# ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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**Block 9  (Roadblock)**

[Thanks to Zap's coolness Hex and Cleo have bluffed their way out of a sticky position in San Guine. Zap, Hex and Ascii have jogged back to their mountain retreat, leaving Cleo and Lambda to join them on the motorbike -- only to find their hideout blasted by an aerial bombardment.]

As soon as they had waved goodbye to Zap and Hex, Cleo opened up the throttle and sped away from the research centre. Lambda clung on in the passenger seat as Cleo hurled the machine round the corners of the narrow lanes like a maniac. At each bend Lambda closed her eyes and prayed that no oncoming traffic would meet them as they hurtled round.

After only a few minutes of this grand-prix-style driving Cleo surprised her sister by slowing down and drawing up gracefully by the kerb.

"What's this then?" asked Lambda "a pit stop?"

Cleo held up her hand. "The bike is going like a dream."

"Exactly," replied Lambda, "nightmarish."

"Wait till you hear the bad news," continued Cleo, "first, we're running short of fuel; second, I don't know where we are."

"How about asking a policeman?" suggested Lambda wryly.

Further repartee was cut short by the banshee wail of a siren in the distance.

"They're after us already," said Cleo. "Quick! Back on the bike."

Black tyre marks seared into the tarmac as the powerful machine leapt forward. The speedometer needle moved smartly up to maximum and stayed there. They soon reached a stretch of flat open road. Cleo simply put her head down and pushed the engine for all it was worth.

From time to time Lambda cricked her neck to get a look at their pursuers. At first all she could see was a flashing red light but, slowly, inexorably, the sleek shape of a Cray-4 supercharged datamarang with its twin streamlined hulls emerged from the darkness, levitating just above the roadway on magnetic fields.

"That thing," she thought gloomily, "can go at over 10 thousand mips. It's limited only by the speed of light. We've had it now."

Suddenly there was a screech as Cleo applied the brakes. Lambda looked ahead. In front, racing up to meet them, was a parked double-decker unibus blocking the road, surrounded by scores of armed Error Squad riot police. At the last moment, when collision seemed

inevitable, Cleo spun the handlebars and veered off the road. Headlights off, she drove through a field in pitch blackness. Ripe corn brushed against them as they jolted along.

"They can't follow us," she called out to Lambda. "The datamarang's microprocessor-controlled steering gear won't work outside the Network traffic control system."

Lambda didn't bother to ask her how she knew. She just clenched her jaws and held tight, her bones jarred by each unseen obstacle they surmounted. Eventually Cleo stopped and switched off the motor. They listened intently for the sound of pursuit, but their ears were bathed only by the pure cool stillness of the night.

"Where did you learn to drive? Monte Carlo?" enquired Lambda.

"We all drove like that on the reservation," replied Cleo. "You should see me when I'm really pushed."

Talk of the reservation reminded Lambda of their parents. "When I saw you back at San Guine," she began, "well, I mean, I had been worrying about you, and Mum and Dad. We heard that Silicon Valley was vitrified."

"It was. Everyone was killed -- Mum, Dad, everybody."

There was a pause.

"I didn't know," said Lambda.

"No, you didn't."

"How did you survive?"

"I wasn't there. I had been sent to work for two crooked androids. It's a long story."

The sky was beginning to light up with the dawn. To save fuel, and keep as quiet as possible, they wheeled the bike. When they had passed through a small copse of trees they came to the edge of a stream, beyond which they could see another road. Cleo wanted to carry the bike over, but they couldn't lift it, so, after wandering up and down the bank to look for a ford, they picked the shallowest place and waded through, rolling the bike across with them.

"I hope the water didn't get into its tank," said Cleo when they had reached the road and were re-mounting. Her fears were groundless: she gave the starter pedal one kick and the motor purred sweetly.

They drove off, this time at a sedate pace. At the first bend Cleo leant over to turn left and swung the wheel deftly with her practised hands. But this time the machine didn't respond. The back wheels drifted into an uncontrollable skid. In a brief moment while time was frozen, Lambda felt herself hanging suspended in mid-air. Then the road rushed up to hit her. There was a sickening thud as she landed heavily right on top of Cleo. The bike slewed away, cartwheeling several times in ungainly acrobatics. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion, like a film.

"Are you still alive?" asked Cleo. She had stood up at once and was gazing around in a daze, apparently not seeing anything. Her legs had been badly gashed: ugly folds of skin flapped from both knees.

Lambda was winded, When she recovered her breath she said: "Yes, I'm all right. You broke my fall."

"Where are we?" Cleo asked.

"I don't know. We're lost," replied Lambda. "We're had a motorcycle accident. It looks as though you need a doctor." She began to administer first aid. Having guided Cleo to a sitting position, she covered her with her coat, took off her blouse and tore it into strips for bandages.

"Wait here a minute," she said, "I'm going to the river to get fresh water to wash your wounds."

Looking down on her own bloodstained legs brought home to Cleo the shock realization that she had been injured. For a moment her eyes were sharp with concentration as the pain shook her out of her dazed state. Then she keeled over in a dead faint.

- Is this the end of the road?
- You ain't seen nuthin' yet.