

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 15 (Jailhouse Block)

[Hex and his friends are now trapped inside their crater with the talking Sasquatch. While they ponder their fate, Extracode is finishing off his interrogation of Simula.]

Simula was still trying to digest what Benzedrine had told her when Extracode's voice penetrated her private thoughts.

"That will be all for now."

"Oh, right," she replied uncertainly.

"Miss Benzedrine will conduct you to your quarters."

"Quarters?" The word had conjured up in her guilty mind a picture of a prisoner being hanged, drawn and quartered.

"You will remain with us for the time being. I trust you will find your stay a pleasant one," elucidated the inspector.

Benzedrine led her out, placid like a lamb to the slaughterhouse, and took her to a wing of the building where a little room had been prepared. There wasn't a peephole in the door or any bars on the window, but the idea of a prison did somehow suggest itself to her.

When Benzedrine left, Extracode rose and went to a bookshelf behind his desk. He selected a volume and pulled it out, not to read but to activate the unlocking mechanism which caused his bookcase to swivel round revealing an entrance to a large well-lit room, the far end of which was divided off by a glass partition. In the further half were banks upon banks of the latest electronic equipment. At the near end sat two robots behind a table whose surface was in fact an illuminated chart of the Sierra Nueva region, holographically contoured. The nearer of the two nodded in his direction and beckoned him in.

"Ah Derek! The third member of our panel," said the robot. "Do join us."

The speaker was Ivor Glitch, Database Administrator. Next to him sat Commander Herman Kludge, the Dynamic Debugger at whose hands Sheriff Sprocket had met a sticky end. Together with Extracode they constituted the Committee On Bug Rectifying Action (COBRA) and their brief -- the detection and correction of errors throughout the System -- made them one of the most powerful groups in the land. In fact in a case such as this, the 'hot pursuit' of a rogue android, the only authority that could countermand their orders was the Universal Network Operating System (UNOS) itself.

The chairmanship of this committee rotated on a monthly basis. This month Glitch was in the chair, as previously Kludge had been. Extracode's turn at presiding would come next.

Extracode took his place on Glitch's left. Standing in front of them on the carpet looking damp and bedraggled after cycling through a downpour, was James Hock.

"I hope you had a productive afternoon," said Glitch as Extracode sat down.

"I think I have," he replied. "I believe I've got the lead we've been seeking."

"Excellent. Well, just to put you in the picture, this is Mr Hock who has had some valuable things to tell us. Apparently he was waylaid by the Kid and the human, who stole his motorbike. He tracked them down to San Guine and apprehended them. Unfortunately they escaped -- with help from inside the System. Then the conspirators split up and Cleo, with one of the traitors, eluded our patrol which gave chase on a Cray-4."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Extracode.

"I needn't tell you what a serious breach of security this represents," continued Glitch. "But while our forces were floundering Mr Hock had the presence of mind to set out to rediscover his vehicle, which they had used in their getaway. He found it abandoned by the roadside near the Sierra Nueva foothills -- just here," he said, tapping the map-table. "Mr Hock also consented to a mind-probe which has supplied us with information about Cleo, on whose behaviour patterns we have so far had inadequate data to establish a predictive profile. We have fed this into the Psycho-Evaluative Estimation Program and are expecting the results in a few minutes."

Extracode was less than thrilled. Somehow he resented the triumph of the soulless formulae of psychonomic calculus over the seasoned detective's insight.

Glitch turned from him and spoke to Hock. "Your efforts, Mr Hock, will not go unrewarded."

Hock purred inwardly. Even the indignity of the mind-probe had been worth it for the promise he had obtained -- a trial of his text-processing package.

Just then a bell sounded on the red scrambler modem by Glitch's right hand, he reached down and plugged it into the decryption socket behind his ear. Extracode watched the orange carrier-signal lamp flickering. When it finished Glitch spoke first to Hock.

"You may go now."

"What about the installation of my string-processor?"

"Later, later! This is an emergency."

Hock made his obeisance with an elaborate pantomime of bowing and scraping. When the door finally closed on him Glitch spoke hurriedly.

"Word has just come through that Hex and his guerrillas are holed up in the crater of a dormant volcano in the Sierra Nueva. They are under observation by two trained animal-handlers. Kludge, I want you to take a detachment of storm troopers up there right now."

Kludge rose, saluted and clicked his heels.

Extracode felt a twinge of regret. He should have been glad that the guesswork was over and Hex's days were numbered, but in fact he was rather annoyed that his subtle scheme for setting Simula as bait to catch the Kid, based as it was on an intuitive grasp of the nice

balance of human and inhuman motivations, would not now be needed. His painstaking labour would never now come to fruition.

"Remember," added Glitch as Kludge reached the door, "I don't care about the rest but I want the Kid alive."

"Alive?" queried Kludge.

"The high-level goal-coordinator has issued a directive: get him, but get him alive."

This was news to Extracode too. The goal-coordinator was a permanently resident routine that sorted out competition between System priorities -- the conscience and Supreme Court of the System rolled into one. The fact that it didn't simply want to crush Hex was intriguing.

- Has the hardware gone soft?
- More firmware next week.