

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 20 (Blockhead)

[Having dispatched Ascii on a do-or-die mission to Fort Ranfour with Dr Null's contagious gigotic induction program embedded in his microcode, Hex rejoins his fellow outlaws at Sprocket's Hole. In the small hours his repose is shattered by a signal on his personal radio. Simula is trying to make contact.]

"Hex? Are you receiving me?" came Simula's enquiring voice again, crystal-clear through the ether.

"Receiving you loud and clear. Over."

There was a crackle of static, then her reply: "I can't hear you too well. Can you increase the power of your transmission?"

Hex hesitated. His transmitter was for local use as a walkie-talkie in and around Base 16. So was hers, but evidently she had got hold of an amplifier. If there was one thing the System would like it was a nice strong radio beam to take a fix on.

He looked around at his companions asleep on the wooden floor. To give away his own position was bad enough, but if he were caught they would fall with him.

"Hex?"

If it had been Fetch or Execute, he might have suspected a trick and shut up. But Simula? Surely she was incapable of treachery. His reply went out at normal strength: "What is it?"

"Listen," she responded instantly, "I still can't hear you very well, but this is an emergency. I'm being held captive at Fort Ranfour. They want to use me to lure you in. I must warn you: don't come even if I ask you. Do you understand?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't on any account listen to any further broadcasts I make. They may torture me and I may agree to ask you to meet me somewhere; but IGNORE it! OK?"

"Torture you?" Hex's mind was reeling.

"It's no good," she said, "I still can't hear you clearly. Just remember what I've said. Don't listen to me after tonight, no matter what. Bye Hex. Good luck."

Hex boosted his transmitter to full power. "Simula! Wait!"

"No. It's not safe to go on. Someone might eavesdrop. Over and out."

"Simula, I have to tell you something too. Don't go yet."

But all his calls were unavailing. She had closed down for the night.

He switched off his FM set. This bolt from the blue had stirred up a gaggle of unresolved questions; but none more insistent than this: Why did he have the receiver on in the first place? Why, since leaving Base 16, had he kept that channel permanently open? There was really only one answer.

He rose to his feet, careful not to disturb the other sleepers. He could see only one way ahead. Simula had warned him not to contact her; but he hadn't had time to tell her that Ascii was on his way, primed to destroy Fort Ranfour. As soon as Ascii arrived the whole System would go gigotic, and in that conflagration Simula would undoubtedly perish. He owed it to her: he must go to Fort Ranfour and bring her out alive.

He tiptoed outside. It was another sharp cool desert night. The stars were precise pinpoints. He felt wide awake and raring to go. He walked away from his comrades with no real thought for the consequences of his action.

His mind turned to Cleo. At 16, he decided, she was just too young. He was 55 and though in terms of the android life expectancy of 255 years he was still a stripling (hence his nickname, the Hexadecimal Kid) it made him too old for her. She had plenty of spirit, all right: she was a plucky girl. But the trouble with Cleo was that she was too possessive. She was also very stubborn about not getting cybernated. She had a pathological phobia of all things electronic. What she wanted was to settle down on some reservation -- free from interference by the Information Society -- and raise a family. It was not a prospect he could share with any enthusiasm.

The first hint of dawn tinged the sky. He quickened his rather leisurely pace. Fort Ranfour was near San José. The quickest way was to head north through Silicon Valley. That meant crossing the ruins of the human reservation again.

When it grew light he left the road and made his way across rough country. In the early afternoon he came to the desolate reservation. He was amazed to find that the humans were back -- a few of them anyway. In the centre of the ghost town some tents had been erected, and the smoke from a cooking-fire was curling lazily into the air. You had to give these humans full marks for tenacity: like rats, it was hard to keep them down for long.

He gave them a wide berth. A lone android could expect no mercy after their treatment at the hands of the Night Operators. He didn't want them venting their spleen on him. So his path led, skirting the city, to the wooded hillock where he had buried his father, Abraham Synapse. It seemed more than one lifetime ago.

Feeling in a contemplative mood, he scratched about, turning over the fallen leaves with a stick; but he could find no sign of the grave. Professor Synapse (or Dr Null, as he still thought of him) had returned to the earth.

He sat down and reviewed events since he had last been there. The System circulated horrific tales of data-starvation, but they were largely bogus. Now that he had written a neat little forgetting algorithm he had had no more trouble with directory overflows, and his average access time was greatly reduced. Of course he had to lose certain trivial details, but he had come to prefer it that way. Forgetting, he concluded, was very important. The uncritical hoarding of information was a great handicap. If the Database could only, renounce its miserly attitude towards data, half its problems would disappear overnight. After all, everyone knew that data expands to fill the storage allotted to it.

- Has he forgotten something?
- More memorable incidents next week.