ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

Block 22 (A Block of Ice)

[Simula's late-night broadcast has aroused Hex to more unsystematic activity. Leaving his colleagues he sets out towards Fort Ranfour. En route he encounters Johnny McNull, an inveterate collector of electronic baubles with a peculiar form of brain damage.]

After sending her warning to Hex, Simula stowed away the booster aerial and slipped back into the hard bed. She slept soundly. Her conscience was clear: she felt she had done her bit.

She woke the next morning to find the redoubtable Eleanor Benzedrine leaning over her. She assumed this was the moment of truth: they had come to drag her off to the brain-scanner.

"Get packed and ready to go," ordered Benzedrine. "You'll be leaving in an hour. You're going home."

Simula was perplexed. She had steeled herself to face a renewed inquisition. This was an anti-climax. "Home?" she queried, "but you need my background information on Hex." She still did not suspect that she had already fulfilled her part in Extracode's intricate stratagem and was now redundant.

"We have all the information we need," Benzedrine curtly informed her.

A glimmer of realization dawned on her. If they had monitored her call to Hex, and his reply.... Perhaps she had been a pawn in their game. A gnawing doubt clutched at her stomach; but anything more she said would be incriminating, for herself and Hex, so she kept quiet and meekly followed Benzedrine out.

Meanwhile in another part of the Fort a meeting of the two surviving members of COBRA (Committee On Bug Rectifying Action) was in session.

"The Hexadecimal Kid and his damned Nullards are making us look like fools," complained Ivor Glitch, pacing angrily across the room.

"I don't think so," replied Extracode, unruffled.

Glitch fixed him with a venomous glare. "How can you say that? We've lost Kludge and sixty of our best operators. Only four survived the expedition. Their camp turned out to be an active volcano."

"That was pure bad luck. No, he's not making fools out of us," denied Extra-code, "we're making fools of ourselves. We're using sledgehammers to crack a nut."

"I'll crack his nuts with a sledgehammer if I get near him!" stormed Glitch.

"We're taking him too seriously," soothed Extracode. "He's a small fry. He can only hurt us through our own mistakes."

"Well, what do you suggest then?" demanded Glitch. Extracode's patronizing assumption of superiority displeased him. After all, he was the boss.

"If we give him some room to manoeuvre he'll start making his own blunders."

"I hope you're right. Anyway, next time we know where they're hanging out we'll have to be more careful how we handle them."

"I do know where they're hanging out, and I am being more careful about it."

"What!"

"They're back in Sprocket's Hole, at least they were last night. I've a feeling they'll be moving on now."

"You let them get away?" expostulated Glitch, too incredulous to be angry.

"I encouraged it," revealed the ice-cool Extracode.

"All right," said Glitch in resignation. "What's going on here?"

"I think you'll enjoy it more if I leave you a bit in the dark for the time being," answered Extracode suavely. "Let me just say that I've provided our friend Hex with the rope he needs to hang himself. I think this problem will be solved far sooner than you anticipate."

"You haven't forgotten the penalty for withholding data from the Database?"

"Most certainly not."

"Or for obstructing the advancement of the System?"

"A robot in my position can't afford to forget that."

"Then you'd better be sure your scheme doesn't misfire. If I have cause to question your reliability I shall hand you over without hesitation to Quality Control for refurbishing."

"I understand."

"Hm," snorted Glitch. "Now let's get on with the business in hand." He walked over to an RJE station where a printer had just finished spewing out forms on pre-printed stationery. These were the curricula vitae of the applicants for Kludge's vacant job as Chief Dynamic Debugger. He hulked the printout over and dropped it with a thud on the table.

"Rather a long short list," remarked the unflappable Extracode.

Glitch looked at him, making a mental note to delve into Extracode's own murky past as soon as possible. There were said to be one or two skeletons in the cupboard of the distinguished inspector's career. Rumour had it that he had been involved in the great virtual machine cover-up fiasco.

"Here are the names," said Glitch, and began reading: "Eleanor Benzedrine, Gino Fibonacci, James Hock, Andy MacRo, Rosanne Rose. I don't know why that incompetent bungler MacRo bothered to apply. As for Hock...." He shrugged.

"I know the others, but who are Fibonacci and Rose?" asked Extracode.

Glitch flicked through the papers. "Gino F. Fibonacci, Design Consultant. Doesn't have much to recommend him. It says something here about graphics expertise. We needn't waste much time on him. Rosanne Rose is a different kettle of fish altogether -- the candidate approved by the System evaluation routine. She's the wife of Mike Rose, former Professor of Telematics at Winograd University."

"But who's he?"

"He's the leader of the hush-hush Future System project."

Extracode looked impressed, but he didn't give up easily. "I would have thought," he suggested in his most emollient voice, "that if we're to have a female on the board Eleanor Benzedrine with all her experience would be a more suitable choice."

Glitch smiled for once. "You can forget that idea, old boy."

Before Extracode could counter, there was a knock at the door. Evidently one of the candidates had arrived early for interview.

"Come in," called Glitch irritably.

Hex and McNull strode in, each armed with one of Hock's terminators. Glitch turned towards Extracode. "Is this your doing?"

"Not entirely," was the reply.

- What's Extracode up to?
- Mischief.