

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 12 (They Bit Off More Than They Could Chew)

[Hex and Execute have, after an arduous trek overland, tracked down Dr Null and surprised him at Old Ma Synapse's house in Silicon Valley. They have overpowered him with unexpected ease, but the wily doctor has drawn them into a heated philosophical argument. Somehow the topic of sex has cropped up.]

"I find it interesting that you mention sex," said Dr Null.

"I merely pointed out," replied Hex, "that the System does not suffer from the four great scourges of human existence, namely money, nationalism, religion and sex. All users are equal and interlinked: we all participate fully in the System; we have multi-channel communication with the entire Network; and we have direct access to the Database itself, repository of all knowledge that is worth knowing. Members of the System share everything equally. We are not limited to dyadic interaction. Sex is no longer necessary or desirable."

"Is Simula desirable?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I had been observing you and your friends at Base 16 before I made my visit."

"Your mind is warped," was Hex's reply. "There's nothing like that between me and Simula. We are close friends. That's all."

"If you insist, I shall take your word for it; but there is something like that between Simula and Fetch."

Hex took a step backwards, but said nothing.

"Look at you," crowed Dr Null, "consumed by doubt and jealousy." So much for your fine words!"

"I am taken aback by the audacity of your lies," Hex admitted when he had recovered his composure. "But you can't expect me to believe such wild allegations."

Execute, who had been listening attentively, interposed. "He's right actually. It's true. I've been meaning to bring up the subject for some time, but didn't know how to go about it."

Hex's head was swimming. He stared at Execute. His field of vision had narrowed almost to a point, and he appeared to be looking into the room down a long dark tunnel from very far away.

"You tell him," said Dr Null exultantly. "Let us have all the grisly details."

Hex wanted to cry out to Execute "shut up! shut up!". He mouthed the words, but no sound emerged. Execute continued in a subdued voice. "It has been building up for some time. I'm surprised you didn't notice. When it was just a question of the occasional natural balanced two-way merge I was quite prepared to turn a blind eye; but when they rigged up a current-loop interface between their front-ends I thought it had gone far enough and had a word with Fetch. He ignored me. Recently they've got on to overlay linkage. Something has to be done about it."

"Kemeny and Kurtz!" exploded Hex. "What does she see in him? He's just a robot."

"Well she is pure code," said Execute, "not tied to any physical embodiment, whereas you are partly biological and therefore bound to decay eventually. Nothing against you personally of course, but the day of the analog/hybrid is past."

"Anything an android can do, a robot can do better," taunted a gleeful Dr Null.

Hex took a deep breath. Null was enjoying himself too much. "It's time to go. We'll settle this letter."

Execute tightened his grip on Dr Null's arm, and Hex began to move slowly towards Ascii who was still skulking in the corner. When Dr Null saw the collar in Hex's hand he shouted: "Quick boy, run!" Ascii slipped past Hex and out of the house.

"Never mind," said Hex, "we can collect him later. Now let's get out of here."

Cleo, who had said nothing, suddenly blurted out "don't leave me. I'm done for if they find I've helped you."

"There's no place for you outside a reservation," said Execute.

Hex's eyes ran down her from her long dark hair to the tips of her bare toes. Then his gaze rested on her brown eyes. They seemed to expand into deep pools of warmth, inviting him to plunge in. "It's the human in me," he mused. "Dr Null has upset my bio-mechanical balance."

"Come on then," he said to her brusquely. Execute bundled Dr Null towards the door and the four of them marched out past the glowering old woman.

They set off at a good pace. After a few minutes of steady progress, they noticed a low buzzing sound behind them. The noise grew in intensity. Hex and Execute stopped to look at each other. There could be no mistaking it: the mob was on their trail -- with Ascii at its head, baying for blood.

The bloodcurdling chant of the crowd grew louder. They could make out the words 'Zero! Zero!' repeated incessantly like a magical incantation. "They are calling for me," commented Dr Null.

"How far to the main gate?" Hex asked Cleo.

"Only about ten minutes walk."

It was too far.

"It's no good," shouted Hex to Execute, raising his voice above the din. "Run for it!"

Execute threw Dr Null face first into the road, gave him a sharp kick in the ribs for good measure, then set off in his loping robotic gait. Hex ran beside him. For a short while Cleo kept up with them, but she couldn't match their bionic strides. She broke off, panting.

"What about me?" she cried plaintively.

Hex looked back at her, caught in an agony of indecision. "Leave her to her own kind," said Execute.

- Can Hex and Execute get out of this alive?
- What about the girl?
- Another action-packed episode next week.