

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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Page 1 -- Front Page News

[When the System died all the computers and robots that constituted its active elements ceased to function. But a very few androids (computerized humans, like Hex) who had for some reason been cut off from data communication during the critical period survived. They soon found that the electrodes implanted inside their skulls, the communications equipment, the auxiliary memories, the on-board brain accelerators and all the paraphernalia of the cybernated man were no longer a boon but a crippling handicap. Nevertheless, some of them kept up the struggle for existence, especially the more un-systematic ones -- as Cleo and her friends are about to discover.]

The first tinges of dawn had begun to lighten the sky, and they were able to see the strange figure quite plainly. They gazed fascinated as he staggered uphill towards them. He was wearing a trapper's leather jacket that looked as though he had just rolled through a briar bush. Every so often he paused and put his hands to his head: it seemed as if he were trying to wrench it from his shoulders.

None of them moved. The stranger was obviously unaware of their presence. He drew closer and closer until, when he was less than three metres away, Piltdown 2 took a pace forward into his path and held up a hand.

The stranger lifted up his eyes. Seeing the apeman's shaggy bulk he fell to his knees.

"Help me," he implored. "Data, please input"

In a flash Cleo recognized not only the symptoms, but who he was. It was wild Bill Bootstrap, clearly far gone into the delirium induced by advanced data deprivation.

"My head hurts," wailed the android. "Please, here just a byte." He pointed feebly to the parallel I/O port fitted just behind his left ear, then, as if the effort was all he could muster, keeled over and lay still.

Quick and businesslike, Cleo knelt over his fallen body and rolled him onto his back, propping up his head against a boulder. Though she had no reason to be grateful to Bootstrap, her former jailer, his suffering touched her. It was fairly clear that, by some minor miracle, he had avoided gigosis but was now experiencing withdrawal symptoms of the severest kind in the absence of the all-embracing Network.

She beckoned to McNull.

"Now the error of his ways is revealed unto him and he sees the evil thereof. So be it," pronounced McNull without sympathy.

Cleo ignored his remark. She knew that McNull had applied for cybernation of his own accord as a young man but had failed the aptitude test. Since then he had nurtured a bitter

resentment for all things cybernetic; but, more useful in the present context, his envy had led to a morbid fascination with electronic gadgetry. Even now, just after escaping by a hair's breadth from the collapsing cavern, his pockets were bulging with LED displays, assorted chips and fragments of discarded circuit board, while the 'Return' key from a VDU keyboard that he had picked up somewhere on his travels hung round his neck on string like a lucky charm. These baubles he collected totally haphazardly -- without regard to their function or value.

"Hand me that," she said, pointing to a video games paddle that was protruding from his vest pocket.

Reluctantly, McNull obeyed. She took it and pressed it into Bootstrap's hand. His fingers closed about it. It had a warm amber handle and it seemed to comfort the android. At any rate his breathing steadied and he fell into a deep sleep.

She stood up. She knew that Mike Rose had commanded Piltdown 2 to obey her orders with his dying breath, and she wanted him to carry Bootstrap. Unfortunately she could not speak predicate calculus, nor even Esperanto, which was the least logical language the Sasquatch could understand. Eventually, by mime, she conveyed her intention to him, and he humped the motionless body over his broad back.

"Salvation should be denied those that merit it not," muttered McNull grumpily as they set off. To tell the truth he was very attached to his electronic trinkets and was far from pleased to have one requisitioned to relieve an android who in his opinion richly deserved his fate. As they walked on he furtively removed his prize possession, a flat-screen micro-television, from an outer pocket and secreted it about his person. That, for sure, was not going to be taken from him. (It didn't work of course, but it shone beautifully in the sunshine.)

Cleo thus emerged as the natural leader. Although still 16, and a female to boot, she was the only one who could make decisions on the spot and the only one with an idea of where to go. Piltdown 2 was bred for service and so shambled along happily behind her. McNull, when he wasn't lost in a transcendental reverie, was putty in her hands. He had inadvertently burnt out that part of his brain which dealt with forward planning in a misguided attempt to fill his head with hobbyist computer kit after the cybernation college turned him down.

Cleo's purpose, which the other two fell in with by default, was to return to Sprocket's Hole as soon as possible. That was where she had last seen her elder sister Lambda, and that was almost certainly where Bootstrap had come from. If he could survive the plague of gigosis then perhaps Lambda too (who, unlike Cleo, had been cybernated) was still alive.

The sun hoisted itself above the horizon and suddenly it was a bright desert morning. They trudged on as the day grew hotter, Piltdown 2 apparently untroubled by his load, McNull perspiring but uncomplaining, stopping occasionally to shake the sand from their shoes. Soon after midday they crested a ridge from which they could look down into Sprocket's Hole. There in the haze lay the two log cabins. Nothing stirred. Cleo galloped down the slope, sliding and slithering on the loose stones, while McNull and the apeman followed at a more sedate pace. As soon as she reached the door of the larger hut she flung it open.

Lambda she saw almost at once, splayed out half across a bench and half on the floor. Panting, she dragged her into the open air.

"Lambda! Lambda!" she called, shaking her sister bodily, "what happened?"

Lambda's eyes didn't open but Cleo could hear the whir of her disc drive motors as the read/write head searched fruitlessly for track zero. Clearly she had received a massive unregulated surge of power which had wiped clean her PROM loader and possibly corrupted her system diskette. Cleo dashed back inside to look for a ROM-pack with a fresh copy of the brain-bug loader on it. After a few moments scrabbling around she found one and emerged just in time to see McNull leaning down over her sister.

McNull's well-meaning but electronically incompetent hand strayed towards the re-start button at the back of her neck.

"No!" shouted Cleo; but it was too late.

Lambda sat up, opened her eyes and started to sing Land of Hope and Glory.

"Fool!" Cleo snarled at McNull, "Don't you realize how dangerous it is to try a warm start on an android who hasn't been powered down properly?"

McNull looked crestfallen. He had only been trying to help.

She switched Lambda off, inserted the new ROM-pack and initiated the cold-start procedure.

"This had better work, for your sake," she said, glaring at McNull.

She began counting under her breath. She knew the start-up routine by heart. First there was the memory diagnostic: that took about ten seconds. Then the processor would exercise every opcode in combination with every possible operand, which took another thirty seconds. Finally there was the disc verification test which wrote, and read back, every track on both discs twice -- first filling it with zeroes, then ones. That took slightly over a minute. If that failed, Lambda's brain, which was alive but which could only communicate with the outside world through the apparatus that encased it, would be trapped for ever inside a coffin of defunct electronic accessories.

Ten seconds were up, then 40, and still nothing had gone wrong. Cleo's heart pounded, making regular counting difficult. Ninety-nine, 100, 101,

Surely it was time for Lambda to wake up?

- Next month: a rude awakening.