THE HEXADECIMAL KID
AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

Bit 13 (Doing their Bit)

[Hex and Execute have arrested Dr Null at Ma Synapse's house in Silicon Valley. Ascii, however, has eluded them. Dr Null has revealed the shattering news (confirmed by Execute) that Fetch and Simula are having an affair. Hex and Execute are taking Null away, guided by the human girl Cleo, when they hear behind them the dull rumble of the human mob -- with Ascii's baying at its head.]

Chief Inspector MacRo, the dour Scottish robot commanding the Hardware Division of the local Error Squad, was drumming his chromium-plated fingers on his desk. In front of him lay Simula's teletext report and beside it an urgent dispatch from the Database Administrator himself. He picked them up and leafed through them again. A speaker on the desk distracted him. "Shall I bring them in?" asked a voice.

"No. Make them wait," replied MacRo.

He rose and began prowling up and down the office, muttering into his beard. It was unprecedented. Never had the humans gone on the warpath like this. He had been forced to send for reinforcements to quell the uprising. It was going to look to his superiors as if he had completely lost control. The fact that the arch-saboteur Dr Null, whom they had written off as dead, was at the centre of it all did nothing to improve his humour. He pressed a button. "Send in the troublemakers now, but leave the girl outside."

Hex and Execute walked sheepishly into the room.

"Are you the Hexagonal Kid?" asked MacRo.

"I feel like it."

"Answer Yes or No only please."

"I am the Hexadecimal Kid."

"Wait. Before you make a statement you must put your hand on this black box."

Hex put his hand on the box.

"Do you solemnly swear that you have put your hand, your whole hand and nothing but your hand upon the box?"

"I do."

"Good. Then I'll tell you something about court procedure in this part of the world. I am judge, jury, witness, prosecutor, evidence, verdict and sentence. There will be no defence. Now then, how do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

"Wrong. Try again."

"Not proven."

"No. One more chance."

"Innocent, Inspector MacRo, sir."

"Don't argue with me, boy, my patience is running out."

"What use is a MacRo without an argument?" asked Hex provocatively.

Seeing stormclouds gathering on the inspector's brow, Execute stepped in. "What are we accused of?" he asked mildly.

MacRo's eyes glinted. "You two have just deserted your post, run amok like a pair of demented humans, kidnapped a young girl, broken into the reservation without a permit, stirred up a revolution among the people and you have the gall to ask what you're accused of."

"But we were acting to protect the System," protested Hex. "Null stole my dog and planned to turn him into a gigotic bomb. That man is a menace to electronic society."

'Your dog is the menace."

"Yes," confessed Hex, "in Dr Null's hands he is: Ascii can use the privileged system primitives PEEK and POKE."

"And you can't get much more primitive than that," added Execute.

MacRo sighed. "Why couldn't you just send in a report, as Simula did, and leave the rest to us? Now we have to deal not just with Null but with Ascii and the rioters too. You know the regulations. The System is based on collective decisions, not harebrained individual initiatives. Your foolhardy escapade has caused chaos. You will be punished accordingly. As from today your modular hierarchy is being restructured: Simula and Fetch will take over as controlling modules and you will be their subroutines. In addition, your right of direct access to the Database is withdrawn."

As MacRo spoke a sickeningly vivid image of Fetch's coarse robotic hands on Simula's peripherals crossed Hex's mind. She had always been the epitome of stepwise refinement to him. Now she and Fetch were being set up as coroutines. "If he lays a finger on her, I'll break his tin head wide open," thought Hex.

"What about Cleo?" he asked when the inspector finished.

"She will be sent back to Sprocket's Hole, where she belongs," replied MacRo.

"Sprocket and Bootstrap are degenerates," objected Hex.

"Their lifestyle is a trifle eccentric, I grant you, but they're working for us, and they're licensed to keep her."

"Why can't she be cybernated?"

"She knows too much Fortran."

"Then I want a licence to take her with us. Those bandits treat her like dirt."

MacRo frowned. "Let me remind you of something. An unreliable robot can always be reassembled or reprogrammed, but if an android proves faulty...." He let the sentence hang. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly clear," answered Hex.

"There is an S-100 bus leaving here in an hour's time," said the inspector. "I strongly suggest you two are on it."

The data bus was small and crowded. Execute managed to squeeze into a window seat next to a fat lady android carrying a cumbersome package wrapped up in text strings, but Hex had to stand the whole way. They both spent an uncomfortable night and were feeling thoroughly miserable when the bus dropped them.

As they trudged wearily up the hill to Base 16 Hex said: "It doesn't feel like coming home."

- What sort of homecoming awaits them?
- How much longer can this go on?
- Another thriller next week!