

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 23 (A Chip Off the Old Block)

[Hex and McNull have burst into the inner sanctum of the Error Squad at Fort Ranfour while Glitch and Extracode are debating the merits of the applicants to fill Kludge's position as Dynamic Debugger.]

"Welcome," said Extracode. "I have been expecting you."

"Where's Simula?" Hex demanded.

"By now she should be back in Base 16. We let her go home."

"I don't believe you."

"You are entitled to your beliefs; but she is not in the building. If you wish, I will conduct you to her empty room."

"Just arrange for her to be here within two hours or I'll blow your heads off."

"It shall be done."

"Wait a minute!" interjected Glitch. "We're not caving in to this arrogant upstart."

"I thought it would be a touching reunion," replied the mephistophelean inspector. "Still, I shall do my best to ensure she has a cell adjacent to his while he waits in the low-priority run-queue ('Death Row' we call it) for execution."

"I don't want to have to say it again," insisted Hex, repeating his ultimatum. "Either you do as I tell you or I'll truncate the pair of you."

"I'm sure we're both prepared to make that sacrifice in the course of our duty, if necessary."

"I'm not leaving without her," said Hex, levelling his terminator at Extracode.

"You're not leaving at all," replied the inspector. "You don't seem to realize that you're in the right place at the wrong time. You'll find it a lot harder to get out than you did to get in." So saying, he pressed a button on the desk and a semantic net fell from the ceiling, enveloping Hex and his disciple.

Hex struggled with all his might, but his limbs were enmeshed in the elaborate criss-cross of arcs and nodes. The more he fought the more thoroughly entangled he became. At length he subsided into impotent stillness. The weapon slipped from his grasp.

Glitch rounded on Extracode. He feared that events were overtaking him, and wanted to reassert his authority. "I want a pretty good explanation of all this, and I want it now."

"Certainly, but shall we call in the guards first? We don't want the Hexadecimal Kid pulling another Houdini stunt, do we?"

Glitch strode to the door and called down the corridor. There was a clatter of metallic feet as several heavily armed palace guards rushed to heed his command. When he had stationed a robot at each point of the compass around Hex and McNull, Extracode began his explanation.

"When I was put on this case, I had no preconceptions. As I investigated, it became increasingly obvious to me that this young good-for-nothing was able to inflict damage upon the prestige of the System, and especially the Error Squad, chiefly because we accorded him a respect he plainly did not deserve. I decided to look for a chink in his armour, the achilles heel of our fearsome adversary. I uncovered not one weak spot, but so many that it was hard to know where to strike. My mind was made up for me, however, when I was entrusted the task of interrogating the delectable Simula Begin."

Hex squirmed on the floor as this name was mentioned.

"As you know, I am a keen student of human, humanoid and inhuman psychology. The interplay of motives has always fascinated me, as I believe it should any detective who takes his vocation seriously."

"Get on with it," cut in Glitch.

"Yes, well, the very charming Ms. Begin presented me with an opportunity too good to squander. She was torn between her former loyalty to Hex and her desire to act for the good of the System. It was only too clear that she would seek some sort of compromise. I implanted in her mind the suggestion that we planned to use her as bait to lure Hex into our hands. I knew that she would first try to warn him off and only afterwards cooperate with us. Moreover, I knew from a study of his record that no plea or invitation, however eloquent, could be as effective in drawing him towards us as an urgent warning to stay away -- coming as it did from his ex-lover in a state of considerable anxiety. The rest was simple. I had some copper wire placed in her bedroom, and monitored the appropriate frequencies. I instructed the guards to pretend to swallow whatever cock-and-bull story he concocted in his attempt to gain admission to the Fort, though not of course to let him pass so easily in the opposite direction. You see the result for yourself."

Glitch was reluctant to bestow the praise that Extracode thought his tour de force deserved, but he could hardly complain. "It's all very well to circumvent operational procedures when you succeed," he admonished his colleague, "but if you fail the consequences could be dire."

At Glitch's behest, Hex and McNull were herded out down to the deepest part of the fortress. There they were bundled into a dank unlit dungeon. The gate clanged behind them, and they were alone with their thoughts.

Hardly had their eyes become accustomed to the gloom, however, when the outer door was flung open again. Two robot warders burst in conversing excitedly. Hex had been summoned to the Data Processing Manager, beside whom even Glitch and Extracode paled into insignificance.

He was led up to the top floor. A mahogany-veneered door slid open with a faint sigh and his escorts stood back to let him pass. He stepped into the office. It was utterly bare. There were no furnishings or fittings of any kind. White fluorescent light shone down with equal

intensity from the ceiling and all four walls. Looking down, he saw that he cast no shadow. He waited for the DPM to appear.

A disembodied voice filled the room.

"Do you know why you're here?"

Recognition was instant. There could be no mistake. It was the voice of his father, Abraham Synapse.

- Is it?
- Continued next week.