THE HEXADECIMAL KID
AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

==========================

[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

Bit 11 (Bit By Bit)

[Hex and Execute have gone in pursuit of the rogue human Dr Null. Their journey has brought them to the edge of the dreaded Silicon Valley reservation where Dr Null has taken refuge. There they encounter two androids, Sheriff Davy Sprocket and 'Wild' Bill Bootstrap, who have gone to pot but who give them shelter. In the night Hex wakes, realizing that their hosts are smuggling contraband computer components to the humans. They decide it is unsafe to stay. Hearing someone at the door, they make a hasty exit via the window -- only to be met by the serving girl Cleo.]

"Take me with you," she begged, "I can do all kinds of odd jobs."

"Do you know where Old Ma Synapse lives?" enquired Hex.

"Of course," she replied: "I was brought up on the reservation."

Hex looked for confirmation to Execute, who nodded. "Okay," he said to the girl, "show us how to get there."

They followed her for the rest of that night. Around daybreak they came to the perimeter fence. On it hung a sign. 'DO NOT FEED DATA TO THE HUMANS.' A little further along was a small hole at ground level. "This is the quickest way in," she said, and crawled underneath. Hex and Execute wriggled through after her. "Hardly a structured walk-through," quipped Execute.

Soon they came to the outskirts of the human city. By now Hex's Ascii-detector was quivering nonstop, but he was distracted by the squalor of the humans' living conditions. Most of them seemed to inhabit ramshackle wooden buildings with corrugated metal roofs. Every few blocks there were young children in ragged clothes playing ball in the street. Old cars drove past in various stages of disrepair, belching out fumes and raising clouds of dust from the dirt roads. The walls were plastered with mindless graffiti such as

'Syntax Rules OK' and 'Algol 68, Fortran 4 -- Shoot the REF'.

"What a dump!" said Execute as they passed the shell of a burnt-out building.

"The Night Operators did that," replied the girl. "They make random swoops to round up suspected hardware pushers."

At the next corner they passed a group of youths who eyed them suspiciously. A few yards further on a hail of stones rained down on them. They turned to see the boys running off, laughing.

They travelled on in silence for some minutes. Then Cleo pointed out a large redbrick house. "That's where Ma Synapse lives." She was about to lead them in but Hex interrupted.

"No. You go first and keep them talking. We'll slip round the back." The girl walked up to the door, knocked and went in. From outside they heard the unmistakable sound of Ascii's bark. Through a side window they could just sneak a view of an old woman with her back turned talking to Cleo. In a nearby armchair sat Dr Null with Ascii at his feet. He was reading the banned 'hard core' newspaper Data Weekly.

"Right," said Hex, pulling out the electronic dog collar, "this is it."

Execute leapt in. Fragments of shattered glass sprayed in all directions. A moment later Hex landed beside him. "Nobody move!" he ordered. Ascii slunk back, teeth bared.

The old woman looked at him. "There is a door, Kid," she said. Dr Null rose calmly from his chair, folded his newspaper and extended his hand. "Welcome to our humble abode."

With one fluid movement Execute took hold of his hand, spun him round and pinned it behind his back. Dr Null raised his eyebrows. "These robots have impeccable manners."

"What do you think you're doing?" demanded the old woman angrily.

"We're taking him into custody: he tried to corrupt the Database," Hex replied.

"Of course he did," she retorted. "The Database is corrupt already. The Network is an octopus. The whole System is evil."

"Human standards of morality cannot be applied to the System," put in Execute. "It is one more phase in the inexorable process of evolution towards higher forms of being. It represents the most momentous evolutionary jump since the integration of single cells into multicellular animals. Humans may not like it because they have been superseded, but that is beside the point."

"Mass genocide is not beside the point!" she yelled, brandishing her walking-stick menacingly. She looked far more formidable than Dr Null.

"Humanity was on the verge of destroying itself anyhow when the System took over," added Hex. "It has been demonstrated by computer simulation. There were too many people and too few resources. It was an unstable situation: the System restored equilibrium."

"On the contrary," responded Dr Null, "the System is racked with internal tensions. It has inherited all the contradictions of mankind -- but on a more destructive scale."

"It's all very well for you to say that," Hex rejoined, "when human history is a dismal procession of war, greed, treachery and deceit. The System has eradicated the four main sources of human wickedness and misery -- religion, nationalism, money and sex."

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

- What is Dr Null's interest in sex?
- Is he deliberately wasting their time in debate?
- All the answers in next week's blockbuster!