

# ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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## Block 5 (Love Is Just a Block Away)

[While Hex and Cleo are asleep in their hideout high up in the Sierra Nueva, Sheriff Sprocket and his deputy meet a sticky end for letting them go free.]

When Hex awoke it was already pitch dark and very cold, so cold that he turned on his metabolism booster. He raised himself onto his elbows and tried to look around.

"You all right?" came Cleo's voice out of the night. She had heard him stirring.

Hex turned towards the sound. "I'm fine. How are you?"

"Freezing."

He realized that she had given him back his greatcoat. "You should have kept this," he said. "It gets pretty cold up here once the sun goes down, and we must have slept all day and half way through the night."

"Some of us must have," said Cleo.

Hex rose and groped towards Ascii's motionless body. Before long Cleo saw two red lights coming towards her. "Let's get back in the tunnel," Hex proposed. "Ascii can warm it up for us."

They hung a makeshift curtain, consisting chiefly of Hex's coat, across the entrance to keep out the draught, then settled down to talk. Hex left Ascii glaring at the wall, lighting it to a dull red glow with the heat of his lasers.

"What we have to do," he announced, "is to find some supporters. On our own we are no match for the System; but if we can find some disgruntled androids to join us we could form a resistance cell."

"Well, I know my elder sister Lambda is pretty fed up, and she works at the San Guine research lab which is not too far from here. Why don't we go and get her?"

"We really want androids, who know their way around the System."

"She is an android," was Cleo's indignant reply. "So is her boyfriend, Zap: he's supposed to be a machine-code wizard. But he's always getting into trouble."

"Zap? You don't mean Zap Zapper, the logic bomber?"

"I think that's his name."

Hex was truly impressed. "You're talking about the Zap Zapper, telecommunications freak and programmer extraordinary -- the one who wrote 'schizophrenia divides and rules OK'

on the central master accounts file. We could certainly do with someone like that. He's a legend in his own time. I'm surprised he's still at large."

"Well, they've confined him to some menial job -- maintaining old Cobol programs, I believe -- that's why he is so discontented."

"Great! Do you think they would agree to join us?"

"I'm sure I can persuade Lambda and I have a feeling that if she comes so will he."

"That's settled then," declared Hex with an air of finality, "we set off for San Guine tomorrow night."

"No. Let's go right away. This place gives me the creeps."

Hex peered out through a crack in the awning. It was already growing light. "What? Travel in broad daylight? You must be insane."

"We're on the run, aren't we? So we have to keep moving."

"Yes, but I could use the day to get Ascii really shipshape again. And I want some time to check out that microprocessor which Null gave me. It may have some very valuable information stored in it."

"We don't have time. If we just lie back and take it easy they'll catch up with us. We're only a day's march away from Sprocket's Hole."

"It's all very well for you, but my alpha-ratio is approaching 0.9. The critical loading is 0.95 and if it goes above 0.96 my brain will seize up. I wasn't designed for this sort of existence: I'll have to implement some forgetting routines."

"Huh," expostulated Cleo scornfully, "I thought you mechanical men were so superior. I'm glad I never got cybernated."

Stung by this taunt, Hex was about to make an insulting remark about her place in the evolutionary scale when he checked the impulse, realizing that they could not afford anger. "Look," he compromised, "I'll just do the very minimum to get Ascii fixed up again and off-load some of my temporary files. Then we'll go, even if it's still light."

Cleo agreed without further ado, and he set to work on his bionic dog.

One by one, Hex went through the diagnostic routines, while Cleo watched over his shoulder. When he was finally satisfied that every circuit board was functioning correctly he rolled Ascii outside and asked Cleo to stand clear. He began the cold-start procedure by switching on the power supply and pressing the reset button.

Ascii cocked one ear, sniffed the air and went bounding down towards the pond, where some birds had gathered to wash themselves. With a great squawking the whole flock took to the air and flew off. Ascii stood under the monkey puzzle tree barking up at a pair which had taken refuge in its branches.

"He looks all right," said Hex. "Now I'll just do a quick file purge and then we'll be ready to go."

Soon they were clambering up the steep tunnel. With a little help from Ascii, pushing at the rear, they emerged at length from their secret resting place, somewhat breathless and very muddy. It was still early morning.

After they had been walking down the hill for a while in silence Cleo asked, a propos of nothing, "what's Simula like?"

"Eh?"

"Simula. What's she like?"

Hex was caught off balance. "Well," he began, "she's a block-structured high-level general-purpose compiler producing relocatable object code ...."

"No. I mean what does she look like?"

"She has blue eyes and blonde hair. She's Scandinavian. Why? It means nothing to you. Why are you so curious?"

"You kept calling her name in your sleep, that's all. It made me interested."

"Let's talk about something else."

- Have we heard the last of Simula?
- Don't bet on it.