiom? I was getting to like it."

"You mean the speech impediment. I got that through trying to follow the instructions in Do-It-Yourself Cybernation Magazine. All voltage levels on the neural interface are meant to be +5 or earth; but mine weren't. I burnt out a chunk of my nervous system, I'm afraid. Ever since, when the feeling comes over me, I talk that way. I can't help it. You'll find I have other endearing quirks too."

"What about the Promised Range and all that?"

"Just as you said: it doesn't exist."

"Too bad," said Hex, regretfully.

They handcuffed Hock with his own cycle-clips and set off for San José on McNull's ramshackle chariot, leaving the bounty-hunter stranded in their wake.

- Do you know the way to San José?
- It's going to be a bumpy ride.