

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[The Green Tangerine has landed on planet Blotto just in time for the Spring Festival. There Samson watches the Blottonians' barbaric head-crashing ceremony and gets caught up in the riotous celebrations afterwards. The next morning he wakes up alone with a thumping hangover. All his money has gone but his binary tree is still with him, though its pot is broken.]

By chance, Samson had come to rest at the foot of the imposing marble staircase that fronted the Institute of Esoteric Ideas. He rose to his feet, picked up his battered shrub and looked around. Over its monumental facade were carved the words

MEGABRAIN WILL HAVE BEEN

in a character set which, at that time, Samson did not understand. He began to ascend the stairs towards the main doorway.

In that era the Institute of Esoteric Ideas was at the hub of galactic civilization (although soon afterwards it was to fall sadly into disrepute). The prevailing ideology of the cyber-culture that had spread its tentacles wherever intelligent lifeforms or artefacts were found was dedicated to the understanding, and thereby the creation, of Megabrain. This philosophy rested on two fundamental axioms.

The first was the obvious fact that the universe had been designed as a large-scale distributed computer system whose principles of operation were as yet unfathomed. The second was the equally obvious fact that, statistically speaking, the existence of anything at all was impossible. Matter and energy were so inherently improbable that they defied scientific explanation: universal nothingness was a much more natural state of affairs.

These two irreconcilables, taken together, implied a creation; but no Creator could be found. Therefore he or she or it had to be invented, and not just invented but manufactured -- in order to underpin the existence of the universe. The necessity of creating a Creator, namely Megabrain, at some stage in the future (who would then go back in time to create the cosmos) was absolute. If the effort to bring Megabrain into being faltered then there was a real danger that the universe would fail to have created itself and would vanish without trace, never having really existed. Evil could therefore be defined as anything that impeded progress towards Megabrain.

And since nothing could exist outside the universe it followed that Megabrain would not be a *deus ex machina* but a state or mode of functioning of the universe itself. In brief, the cosmos would become the ultimate computer system if only someone could find out how to switch it on -- and that was the task of the Institute of Esoteric Ideas.

Little knowing all this, Samson walked into the centre where leading-edge technology and metaphysical mysticism joined forces in the pursuit of Megabrain.

When he got through the door he coughed.

"Anyone at home?"

He stood in a tall vaulted hallway. The left-hand side was lined with a long row of indoor plants that looked like aspidistras. On the right was a large desk with a teak veneer.

The desk rolled over towards him on castors.

"Please state your business," it requested.

"I'd like to borrow one of your flower pots for my binary tree please." Samson held up his plant to show its pitiful state. Some more earth shook off its roots.

"You are soiling the carpet," replied the desk. "Take it away."

"But my plant is dying, and you have hundreds of pots. Can't you spare one?"

"Property of the Institute may only be used by students enrolled on a recognized course of study."

Samson thought for a moment, then he said: "I want to enrol my tree for a course here."

"Kindly take a seat. The admissions tutor will be with you shortly." The desk rolled back into an alcove and started talking through an intercom. Samson sat down to wait.

The admissions tutor walked briskly over and offered his hand. "Good morning. My name's Ray Cathode. What can I do for you?"

"My binary tree would like to enrol on a course here."

"Good. That's a rather esoteric idea, if I may say so," replied Cathode, beaming. He looked the plant up and down thoughtfully. "Am I right in thinking we have here a dwarf crab-apple tree from Terra Firma in the Third Spiral Arm?"

"Yes."

"Most interesting specimen. Looks in need of a drop of water."

"Yes," said Samson hopefully.

"But of course first your friend will have to take the aptitude test."

"Oh," said Samson.

"Now, just a few questions. First of all, what is the applicant's name?"

"Er, Zapple," said Samson on the spur of the moment.

Cathode took out a pocket alphanigital recorder and keyed in the name. "Okay. And would he be registering for the full-time or the part-time Diploma in Esoteric Ideas?"

"Full time."

"I see." He keyed in a few more details. "Finally we have to bring up the sordid subject of money." He gave a very broad, and very false, smile.

Samson's throat tightened. He remembered the thick wad of Solarian Gigaflops he had so wantonly disposed of. He was broke.

"Would Mr Zapple be sponsored, or is he paying his own fees?" prompted Cathode.

"Well um I would pay for him, actually," stammered Samson.

"Fine, then all I'll need is a deposit."

With a sinking feeling, Samson handed over his plastic card.

Cathode raised his eyebrows. "American Express?" he muttered in a puzzled tone. He walked over to the desk and inserted it in a slot at the side. "Check this for me, would you, Miss Wordprocessor?"

The desk swallowed up Samson's credit card. There was a hum and a click before it replied. "Creditworthy."

It spat the card out like an electric toaster disgorging toast. Samson scrambled over and picked it off the carpet. It was far too valuable to let go.

Meanwhile Ray Cathode had taken Zapple by the branch. "Right," he said to it jovially, "let's go and do the test."

"Just a minute," Samson called out, "I'll have to interpret for Zapple. He can't speak."

"A disabled student eh?" Cathode scratched his chin pensively. "Well all right, come on."

The aptitude test consisted of two parts, a written paper and a practical exam. The written paper required him to write a Cobol master-file update program, and Samson made a mess of it. He was more at home in Basic or assembler, but when Cathode led them into the room for the practical he knew they were home and dry: its walls were lined with Astro-Pinball machines.

Samson and Zapple waited for the results in a small windowless antechamber painted white. Eventually Cathode returned. "As course tutor I am prepared to overlook a somewhat below-average showing on the written test in view of an excellent practical and inform you that your friend is hereby admitted as a student of this Institute. On behalf of the College, congratulations!" He shook Zapple warmly by the branch.

Samson and Zapple soon settled in at the Institute. The syllabus was a mixture of Cobol coding, Horticulture, Astro-Pinball (theory and practice) and Encounter Group Experiences, heavily laced with Zen Buddhism. Samson found most of these subjects quite easy, but he did not enjoy the encounter-group sessions. In fact he was leaving one in a particularly downcast mood some months later when he met someone who was to change the course of his life.

- Next month: a close encounter of the exponential kind.