

Love Rusts

by C. D. Peck

Their love was doomed at the onset, yet they engaged in it anyway, heedless of the numerous error messages and critical runtime failures. Abort, Retry, Fail? They selected Retry over and over.

They met at a cyber café near the Tinsel Asteroid on the outer circuit. She was a gleaming android with perky chrome breasts and a swiveling, rotating, gyrating, undulating, oscillating walk designed to allow maximum stability in various gravities. He was a shipbound mech-bot with a claw for manipulating wires and circuitboards. Skating around on magnetic rollerballs, winking at everyone with one red optical sensor, he caught sight of her uploading navigational data in a nearby comm vestibule.

"01001000 01001001 00001101 00001010," he said.

She giggled and responded with a polite, "48 45 59 20 54 48 45 52 45 0D 0A."

Perhaps they should've known then. She was hexadecimal. He was binary. He ran on lithium batteries and she recharged daily in a nuclear powered canister. She stored data on an internal 30 gig harddrive with optional memory stick capabilities for expanded storage. He processed one cartridge at a time, and his external disc burner was... burnt out.

But they made a go of it because love -- true love -- knows no limitations. Unfortunately, hardware *does* know limitations and they were reminded again and again when his side panel flashed LED messages about low memory while she multitasked. His peripherals were incompatible with her ports, and although they discussed adding a universal hub into the mix, it just seemed too kinky.

It was months later when she found him daisy chained to a dot matrix in a seedy supply closet on Tanzak 9. He swore he was only checking the dot's parallel port, but she was no dummy record. She tried to forgive him, but missing packets of data soon began to turn up in her hidden folders, misdirected communications on their private LAN. She wouldn't have caught them if she hadn't initiated

her firewall protocol, but there they were in garbled ASCII. He'd been pinging a fax machine with a 56k modem.

How could he? she wondered. After all, she was high speed, with buffering capabilities and dual sockets for enhanced deep stack calls. She waited for him to get home that night, late as usual although she'd synced up their system time. He claimed he got confused and thought it was CPU time, not wall clock time. She knew better.

If she could smell, she would've found him reeking of cheap toner ink. She confronted him directly, as she was programmed to do, and he denied it, but when she asked to see his dongle, the truth came spilling out like a raw storage dump.

They were over. Finished. Kaput. Exit routine. Stop goddamn run.

It was raining when she swivelled out to the taxipod, her belongings encoded on a flash drive stuck in her ear. The rain slithered like a silvery screensaver down her chrome, caught in the glow of the amplified starlight.

"Don't rust," he said, in binary.

"I hope you get a virus," she spat back, in hex.

Maybe it was never meant to be.

