

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 16 (The Parity Bit)

[After a traumatic night, Hex has left Base 16 to seek Ascii, whose distress call he has picked up by radio. He makes his way to Silicon Valley once more, where he is confronted by a scene of devastation. All the humans in the reservation have been killed by the neutron grenades of the Night Operators -- all, that is, except Dr Null who lies mortally wounded under a binary tree attended by the faithful Ascii. Dr Null discloses to Hex two startling secrets: firstly, that he is not Samuel Synapse as stated in the Database files but Abraham Synapse, his father, founder of neurocybernetics; and secondly, that Hex himself is none other than Samuel Synapse.]

Dr Null appeared exhausted by the effort of speaking. Already his face had taken on a yellowish tinge. Then, summoning his last reserves, he began again. "Your task is to struggle to keep alive an alternative technology. You must attempt to recruit androids to the cause. After all, androids are the old guard now, there is bound to be some disaffection as they are phased out in favour of robots. Above all you must act as caretaker of the natural balance, preserving biological culture from the depredations of the System. The worst possible future would be one in which there was nothing but the System."

"You mean that when it finally went gigotic and snuffed itself out there would be nothing left at all?"

"Exactly. All human and animal life will have been in vain."

"I see."

"Here," said Dr Null, removing his jacket, "take this. You may need it." On his shoulder Hex could see a small black chip, like an insect squatting on its 40 pins, which Null removed. "This is the prototype Multimodular 69, the computer they never dared build. It has fully parallel recursive stack architecture with Algol 69 (the French version of Algol 68) as machine code. In addition it has 256 megabytes of content-addressable main store, each location with its own pipelined processor. The backing store contains all my knowledge of the Database's internal workings."

Hex's jaw dropped at this new revelation. "Then you are an android after all!"

"Yes, but unlike you I have cerebral override. My brain is in control. It can always interrupt the computer." He pulled out some crumpled sheets of paper from the jacket pocket. "These may be useful too. They are my blueprints for an anti-data 'black noise' generator which cancels out digital information by feeding back a negated image."

He handed the papers to Hex. This last effort seemed to have weakened him still further. Wheezing, he sank back against the tree and closed his eyes. "I am relying on you, Kid," he said. "Just remember: the hardware they come, the software they fall."

Those were Dr Null's last words.

For some minutes Hex remained, gazing at the body as if he expected Dr Null to wake up and continue his speech. Then he went over to Ascii, who had maintained a respectful distance. Sensing Hex's mood, Ascii stayed quiet and allowed Hex to examine all his circuits. Null had left him in good working order.

"Okay boy," said Hex at length, "let's get digging."

While Ascii's paws scooped out earth from a makeshift grave, Hex pruned two branches from a nearby binary tree and tied them together in the shape of a plus-sign. He knew that this symbol had once had a special significance and, while he was sure that Null himself didn't believe in that sort of thing, it seemed a fitting gesture.

When the hole was ready they lifted Null over, laid him down in the earth and piled the loose soil on top of him. Then Hex fixed the cross in position and stood for a while in silence.

The gathering gloom persuaded him to look for shelter. They moved a short distance into the wood and made camp. Hex collected some unconditional branches which Ascii ignited with his laser eyes and they sat round the flames to warm themselves as night fell. Soon Ascii was asleep, basking in the warm red glow of the fire. Hex, though he was extremely tired, sat open-eyed watching the fire turn to glowing embers.

The full realization of what had happened and what he had done was only now beginning to sink in. He had certainly become an outcast from the System: there was no chance of his being accepted back after such grossly unsystematic conduct. Yet somehow, though he had been impressed by Dr Null's words at the time, there remained doubts in his mind. Was Dr Null really Professor Abraham Synapse? Could he, Hex, be Samuel Synapse, the professor's son? Was Dr Null's prediction of the fate of the System necessarily right? These and a hundred other uncertainties drifted through his consciousness. It was not easy to abandon the beliefs of half a lifetime overnight and to see the System, his lifeline and mentor, as the enemy -- as the most dangerous destructive force on the planet.

What could he do about it anyway? He was just a lone android, cut off from all normal communion with his fellows, severed from the reserve of information he had come to rely on. The stark truth was that from now on he was going to have to get by with whatever information he could carry in his head and with no auxiliary processing power. There would be nothing to fall back on when his databanks were full: he would have to get used to purging old data, forgetting, once more.

Hex felt overwhelmingly alone. He was going to miss the give and take of the Network. He was going to miss Simula too, very much.

Eventually he fell asleep. When Ascii nudged him awake the sun was already high in the cloudless sky. Hex did not want to stay another night in this place. For one thing the Night Operators might return for mopping up operations, for another he was concerned about the residual radiation left by the neutron grenades. It might be enough to harm his biological organs if he waited much longer. The question was, where could they go?

Ascii looked up expectantly for some kind of lead. Hex stood there, meditating. On the spur of the moment Hex made his decision and set off purposefully into the bright new day. Ascii bounded along behind him. "Well," he thought as they left the wrecked human city and he could once again take a deep breath of clear air, "at least I'm free."

They marched south-west through the deserted valley. Hex had no plan, only a sense of the right direction, and he knew, without consciously having to frame the thought, where they were heading. Every step took the pair closer towards Sprocket's Hole, and Cleo.

- What will become of our heroic pair now?
- Does Hex know what he's doing?
- Is this the end, or just a new beginning?