

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Samson has just met Mantissa, a fellow student at the Institute of Esoteric Ideas, and been completely bowled over by her. But their absorbing conversation about flower power is broken off when Seymour Crayfish butts in to remind Mantissa she has a date with him at the floppy disco.]

"Bye Samson," said Mantissa. "It's been nice talking to you."

"Good-bye," he croaked, his voice choked with jealousy.

As she left she brushed her hand lightly against Samson's. Then she was gone. Seymour Crayfish turned and walked after her. Samson sat there unable to move.

Her parting gesture had imprinted itself on his skin. For days afterwards he could still feel the fleeting touch of her fingertips. He almost expected an outline of her hand to show up as stigmata in red weals on his flesh, so distinctly had his nerve-ends memorized that brief moment of contact.

From then on there was only one thought in his mind -- Mantissa. He neglected his studies. Computers no longer held the same fascination for him: gone were the days when he could spend hours flushing out a recalcitrant program bug or tidying up the last detail of a screen format. Even his astro-pinball rating slumped miserably. From being a star pupil he fell to the bottom of the class.

Since he was already in disciplinary trouble for taking the name of Megabrain in vain this was bound to lead to his eventual downfall, but he did not care. He went around in a trance. It was as if the 1001 thoughts that had crowded and jostled in his brain till the day he met Mantissa were just squatters who had been summarily evicted and now stood huddled miserably on the pavement with nowhere to go.

Occasionally he saw her on her way to a lecture or in the student café surrounded by a group of admirers, usually (he noted bitterly) including Seymour Crayfish. On such occasions she was invariably polite and friendly towards him, though he tended to drown in a quicksand of tongue-tied embarrassment.

What Samson had not come to terms with was that Mantissa was nice to everybody. Not only was she very beautiful, she was very amiable too. Like all natives of Ghendor-Ghendoran she had a touch of the psycho-chameleon.

A psycho-chameleon is a small reptile found in the luxuriant tropical forests of Ghendor which feeds off the kaleidoscope plant. It protects itself from its enemies by sensing what would-be predators fear must and projecting just such an image back at them. By studying this lowly creature in its natural habitat the Ghendorans eventually understood its behaviour well enough to build a microelectronic device which mimicked some of its capabilities. This device used sophisticated pattern-recognition algorithms to detect and enhance the minute electrical discharges given off by thinking and the latest holographic

laser imaging techniques to relay back the desired picture. It enabled its user to present himself or herself as whatever most appealed to another being -- or indeed to present a different favoured mask to several others at the same time. It did not so much falsify the facts as selectively highlight or play down aspects of the truth. Furthermore it was small enough to be worn as a lapel-badge or brooch. This little charmer had, through the centuries, done much to safeguard the prosperity of Ghendor and its citizens.

One activity Samson did find time for in his zombie-like state was perusing the encyclo database for information about Mantissa's home planet. There he learnt all this; but by then it was too late. He realized that neither he nor anyone else had seen the real Mantissa, but the knowledge fell on barren ground. The spell had already done its work.

One evening the moment he had been waiting for arrived. He was returning from a meeting with Dr Catharsis at which his recent lack of progress in his studies had been discussed and at which he and Zapple had been given one last chance to prove themselves. He decided to call in at the library at a time when it was unlikely to be crowded and do some further research on Ghendor-Ghendoran. He entered to find the library quite deserted, except for Mantissa who was sitting at one of the encyclo data readers. She looked round and saw him.

"Oh Samson, do you think you could do me a favour?"

"Certainly."

"I'm having trouble with this thing. Do you know how to work it?"

"Well I've used it a lot recently."

"That's good, because I'm stuck. I'm trying to look up an article on vegetative computer systems published in the journal 'Impersonal Computer World' but I can't find any reference to it at all."

Samson made to lean over and reach the keyboard, but she moved her chair slightly aside and gestured for him to sit down.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said. "Draw up a chair."

He pulled up a seat next to her and started typing at the keys.

"It's organized as a hierarchical view database," he explained, thrilled to be so near her and glad she had probed him on a topic where he felt competent. "I press the button here and that takes us to the master bibliographic index. Okay? Now we have a choice: we can either try under 'Im' for 'Impersonal Computer World' or under 'Ve' for vegetative computing. By the way, do you know the author?"

He had turned as he asked the question and met her wide blue eyes looking at him. They were lagoons. He could swim in them. He could almost hear the surf breaking lazily on the warm coral sands.

"No. It was written by a woman: I know that; but I'm afraid I've forgotten her name."

With a great effort he wrenched himself back to the viewer. "Never mind. Let's try 'Ve'. We could go to the Impersonal Computer World annual catalogue, but since we don't know the date it would take ages to step through it. Now, here we are. 'VDUs', 'Vector Processors', 'Vedic Mathematics' 'Vegetative Computation and Computer Systems' by Daisy Wheel.

There you are! We've got it. I'll just put in a queue request and you'll have a microfiche copy waiting in your output pigeon-hole tomorrow morning."

"It all seems so easy," said Mantissa. "How silly of me not to find it!"

"I can see why," replied Samson. "You were looking under 'Impersonal Computer World' but in fact it was printed in 'Impractical Computing'."

"Ah! That explains it," said Mantissa, full of admiration. "How clever you are."

Just at that moment Samson felt a gentle pressure against the side of his knee. He could hardly believe it. Yes, it was true! Their legs had met under the table. Now they were both pressing: it could not be an accident.

His vision of the screen blurred. He turned to face Mantissa. Somehow their fingers met and intertwined. Now his gaze was locked onto hers. Gradually their lips moved closer together.

"It's a dream," thought Samson. "It has to be a dream." His heart pounded and his breath came in fitful gulps as Mantissa's lips, now only centimetres away, framed the kiss he had yearned for so desperately. Then he leant forward and bit her on the neck.

"Ow!" she yelled. "What do you think you're doing?" She jumped up clutching her wound and staggered, crying, towards the door.

Poor Mantissa. She was used to being adored, but Samson was the only one who had still loved her when the low-battery warning indicator flashed on her chameleon brooch. That night in the library, though he had not noticed, she had deliberately left it switched off. A moment ago everything had seemed possible and now this. Bitterly, she vowed never again to expose her naked self, and turned her camouflage device back on, retreating into the prison of her emotional armour.

And poor Samson, he was still sitting there stunned by his own action, almost as distraught as Mantissa. She could not know, and nor did he, that it was the parasitic programmable virus which had infiltrated his defenceless bloodstream before he was even born that caused him to act as he did. Twice now, in its relentless quest for new host bodies, it had incited him to meaningless violence that had brought his world crashing round his ears.

"What's going on in here?" Ray Cathode, one of the lecturers, had flung open the door and was peering in.

Seeing Mantissa in tears he put his arm round her shoulders. "What happened?" he asked soothingly.

"He bit me," she sobbed.

"I'll take you to the sanatorium," he said paternally. "As for you," he declared, rounding on Samson, "I suggest you leave at once." There was venom in his voice.

"Yes, I'm going back to my room," replied Samson weakly.

"I don't mean back to your room; I mean back to your miserable little planet."

- Is this the end of a beautiful friendship?