

# **Fire Wall**

Episode IV – A New Hope Lost

By Leslie Styles

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Names have been changed to protect the guilty, or just plain stupid.

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The short story below is the first I wrote, after a particularly odd day at work, and was made available as a bonus from my official website

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I hope you enjoy it!

## **Fire Wall**

### **Episode IV – A New Hope Lost**

A long time ago, in a Kingdom far, far away, there was a kindly Network Manager, who was beloved by his Users, but sorely oppressed by the Holders of the Purse Strings, who refused him all but the most meagre scraps of technology. Placed above our hero was an evil Ogre, who, though capable of delivering a devastating blow of the tongue, was none the less gullible, as Ogres are. Thus the Network Manager hatched a plan, to gain vengeance on the forces of evil, and mayhap raise the standard of computing for the lowly Users that inhabited the dark corridors of the Kingdom.

It was the time of Bidding, when the Network Manager was forced to beg for computing sustenance, that the Users may continue to analyse their data for the year to come. But this year, into his Bid the Network Manager placed an item of great value and rarity, claiming it would keep all foes trapped beyond the gates of the virtual Kingdom, that the King's data should not be plundered. Nothing less did he Bid for than the very Holy Grail of all Network Managers, the Managed Firewall of Argent, an item of great and arcane magicks, housed in a fortress of blackest steel. So powerful was it that the Lords of Argent demanded ten thousand pieces of gold before the devout be allowed gaze upon it.

Should the bold Network Manager succeed in his Bid, and the Managed Firewall of Argent be approved by the Holders of the Purse Strings, he would horde the gold for one month, before claiming that the Grail had been discovered false, and that ruthless bands of Hackers would be able to enter the Kingdom by stealth, to rape our resources and pillage our research. Thusly he would rob the rich, and give to the poor in the form of much needed Upgrades.

But between the Network Manager and the Accountants stood the Ogre. With great guile did the Network Manager attempt the mental besting of the Ogre, alternating facts with fiction, and generally Making It Up As He Went Along. The Ogre was greatly nonplussed, but not wishing his ignorance to become apparent agreed that the Bid should pass. But also was he greatly angry at his defeat, and treated the Network Manager with even greater cruelty and disdain from that day forth.

The Bid was passed to the Accountants, who entered into their great Debates. Much muttering and wailing issued forth from their domain,

and spells of Unnecessity and Would-Be-Handy-But-Not-Just-Yet-Eh were cast upon the items of the Bid, that they may wither and fall from the List to rot.

It was during this time of tense Negotiations that the Network Manager's plan went awry, for Lo! the King did cast the evil Ogre out, and computing within the Kingdom was throw into disarray. As headless chickens did the Higher Ups become, though the Network Manager stood firm in the crisis and Took Charge. Much rejoicing was to be heard from the lower ranks and Users at the fall of the Ogre, and the Deletion Of His Access Rights was a moment of great personal joy for the Network Manager, but alas there were times of great darkness to come, for the King was Unsure Of Himself, and sought advice from the Oracles and Wizards of Head Office.

Examining the Runes, the Wizards of Head Office declared an age of Great Peril, stating that the bastion of our Security be compromised, and that only a Clamp-Down might save us. Thus began the great Changing Of Locks And Passwords, which the Network Manager undertook with great diligence, that he might prove his great worth. It was at this time that the Wizards and Oracles did spy the Bid, and did instantly fixate upon the Managed Firewall of Argent, being listed as it was under the heading of Security.

Immediately did they decree that the Firewall be purchased, and that until its Installation the Users be bereft of all Internet and E-Mail. Also did they decree that a Consultant be sought from the wise Sages of Galea Libra, and that the sacrifice demanded be provided by the Kingdom. Downcast became the Network Manager, and in great sorrow did he bethink the plight of the Users. Forever lost was the hope of Upgrades, and the Internet, the sole beacon in their dull and dreary lives, was to be denied them. A new Plan was needed.

Beyond all hope was the Users again entering the great library of Internet until the Installation ceremony was complete, but for the basic human communication of E-Mail there was still a chance. Carefully did the Network Manager plan his speech before he approached the Analyst, into who's lap the weighty burden of Responsibility had been dropped. Being kind at heart, and mindful of the Users' well-being, she agreed to the Plan, though it meant great changes for the Users, and much extra work for the Network Manager.

Pausing only to collect his sparse bag of tools, the Network Manager descended to the lowest levels of the Kingdom, and came to stand outside the Comms Room. Here was he briefly delayed, for he

had changed the order of the ritual Combination to the door, but had so much on his mind that he did perform the old ritual three times before realisation did strike.

Then entered he the Comms Room, the heart of his domain, and faced the mystical Hub, through which all machines in the network did converse. Withdrawing his trusty Number Four Screwdriver from its scabbard, the Network Manager approached the Hub, and cleft he the Stack in twain. Removed he the separated Unit, which as the worm did not die but lived as a new entity, and with it did he create a new Network. To both this new Network and the old did the Network Manager connect his own Computer, that he might check and send the E-Mails of the users, though the task be long and tedious, and needs be performed hourly.

On the fourth day of this trial did the Network Manager receive word that the Sage Consultant from Galea Libra had declared his intention to arrive on Thursday. This bode sorely ill, for the Lords of Argent had likewise declared their intentions to provide the Firewall on Friday. Little had they foreseen the craving their product would illicit, and few had they in stock, but the Network Manager was able to barter an agreement that it should arrive on Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest. All during the conversation did the Lords of Argent refer to their mighty Managed Firewall as The Brick, which inspired less than total confidence in the Network Manager.

Tuesday arrived, but of the Brick naught was to be seen. Then came Wednesday, and early arrived a messenger of the Lords, carrying with him the mighty Brick. Early rejoicing fell silent though as the world all turned to Farce.

Weighty was the Brick, and also thicker than expected was the mighty tome of its Manual. With his trusty Deputy, the Network Manager carried with great reverence, and only slight herniaing, the Brick to the Comms Room, where they did find its great dimensions exceeded that of the Cabinet that was to be its home. Fiddled, shoved and kicked did they, but to no avail. The Brick was therefore consigned to live atop the Cabinet, with the cables hanging down the back where no-one would see them if they didn't look too hard.

With great ceremony was the Brick plugged into the Mains, the source of its power, and with a cry of 'Ere, is it supposed to come on straight away?' did the Deputy reported to the Network Manager that Something Was Happening. Then passed the Network Manager to the Deputy the cables from each Hub destined for the Brick, and with a

further cry of ‘Ere, shouldn’t these lights come on now?’ did the Deputy report to the Network Manager that Nothing Was Happening. No amount of flicking at the front panel could coax the lights to life, so the Network Manager retreated to consult the tome of Instructions.

Much enlightenment was gained from the section ‘Why isn’t it working?’, and the Network Manager returned to pass on to the Deputy that they lacked a vital part, a Cross-Over Cable. The Lords of Argent clearly had these littering their lands in plenty, and expected all others to also be so blessed, but within the whole of the Kingdom not one was to be found. But hope still remained, for surely one could be purchased at the markets of PC Planet, in whose warehouse all the treasures of Computing lay.

The oracle of Directory Enquires was consulted, and the method of contact for PC Planet obtained, but upon reaching them the Guru of Networking was unavailable, but would surely call me back. This never came to pass, and all attempts to reach the Guru were foiled, so a new Plan was hatched. As fortune would have it, the Network Manager had in his possession at home a Spare Hub, into which ordinary cables could be plugged in order to act as a Cross-Over Cable. Neither the Network Manager nor the Deputy owned a chariot, but the Deputy Deputy had had the foresight to challenge the Examiners of the Driving Test and pass, so he took the Network Manager home to collect the Spare Hub.

Upon their return they went immediately to the Comms Room, and after a brief invocation to the Gods of Luck, plugged they the Spare Hub into the power of Mains, whereupon went it ‘Fzzzt’. Though greatly crushed by the loss of his own equipment, the Network Manager was eventually restored by the promise that the Kingdom would meet the cost of any repairs, and returned he to his earlier Plan.

On this third attempt, the Guru of Networking at the market of PC Planet was found, whereupon did he swear that the Cross-Over Cable was indeed held within the market, at the reasonable sum of only £7.99 in the common coinage of the realm. The Network Manager relayed this joyous news to the Analyst, who approved the Plan and sent him to see Judy of the Petty Cash.

Judy of the Petty Cash solemnly unlocked the sacred tin, and gazed inside, only to declare ‘Sorry, I’ve only got about three quid.’ The Network Manager returned once again in the Smelly Lift to the lofty abode of the Analyst, whereupon he broke the bad news. The Analyst was greatly dismayed, there being now but four working hours until

the arrival of the Sage Consultant of Galea Libra the following day, and promptly organised a Whip-Round to obtain the necessary funds. She even managed to obtain a full ten pounds, just in case.

Thusly fortified with cash, the Network Manager and Deputy Deputy did set forth to PC Planet, where they roamed the great market in search of the fabled cable. Unfortunately the market was vast in size, and the cable small, and they were forced to seek the help of an assistant. When one could finally be pried from his conversation of great import with the other assistants, he waved us vaguely Over There. This failed to be a great help, and eventually the Network Manager and the Deputy Deputy were forced to seek the advise of the Customer Service desk, albeit with great reluctance. There were they informed that in fact no such cable was to be found anywhere within the bounds of PC Planet, and that any telephone information to the contrary must have been imagined.

To quell the wailing of the tormented heroes, the Customer Service Advisor suggested that the cable may indeed be found at Chartlins. Dejected, but having no other option, the Network Manager and Deputy Deputy did proceed towards Chartlins, but on the way found themselves passing Abacutronik Systems, another vendor of Computer Bits. Deciding to take a Quick Detour, the adventurers parked outside Abacutroniks, and attempted to gain entry, only to be foiled by a locked door. Stepping back, they noticed a large sign adorning the windows, bearing the legend 'We Have Moved', and further down a map, labelled 'You Are Here' and 'We Are Here'.

Once more did they set off, to the New Land of Abacutroniks, and it was as they were travelling that the Deputy Deputy did jump, and proclaim the receipt of a nasty fright. Concerned, the Network Manager pressed him for details, to which the Deputy Deputy replied 'I thought the woman driving the car behind us was L.B.' The Network Manager soothed his companion, stating that 'Surely we cannot be being stalked by L.B.,' and both laughed at the Deputy Deputy's irrational fear.

Eventually did they arrive at the portals of the new site of Abacutroniks, having been delayed slightly due to necessary Checking Out Of Babes, but were once again cast out as heretics, with the sole hope left being that Abacutroniks also believed their salvation lay within Chartlins. As the headed back to the car, they came upon L.B., who claimed to have followed them up the hill, and was sorely confused by the laughter.

With Chartlins as their sole remaining hope, and with the day rapidly dwindling, the two weary heroes set course, and after eventually finding somewhere to park, stepped humbly over the threshold. Within was a veritable cornucopia of Bits, of all shapes and sizes, some of which had functions that could only be guessed at. The Network Manager stepped up to the desk, followed closely by the Deputy Deputy, and with reverential though unexpectant tones asked after the Cross-Over Cable.

The Minion of Chartlins pored over his screen, tapping in arcane Code Numbers, before returning his attention to the heroes, and stating ‘All we’ve got in stock is fifteen and twenty-five metres.’ The Network Manager was taken aback, but rallied bravely to assert ‘But we only need about three metres.’ The Minion was firm, and the Network Manager was forced to accede to his wishes, and enquired as to the price of the Fifteen Metre Cross-Over Cable. The answer was immediate and impossible. ‘£ 14.99’. The Network Manager looked forlornly at his hard-won and meagre ten pounds, and considered crying.

Then inspiration struck. Chartlins was a Bits shop, therefore surely they would have the Bits needed to make a Cross-Over Cable, at the required length of Three Metres. This new line of enquiry bore fruit, with the Minion responding that cable was a mere thirty-five pence per metre, and that the connectors were either one pound each, or a pack of ten for one pound and ninety-nine pence. The Network Manager, delighted, asked the Minion for three metres of cable, and one ten-pack of connectors. The Minion looked up, and declared ‘Sorry mate, we’re out of ten-packs.’ The Network Manager wasn’t to be put off, and said that two single connectors would do. The Minion then dealt his next blow, asking ‘Have you got the necessary Crimping Tool?’ The Network Manager was forced to admit his lack, and enquired as to the price, with dread in his heart. ‘£ 17.99,’ came the reply, the Minion employing its evil streak to the full, ‘And we haven’t got any in stock.’

With no hope or recourse left, the Network Manager and Deputy Deputy returned once again to the Kingdom, and accepting full blame the Network Manager ascended once more in the Smelly Lift to the Analyst’s lair. The Analyst took the news well, all things considered, and declared yet another expedition, this time led by her, with the purpose of returning to Chartlins, this time armed with her Cheque Book, and determined to return with the Cross-Over Cable or not at all.

Leaving the Network in the trust of the Deputy, the Network Manager set out with the Analyst, and once again crossed the threshold to Chartlins. Confronted by a new Minion, the Network Manager placed his request for the Fifteen Metre Cross-Over Cable. This new Minion, slower maybe than his co-Minion but by no means any less evil, calmly stated that such an item was not to be found within the realm of Chartlins.

The Analyst quailed, but the Network Manager stood firm, and looked the Minion straight in the eye. With his clear voice ringing like a bell, the Network Manager insisted that the earlier Minion had checked and they had some, and under his steely gaze the new Minion faltered and then conceded, and went to fetch the cable. The Minion returned, some time later, bearing a bag labelled 'Stereo Headphones,' but clearly actually containing the Cross-Over Cable that had been the goal of the Quest. The Analyst paid, and prize in hand they left.

Once more the Network Manager entered the Kingdom, to be greeted with 'Planning to stay this time?' from the Receptionist, but he knew it was meant in jest, and took he no offence. Pausing only to summon the Deputy, he entered once more the Comms Room.

With the Fifteen Metre Cross-Over Cable in hand, and quite a lot trailing round the floor, the Network Manager approached the Brick, and connected one end to the Internet Connection, and the other to the Brick. Instantly the Link Pulse Light responded, and the Brick acknowledged that the Cross-Over Cable did indeed work, and that it was now connected to the Internet. Choirs of Angels descended, singing songs of great praise, and much rejoicing was rejoiced. The Network Manager and the Deputy clapped each other on the backs, and grinned.

Then it was that the Network Manager noticed that the Brick was not passing the Internet Traffic through to the rest of the Network, and that it was instead swallowing it whole. Armies of Demons ascended, and gave the Angels a good kicking, and then proceeded to Urinate on the Hopes of the Network Manager and Deputy. It was at this time that the Front Door Bell rang, announcing the arrival of the Network Manager's Sister to Give Him A Lift Home, so unplugging the Brick, the Network Manager put things Back How They Were, and Legged It, hoping that the Sage Consultant from Galea Libra Wouldn't Notice.