

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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Page 10 -- Pageantry

[Samson Synapse has been picked up by a press gang from the spacecraft Green Tangerine on account of his prowess at Astro-Pinball. Having just blasted Neptune's moon Triton out of their path he has set course for Omega Solaris and can now relax in the uncluttered interstellar flight corridors.]

"Right," said Samson with the ship safely locked on auto-pilot, "all that excitement has given me an appetite. I could eat a horse."

"Horse?" queried Rom. "Please explain."

"It means I'm hungry. I want some food."

"Please explain 'food'."

Samson suspected his leg was being pulled, but he could not detect sarcasm in the cybernoid's even voice.

"Food is what gives you energy," he began warily.

"Ah!" said Rom, "electricity." He plugged an extension flex into a wall socket and started unrolling it.

"No. No. I mean something to eat, something I can chew.... ingest.... digest."

"I think he refers to a biochemical process," suggested Ram. "Beings of his sort derive their motive power from the breakdown of organic hydrocarbons."

A horrible thought dawned on Samson. "Haven't you got anything edible on the whole ship?"

"Well, Prestel has an Arcturan cuttlefish bone to sharpen his beak," offered Rom.

"And there's a Chinese Takeaway near Delta Pavonis, but we've already passed that," added Ram.

"I'm going to starve!" wailed Samson piteously.

"Leave it to me," cut in Prestel. He hopped into his cage and began turning the exercise wheel back and forth, like a thief testing a combination lock. A holographic image of strange shapes and hieroglyphics surrounded him as he did so. He twiddled his wheel some more, working his way through the index pages to the classified refreshment frames. Moments later a red and white cardboard box, somewhat battered in transmission, plopped onto the floor of the cage.

"There you are," he said with pride, "Kentucky Fried Klingon. Any subscriber can dial some up, if they know the right number."

"Mm good!" said Samson when he finished, licking his fingers appreciatively.

They landed on Blotto, seventh planet of the giant red sun Omega Solaris, three temporal units early amidst a hubbub of mutual congratulation. The crew stayed on board to supervise the unloading as the half-baked ideas were pumped out to replenish the dangerously depleted supply of the Intergalactic Think Tank, which had its headquarters on this planet.

That left Samson at a loose end. He had been paid well for his efforts and was now the possessor of a huge wad of Blottonian Gigaflops, but he had no real idea how to spend them. With time hanging on his hands he wandered around the amusement arcades, notching up phenomenal scores at Astro-Pinball and raising a few eyebrows by his performance at N-dimensional Hyperchess. He even paid a visit to Blotto's notorious infrared-light district, but was too timid to sample any of the wares on display, which for a boy of 12 was just as well.

Eventually he mooched back to the ship.

"Bored eh?" was Ram's reaction. "You're set loose in the entertainment centre of the entire galaxy with a fistful of Blottonian Gigaflops and you complain of boredom! I can see I'm going to have to teach you how to enjoy yourself. Just you wait: our unloading will be finished in a couple of hours. Then we'll really hit the town in style. By the way, where have you been staying?"

"At the YMCA."

"No wonder you're depressed! That crowd of dossers and space hoboes would give anyone the creeps. Listen: I'll tell you what we'll do. First we get cleaned up -- then we head straight for the bar at the Intergalactic Hotel. When we've got warmed up with a little jungle juice under our belts we'll take us along to watch the Tournament. I bet you don't even know what day it is tomorrow."

Samson confessed his ignorance.

"Well, tomorrow's the Vernal Equinox here on Blotto, and tonight's a bit special. Since it takes about 19 of your earth-years to come round they get quite excited about it -- kind of carnival atmosphere. At midnight they'll hold the head-butting ceremony. All the young studs in town will climb into the ring and run at each other head-to-head. The winner is the last one left standing. He'll be crowned Spring King."

Samson looked shocked. Ram waved an antenna dismissively.

"It's a vestige of a primitive ritual they had before computerization. Normally we bring the disposable diapers on the Green Tangerine which they use as padding round their heads, so I guess this time it could get a mite noisy. So long as we arrive in time to catch the quarter final round we shouldn't miss much of the fun. And when it's over things really go wild, Boy! They sure let it all hang out. Don't expect to wake up with the same companion you began the evening with, eh? Know what I mean?"

Samson almost imagined a wink on Ram's impassive front panel.

And so it was that Samson found himself, only a few hours later, standing amidst a packed crowd of assorted lifeforms on the steeply raked terracing of the Stadium of Photons, with a half-drunk can of Solarian Punch in one hand shouting enthusiastically at the barbaric spectacle beneath. The contestants were now down to four. Prostrate bodies, felled in earlier rounds, lay littered across the floor of the arena. Two of the survivors were lined up like sprinters at either end of the stadium ready to dash full tilt at one another. This was the needle match. These two were the favourites. At the near end was the local lad, an inhabitant of the neighbouring star system of Altair, who sported a fine pair of antlers and rejoiced in the name of Mighty Micro. Even at this distance Samson could see that his face was streaked with gashes from earlier bouts. At the far end, built like a tank, was a 40-tonne military cybernoid of the Behemoth class, hailing from a planet called Poughkeepsie in the Greater Magellanic Cloud.

The crowd were right behind their own man. Every time the Behemoth moved they hissed, and a great cheer of support erupted into the night when the game Alatairian, though dwarfed by his opponent, took off his tracksuit and waved.

A gunshot sounded and the words "THEY'RE OFF" flashed up on the electronic scoreboard. The two gladiators rushed headlong at each other. There was a jarring crunch as skull met steel, distinctly audible above the breathless hush of the spectators. A moment later its echo was drowned by a great roar. Amazingly the skinny Altairian had triumphed: the metal monster keeled over sideways and thudded unconscious to the ground. Samson, carried away by the spring fever, cheered himself hoarse.

The final bout resulted, as expected, in victory for the local hero. He thus won the contest outright and was led to the champion's pedestal from where, dazed and groggy but triumphant, he raised his arms in salute to the crowd -- before being borne off shoulder-high into the streets.

And then the festivities really began. In true Blottonian style the frenetic revelry continued unabated till dawn. The roadways were full of dancers and there were wild goings-on as an incredible variety of different beings drowned their inhibitions in the firewater for which Blotto was justly famous.

Samson's recollection of the subsequent events of that night was very hazy. Suffice it to say that he woke up with a very thick head in a side-street of the Blottonian capital. His money was all gone. He never found out whether he had lost it, spent it or simply had his pocket picked. Next to him in the gutter lay his Binary Tree. Its pot was smashed but some soil still clung to its roots.

- Where does he go from here?
- Enlightenment next month.