

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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Page 12 -- Full Page Spread

[Cast adrift on planet Blotto, Samson Synapse has enrolled at the Institute of Esoteric Ideas on behalf of his binary tree, Zapple. By the middle of the second semester they have both settled in well. They are coping with the technical side of the course, dealing mainly with Cobol, Horticulture and Astro-Pinball; but Samson finds the mystical ethos surrounding it hard to swallow.]

Each morning the students lined up in the main quadrangle and chanted slogans such as 'thou shalt not leave until runtime that which can be done at compile time' which were supposed to put them in tune with cosmic consciousness, and thus bring them closer to an understanding of Megabrain. They always ended with a rousing chorus of 'Megabrain will have been'.

At one of these morning services Samson was seen yawning. Since disrespect for the name of Megabrain could lead to expulsion the matter was a grave one, and he and Zapple were instructed to appear that afternoon in the office of Dr Catharsis, the director of the institute, for spiritual debugging.

Samson entered with some trepidation. He enjoyed most of the course, especially the advanced study of Astro-Pinball strategy, and had no wish to be thrown out. That would put him back to square one -- homeless on a strange planet.

Dr Catharsis looked up and adjusted his spectacles.

"I want you to insult me."

"I beg your pardon sir?"

"Say something nasty to me," explained the doctor.

Samson suspected a trick. "What sort of nasty thing?" he enquired.

"The worst you can think of."

There was silence.

"Go ahead," urged the doctor, "spit it out."

"You're an idiot," began Samson cautiously.

"Good, good. Go on."

"You're a fool. No one can take you seriously. All the students laugh at you behind your back."

"That's the stuff. Now give it some feeling."

"You stink," said Samson, warming to his theme. This whole place stinks. It makes me want to vomit -- all that stupid chanting. It's meaningless mumbo-jumbo. It's for kids."

"That's more like it."

Samson was in full flow now. The doctor's bland detachment annoyed him. "You think you're clever, but what do you really know about computing? You so-called teachers just want to pull the wool over our eyes with all that bloody superstitious nonsense about Megabrain. That's just a load of old rubbish."

"It's still a bit lukewarm. Can't you pep it up a bit?" requested Catharsis urbanely, seeing that his refusal to take offence was having its desired effect.

"All right," replied Samson, seeing red. "You want to know what I really think of you lot and your Megabrain business? In one word?"

Dr Catharsis nodded vigorously.

"I'll tell you: it's crap. Pure unadulterated shit!"

"I see," said the doctor, drily. "Then you will have no objection when you hear that your continued presence at the Institute is no longer considered desirable."

Samson swallowed hard. He had walked straight into a trap.

"You bastard," he whispered.

"Bastard", repeated Catharsis, turning the word over on his tongue. "Does this word 'bastard' have any special associations for you?"

Samson had no answer. He felt drained.

"Well, that will do for today," Dr Catharsis announced. "He pulled out a cassette from a drawer in his desk. Here is a tape-recording of our conversation. I want you to take it away and play it yourself. Meditate on your remarks about Megabrain, and pay particular attention to that word 'bastard'. I think that may be at the root of your problem. Then in a couple of days we'll meet and discuss your case further."

Samson pocketed the recording and let himself out.

All he could think about was getting as far away from the director's office as possible. He slammed the door and bumped straight into another student, hardly even bothering to apologize.

"Hi," she said. "My name's Mantissa. What's yours?"

Samson raised his eyes from the floor. What he saw sent his brain reeling. Her face was ringed round with a halo of golden curls, and she was smiling. It was a smile so intensely radiant it was like a sunburst, too bright to gaze upon.

"Hello," he managed to reply, "I'm Samson Synapse, and this is my friend Zapple." Already his heart was thudding and his stomach had been gripped by a feeling like fear.

But there was nothing frightening about Mantissa: her blue eyes were candid and friendly.

"Hey that's cute! Is he a student here too?"

"Well actually he is and I'm not. I interpret for him because he can't talk. I'm just an associate student."

"Sounds really neat," she enthused. "Listen. I'm just going to the cafeteria. If you have nothing scheduled why don't you and Zapple come along and have a protein-burger with me? You see I come from Ghendor -- I guess you've heard of it."

Samson had heard of the fabulous twin planets of Ghendor-Ghendoran in his horticulture lessons and nodded assent.

"Anyway," she continued, "I kinda miss having someone who really understands plants to talk to."

"Sure," agreed Samson with alacrity, "I'd love to come." It was a monstrous understatement.

In truth he had a lecture to attend, but all thoughts of everyday matters such as classes, coursework assignments and even Astro-Pinball fell away like ballast as the hot-air balloon of his immediate infatuation soared away into the stratosphere.

Once they had found a free table Mantissa started telling him about herself and her home planetary system. Samson listened enraptured.

The inhabitants of Ghendor-Ghendoran were very keen botanists. They had discovered early in their history, as Samson had in his own small way, that it was possible to grow computer equipment. In consequence they had become extremely wealthy, and had devoted some of the proceeds to covering the entire continent that dominated the southern hemisphere of Ghendor with the most stupendous labyrinth of botanical gardens in the known universe. Here they cultivated species from every corner of the galaxy. It was said that a person could spend a lifetime wandering through its bowers and rockeries, its ornamental grottoes and glades, and never see the same flower twice. It was one of the wonders of the Milky Way. Every season millions flocked to admire its legendary beauty.

The centrepiece of it all was the Garden of Fantasy where flourished the mysterious kaleidoscope vine. The aromatic emanations of this strange plant amplified and subtly distorted the innermost feelings of its beholders, and only those with stable personalities were allowed to see it.

That was the reason for Mantissa's presence. Despite her youth she was a qualified biocybernetician and had been sent to the Institute to carry out research into ways of purifying the active essence of the kaleidoscope plant, so that it could be used to assist the monks at the Galactic Think Tank in their contemplation of Megabrain.

Samson found her fascinating, and she too, when she heard of his horticultural exploits, was genuinely impressed.

"You really must visit Ghendor next vacation. I'll show you around. Wait till you see the triple sunset from the parapet in the Fantasy Garden. That will really blow your mind."

Samson's mind was totally blown just by the invitation.

Before he could utter a reply, however, a group of students joined them.

"Come on Mantissa," said one, "don't forget you're coming to the floppy disco tonight. You're gonna be late if you don't get a move on."

Samson recognized the speaker. He was Seymour Crayfish, one of the post-graduates who occasionally assisted at his lab classes in video gamesmanship.

"Oh Seymour, I'll be with you in a minute. Bye Samson, it's been nice talking to you." She rose to leave.

"Goodbye," he croaked, his voice choked with jealousy.

- Is this what they mean by green-eyed monsters in space?
- Wait for our next pulsating issue.