

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 9 (A Bit Too Far)

[Simula, who had been locked in an upstairs room with Dr Null, has been saved from a fate worse than death by the unexpected arrival of the garbage collector with two industrial robots. However Dr Null has escaped, taking Ascii with him. Hex and Execute have set off to hunt down Dr Null, leaving Simula to tend the wounded Fetch. They have seen on the graphics display that Dr Null is heading towards the infamous Silicon Valley reservation -- one of the few places on earth where robots and androids fear to tread.]

Hex and Execute followed Ascii's trail through the night. By the afternoon of the next day they had entered the rugged foothills of the Sierra Nueva (New Range) whose topmost peak rose 2983 metres above sea level. The terrain was growing rougher underfoot with every pace, and the sun beat down mercilessly.

"I'm a software specialist," panted Hex as he paused to mop his brow, "I'm not used to all this physical exertion."

"According to the map," replied Execute, "there should be a node of the Network on the other side of that rise." He pointed straight ahead.

Hex looked in front of them. All he could see in the shimmering haze were a few stunted shrubs and some cactus plants. He began to wonder whether he was susceptible to mirages: he could almost imagine a nice air-conditioned computer room housing a gleaming mainframe with its banks of whirring tape decks, humming disc drives and winking batteries of console lights springing up out of the waste land. The illusion faded. "I don't know if all my circuits are certified for these temperatures," he said to Execute.

"Come on," urged the robot, "it's not far now."

And, sure enough, when they crossed the ridge and looked down into the gulch beneath, they could see a couple of old-fashioned wooden huts.

"I hope they're on-line," said Hex as they scrambled down the slope, "I'm in no mood for messing about with remote batch."

In front of the huts stood a large billboard. It was obviously many years old and its crude lettering had been severely weathered.

WELCOME TO SPROCKET'S HOLE
(Frontier Trading Post)
Coca-Cola, Human Artefacts, Ice Creams, Floppy Disco.

Execute rapped on the door of the nearest hut. The sound echoed from the surrounding hills. Nothing stirred. "Anyone at home?" he called out.

After a long interval, an android peered cautiously out of the cabin window. He was clearly a very early model: his face was wizened and he wore a racoon-skin cap. The head withdrew. Hex and Execute waited. Eventually the door creaked open and the android stood before them. He held out his hand.

"Mighty pleased to see you folks," said the stranger. "We don't get many visitors round these parts nowadays."

Hex took his hand. "Glad to meet you. My name's Hex and this is my companion Execute."

"I'm Sheriff Sprocket," replied the other. "You can call me Davy. Come inside and meet my deputy, Bill Bootstrap."

He led the way in, and Hex and Execute gingerly followed. Inside was another android, if possible even more dishevelled and unkempt than the first. Davy Sprocket introduced them, and then said "I guess you all could use a byte to eat."

"We surely could," replied Hex.

Sheriff Sprocket motioned them towards an ancient terminal across the room. Hex caught his breath. It was an antique Teletype, model 33 -- with papertape reader/punch! He hadn't realized there were any still in service. "This is a museum piece," he thought, "it must be worth a fortune." But he managed to say: "Thanks, we're very grateful to you." Then he logged in, marvelling at the noise made by its obsolete electro-mechanical print-head.

When Hex and Execute had had their fill, which took some time at 10 characters a second, Davy Sprocket invited them to sit with him and Bill Bootstrap round the table. "We call this our 'hash table'," announced Sprocket, winking at Hex. He clapped his hands and a young girl appeared out of the shadows bearing a tray with some dried leaves and a pipe on it. She placed it in front of Bill Bootstrap and then withdrew.

Hex's eyes boggled. Not only were these hillbillies smoking tobacco (if nothing worse) which was expressly prohibited by the System, they were also apparently employing a human female as some sort of slave processor -- a practice which was supposed to have died out years ago. "They're little better than humans," he thought.

"That's Cleo," explained Davy Sprocket. "She does the housekeeping and brings us human produce from the reservation in exchange for scraps of data. We find humans are surprisingly useful in these outlying areas. You can teach them all kinds of tricks."

Out of respect for their hospitality, Hex swallowed his suspicions and accepted the burning pipe. After a few puffs his feelings of outrage subsided, and he passed it on to Execute who politely declined on the grounds that he had not been built to inhale gaseous mixtures. Soon Hex relaxed and a friendly conversation developed, though Bill Bootstrap remained ominously taciturn throughout the evening.

- Do you know what is in the pipe?
- Have Davy Sprocket and Bill Bootstrap gone to pot?
- Read the next mind-blowing instalment!