SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

Page 2 -- Virtual Paging

[Cleo has escaped from the downfall of the System with Johnny McNull and Piltdown 2. They have come to Sprocket's Hole where her sister Lambda (who has been cybernated, unlike Cleo) has survived gigosis only to fall victim to acute data starvation. Their attempts to revive Lambda have failed, and Cleo is worried that the System Crash may have corrupted her loader routine -- rendering her unable to re-boot her brain.]

Lambda suddenly opened her eyes and blinked. Then she yawned a yawn that Rip Van Winkle would have been proud of.

She looked straight at Cleo, but registered no recognition. "Ready for input," she declared. "Please enter program header."

"Program header?" queried Cleo. "What do you mean?"

Lambda merely answered in a matter-of-fact tone: "Question malformed. Collateral ambiguity detected. Remove axiomatic inconsistency before resubmission."

"Get away with you!" expostulated Cleo.

"Improper punctuation," Lambda responded blandly. "Missing keyword or delimiter. Statement fails to compile."

"If that's all you can say by way of thanks then you had better shut up," said Cleo angrily, "or else I'll switch you off again."

"Unrecognized Boolean operator," replied her sister. "Invalid conditional clause. Syntax error."

This rebuff was too much for Cleo. Reaching forward to turn Lamdba off, she stormed: "That is the END."

Lambda heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank Wirth that's over. I was doing a Pascal compilation when the System went down. I thought I'd be stuck in the compiler for ever. I couldn't get out until someone said END. Sorry I was a bit off-hand."

"So much for progress," commented Cleo. "Anyway, how are you?"

"Well, I've a headache that feels like 600 steam hammers all pounding away at once, but otherwise I guess I'm all right."

"You're one of the lucky ones actually. You realize the System has been completely destroyed?"

"I figured it wasn't just an ordinary crash. Do you know what caused it?"

"Hex claimed it was his mechanized hound Ascii who carried gigosis into the heart of the Network."

"Hex, eh?" mused her sister. "Where is he now?"

"He's dead."

"Oh. Well at least he achieved his ambition."

"I suppose he did," said Cleo, almost to herself. Her mind drifted back to Sam Synapse, the Hexadecimal Kid -- to give him his full title -- ace programmer, android adventurer, wrecker of the System and now, if she was to believe Dr Rose's diagnosis, posthumous father to her unborn child. She wondered if this was the moment to break that piece of news to Lambda.

A groan from the vicinity of Piltdown 2's shoulders interrupted her thoughts. Bill Bootstrap appeared to be regaining consciousness. Piltdown 2 had been standing placidly out in the sun with the injured android on his back, quite content to await her instructions; but the heat had affected Bootstrap.

"Hey!" exclaimed Lambda. "He looks just like Piltdown!"

"It's his clone," Cleo explained. "They were both conceived in the same test-tube -- one of Mike Rose's little experiments. I think he's going to be very useful: Rose commanded him to look after me. He'll do anything I say. The trouble is I can't speak Esperanto, so it's difficult to get the message across. Do you think you could ask him to take the casualty indoors and lay him down?"

"Mi petas: metu la korpon en la domon," pronounced Lambda.

Piltdown 2 didn't budge.

"You say it." Lambda told her sister. "I don't think he'll listen to me.'

"Metu la korpon en la domon," repeated Cleo hesitantly. This time the beast complied. They all followed him in. As soon as he put Bootstrap down, Lambda recognized who it was.

"What's the idea of bringing that criminal here?" she demanded.

"He needed help," Cleo replied. "Why shouldn't I?"

"I'll show you why not," answered Lambda indignantly. She led her sister by the sleeve to the smaller hut. The stench made Cleo recoil when they entered but, trying not to inhale deeply, she forced herself inside.

"Look!" said Lambda, stabbing her forefinger at one of the two iron bedsteads. On it, already in an advanced state of decomposition, was a recumbent form. It was the corpse of Zap Zapper, the rebel android who had been Lambda's boyfriend.

"Bootstrap is responsible for that," said Lambda icily. "The pair of them were sniffing Gallium Arsenide one night and got as high as two kites. Idiots! They wouldn't listen to my warnings. Some kind of argument developed and they started to fight. They just threw me to the ground when I tried to part them. Then Bootstrap pushed Zap into a tank full of syllogistic acid -- that vat at the back he used for illicit home-brewing -- and ran off. Zap was

half drowned and stoned out of his RAM by the time I managed to fish him out. He never stood a chance when the Crash came."

"Poor Zap," was Cleo's reply. "At least he died happy."'

Lambda scowled. "Bootstrap is a killer. If you don't get rid of him I will."

"All right," agreed Cleo. "When he has recovered we'll send him packing."

"It gives me the creeps having him around."

"Don't worry. He's no match for Piltdown 2."

So Cleo settled down to nurse Bootstrap back to health, to take charge of her oddly assorted household and to prepare as best she could to become a mother at an unwantedly early age.

Meanwhile, far out in the unimaginable vastness of deep space, the starship 'Green Tangerine' with its crew of 32 mutant cybernoids and one ship's parrot was plotting a course that would take it within 15 light-minutes of our own planet. The Green Tangerine, a class four bulk carrier, plied the lucrative trade route between Omega Solaris in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud and Zargon 7 in the third spiral arm of the main galaxy carrying a cargo of large prime numbers on the outward trip and returning with a hold full of 30 million disposable nappies as ballast. Using Factorial Drive, which propelled the ship by calculating the factorials of very large integers and shooting out all the zeroes at the rear, she could complete the tour in a little under thirteen earth weeks -- including docking at both ends and a refuelling stop at Arcturus -- which for a ship of her size was good speed.

Though her voyages frequently took her close enough to our sun to pass within the orbit of Saturn, the earth was not marked on any of the stellar charts in her control room. Its presence was acknowledged only in a few bytes of her navigational computer's backing store. Nor had any being on earth witnessed her regular comings and goings, except for an eccentric amateur astronomer in the days before the System who spotted a dissolving vapour trail of zeroes in the sky through a nine-inch refractor and spent the rest of the night trying to polish them off his lens.

- Is the Green Tangerine a red herring?
- Why are disposable nappies so highly prized in the region of Omega Solaris?
- Find out more in our next, incredibly colourful, episode.