

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Samson has left Blotto for earth. On board the star cruiser Green Banana he has a mystical experience while looking at the heavens, but now he is stuck on the moon of a planet orbiting Tau Ceti, eleven light years short of his destination. There are no flights to the solar system.]

The windows of the transit lounge were misted with condensation. Idly he wiped a patch clear with his hand. He gazed out over the cratered moonscape towards the faint yellow star, eleven light years distant, which was rising over the rim of jagged peaks on the horizon. That, he knew, was his own sun.

As he looked, he had an idea. There was a small repair depot next to the space terminal, and at any given time there were three or four space buggies parked outside awaiting collection. They were not really meant for interstellar travel but, on a full tank, might just stretch to a hop of a dozen light years.

Nightfall found Samson, clad in a stolen space suit, creeping over the concrete apron of the launch pad towards the space buggy parked furthest from the workshop. He clambered easily up its side in the low gravity and found the hatch, mercifully, unlocked. In the cabin the electrical systems were energized, and the fuel tanks were nearly full: it was to be collected next day.

"3, 2, 1, zero," he whispered, and pressed 'Escape' on the console.

As the tiny craft rose unsteadily on a column of blue flame the radio crackled into life. "Control Tower to Z-8001. This is Control Tower. You do not have clearance for lift-off."

Samson switched it off.

The night-shift duty officer at the space traffic control desk yawned as he tracked the unauthorized take-off on his radar scanner. The Space Traffic Controller was off sick with a hardware bug, and the Deputy Controller and all his staff were in dispute over a pay claim and operating a work-to-rule. So they lobbed a neutrino mortar half-heartedly after Samson, which damaged a tail strut when it exploded off his port side, logged his time of departure in the flight-path computer, and went back to their game of poker. They had more important things to attend to than a solo joyrider.

It took Samson almost as long to reach earth in the space buggy as the hyperspace cruiser had taken to cover the 70000 parsec journey from Omega Solaris, but eventually he crash-landed smack on target less than 4 km from Sprocket's Hole. He climbed out onto home soil again and stretched his limbs joyfully.

He left his spacecraft smouldering in a mangled heap and set off at once for his birthplace. When he reached Sprocket's Hole he found it much as he had left it. A thin coil of smoke curled lazily upwards from one of the chimneys. In the vegetable garden a peasant woman was hoeing wearily.

Samson approached her. "I come from afar to bring the knowledge of cosmic oneness to all who will open their hearts to Megabrain," he announced by way of introduction.

She straightened her back and looked up from her exertions. "You sound just like my father," she declared.

"You look just like my mother," he replied.

They both laughed.

It was true. The woman he addressed was his baby half-sister Ada, born of his mother Cleo to Johnny McNull eleven years after his own birth. He could see the tell-tale scar on her neck (made by his own teeth) that identified her without question. But owing to the time warp caused by his extensive travels through hyperspace his younger sister was now a grown woman while he remained a teenager. Indeed there was no way of knowing his biological age with accuracy, though he reckoned he was 15 or 16.

"So you're Samson then," she said, once he had convinced her of the reality of time dilation. "Folk talk a lot about you, but I never thought we'd see your face again. Come inside and have something to eat."

"You're not angry with me then?"

"Angry?"

"I mean about the er He tapped his throat with one finger.

"Oh that. I can't remember anything of it. Just as long as you don't try it again."

"I won't do that," he promised. "I've learnt my lesson."

From Ada he learned that both McNull and Cleo had died in successive hard winters. She told him other startling news too.

"You're Son of Hex now, you know," she explained. "You have a following. Your ascent to heaven was seen, and many have predicted your return. They await your word. My father came round to that way of thinking before he died, though the Nullards punish anyone who talks about it."

"That's good, for I have returned to overthrow the stultifying Nullard doctrine and open men's eyes to the glory of Megabrain. They will see that all is computation, and everything that is, computes."

"The Nullards certainly won't like the sound of that," she warned him.

"You can be the first," he said. "Look, this is Zapple, the binary tree of knowledge. It has been all round the universe with me. It has seen things you can scarcely imagine. And all the time it has been absorbing information -- more than you can ever dream of. Eat of its fruit and you will be wise beyond any wisdom known on earth."

"Oh no. Not me, thank you. I've quite enough on my plate being ignorant. I'll feed you if you like -- though that could cost me dearly -- but you won't get me to byte off more than I can chew."

"Well then, I'll be off." He knew she meant what she said, and realized that his continued presence put her life in danger.

"Where?"

"Into town. I must spread the word."

"Are you mad? You'll be arrested. You'll be hanged. Why not lie low here for a while?"

"No. I must speak now."

Even as he left, Ada was still trying to persuade him of his folly; but he stuck to his rash decision.

When he reached the great central plaza of Nada, the holy city of Nullardy, he strode straight up to the immense statue of Tony Bony, climbed onto the plinth at its base, unpacked his bag and started to shout.

"Megabrain is lord of all, and I am his prophet," he proclaimed to all who would hear.

People looked up. Before long a few curious passers by had formed a straggling audience.

"Who do you think you are?" challenged one of them.

"I am the Son of Hex. I have come to welcome you to the wonderful world of computers. I will show you the marvels of the micro-chip."

"And I'll show you the marvels of the bacon-flavoured chip!" quipped a heckler. He held a bag of potato chips in his hand, one of which he popped ostentatiously into his mouth and crunched. There was a ripple of laughter.

"Come unto me," commanded Samson magisterially.

The heckler stepped forward hesitantly, all eyes suddenly on him. "Give me what is in your hand."

"That's my lunch!"

"Give it to me."

Reluctantly he proffered his bag. The onlookers pressed forward for a better view. Samson held the food in his left hand, and laid his right on the man's shoulder. Then he returned it to its owner.

"Arise, take up thy chips, and think."

There was a gasp from the crowd.

Samson, at the height of his powers now, had worked a miracle. What he handed back was not a crumpled packet of soggy crisps but a video workstation with EEG interface. The parasitic computing virus that had invaded his cells was beginning to do what its designers had planned long ago.

"Fear not," Samson admonished them. "The computer is just a tool -- to lead you to greater knowledge. All life aspires to the condition of computing. Every one of us is part of a distributed system, and if you will open your minds to Megabrain we shall all be linked in the everlasting universal ethernet."

The crowd surged eagerly forward.

"Give to us too, O Son of Hex!" they clamoured.

"You shall have your fill," he called out above the din. "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after processing power, for they shall control the CPU. Processors for the people! One man, one micro!"

As the crowd pushed and shoved to claim their free gifts, two hooded figures detached themselves and made off swiftly. They were spies employed by Brother Bottleneck, one of the seven patriarchs of the Nullard church, on their way to tell him what they had seen.

- Can Samson get away with it?
- Find out in next month's grand finale.