

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 1 (Label Records are Standard)

[Hex has set off with Ascii from Silicon Valley to rescue Cleo from the clutches of Sheriff Sprocket and 'Wild' Bill Bootstrap, as the first stage of his plan to overthrow the System.]

Hex and Ascii passed through a narrow crossing between the northern peaks of the Sierra Nueva at about midday, and then began to descend. They reached the hills overlooking Sprocket's Hole early that afternoon. For a while Hex lay on his belly, scouting out the land.

There was very little shelter to be seen. He had hoped that he could creep unobserved right up to the smaller hut and wait in the shadows to accost Cleo as she went about her daily work. But he had forgotten how bare the landscape was. Clearly that approach was out of the question. The next best thing was a night-time ambush. He could observe the movements of Cleo and the two androids from his concealed position in the hills during daylight, then storm in under cover of darkness and seize her before either of her jailers had time to react. If it came to a fight he felt confident that the advantage of surprise, and Ascii's bionic teeth, would see them through.

He settled down to watch. Now and then he caught sight of a figure moving between the huts. From a distance it was not easy to identify but he thought it looked like Bill Bootstrap. As sunset approached and there was still no sign of Cleo Hex began to worry. He had only the word of Inspector MacRo that she was to return here. Perhaps Macro's order had never been carried out. Or perhaps it had been a lie, merely to placate him, and she had been executed? After all, the Night Operators had exterminated a whole city of people -- why balk at one more death?

He turned his lenses to full magnification, but the air was too warm and turbulent for a clear view. He dearly wished he could hook up over the Network to a nice fast array-processor and analyze the image in 3D.

Then, just as the sun began to sink behind the mountains, a figure with bare arms, wearing what seemed to be a white blouse, appeared briefly at the window of the larger hut to draw the curtains. He only caught a momentary glimpse; but it had to be Cleo.

The light was fading. He decided to go ahead with the attack. He stood up and whistled softly for Ascii, who had wandered off while Hex was busy surveying the valley. There was no answering bark; but shortly afterwards the dim glow of Ascii's eyes at low power became visible. He had caught a rabbit. He opened his mouth and proudly deposited his prize before his master. Hex was thinking that a succulent leg of rabbit, deep roasted by Ascii's lasers, might not go amiss before their exploit when the creature shook itself upright, stood for a moment petrified then bolted into the night. So much for Ascii's razor-sharp fangs!

"Okay, old friend," said Hex, "we're going in to get Cleo. Remember: this has to be absolutely silent."

He started to crawl down slowly on hands and knees. Ascii followed obediently, close behind. When they were still about 100 metres from the main cabin he halted. To go any closer would expose them to the light and risk detection. Their only choice was to wait till the lights went out, give the androids time to fall asleep, then pounce. Hex prepared for a long vigil. As the stars wheeled imperceptibly overhead, he grew colder. He rubbed his hands to bring back some life into them.

Then he felt something metallic nudge him in the ribs from behind.

"All right," he whispered to Ascii, "don't get impatient. We can't go in until they put out the lights."

"You're going in right now," said a gruff voice.

Hex turned round. He found himself facing Bill Bootstrap who held an old fashioned shotgun aimed directly at his midriff.

"Tell your hound that if he gives any trouble I'll blow you to bits."

Hex swallowed hard, raised his arms above his head and said to Ascii in as unruffled a manner as he could: "don't try anything rash, old boy."

He was manhandled roughly to the doorway where a sharp shove in the ribs propelled him staggering into the lamplight. Inside sat Davy Sprocket, a rifle on his lap. Hex blinked. There was no Cleo.

Sheriff Sprocket stood up and trained his firearm on Hex. Ascii entered meekly, followed by Bill Bootstrap who slammed the door.

"Our orders are to keep you here under guard till the arrival of Commander Kludge," stated Sheriff Sprocket. "The first thing you have to do is power down your dog."

"Impossible!" protested Hex, "his memory is volatile."

"Either that or we shoot you. We were told to bring you in dead if we couldn't get you alive."

Reluctantly Hex bent over his bemused dog and initiated the emergency power-fail procedure. There was a lump in his throat as Ascii finally whirred to a stop. Now they were really trapped.

"Good," said Sprocket, "we can all sit down now."

Hex took a stool next to Ascii's recumbent form, while Sprocket eased himself into a rocking chair across the room, still holding the rifle. Bill Bootstrap propped his gun against the doorpost, and Hex watched as he went outside again. When he returned a few moments later his pipe was in his mouth. He picked up his shotgun and seated himself at their hash table, puffing contentedly.

"Where's Cleo?" asked Hex, breaking the heavy silence.

"Good question," replied Sprocket. "You seen her recently Bill?"

"Now let me see," answered the other, "Cleo?" He stared at the ceiling in mock puzzlement. "If I recall rightly she used to work here once."

"That's the one," responded Sprocket, grinning as Bootstrap handed him the pipe.

Hex made no further attempt at conversation.

- Can this really be the end for the Kid and Ascii?
- You'll wish it was when you read next week's breathtaking episode.