

# SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Samson Synapse's dream nearly comes true one night when he finds himself alone with the lovely Mantissa in the library of the Institute of Esoteric Ideas, but their romance breaks off before it has begun when, as she leans forward to be kissed, he bites her neck.]

Samson trudged back disconsolately to his room in the hall of residence and packed his few belongings, including Zapple. Before dawn he was wandering along the dockside of the Blottonian spaceport looking for a berth on a vessel heading towards Terra Firma.

He scuffed his heels along the quay, head bowed. Above him space gulls wheeled, cawing their melancholy cries, but he did not heed them. Presently he sat down and gazed at the stubby but powerful hulls of the star freighters. But he looked with unseeing eyes: his mind was still full of Mantissa and the way he had thrown away their chance of happiness.

He had to get away. There was no place for him on Blotto now. But how could he work a passage? He had not stayed at the Institute long enough to obtain his astro-pilot's license. He was not even an able spaceman.

Very shortly his question was answered for him.

"Hello there! If it isn't the earthling! Haven't seen you since the night of the vernal equinox. Have a good time, eh?"

It was Ram, the salacious old space dog who had got him into this pickle in the first place.

Abruptly, almost without pausing for breath, Samson spilled out his story. Ram was unimpressed by his ill-fated encounter with Mantissa -- 'preying Mantissa' he called her dismissively. It appeared that everyone around Omega Solaris knew of her.

"You're well rid of her," he said unsympathetically, and cackled when Samson confided, still smarting at the memory, his unchivalrous deed.

He was not very sympathetic when Samson asked for a job either.

"We've got our full complement on board at present," he said.

"But you must get me aboard. I can be very useful. I know my way around the Green Tangerine."

"I'm not on the Green Tangerine any more," Ram replied. "I've got my own ship now. I command the Green Orange."

"Not another green fruit," said Samson.

"Yeah, there's a whole fleet of them: Green Tangerine, Green Orange, Green Lemon, Green Tomato ...."

"And Green Apple?"

Ram looked askance at him. "Green Apple? What a silly name for a spaceship."

In the end Samson persuaded Ram to take him to the offices of the Green Fruit Salad Line. There he met Prestel the parrot again, who had been promoted to a perch on the ground as controller of voyages.

For all Samson's earlier prowess Prestel was far from keen on employing him without the proper paperwork.

"But I saved your lives," pleaded Samson. "You didn't ask for a certificate then."

Prestel consulted the crew sheet in front of him once more.

"Oh all right, I'm short of a cabin boy on the Green Banana, bound for Optima Pascalis 4 with a cargo of error diagnostics."

"A cabin boy?" Samson had hoped for a navigator's post, at least.

"It's the best I can do. From there you can catch the shuttle to Tau Ceti. Then you're only 11 light years from your own planet."

"Eleven light years. What am I supposed to do -- swim?"

"I said: it's the best I can do. You know no ships call at Terra Firma."

Samson acquiesced with a sigh. "Okay. When do I join?"

"Blast-off's at midnight tonight."

They kept Samson very busy at first on the hyper-space cruiser -- pumping out the bilges, sweeping floors, mixing cocktails for the first-class passengers and doing other menial tasks too demeaning for robots. But once they reached the long free fall through intergalactic space between the Lesser Magellanic Cloud and the Milky Way there was less to be done. He even found some time to relax on the Observation Deck when the passengers were at dinner.

The walls of the Observation Lounge were lined with port-holes with image-intensifying binoculars mounted at each one. He could peer out through these at the main galaxy spread out in all its majesty below them. Their sophisticated fibre-optic photoprocessors not only enlarged the image but also corrected for their large blue-shift and displayed a stereoscopic view. Just by twiddling a knob he could make the scene appear to rotate or obtain a cross-sectional view which the instrument calculated from the spin of incoming photons. It could even seem to take the observer inside an exploding supernova.

It was while gazing out at the detailed panoramic splendour of the galaxy that Samson had his revelation.

Suddenly he saw a meaning etched out in the sky by millions and millions of densely packed stars. All the words about Megabrain, which he had treated with such cynicism and half forgotten, rose up from his subconscious in a flash of insight.

It was all so clear, so obvious once you saw it: it made sense of everything. And yet the key, the answer to the cosmic question, had miraculously been granted not to the monks practising their austere meditative disciplines at the Intergalactic Think Tank, not to the whizz kids with their arrays of array processors at the Galactic Computer Centre but, amazingly, to him -- the unworthy Samson Synapse, astro-pinball freak and space-hobo extraordinary.

"What in hyperspace do you think you're doing?"

It was the captain, who had entered to find Samson kneeling on the floor by a port-hole. His harsh voice shattered the luminous moment of inspiration.

"Don't you understand?" Samson demanded urgently. "It's true. Megabrain does exist. The hardware is in place. All it needs is the software -- one little bootstrap program to start it all going. That's me! That's you! We are Megabrain -- every living being in the universe, just waiting to link up into the ultimate ethernet. Megabrain's body is the physical universe: we are his soul."

"Get down below where you belong, and spare us all this religious fanaticism. I've got a ship to run."

"But don't you see?"

"See what?"

"Megabrain."

"I see a cabin boy suffering from star-stroke, who will be slung overboard if he doesn't obey my orders."

Samson retreated below decks, but the vision still haunted him. He had no one to share it with except Zapple. When he tried to explain it to the officers they laughed, and the deck hands just ignored him. But with Zapple he felt a sense of communion. Alone in their cabin he poured out his revelation -- how Megabrain lay sleeping waiting for the awakening in a trillion hearts and minds of the dramatic realization: we are Megabrain.

The apple tree made no reply of course, but Samson was sure it could feel in its sap the import of his discovery. In fact it bore its first fruit since leaving earth, which he took as a good omen.

When they arrived at Optima Pascalis Samson was unceremoniously dumped. The captain had only taken him on as a favour to Prestel, and his tiresome religious proselytizing had made him even less welcome. The pittance he had earned as a cabin boy was just enough for an economy class standby ticket to Tau Ceti. He could not even afford the in-flight feelie. This left him stranded on a desolate moon with a thin atmosphere and no indigenous population. Since he had no exit visa he had to remain cooped up in the Transit Lounge, and the duty-free shop would not even accept his American Express card.

- Where does he go from here?
- Is this the end of the road?