

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 7 (The Blocking Factor)

[Hex and Cleo have stolen the motor-bicycle of the eccentric James Hock, leaving him spluttering in the ditch, and are now on their way at top speed to a rendezvous with Ascii in San Guine.]

As they approached the city the comments from the robot drivers of the hover-transport which they overtook became more and more ribald. They realized that they couldn't risk getting stuck in the city's automatic traffic control system. Fortunately the research establishment was situated some way out of San Guine, so they decided to take a detour avoiding the town centre.

They came to the southwest corner of the compound just before sunset, free-wheeling the last 400 metres. There they dumped the bike under a bush -- doing their best to camouflage its presence. Ascii was waiting for them, exactly as planned. It was a beautiful evening, warm but not hot, with a gentle breeze ruffling Cleo's hair. They sat concealed by the undergrowth awaiting darkness and listened to the chirrupping of cicadas.

When it was dark, Ascii chewed a hole in the fence. They left him there to guard their exit and walked stealthily to the central piazza. There a fountain played, lit up by many-coloured lights from under the water. A few groups of androids laughed and chatted at tables around the pool, relaxing after a hard day's coding. Hex and Cleo strolled up to an unoccupied table and sat there inconspicuously. After they felt they had merged into the background they got up as casually as they could and sauntered over to the large sliding plate-glass doorway. "Lambda has a cell in C-wing," whispered Cleo as they strode into the hall and towards the lifts. They had wanted to wait for an empty one, but a robot saw them and held the doors open.

"Which floor?" he asked.

"Floor D please," replied Cleo immediately. Hex breathed a sigh of relief inwardly: she had remembered not to use decimal.

The journey seemed endless. Neither could think of anything to say to the robot, who for his part stood inscrutably by the elevator controls. At last they stepped out onto the plush carpets of the thirteenth floor.

Cleo led Hex quickly past rows of doors, each identical save for a machine-readable bar-coded nameplate. Eventually she knocked on one. A few moments later it was opened by a young female android. She looked similar to her sister but somewhat older, fuller and altogether more womanly -- making Cleo by comparison seem a little skinny. Hex liked the look of her at once.

"Cleo!" she expostulated. "What are you doing here?"

"No time to explain. Can you tell us where Zap is?"

"He's probably in the machine room."

"Could you lead us there?"

"Just a minute," said Lambda, eyeing Hex suspiciously. "Who's this?"

"Don't worry," replied Cleo. "He's just the Hexadecimal Kid."

The door slammed in their faces.

"Come on," pleaded Cleo, "don't be like that."

"Go away," came Lambda's voice from inside.

"Please."

There was a pause. Hex glanced anxiously up and down the corridor. Then Lambda opened her door ajar again. "Do you realize I could be de-compiled just for speaking to you?"

"We need your help," said Cleo. "We're going to set up a resistance movement."

Lambda shook her head but said nothing. In the end she relented. "All right," she sighed. "You're mad, but you are my sister."

Staunching Cleo's effusive thanks, she led them to the fire escape stairs. They clanked down fourteen flights of steel spiral stairway to the basement, then along to a pair of swing doors marked 'Machine Room: No Admittance'. Lambda pushed them apart.

Sitting inside at the console was a dark-skinned android wearing a knitted woollen cap and sun-glasses. He was too immersed in what he was doing to hear their entrance. As they approached him, Hex could overhear what he was saying to the VDU.

"Pow! Another Klingon bites the dust. Phasers locked on target. Fire the photon torpedoes! Zonk!"

Lambda tapped him on the shoulder. "Zap, meet Cleo, my sister; and this is the Hexadecimal Kid."

Zap jumped up, pushed his shades over his forehead and shook both of them by the hand. "Man! So you're the Hexadecimal Kid. We've been hearing plenty about you lately."

"They want us to leave with them right now to form a rebel group up in the hills," stated Lambda with disapproval.

"Leave?" demanded Zap. "You must be joking: I still have five Klingon warships to destroy."

With that he turned back to the display tube and they watched with fascination but also mounting anxiety as the huge starships hurtled across deep space only to explode in multi-coloured pyrotechnic fireballs when Zap's simulated photon torpedoes struck them amidships.

When he had saved the galaxy he rose and turned to his audience. "I wrote that Startrek program myself. It's so good I can't bear to leave a game unfinished," he announced modestly.

"We want you to help us crash the System," said Hex.

"Okay. Let's go."

"You're willing?" asked Lambda, incredulous.

"Sure. Why not? Sounds like a bundle of fun."

There was no time for further discussion. They retraced their steps to the ground floor where Lambda pointed out a fire exit.

"Don't come with us now," suggested Hex. "You can use the main entrance. Why don't you go back to your rooms, collect what you need, lock your doors and meet us outside? We'll wait near the front gate."

The others assented, leaving Hex and Cleo to stalk across the grass to the waiting Ascii. Then they went over to the bush where the motorbike was hidden, congratulating themselves on how smoothly it had gone.

Suddenly the beam of a headlight sliced the darkness, temporarily dazzling them.

"I've got a bone to pick with you."

It was James Hock, sitting on his bike again, with a law enforcement robot on either side.

- Will Hex get zapped?
- Has Zap been Hexed?
- No prizes for guessing the answers.