

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 8 (Block Mode Transfer)

[Hex and Cleo have slipped into the research centre at San Guine, persuaded Lambda and Zap to work with them and slipped out again unobserved. At the bush where their getaway motorbike is hidden, however, they are confronted by its irate rightful owner, with two law enforcement robots.]

Hex took one look at the armed robots. "We surrender," he said. "Don't shoot." He didn't want Ascii to make a suicidal attempt at resistance; but Ascii had already disappeared into the thicket.

"Come with us," replied James Hock.

They followed him to the main gate. There a sentry challenged him.

"I have come to turn these criminals over to your security service," said Hock. "They stole my motorcycle. The girl is a human and I suspect the android is some sort of drop-out."

Before the guard could reply an imposing figure strode towards them. It was Zap. "Mr Hock, I presume," he said. "I understand you've had some trouble with these two renegades."

"Quite so," replied Hock. "They assaulted me and left me by the roadside. I want to report them to your security officer."

"I am acting chief security officer," said Zap, flourishing his ID-card authoritatively. "I'll take charge of them personally. These are not just common thieves; they are suspected of belonging to the Hexadecimal Kid's terrorist gang. You may not be aware that a substantial reward is on offer for information leading to their arrest. The System will be indebted to you."

Hock beamed. "I'm not called Add Hock for nothing."

"What are you called Add Hock for?" enquired Cleo.

"Because I can put two and two together, stupid," he retorted.

Cleo decided no further comment was necessary.

"Now," put in Zap, "I'm afraid we'll have to take the motorbike in for forensic tests. You can of course stay here, at least until some transport can be arranged."

"That's very hospitable," replied Hock. "As it happens I was on my way to give a demonstration of my word-processing package to your software manager, but as these hooligans tore up my source listings I'll need a while to make it presentable again."

"Fine, then, just follow me," said Zap, and added to the law enforcement robots: "You can go now, thank you, we'll handle this ourselves."

Hex hardly dared sneak a glance over his shoulder to see if they had obeyed Zap's order. But when he did, sure enough, there they were, trotting obediently into the distance.

Once inside the main building Zap put his arm round Hock's shoulder and began chatting expansively about the virtues of the PUFTA system, about which he appeared quite well informed. They quickly reached Floor D and made their way to what Hex seemed to recall was Lambda's door. Zap unlocked it and ushered him in. "This is your overnight accomodation. I hope you find it comfortable. If you need, anything, just request it on the viewdata terminal. Now excuse me for a moment: I must deliver these two to the basement cells for interrogation." He bade Hock goodnight and shut the door.

"Easy does it," whispered Zap as they walked back to the lift.

Lambda was waiting for them in the foyer. All four of them marched out together. Hex noticed that Zap had unfastened his holster and drawn out a terminator, which he brandished menacingly in Hex's direction.

"Any trouble from you," he called out loud enough for the sentries to hear as they approached the gate, "and you'll both get zapped."

Both guards stood out to check their progress.

"Orders to take these prisoners to Galactic Headquarters," explained Zap, pre-empting their questions.

"Whose orders?"

"My orders," replied Zap, pointing his terminator directly at the questioner.

The other sentry moved fast, but not as fast as Hex who grabbed his blast-gun and stuck five digits in his interface before he could fire. Seeing this, the first one dropped his blaster and raised his hands in the air. They hustled him through the gateway.

"Where's the bike?" asked Zap.

"Follow me," replied Hex.

When they got there, Ascii, who had eluded Hock's searchlight and lain low since their capture, was still waiting. They tied up the sentinel and put Cleo and Lambda on the motorcycle.

"We'll go on foot," said Hex, "and meet you at the inter-block gap. Take care."

"See you soon," called Cleo as the machine spluttered into motion.

Hex, Zap and Ascii jogged cross-country through the night. They hadn't much time, or breath, for conversation, but in the middle of the night Zap asked "do you think they let us get away?" to which Hex had no reply. Reflecting on it, though, he did think it had gone just a bit too easily.

By morning they were high up once more in the Sierra Nueva. They arrived before the girls and Hex led Zap down the secret tunnel. The last few metres, however, were blocked by an earthfall. Ascii dug, while Hex and Zap ferried stones laboriously up to the surface, to clear a passage. When they finally broke through, Hex was unprepared for what he saw.

The carpet of green moss had turned red; the tree by what had been the pond was just a charred black stump like an outsize matchstick, and the pool itself was no more than a muddy brown puddle. Hex turned to Zap. "This place has been bombed while we were away."

Zap glanced at the rock walls of the crater which were glazed like porcelain confirming Hex's surmise. "They must have used psycho-logic to predict your movements. There's enough data on you in the Database for them to work out an extrapolation formula. The only question is: why were they late?"

"That's just it," said Hex. "Cleo persuaded me to leave early. They obviously haven't got her on file."

"And they obviously didn't expect an android to change his plans for a mere human," replied Zap with a mischievous smile.

"I hope she gets back soon," was Hex's response.

- Were they wise to leave Cleo and Lambda to fend for themselves?
- No.