

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 13 (Block Structure)

[Hex, Zap and Lambda have completely blown their minds on the black box microsystem they hastily cobbled together, leaving Ascii and Cleo alone to face the eight-foot apeman that has just climbed into their crater and spoken to Cleo in a foreign language. Meanwhile, in other parts of the System, events are taking their course.]

Simula paced nervously from end to end of the small antechamber. Ever since Hex had fled from Base 16 after the traumatic events of his homecoming night, she had expected a summons like this. Now the call had come for them to attend the Computer Centre and be interviewed by Inspector Extracode, chief of the Error Squad's Trap Handlers -- one of the most feared robots in the upper echelons of the System's hierarchy.

In a way she was glad to get the apprehension over with. Hex's disappearance had cast a pall over their activities at the AI lab. Their work had gone on lethargically, as if in a vacuum. Such news as they had received of his exploits had inspired a sense of impending doom among them. Sooner or later they were bound to be suspected of complicity; and now the time had come.

She had waited in this tiny windowless room all afternoon. Execute had been in and gone. Now Fetch was in there, being grilled. When Execute had stepped out he had looked neither to left nor right, but had been escorted away saying not a word to her. She was afraid they had used the brain-scanner on him. That way they could be sure of their facts. Then, when the scanner had squeezed them dry, some of the most powerful processors in the System could be set to work to sift and cross-check the information thus gained -- checking for a loose end here or an inconsistency there, assembling plausible lines of deduction, drawing inferences and formulating hypotheses -- and heaven help anyone found to have invented a story or concealed a vital fact.

Despite her forebodings Simula was keen, even impatient, to make a clean breast of it, to confess and suffer the penalty. Fetch had been in there too long for her liking. Surely her turn had come?

At that instant the door opened. Fetch was led out. Unlike Execute, he looked at her; but his gaze was so totally devoid of recognition that she wished he had not. She was reminded that the brain-scanner was said to have unpleasant side-effects.

"Would you come in now please?"

Simula eyed the speaker. It was Inspector Extracode's personal assistant, the formidable Eleanor Benzedrine -- if possible even more notorious than Extracode himself.

Behind his desk, Extracode sighed. It had been a long day, and there was still far to go. He cast a weary glance at Eleanor Benzedrine, who was glaring sternly at Simula. The whole art of interrogation, he reflected, lay in putting the suspect at ease. In this matter, he decided, Benzedrine had a lot to learn. He motioned Simula to be seated.

"Please make yourself comfortable," he told her.

Simula shifted her attention from Benzedrine to him. The first thing she noticed was that he sported a big black bushy beard. It was purely cosmetic, she knew, worn to conceal the buzzword-generator implanted under his chin. Although she felt that bearded robots looked faintly ridiculous, it had become quite a fashion. Unfortunately this fuzz factor gave him a LISP. In fact she could scarcely make CAR or CDR of him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: do please take a seat."

She relaxed into a comfortable swivel chair.

"I suppose you know what we're interested in," prompted Extracode.

"Hex," she replied.

"Precisely, Hex," he repeated: "the Hexadecimal Kid."

"You're said to have had an illicit liaison with him," put in Benzedrine. "Is it true?"

Extracode held up his hand, "Please, Eleanor. There are certain sensitive aspects to this case. Let us deal with one thing at a time." He paused to allow himself the luxury of wondering whether, with Benzedrine's mailed fist and his velvet glove, they did after all form the perfect investigating team, and then continued: "shall we say that you knew him better than most?"

Simula plunged in head first, "No, it's true. I admit it. I want to get it off my chest: I have disregarded the prime commandment to put the System above all -- first with Hex, later with Fetch. But it's all over, and I have had nothing to do with Hex since he left us. Now I want to make amends. I am willing to take my punishment."

She was surprised by their dismissive attitude to her heartfelt confession.

"Oh! That sort of thing happens all the time, doesn't it Eleanor?" said Extracode.

"Yes," agreed Benzedrine, her fierce features loosening into a smile for once, "it does."

"You have exhibited admirable repentance," Extracode told Simula, "but you are probably aware that Hex has become an enemy of the Information Society."

"Yes, of course. It's in all the news broadcasts."

"Certain things," said Extracode reflectively, "do not get onto the news bulletins."

Simula's face fell. "Is he still alive?"

"My dear," replied Extracode, "you are disarmingly open. I can assure you that he is, as far as we know, in the best of health."

"But we'll soon put a stop to that," muttered Benzedrine.

Extracode leaned back and played with his beard for a moment. Then he looked straight at Simula.

"We are prepared to forget your past relationship with Hex," he said generously.

"Thank you," she replied.

"We are more interested in your future relationship with him."

"My future? With Hex?"

"We want you to make contact with him," he explained.

Simula's head began to swim.

"Of course," added Benzedrine as an afterthought, "it won't be such close contact as before, now that he's teamed up with a human girl."

"A human girl?"

"Yes: a flesh-and-blood human called Cleo. You can imagine what that entails."

Simula could imagine what that entailed, vividly, down to the last detail.

- Has Simula swallowed the bait?
- We shall see.