

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 14 (Bit, Bitter, Bitterness)

[Hex and Execute, having failed to capture Dr Null in Silicon Valley, are severely reprimanded by Inspector MacRo and demoted. After an unpleasant night ride on a cramped data bus they return to Base 16 where Simula and Fetch are waiting for them.]

After a tiring slog up the hillside they reached the AI lab. Simula and Fetch were already at the door to greet them.

"Welcome home!" said Simula enthusiastically.

Neither Hex nor Execute could summon the energy to reply. Hex looked from face to face, trying to discover an inkling of what he wanted to know behind their bland smiles. Simula's cool blue eyes gave no clue to her inner thoughts. He noticed that, although the maintenance engineers appeared to have done a first class job on Fetch, there were still two black marks on his control panel where he had met the full blast of ASCII's lasers.

"Glad to see you're better," said Execute to Fetch.

"Glad you're safely home," replied Fetch. "We heard some pretty hair-raising tales of your adventures in Silicon Valley."

"Come in." Simula beckoned.

As they followed her in, Fetch started to explain, in the friendliest possible tones that -- strictly on orders from the System one or two very minor changes had been made while they were away. It had been felt, for instance, more appropriate (by whom was left deliberately vague) that he, Fetch, should now occupy a room on the upper floor, next to Simula's, leaving his old room at ground level for Hex.

"You'll find all your belongings in place," said Fetch as he opened the door to show him. Hex could see all his own books, papers and listings stacked neatly on the shelves, with one notable exception -- the System Manager's Handbook.

"I always found it quite comfortable," stated Fetch with a short laugh. "I'll leave you to get unbundled. Dinner will be ready soon."

Hex closed the door behind him. For a long while he sat on the bed, gazing morosely into space. Then his reflections were disturbed by a soft knock. Simula entered. Once again he found himself scanning her clear blue eyes for some kind of telltale sign. His heart pounded. So many questions sprang to his lips that he was unable to utter a syllable. "What happened to our special relationship?" he wanted to know.

"It's time for dinner, Hex," she said. "We thought we'd throw a little party to celebrate your return. Fetch has been down to the cellar and uncorked a bottle of Coral '66. It was a particularly good year. I know you'll like it."

"Thanks," said Hex absently, his mind still seething with unasked questions. They made their way to the dining room. Fetch and Execute were already seated and Execute was tucking in greedily to an appetising 2½D core plane. Fetch poured a glass of Coral '66. "Here Hex, taste this."

Hex raised his glass and they all did likewise. "Top down," he said and drained it in one gulp.

"Bottom up," chorused the others.

The festivities were an absolute washout, about as merry as a mausoleum. Hex hardly spoke and even Execute was unusually subdued. It was left to Fetch and Simula to make all the running. Quite early the gathering broke up and they all turned in for the night.

Alone in his room, Hex made a desultory attempt at reading, but it was useless. Indignation was rising in him, replacing the numb acceptance of his new status. When it was dark he slid noiselessly out of the window and paced around outside. His steps took him to the wall below Simula's bedroom. Her light was still on, but the light in his -- or rather Fetch's -- room was already off. He stood mesmerized, unable to sort out his own feelings. "What am I doing here?" he asked himself. "Spying?" The night grew colder. Still he stood there, staring upwards.

At last the light went out. The effect on Hex was dramatic. He shook himself out of his trancelike immobility, dashed indoors and bounded upstairs. At her door he raised his hand to knock, but then steadied himself. "What are you doing?" he asked himself again. "There's no point in making an embarrassing scene." For a moment it seemed as if reason might prevail, but then his resolve snapped and he flung open the door, switching on the light as he did so.

The room was empty. Simula was spending the night elsewhere. From next door he thought he could hear the low murmur of information transmission.

He put out the light, closed the door quietly and returned, desolate, to his room. He lay there restlessly, dozing from time to time. His head throbbled with a phrase of Dr Null's: "anything an android can do, a robot can do better".

Just before dawn he was abruptly wakened from one of these bouts of fitful sleep. He sat up alert, banishing the fevered images of jealousy from his brain. His ears rang with a penetrating high-pitched whine. It was Ascii's distress call on the UHF wavelength, coming from the direction of Silicon Valley. It didn't take long to work out that Inspector MacRo had sent in his shock troops, the Night Operators. Ascii was in real peril: they wouldn't bother to catch or tame him, they would destroy him on sight. At least the fact that he was signalling meant that he was still alive.

The ringing in his head rose to a banshee wail. Hex took a quick fix on it, then switched off his receiver. He had dressed, packed his electronic dog collar, a soldering iron and a few other handy devices, and left the house before any of the others had risen. In the pale pre-dawn twilight he set out briskly along the path he now knew, determined to put as much distance as possible between him and what had been his home before anyone reported him missing.

"This time," he thought, "I won't be coming back."

- Has Hex gone out of his mind?
- What would you have done?
- More breathtaking suspense in our next bit.