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**Opening Extract from...**

# Hex

Written by Thomas Olde Heuvelt

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

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# HEX



THOMAS  
OLDE HEUVELT

TRANSLATED BY  
NANCY FOREST-FLIER

**H**  
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STOUGHTON

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To Jacques Post,  
my literary shaman



# ONE

**STEVE GRANT ROUNDED** the corner of the parking lot behind Black Spring Market & Deli just in time to see Katherine van Wyler get run over by an antique Dutch barrel organ. For a minute he thought it was an optical illusion, because instead of being thrown back onto the street the woman melted into the wooden curlicues, feathered angel wings, and chrome-colored organ pipes. It was Marty Keller who pushed the organ backward by its trailer hitch and, following Lucy Everett's instructions, brought it to a halt. Although there wasn't a bump to be heard or a trickle of blood to be seen when Katherine was struck, people began rushing in from all sides with the urgency that townsfolk always seem to exhibit when an accident occurs. Yet no one dropped their shopping bag to help her up . . . for if there was one thing the residents of Black Spring valued more highly than urgency, it was a cautious insistence on never getting too involved in Katherine's affairs.

"Not too close!" Marty shouted, stretching out his hand toward a little girl who had been approaching with faltering steps, drawn not by the bizarre accident but by the magnificence of the colossal machine. At once Steve realized that it hadn't been an accident at all. In the shadow beneath the barrel organ he saw two grubby feet and the mud-stained hem of Katherine's dress. He smiled indulgently: So it was an illusion. Two seconds later, the strains of the "Radetzky March" blared across the parking lot.

He slowed his pace, tired but quite satisfied with himself, almost at the end of his big circuit: fifteen miles along the edge of Bear Mountain State Park to Fort Montgomery and right up along the Hudson to West

Point Military Academy—which folks around here called The Point—where he veered off toward home. Back into the forest, the hills. It made him feel good, not only because running was the ideal way to rid his body of the tension it accumulated after a long day of teaching at New York Med in Valhalla. It was mainly the delightful autumn breeze *outside* Black Spring that put him in such an excellent mood, swirling through his lungs and carrying the smell of his sweat to more westerly regions. It was all psychological, of course. There was nothing wrong with the air in Black Spring . . . at least, nothing that could be proven by analysis.

The music had lured the cook at Ruby's Ribs to come out from behind his grill. Joining the other spectators, he gazed suspiciously at the barrel organ. Steve walked around them, wiping his forehead dry with his arm. When he saw that the beautifully lacquered side of the organ was actually a swinging door, and that the door was ajar, he could no longer suppress a smile. The organ was completely hollow inside, all the way to the axle. Katherine was standing motionless in the dark as Lucy shut the door and hid her from view. Now the organ was an organ again. And boy, did it play.

"So," he said, still panting, his hands high on his hips. "Mulder and Scully been lining the coffers again?"

Marty walked up to him and grinned. "Says you. You know how much those fuckers cost? And I'm telling you, they're pinching pennies till they holler." He jerked his head at the barrel organ. "It's a total fake. A replica of the organ from the Old Dutch Museum in Peekskill. Pretty good, huh? It's just an ordinary trailer underneath."

Steve was impressed. Now that he had a better look, he could see that, sure enough, the façade was nothing but a hodgepodge of mawkish porcelain figures and carelessly glued geegaws—and badly painted, too. The organ pipes weren't even real chrome, but gold-lacquered PVC. Even the "Radetzky March" fell flat: an illusion, without the delightful sighing of the valves or the slapping of the perforated music cards that you would expect from an instrument of yesteryear.

Marty read his mind and said, “An iPod with a big-ass speaker. Pick the wrong playlist and you get heavy metal.”

“Sounds like one of Grim’s ideas,” Steve laughed.

“Uh-huh.”

“I thought the whole idea was to divert attention *away* from her?”

Marty shrugged. “You know the master’s style.”

“It’s for public events,” Lucy said. “For the fair, or during the festival if there are lots of Outsiders.”

“Well, good luck.” Steve grinned, getting ready to continue on his way. “Maybe you’ll collect some money while you’re at it.”

He took it easy on the last mile, heading home down Deep Hollow Road. As soon as he was beyond earshot he stopped thinking about the woman in the dark, the woman in the belly of the barrel organ, though the “Radetzky March” kept playing in his head to the rhythm of his footsteps.



**AFTER A SHOWER,** Steve went downstairs and found Jocelyn at the dining room table. She shut her laptop. With the subtle smile on her lips that he had fallen in love with twenty-three years before and that she’d probably have until the day she died, despite growing wrinkles and bags under her eyes (forty-plus pockets, she called them), she said, “There, enough time for my boyfriends. Now it’s my husband’s turn.”

Steve grinned. “What was his name again? Rafael?”

“Yup. And Roger. I ditched Novak.” She stood up and slid her arms around his waist. “How was your day?”

“Exhausting. Five straight hours of lectures with one twenty-minute break. I’m going to ask Ulmann to change my grid, or mount a battery behind the stand.”

“You’re pathetic,” she said, kissing him on the mouth. “I ought to warn you that we have a voyeur, Mr. Eager Beaver.”

Steve drew back and raised his eyebrows.



“Gramma,” she said.

“Gramma?”

Pulling him closer, she turned around and nodded over her shoulder. Steve followed her glance through the open French doors and into the living room. Sure enough, standing in the odd corner between the couch and the fireplace, right next to the stereo—Jocelyn always called it her Limbo because she couldn’t figure out what to do with it—was a small, shrunken woman, skinny as a rail and utterly motionless. She looked like something that didn’t belong in the clear golden light of the afternoon: dark, dirty, nocturnal. Jocelyn had hung an old dishcloth over her head so you couldn’t see her face.

“Gramma,” said Steve meditatively. Then he started to laugh. He couldn’t help it: With that dishcloth, she made an awkward, ridiculous spectacle.

Jocelyn blushed. “You know I get all creeped out when she looks at us that way. I know she’s blind, but sometimes I get the feeling it doesn’t make any difference.”

“How long has she been standing there? Because I just saw her in town.”

“Less than twenty minutes. She showed up just before you came home.”

“Go figure. I saw her in the parking lot at the Market and Deli. They had put one of their new toys right on top of her, a friggin’ barrel organ. I guess she didn’t like the music very much.”

Jocelyn smiled and pursed her lips. “Well, I hope she likes Johnny Cash, because that’s what was in the CD player, and reaching past her to press play once is enough for me, thank you.”

“Brave move, madam.” Steve stuck his fingers in the hair along the back of her neck and kissed her again.

The screen door flew open and Tyler came in with a large plastic bag that smelled of Chinese takeout. “Hey, no hanky-panky, okay?” he said. “I’m underage until March fifteenth, and until then my tender soul can’t bear to be corrupted. Least of all within my own gene pool.”

Steve winked at Jocelyn and said, “Does that go for you and Laurie, too?”

“I’m supposed to experiment,” said Tyler as he put the bag on the table and wriggled out of his jacket. “It’s age appropriate. Wikipedia says so.”

“And what does Wikipedia say we should do at *our* age?”

“Work . . . cook . . . raise allowances.”

Jocelyn opened her eyes wide and burst out laughing. Behind Tyler, Fletcher had wormed his way in through the screen door and was pattering around the dining room table with his ears cocked.

“Oh Christ, Tyler, grab him . . .” Steve said as soon as he heard the border collie growl, but it was too late: Fletcher had caught sight of the woman in Jocelyn’s Limbo. He broke into a deafening bark, which shifted into such a shrill, high whine that all three of them jumped out of their skin. The dog flew through the room but slid across the dark tiles; Tyler was just able to grab him by the collar. Barking wildly and pawing the air with his front legs, Fletcher came to a halt between the French doors.

“Fletcher, down!” Tyler shouted, jerking the leash sharply. Fletcher stopped barking. Wagging his tail nervously, he began to growl deep in the back of his throat at the woman in Jocelyn’s Limbo . . . who hadn’t moved a muscle. “Jesus, couldn’t you guys, like, tell me she was here?”

“Sorry,” Steve said, taking the leash out of Tyler’s hands. “We didn’t see Fletcher come in.”

A wry expression spread across Tyler’s face. “Suits her well, that cloth.” He threw his jacket over a chair and ran upstairs without further comment. Not to do his homework, Steve assumed, because when it came to homework Tyler was never in a rush. The only thing that made him hurry was the girl he was dating (a pert little cutie from Newburgh who unfortunately couldn’t visit very often due to the Emergency Decree), or the video blog on his YouTube channel, which he had probably been working on when Jocelyn sent him to Emperor’s Choice Takeout. Wednesday was her day off and she liked to keep it

simple, even though everything from the town's Chinese takeout place tasted pretty much the same.

Steve led the growling Fletcher to the backyard and locked him in his kennel, where he jumped up against the wire mesh and started pacing restlessly. "Cut it out," Steve snarled, more sharply than the situation perhaps called for. But the dog got on his nerves, and he knew Fletcher wouldn't calm down for the next half hour. It had been quite some time since Gramma had dropped in on them, but no matter how often she came, Fletcher never seemed to get used to her.

Back inside, they set the table. Steve was unfolding paper containers of chicken chow mein and General Tso's tofu when the kitchen door flew open again. In came Matt's riding boots, rolling over the floor, as Fletcher continued barking nonstop. "Fletcher, Jesus!" he heard his youngest yell. "What's wrong with you?"

Matt entered the dining room with his cap askew and his riding breeches crumpled up in his arms. "Ooh, yummy. Chinese," he said, hugging both parents as he passed. "I'll be right down!" And, like Tyler, he ran upstairs.

Steve regarded the dining room at around this hour as the epicenter of the Grant family, the place where the engaging lives of individual family members slid over each other like tectonic plates and came to rest. It wasn't just that they honored the tradition of eating together whenever possible, it had to do with the room itself: a trusted place in the house, framed with railroad ties and a million-dollar view of the stable and the horse pen at the back of the yard, with the steeply rising wilderness of Philosopher's Deep right behind it.

He was serving up sesame noodles when Tyler entered the dining room with the GoPro sports cam he'd been given for his seventeenth birthday. Its red REC light was now on.

"Turn that thing off," Steve said firmly. "You know the rules when Gramma's here."

"I'm not filming her," Tyler said, pulling up a chair at the other end of the table. "Look, you can't even get her in the picture from here.

And you know she hardly ever walks when she's inside." He gave his dad an innocent smile and switched on his typical YouTube voice (music 1.2, flair 2.0): "And now it's time to ask you a question for my *très important* statistics report, O Worthy Progenitor."

"Tyler!" Jocelyn shouted.

"Sorry, O Twice Worthy Childbearer."

Jocelyn looked at him with friendly resolve. "You're going to edit that out," she said. "And get that camera out of my face. I look awful."

"Freedom of the press." Tyler grinned.

"Freedom of privacy," Jocelyn shot back.

"Suspension of household duties."

"Cutting allowances."

Tyler turned the GoPro on himself and assumed a tormented face. "Aww, I get this kind of crap all the time. I've said it before and I'll say it again, my friends: I'm living in a dictatorship. Freedom of speech is seriously jeopardized in the hands of the older generation."

"Thus spake the Messiah," said Steve as he served up the General Tso's, knowing that Tyler would edit most of it out anyway. Tyler made clever cuts of his opinions, absurdities, and street footage, which he dubbed with catchy pop and fast-paced video effects. He was good at it. And with impressive results: The last time Steve looked at his son's YouTube channel, TylerFlow95, it had 340 subscribers and more than 270,000 hits. Tyler even earned some pocket money (absurdly little, he admitted) from advertising income.

"What did you want to ask?" Steve said, and the cam swept over to him immediately.

"If you had to let someone die, who would it be: your own child or an entire village in the Sudan?"

"What an irrelevant question."

"My own child," Jocelyn said.

"Oh!" Tyler cried with great sense of drama, and out in his kennel, Fletcher perked up his ears and began barking restlessly again. "Did you hear that? My very own mother would mercilessly sacrifice me

for some nonexistent village in Africa. Is this an indication of her third-world compassion, or a sign of dysfunction within our family?"

"Both, darling," said Jocelyn, and then called upstairs, "Matt! We're eating!"

"But, seriously, Dad. Say you had two buttons in front of you, and if you push one your own child dies—*moi*, that is—and if you push the other a whole village in the Sudan dies, and if you don't make a choice before the count of ten they both get pushed automatically. Who would you save?"

"It's an absurd situation," said Steve. "Who would ever force me to make such a choice?"

"Humor me."

"And even then, there's no right answer. If I save you, you'll accuse me of letting an entire village die."

"But otherwise we all die," Tyler insisted.

"Of course I'd let the village die and not you. How could I sacrifice my own son?"

"Really?" Tyler whistled in admiration. "Even if it's a village full of severely undernourished child soldiers with bulging little bellies and flies buzzing around their eyes and poor abused AIDS mothers?"

"Even then. Those mothers would do the same for their children. Where's Matt? I'm hungry."

"And if you had to choose between letting me die or all of the Sudan?"

"Tyler, you shouldn't ask such questions," said Jocelyn, but without much conviction; she knew perfectly well that once her husband and oldest son were on a roll, intervention stood as little chance of success as . . . well, as any intervention in the larger political arena.

"Well, Dad?"

"The Sudan," said Steve. "What's this report about, anyway? Our involvement in Africa?"

"Honesty," said Tyler. "Anybody who says he would save Sudan is lying. And anybody who doesn't want to answer is just being politically

correct. We asked all the teachers and only Ms. Redfearn in philosophy was honest. And you.” He heard his younger brother come rumbling down the stairs, and called out, “If you had to let someone die, Matt, who would you choose: all of the Sudan, or our parents?”

“Sudan,” came the immediate reply. Outside the camera frame, Tyler nodded at the living room and ran his finger over his lips, miming the closing of a zipper. Steve shot a reluctant look at Jocelyn, but he saw from the way she was biting her lip that she was willing to play along. One second later the door opened, and in came Matt with only a towel around his waist, apparently straight from the bathroom.

“Awright, you just got me an extra thousand hits,” Tyler said. Matt pulled a clownish face at the GoPro and wiggled his hips back and forth.

“Tyler, he’s thirteen!” Jocelyn said.

“Seriously. That clip with Lawrence, Burak, and me doing a shirtless lip-synch of The Pussycat Dolls got over thirty-five thousand hits.”

“That was close to porn,” Matt said, pulling up a chair next to him with his back to the living room—and to the woman in Jocelyn’s Limbo. Steve and Tyler exchanged an amused glance.

“Can’t you wear some clothes at the table?” Jocelyn sighed.

“You wanted me to come down and eat! My clothes smell like horse, and I haven’t even had a shower. By the way, I liked your album, Mom.”

“What?”

“On Facebook.” With a mouth full of noodles he pushed himself from the edge of the table and tottered on the hind legs of his chair. “You’re so cool, Mom.”

“I saw it, darling. Four on the floor, okay? Or you’ll fall again.”

Ignoring her, Matt turned his attention to Tyler’s lens. “I bet you don’t want to know what *I* think.”

“No, I do not, brother-who-smells-like-horse. I’d rather you took a shower.”

“It’s sweat, not horse,” Matt said imperturbably. “I think your question is too easy. I think it’s much more interesting to ask: If you

had to let somebody die, who would it be: your own kid or all of Black Spring?”

Fletcher started up a low growl. Steve looked out into the backyard and saw the dog pressing his head low to the ground behind the wire mesh and baring his teeth like a wild animal.

“Jesus, what’s wrong with that dog?” Matt asked. “Apart from being a total nutcake.”

“Gramma wouldn’t happen to be around, would she?” Steve asked innocently.

Jocelyn dropped her shoulders and looked around the room. “I haven’t seen her at all today.” With feigned urgency, she glanced from the backyard to the split red oak at the end of their property, where the path led up the hill: the red oak with the three security cams mounted to the trunk, peering into various corners of Philosopher’s Deep.

“*Gramma wouldn’t happen to be around.*” Matt grinned with his mouth full. “What’ll Tyler’s followers make of that?” Jocelyn’s mother, a long-term Alzheimer’s patient, had died of a lung infection a year and a half before; Steve’s had been dead eight years. Not that YouTube knew, but Matt was having fun.

Steve turned to his oldest son and said, with a severity that was not at all like him, “Tyler, you’re cutting this out, right?”

“Sure, Dad.” He switched voices to TylerFlow95. “Let’s bring the question closer to home. If you had to let somebody die, *o padre mio*, who would it be: your own kid or the rest of our town?”

“Would that include my wife and my other child?” Steve asked.

“Yes, Dad,” Matt said with a condescending laugh. “Who would you save, Tyler or me?”

“Matthew!” Jocelyn cried. “That’s enough of that.”

“I’d save you both,” Steve said solemnly.

Tyler grinned. “That’s politically correct, Dad.”

Just then, Matt leaned back too far on his chair legs. He flapped his arms wildly in an attempt to regain his balance, red sauce flying off his spoon, but the chair fell backward with a crash and Matt rolled

onto the floor. Jocelyn jumped up, startling Tyler and causing the Go-Pro to slip out of his hands and fall into his plate of chicken chow mein. Steve saw that Matt, still with the flexibility of a child, had caught his fall with an outstretched elbow and was giggling hysterically, lying on his back and trying to hold the towel around his waist with one hand.

“Little bro overboard!” Tyler whooped. He aimed the GoPro down to get a good shot, wiping off the chow mein.

As if he’d received an electric shock, Matt began shaking: The expression on his face turned into a grimace of horror, he knocked his shin against the table leg, and he uttered a loud cry.



**FIRST: NO ONE** will ever see the images that Tyler’s GoPro is shooting at that moment. That’s unfortunate, because if anyone were to study them they’d be witness to something very odd, perhaps even unsettling—to put it mildly. The images are crystal clear, and images don’t lie. Even though it’s a small camera, the GoPro captures reality at an astonishing sixty frames per second, producing spectacular clips taken from Tyler’s mountain bike racing down Mount Misery, or when he goes snorkeling with his friends in Popolopen Lake, even when the water’s cloudy.

The images show Jocelyn and Steve staring with bewilderment past their youngest son, still on the floor, and into the living room. In the middle of the image is a spot of congealed noodles and egg yolk. The camera jerks the other way and Matt is no longer lying on the floor; he rights himself with a spastic twist of his body and shrinks back, bumping into the table. Somehow he has managed to keep the towel around his waist. For a moment it feels as though we’re standing on the undulating deck of a ship, for everything we see is slanted, as if the whole dining room has come apart at the seams. Then the picture straightens up, and although the splotch of noodle hides most of our view, we see a gaunt woman making her way through the living room toward the open French doors to the kitchen. Until then, she has stood



motionless in Jocelyn's Limbo, but suddenly she's right there, as if she has taken pity on the fallen Matt. The dishcloth has slid off her face, and in a fraction of a second—maybe it's only a couple of frames—we see that her eyes are sewn shut, and so is her mouth. It all happens so fast that it's over before we know it, but it's the kind of image that burns itself into your brain, not just long enough to pull us out of our comfort zone but to completely disrupt it.

Then Steve rushes forward and slides the French doors to the living room shut. Behind the half-translucent stained glass we see the gaunt woman come to a halt. We even hear the slight vibration of the glass as she bumps up against the pane.

Steve's good humor has vanished. "Turn that thing off," he says. "Now." He's deadly serious, and although his face is hidden from view (all we can see is his T-shirt and jeans, and the finger of his free hand stabbing at the lens), we can all imagine what it must look like. Then everything goes black.



**"SHE CAME RIGHT** for me!" Matt shouted. "She's never done that before!" He was still standing next to the fallen chair, holding the towel around his waist to keep it from sliding down.

Tyler started laughing—mostly from relief, Steve thought. "Maybe she's got the hots for you."

"Ew, gross, are you kidding me? She's ancient!"

Jocelyn burst out laughing, too. She took a mouthful of noodles but didn't notice how much hot sauce she had put on her spoon. Tears sprang from her eyes. "Sorry, darling. We just wanted to shake you up a little, but I think you shook *her* up. It really was strange how she came walking up to you. She never does that."

"How long was she standing there?" Matt asked indignantly.

"The whole time." Tyler grinned.

Matt's jaw dropped. "Now she's seen me naked!"

Tyler looked at him with a mixture of absolute amazement and the

kind of disgust that borders on a sympathetic sort of love, reserved only for big brothers toward their younger, dim-witted siblings. “She can’t see, you idiot,” he said. He wiped off the lens of his GoPro and looked at the blind woman behind the stained glass.

“Sit down, Matt,” Steve said, his face stiffening. “Dinner’s getting cold.” Sulkily, Matt did what he was told. “And I want you to erase those images now, Tyler.”

“Aw, come on! I can just cut her out. . . .”

“Now, and I want to see you do it. You know the rules.”

“What is this, Pyongyang?”

“Don’t make me say it again.”

“But there was some kick-ass material in there,” Tyler muttered without much hope. He knew when his father meant it. And he did indeed know the rules. Reluctantly, he held up the display at an angle toward Steve, selected the video file, and clicked ERASE, then OK.

“Good boy.”

“Tyler, report her in the app, would you?” Jocelyn asked. “I wanted to do it earlier, but you know I’m hopeless at these things.”

Cautiously, Steve walked around to the living room via the hallway. The woman hadn’t budged. There she stood, right in front of the French doors with her face pressed against the glass, like something that had been put there as a macabre joke, to replace a floor lamp or a houseplant. Her lank hair hung motionless and dirty under her headscarf. If she knew there was someone else in the room, she didn’t let on. Steve came closer but deliberately avoided looking at her, sensing her shape from the corner of his eye. It felt better not to look at her up close like this. He could smell her now, though: the stench of another era, of mud and cattle in the streets, of disease. She swayed gently, so that the wrought-iron chain shackling her arms tightly to her shrunken body tapped against the varnished doorpost with a dull clank.

“She was last seen at five twenty-four p.m. by the cameras behind the Market and Deli,” he heard Tyler’s muffled voice say from the other room. Steve could also hear that the woman was whispering. He knew

that not listening to her whispering was a matter of life and death, so he concentrated on the voice of his son, and on Johnny Cash. “There are four reports from people who saw her, but nothing after that. Something about a barrel organ. Dad . . . are you okay?”

His heart pounding, Steve knelt down next to the woman with the stitched-up eyes and picked up the dishcloth. Then he stood up. As his elbow brushed against the woman’s chain, she turned her maimed face toward him. Steve dropped the dishcloth over her head and scrambled away from her and back to the dining room, his forehead drenched in sweat, as Fletcher’s fierce, alarmed barking came from the backyard.

“Dishcloth,” he said to Jocelyn. “Good idea.”

The family continued eating, and all during dinner the woman with the stitched-up eyes stood motionless behind the stained glass.

She only moved once: When Matt’s high-pitched laugh sounded through the dining room, she tilted her head.

As if she were listening.

After dinner, Tyler loaded the dishwasher and Steve cleaned the table. “Show me what you sent them.”

Tyler held up his iPhone with the HEXApp logbook on display. The last entry read as follows:

Wed. 09.19.12, 7:03 P.M., 16M ago

Tyler Grant @gps 41.22890 N, 73.61831 W

#K @ living room, 188 Deep Hollow Road

omg i think she digs my little bro

•-|-|-•

**LATER THAT EVENING,** Steve and Jocelyn were both sprawled in the living room—not in their regular spot on the couch but on the divan on the other side of the room—watching *The Late Show* on CBS. Matt was in bed; Tyler was upstairs working on his laptop. The pale TV light flickered on the metal chains around the blind woman’s body—or at least on the links that weren’t rusted. Beneath the dish-

cloth, the dead flesh at the open corner of her mouth twitched, barely visible. It pulled on the jagged black stitches that sewed her mouth tight, except for that one loose stitch in the corner that stuck out like a bent piece of wire. Jocelyn yawned and stretched herself against Steve. He guessed it wouldn't be long before she dropped off to sleep.

When they went upstairs half an hour later, the blind woman was still there, something of the night that the night had now recovered.