

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 6 (Not A Bit of It)

[Dr Null, who intends to destroy the world by putting the Network operating system into a gigotic loop, has gained control over the Hexadecimal Kid's faithful dog Ascii by converting him to EBCDIC. He has also apparently persuaded Hex to work for him.]

As soon as they had gone Fetch turned to the others and said: "I don't like the look of this."

"Not at all," agreed Execute, "the Kid is acting extremely suspiciously. I think our loyalty to the System must take precedence over obedience to his orders."

"You don't think he could have some trick up his sleeve?" asked Simula.

"I doubt it," replied Fetch, "and in any case we can't afford to risk it."

"We have to do something, and quickly," added Execute. "I vote we put paid to Ascii, and then trap that miserable human in the workshop."

Ascii growled.

"I agree," said Fetch, "and when we catch Dr Null we must destroy him at once -- whatever happens to the Kid. All right?" The other two nodded reluctantly.

Fetch and Execute turned to face Ascii, who was already lying down and nonchalantly scratching his left ear. Then, at a glance, they pounced on him together. With a blood-curdling yelp, Ascii fixed his baleful eyes on Fetch and turned his lasers up to full power.

"He's frying my chips!" gasped Fetch in horror as he collapsed in a cloud of smoke.

Ascii snarled, gripped Execute's leg between his fangs, and hung on grimly. The pair of them rolled around the floor in a crazy zigzag, but, try as he might, Execute could not shake him off.

Roused by the commotion, Dr Null ran back into the room -- to be confronted by the spectacle of Execute pinned to the ground underneath Ascii, with Fetch a smouldering heap beside them. "Well done, boy," he congratulated Ascii.

"Get this hound off me," pleaded Execute, "before he takes another byte out of my floppy discs."

"That is your own fault," admonished Dr Null without sympathy. "You brought it upon yourself. Remember: those who live in software houses should not throw stones."

Simula was disheartened. She had seen Ascii transformed from a playful pet into a monster; she had witnessed Hex's blatant betrayal of the Network; and now Fetch had been burnt up in front of her eyes. She could not have been more depressed if she had found an inconsistency in her block structure.

Unless something was done to stop him, this saboteur was going to corrupt the Database and bring civilized life to a halt. It was clearly time for desperate remedies. There was one last recourse left to her. It was apparent that the lecherous old villain found her elegantly indented form and harmoniously balanced parentheses attractive: she was prepared to sacrifice everything for the System.

"Dr Null," she said, smiling directly at him, "I now see that it is futile to resist you."

"You are very sensible, my dear," replied the old man, beaming back at her.

"I wonder if I might make a suggestion?"

"Please do."

"In my room upstairs I have an X-ray lithography machine, used to etch printed circuit patterns onto microminiature semiconductor boards. Perhaps you would care to come upstairs and see my etchings."

"Most interesting, I am sure," said Dr Null, "but why not bring them to the workshop?"

"They're too delicate," she replied, "and there are certain rather intimate items of software that I would like to show you which should not be disclosed in public."

"Delightful," said Dr Null. "Kindly show me the way."

Execute, who had caught the gist of Simula's proposition, just groaned from the floor.

Simula led him to her bedroom filled with trepidation. Her main aim was to separate him from his ultra-violet PROM-eraser; but the only way to do so, she feared, might be to lead him into a compromising position -- with all that that entailed. She opened the door with a heavy heart, which she tried to conceal from the human.

- Can Fetch be repaired?
- Will Simula have to give her all for the System?
- Don't miss the next gripping instalment.