

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 2 (A Mental Block)

[Hex has been taken prisoner at Sprocket's Hole and forced at gunpoint to switch off Ascii. Now he awaits his fate with resignation.]

Sheriff Sprocket accepted the pipe from his partner and took a couple of deep breaths. A look of satisfaction settled on his features. Hex averted his eyes and sat with his head cast down, his mind so empty of ideas for escape it might have been running the null job. He gazed at the floorboards in silence, losing all track of time.

Suddenly he was aware of a monotonous rhythmic drone. He raised his eyes to look at the androids. There was Sprocket, slumped deep in the rocking chair with the rifle still cradled in his arms, fast asleep and snoring like an old walrus. Bill Bootstrap had actually slid off the bench and knelt against the table, his chin propped up by it, with a beatific smile on his face. The clay pipe had fallen from his lips and splintered into pieces on the floor. Beside it lay his shotgun.

At that moment, as Hex gaped in astonishment at this golden opportunity for deliverance, the door creaked gently open and Cleo crept into the room. In spite of his amazement, Hex was the first to speak.

"You risked your life," he said.

"So did you when you dragged me clear of the mob on the reservation," she answered, "and by coming here."

"How did you do it?"

"I knew when I overheard the Network news that they would be expecting you, so I changed the hash coding algorithm in Bootstrap's n-dimensional dope vector. He got something stronger than he bargained for. Now he's gone into a hibernate state." She broke off as Davy Sprocket's body was racked by a particularly convulsive snore. "Better get packing," she urged Hex, "we can't sit about talking all night."

"But it will take hours to power up Ascii safely."

"By which time Kludge and his inquisitors will be here. They're due early in the morning."

"Yes, but if I just switch the juice on again he might have a head crash, or worse."

"If you don't want to risk it we'll have to carry him."

Hex looked down at Ascii's prone body, weighing the best part of a hundred kilograms, and scratched his chin. "I've had an idea," he said after a moment's thought. "Is there any wire in this godforsaken hole?"

"Well, there's a 25-way cable leading from the teletype."

"Fine! This will only take a few minutes."

Hex went over to Bill Bootstrap and gingerly extracted from his limp hand the leather pouch containing all his worldly possessions, which the android had confiscated. In it were the blueprint for an anti-data 'black noise' generator and the 40-pin microprocessor that Null had bequeathed to him. At the bottom was his soldering iron. He took it out and moved over to the archaic teletype.

Cleo watched in puzzlement and some impatience as he ripped out the data lead and brought it over to Ascii. "What's the idea?" she enquired.

"It's safe enough to turn on his motors," explained Hex, "but I'm worried about his logic circuits. I didn't have time to go through the proper shut-down procedures, you see, and his memory may have been scrambled. So I'm going to drive him by remote control. Then when we have time I can check all his circuits and restart him in the normal way."

"You mean you're going to rig him up as a peripheral?" she asked.

"Exactly. I wonder if you could give me a hand," Hex said holding out the connector. "If you look on the back of my head you'll see a socket marked 'auxiliary I/O port'. Plug it in there."

Cleo plugged it in and Hex finished soldering the connection on Ascii. "Right," he said, "now before we try it out, you collect their weapons." Cleo carefully prised the rifle from under Sprocket's forearm, then picked up Bootstaap's shotgun.

"Okay, stand clear," advised Hex: "here we go!"

Cleo edged towards the door. Hex touched the live wire to Ascii's batteries. For a fraction of a second nothing happened. Then a red warning indicator flashed on Ascii's nose and the hut was filled with the screech of a siren.

"Motherboard!" swore Hex, throwing open the lid between Ascii's ears. His hand dived in and flicked a switch. There was peace once more. "I forgot to switch off the audio alarm," he apologized to Cleo.

"So I noticed," she replied.

Throughout it all Sprocket's regular snoring had continued unabated.

"It seemed louder than it was," added Hex in self justification. "Anyway he's ready to roll now. Could you please open the door for us."

Cleo pulled it open and made her exit into the night. Then Ascii jerked into motion under Hex's guidance and the pair of them, linked by two yards of wire, lurched drunkenly towards the door. Mercifully, they missed all the obstacles in their path.

When they rejoined Cleo outside Hex turned to shut the door behind them, then paused as if he had forgotten something.

"Wait a minute," he said, and pulled out the data cord again. Before Cleo could voice her objections he had reentered the hut and strode over to the now-defunct terminal in the corner. He switched it off-line, and typed one word.

BYE

- Would Cleo be better off without her 'rescuers'?
- Read next week's issue for her own opinions on the subject.