

# SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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## Page 8 -- Radio Paging

[Samson Synapse has become a secret computer freak. He has also discovered that he can influence living things, causing plants to grow into computer peripherals. But when he takes a fancy to drinking his newborn sister's blood, things have clearly gone too far.]

"Waaaagh!" The cry of Samson's baby sister split the night.

Cleo sat up in bed. "Samson, is that you? What are you doing?"

Samson ran upstairs to his room and bolted the door. He was shaking. Shame and revulsion at what he had done swept over him. Quickly he pulled on his shoes. Downstairs there was quite a commotion. The baby was still crying, and Cleo was trying to soothe it. He could hear McNull's raised voice and Cleo telling him to be quiet. Presently there came the sound of footsteps on the stairs. There was a knock.

"Samson, come out."

The door handle rattled. Samson backed towards the window.

The door would not budge. There was a pause. Then he heard his aunt's voice giving a command to Piltdown 2 in Esperanto. The wooden latch began to bend and crack.

Samson did not wait for it to break. Clutching his precious potted plant he leapt out of the window and plummeted into the sand beneath. He picked himself up, shook off the dust, and tore off into the hills. He ran until he could no longer hear the confusion of shouts behind him.

Soon Sprocket's Hole was far out of sight and he was scrambling over the rocky slopes that hid his sanctuary from prying eyes. Almost as soon as he arrived, he huddled under the cedar tree that sheltered his makeshift micro lab and fell asleep.

Next morning he took stock. He was too proud to go home, and would not be welcome there in any case. To visit a Nullard village, even where he was not known, would be to court death. Yet he had no idea how to survive on his own in the wild. He was a dab hand with a soldering iron and a wizard at machine coding but what he needed now was food and drink. He was already feeling thirsty.

The more he thought about it, the more depressing it seemed. There was only one thing to do. He switched on the Moonshine Micro, sat down at its keyboard and slotted a pair of his home-grown floppies into the disc drives. The drives hummed and the screen filled up with a cloud of menacing crater-pitted asteroids rushing towards him at alarming speed, cleverly projected to give an illusion of depth. It was his favourite, Astro-Pinball.

Soon he was lost among the meteorites, oblivious to the cares of the world. The counter at the top corner of the screen clicked up and up as he manoeuvred his way through the meteor swarm. He was at the helm of a great spacecraft which leapt and turned in response to fingertip pressure, weaving past the onrushing planets and zapping any alien ships foolish enough to cross his path. They exploded with vivid orange flashes as his high-energy beams vaporized them in their tracks.

Higher and higher climbed the score. He was intoxicated. Now he was destroying everything in his path -- comets, moons, planets even stars with the touch of a button as he raced to the ends of the galaxy. Suddenly a cracking twig brought him down to earth again. The sound, though quiet, stood out from the shrill electronic bleeps of his video game. He looked around. His eyes probed the chinks in the foliage. Was it just a rustle of leaves in the wind?

Wham! That moment of inattention had cost him the game. His starship had ploughed straight into a neutron star. Now the screen was a field of little dots of light, twinkling serenely. On the bottom line was an invitation for him to record his name for posterity. Despite his lapse of concentration he had beaten the previous top score by a substantial margin.

As he tapped in his initials he heard another twig snap. This time he was sure: he could feel someone's eyes on his back. He sprang up and pushed aside the overhanging branches. For an uncomfortable second he was eyeball-to-eyeball with a coarse face. The brow was furrowed in a leering frown and the eyes filled with distrust. Then it fled.

He watched the figure, clad in ragged furs, loping down away from him. It was one of the village lads from Happy Valley.

"But what the Hell was he doing up here?" Samson asked the heavens out loud.

Perhaps the intruder had been out fur-trapping and had overheard the Astro-Pinball sound effects. Perhaps he had been minding sheep and one of them had strayed. The answer did not matter. What was certain was that he would head back to his folks and tell them that he had seen. A Nullard search party would be on its way before nightfall.

Samson cursed his misfortune.

Meanwhile far out in the frigid vacuum beyond the orbit of Pluto the space freighter Green Tangerine drifted helplessly out of control. Her metal sides glinted dully in the faint light from the distant pinprick of fire that was our sun as she rolled ponderously end over end.

On the foredeck Prestel, the ship's parrot and commanding officer, had called the two most senior of the mutant cybernoids who crewed the ship to him for an explanation. He directed his questioning at the first mate, an experienced veteran of the space lanes.

"Rom, what's the meaning of this?"

"Navigational computer sir! That cosmic ray storm put the refresh circuits out of action."

"Well, can't you fix them? What about the backup modules?"

"Same problem, sir, we've tried. We'll have to take her to Arcturus under manual control."

Prestel gnashed his beak in frustration. He thought of the long haul to the repair depot at Arcturus, limping along under manual guidance. It would take an eternity.

"Do you realize what we're carrying on this trip?"

Rom had no idea. He had been surprised and annoyed by the obsessive precautions during loading on Zargon 7. When he had come on board early unannounced, a security guard had machine-handled him off his own ship.

"Well I'll tell you. There's no point in secrecy any more. We have a cargo of half-baked ideas to replenish the dwindling supply on Omega Solaris. It is vital that we get them through before they go stale.

Rom drew in a long breath. So that was it. Now he understood the reason for all the cloak-and-dagger stuff in port. If the supply of half-baked ideas to the Think Tank in Omega Solaris dried up it would throw the whole galaxy into chaos.

There was silence. Prestel shifted from claw to claw on his perch.

"Well?" asked Prestel. "You're the pilot."

"Permission to make a suggestion sir?" chimed in Ram, the other cybernoid, who had held his peace so far.

Prestel leaned forward. "Yes?"

"I was checking the instruments after the radiation storm to inspect for damage when I noticed something interesting."

"Go on."

"The sensors detected evidence of intelligent life on the third planet of the local stellar system."

"Intelligent life on Terra Firma? It must be an instrument failure."

"With the greatest respect sir, there's only one configuration of signals that indicates a score of over 10 billion on Astro-Pinball. I'd know that pattern anywhere."

"Astro-Pinball," murmured Prestel as he chewed over this nugget of information. Even their shipboard computer had an Astro-Pinball rating of less than 5 billion. As for Rom, he wasn't in the same league. A pilot of that calibre, if one truly existed, could not merely get them to their destination on time but ahead of schedule. He, Prestel, would be showered in glory.

He spoke to Rom and Ram. "You two are going on a little recruiting drive."

"Understood sir," they replied in unison, and started heading towards the exit hatches at the stern of the ship.

"Oh, and Ram ...."

"Yes sir," said Ram, pausing at the door.

"You'd better be right."

"I am sir."

"Good. Because if you're not back with your Pinball Wizard within four temporal units we'll blast off without you."

- Will it soon be Samson Synapse Superstar?
- More moonshine next month.