

Omega One

the Holiday Edition

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Oral

EASTER

Ch 1 - Paul

Paul, the young fairy prince, fluttered his transparent wings behind his back and lay belly-down on his bunk. He looked over his homeworld from his viewport and opened the window for some fresh air. His father's palace was found on a baleen of a large whale and the breeze from the salt water refreshed his spirits. His view was uninterrupted and he could see some three centimeters to the horizon.

"I will miss our home, but the Dentist must serve the Dentaper as we all must," thought Paul. He was taking a break before his mother fetched him for a training session with his father's weaponmaster.

He was less concerned about the weapons training and more concerned about a test later in the day. His mother, Lady Jessica, insisted that he sit with a Mother Hygienist and that his cleaning abilities would be evaluated.

She had tensed when she had told him about this meeting. Paul thought, "She fears this test. Why? Her Bene Hygiene training should have suppressed any fear from showing. She must think it's dangerous."

He thought of his father, the Dentist Leto of fairy House Molar, "I wonder if my father even knows of this test. He does not even know that my mother has been training me in the Bene Hygienist ways."

As Paul was his only heir to the seat of power, the Molar House AdjustableChair, the Dentist himself had left study materials in his room on their new assignment, the human mouth known as Oral.

Paul listened as his father's holopack spoke, "The planet Maxillofacialium, known to their native Frefairy tribes as Oral, is home to the key resource for the entire dental lifestyle that powers all fairydom. Oral is the only source of Enamel, the psychotropic substance, that allowed fairies to live longer, see further, know themselves and build their Practices."

"House Rabbit, led by the Bunny Rabban will withdraw to their homeworld of BunnyPrime. As custom, their prince, The Bugs, is ready to assume the Carrot throne of their kin. He is thought to be even more dangerous than Rabban himself," the thing said.

Paul flitted upright and thought, "The Enamel. The Enamel must flow or House Molar will be exposed. Why does the Dentaper want us there?" The holopack offered no answers to Paul's question so he calmed himself by reciting his Bene Hygiene training, "Decay is the tooth killer. Where there is decay I will drill. Where I drill, the decay will be no more. Only I and the tooth will remain."

Paul felt a change in the air pressure around him and heard someone's heart beating from the nearby hallway. He relaxed as he recognized his mother's scent before she entered his room. "Good morning, Paul. It's time for your martial training with Gurney. Are you ready?" asked his mother to his back.

Paul greeted his mother and they left his room.

His mother had trained him in her sect's ways as a child. He was learning the cleaning way and, as a male, this was dangerous. Men who tried to become a Bene Hygienist always go mad. It was madness to even try; however, breeding the male Bene Hygienist, the legendary Der Tseyn-Gehilf, was the ultimate goal of the Bene Hygienist order. Jessica's hubris in

thinking Paul might be the legend himself would be tested later today.

Paul could sense his mother's fear and wanted to ask about this test that consumed her peace. There was no time to talk as the weaponmaster, Gurney, flitted into the training area.

The boy complained, "I'm in no mood for combat cleaning today, Gurney." Gurney darkened and flipped his dental shield up. "Defend your mouth, young assistant!" the old fairy said as he lifted his scaler to attack. The cleaning tool's razor tip gleamed in the morning light and was headed straight for Paul's number six on the upper right.

Paul barely managed to get his own shield up and dodge the well-timed thrust by his father's weaponmaster. Gurney flitted to Paul's right and the young prince attempted to riposte, but Gurney pressed and the weaponmaster's tool headed to Paul's twenty-two with deadly purpose.

"Is Gurney trying to kill me?" the prince wondered as he managed to gain space by a solid neuvieme and had tempo on his instructor.

"The slow scaler gets past the face shield," the boy thought as he carefully aimed for Gurney's thirteen from the right and low.

Gurney managed to deflect with a pronation seconde and the two fairies circled each other.

"Are you in the mood yet?" snarled Gurney as he closed the distance by pushing off his back foot and a wing snap.

Paul flitted out of line and drove forward towards Gurney's seven on his upper jaw. He stopped just before drawing blood.

“Hold! I have you, Gurney. Drop your weapon!” said the prince triumphantly.

“Look down, young prince,” said Gurney. His scaler was touching Paul’s eighteen deep in his lower jaw.

“We would have cleaned each other in death, I’m afraid. Your form is excellent but mood is for singing and lovemaking. A Dentist must always be ready to clean—regardless of ‘mood’,” said Gurney to his student.

“Would you have drawn blood, Gurney? You came so close?” worried Paul.

“If you didn’t try your hardest back then, I might have given you a good scrape to remind yourself of your duty. Enough for today, your mother is waiting for you and your next meeting. Fare well, young Dentist, and I will see you again on Oral,” said the teacher as he left the room.

His mother said, “Please come with me,” but her wand moved slightly. She was using the House wandlang to warn Paul.

“Prepare yourself, Paul. We meet the Mother Hygienist who trained me and is my mentor. Please remember your training; she wants to evaluate your cleaning and your adoption of the Bene Hygienist ways,” said her wand movement.

Paul adjusted his lapel with his wand in reply, “I read you, mother. I will do my best.”

The two fairies flitted down the hallway and entered a reception area. A Bene Hygienist receptionist greeted them both and asked them to take a seat while they waited for their appointment time.

“I’m looking forward to a good cleaning,” Paul said but his wand was also communicating his concern.

“Why do I need to see a Hygienist, mother? Dr. Noah gave me a complete checkup just last week,” said the prince’s wandlang as he touched his nose with the sparkly star at the top of his staff.

“You’ll love how clean your teeth will feel after this, Paul,” said Jessica as her wand tried to calm her son.

“Dr. Noah is our trusted ortho and keeps us aligned with the truth; however, Mother Hygienist Debbie is my mentor and a Bene Hygienist. You will learn and be judged at the same time, Paul. Focus on your teeth for now and calm yourself for what is to come,” said Jessica’s wand when she placed it between her knees and rubbed her chin with her sparkly star.

“Paul? The Mother is ready to see you now,” said the receptionist.

Paul rose and started towards the receptionist. “Room four on the left, please,” she said as she pointed down a long hallway of closed doors with numbers on each one.

Jessica tried to smile at her son when he looked back, but her eyes gave away the truth. Paul took a deep breath and recited to himself, “Decay is the tooth killer. Where there is decay I will drill.”

The prince walked down the hallway and found Room Four. An elderly woman with a face shield was already there.

“Sit down here and open your mouth,” Breathed the Mother. The sulfuric cloud from her mastery of the Bene Hygienist technique flooded the young fairy’s nose.

Without his direct agreement, his body obeyed the command from her halitosis. “You could have just asked and I would have sat on my own, Debbie!”

“You will address me as Mother Debbie and be still,” said the master Hygienist.

Paul started to get up to show this woman what a prince of House Molar can do when displeased, when the woman moved at incredible speed.

A razor-sharp needle was in Mother Debbie’s hands. It dripped with a clear liquid and was hovering at Paul’s thirty.

“This is the gum jabbar. The clear liquid is a deadly neurotoxin that, in the hands of a Bene Hygienist, can either cure or, in the case of non-fairies, can kill. Are you fairy or not? We will find out if you are an Assistant or no. Move again and die, young prince,” growled Debbie.

Paul froze in fear as the fine needle hovered near his gums. The Mother Hygienist began and the pain began. It started as a small rip across the gums by her sickle scraper. “Have you been flossing?” Debbie sneered behind her face shield.

As she worked, Paul could feel his gums being pulled off their respective teeth and metal was jammed deep into his gums.

“A six? This will not do!”

The pain increased as he felt his gums being flayed and the blood streamed down his throat. He recited the litany to calm himself through the agony.

“Decay is the tooth killer. Where there is decay I will drill,” thought Paul as he saw a piece of raw flesh fly from his mouth onto Debbie’s face shield.

“This simply must come out RIGHT NOW!” offered Debbie as she reached for a pair of needle-nosed pliers.

“WHERE I DRILL, THE DECAY WILL BE NO MORE!” screamed Paul in his mind as he held perfectly still. The sounds of cracking and crunching bone filled his ears as Debbie began her extraction without anesthesia.

Paul felt his tooth twisting and the nerve threads pulling out as long threads from his gums that Debbie snipped with a pair of poultry shears.

“WHERE I DRILL, THE DECAY, THE DEC.. WILL BE NO MORE. ONLY I AND THE TOO... THE TOOTH!! WILL WILL REMAIN!” The prince shook in pain as he tried to get the litany out.

“Whoa! Big surprise! No female Hygienist ever felt such pain and still remained still!” said Debbie as the pain immediately ended.

“Rise, young fairy. You very well may be a Hygienist. I need to speak to your mother,” she continued.

Paul immediately jumped up and checked his mouth in a nearby mirror. His teeth were all there, and, well, they were perfectly cleaned.

He avoided Debbie and walked out to the reception area.

Jessica saw her son and thought to herself, “My son was cleaned and lived!”

“That fairy, if you can call her that, wants to speak to you,” said Paul with his wandlang.

“Thanks, mom. I’ll wait here. They want to talk to you,” he said out loud.

Lady Jessica flitted down to Room Four and saw her mentor awaiting.

“I should clean you right here. A male fairy? You know our plans were for Der Tseyn-Gehilf. The Bugs, he was to marry your daughter to create Der Tseyn-Gehilf and heal the feud between House Molar and Rabbit,” said Mother Debbie to her charge.

“Leto needed an heir. I could not refuse him,” Jessica offered.

“Well, now... now there will be war,” said the old woman, and she walked out of Room Four.

“My son lives. He lives,” said Jessica to herself as she sat alone and looked at her hands.

Ch 2 - House Rabbit

Johnny Rico sat attentively in his high school civics class. His girlbun Carmen was just in front of him and she was so fuzzing hot. She had his full attention and the looking was good.

She was covered in tawny brown fur with a white belly where she had a pierced rabbit navel. She topped it off with long, long ears and round haunches that looked ready to spring a full millimeter before you got her by the neck. That cottonball in the back would look just great in some yoga pants if you know what I'm saying. Wait, was someone talking right now?

"MR. RICO! Can you give me a summary of what I just said to the class?" said Johnny's teacher, Mr. Razzcat. The feline's vertical iris from his one good eye narrowed at his educational prey.

Johnny Rico's ears flattened and he meekly offered, "Hopping ensures warrenhood. Only warreners should guide the body rabbit."

The feline purred back, "Yes. The textbook answer as to why citizenship is awarded. Military service ensures a place in the warren, but that's not the question. Why would we want military service as a basis for moral authority in polymammalian society?"

The cat walked between the students looking for someone who might give him a reasonable reply. His missing eye had a dark patch over it, but everybunny thought he could still see out of it somehow.

Rico tried, "They have skin in the game, sir?"

The cat looked back at Rico and said, “Skin yes, but what is it about military service that ensures warrenhood? Why this mode of service to the community and not, let’s say, school teachers?”

The class laughed at this as Mr. Razzcat was a known veteran. The eyepatch and the missing front paw were a constant reminder of the sacrifices the cat made in service of House Rabbit.

Johnny sputtered between his buck teeth and couldn’t come up with an answer. Razzcat addressed the rest of the class and asked, “Can anyone help out Mr. Rico here?”

Carmen raised her hand saucily, “Mr. Razzcat?”

The cat called on the young female bunny, “Yes, go ahead, Ms. Ibanez.”

Carmen answered calmly, “Violence is the basis of all moral authority. As hoppers, bunnies can deliver violence, sugar the non-compliant, and protect the warren unlike any other.”

Mr. Razzcat smiled, “Exactly right. Violence, state-sponsored violence, is the basis by which all mammals form the needed hierarchies that drive evolution forward. Without violence, the state is unhealthy and the body rabbit becomes ill.”

The cat walked to the head of the class and offered, “Think back on how we needed to deal with the squirrels. They refused the hoppers. They refused to harvest the Carrot. They simply took and twitched their tails as they attempted to gain control of mammalian society. Now they have their proper place. Let’s have a small demonstration on how violence maintains order and why those we entrust with its power are our society’s overseers. I’m feeling a bit peckish before lunch.

I guess I should order something to eat before I get too cranky. Low blood sugar issues, unfortunately.”

Razzcat pulled the velvet rope that summoned a teaching assistant. TA Nutty came into the room. His squirrel eyes did not meet any of the rabbits as he entered. “You need something, sir?” said the brown squirrel to the cat. The squirrel kept his head lowered and would not look at any rabbit in the room.

“Yes. Nutty. I would have you for lunch,” said the cat over one gleaming eye.

“I am sorry, sir, but I have another duty at lunchtime,” said the squirrel softly.

“Not to serve, Nutty. I haven’t had squirrel in a month at least. So, not to serve, but to be served. Your mother was very tasty and I suspect the apple does not fall far from the tree,” the cat coolly continued.

“PLEASE NO SIR! I’M AN EXCELLENT TA. LOOK AT THE GRADING I’VE DONE JUST THIS MORNING...” the squirrel screamed.

“As you can see class, Nutty is now fully able to contribute to society and it is violence that keeps him correctly motivated,” said Razzcat over the screaming squirrel.

“I CAN TAKE ANOTHER CLASS ON! I CAN SHINE YOUR CLAWS! I CAN FIND CATNIP! I KNOW A GUY!” continued the TA.

The bell rang as Razzcat informed his TA that he actually had a sardine sandwich from home for his lunch. Nutty sighed and asked if he was allowed to use the restroom. It appeared, based on the puddle on the floor, that this request was late.

The rabbits pushed past the TA and teacher to get to their next class.

Dizzy, a smaller hare with bright red fur and a dark belly, hopped over to Rico.

“Hey, Johnny? I was wondering if you had time later to study? I could use some help and you seem so smart,” said the young rabbit with lightly pleading eyes.

“Carmen, wait up!” yelled Rico after his girlbun’s departing cottontail.

He then told Dizzy, “Sorry, I need to catch Carmen. Maybe some other time, Dizzy.”

“oh. ok,” Dizzy said to her feet and walked slowly away.

Carmen laughed as Johnny caught up, “Are you set for graduation? I’m trying out for Fleet! I want to be a starship pilot!”

Rico offered, “You’ve got the brains for Fleet under those ears, Carmen. Are you doing anything later?”

Carmen toyed with her beau, “Johnny Rico? Are you ready to make 20-30 babies already? No no no! I’m a career bun! Beyond making more Ricos, what is on your mind for after high school?”

Rico noted, “Well, I’m thinking of hopping. Mobile Sugaring is my rabbit hole.”

Carmen was excited by the news, “A hopper? Oh my, I bet you’ll look amazing in a dress uniform! I bet you can’t catch me before I get to Jelly Bean Energy Weaponry class!”
Carmen hopped off and Johnny was close behind.

Dizzy looked at the two of them together from afar and closed her locker with a sigh.

Ch 3 - The Betrayal

The skies of Oral were filled with inbound meteors streaking across the late evening sky. Oral's anti-air defense systems fired white bone shells that burst into sharp shards in the air. The meteors, however, easily dodged these defenses. House Rabbit was attacking Oral to reclaim control of the universe's only known supply of Enamel.

Paul flitted down the hallway in search of his mother, Lady Jessica. The baskets of House Rabbit were in the skies of Oral and House Molar's armed forces were gathering to protect their royalty. House Molar had only a few months in control of Oral and, somehow, House Rabbit had received approval from the Dentaper to attack, but someone had also managed the impossible. Dr. Noah, a trusted ortho, was made crooked. He was the last person seen with the Dentist of House Molar and it was obvious that the house chair had been taken. Paul needed to secure his mother at any cost; he flew down the halls and crashed through the royal bedroom chamber doors.

The Dentist himself was nowhere to be found. Lady Jessica said to her young son, "Things are fine and we should be safe if we stay here." Paul knew to watch for her true meaning elsewhere.

His mother moved her wand towards her mouth a half inch in the House Molar wandlang, "Paul, I am not sure what has happened to your father, the Dentist Leto of House Molar. I fear there's a traitor in our midst. Could someone have broken Dr. Noah's orthodontic training? It is said to be impossible. Without an orthodontist you can trust, how can anyone get straight teeth? We need to be on the lookout for Dr. Noah and

other possible traps. Be ready with your Bene Hygiene training for any foul rabbitous deeds.”

Paul offered his own cover, “I agree, mother. We are safe here under guard.”

The young boy touched his left wing to his right nostril, “I understand, mother. Let’s make our way to the dragonflopers. We can hide with the Frefairy. House Rabbit will pay for their insolence. We must find my father as well. We will return fire from the deep cavities of Oral to get back at these sticky-handed fuzzy monsters.”

Jessica nodded at her son and they headed out of her bedroom. They flitted quickly down the hall to the hangar when two huge rabbits blasted from an open taxiway. The first hare started to point his almond rail gun directly at Paul, but before he could pull the trigger, Jessica Exhaled deep from inside her body.

The sulfur-laden Breathed words traveled quickly to the noses of both rabbits: *“You boys don’t need to kill each other over me now. Don’t be a silly rabbit.”*

Paul watched as the stench of his mother’s Breath took over the wills of the two rabbit soldiers. “She’s mine, you fuzzing mother buckler!” yelled the first rabbit as he fired a yellow beam from his left arm. The second rabbit’s fur caught fire from the beam and he screamed as he fired pastel ovoid shells at the first.

Jessica and Paul ran towards a nearby dragonflopper and hid inside. Paul whispered to his mother, “We cannot leave without my father.”

She replied softly, “Let me turn on my listening devices that I planted on him. Maybe we can find out where the rodents have taken the Dentist.”

Paul hissed, “Are you my mother or a Bene Hygienist spy?”

Jessica nodded, “Yes. We can discuss that later. I think I can make him out now.”

A faint voice could be heard from Jessica’s listening device and they both were hoping there would be a way to rescue the Dentist from the hands of the rabid rabbity horde.

“Where am I, Noah? What have you done to me?” said Leto over the speaker.

Jessica noted, “Listen closely, Paul. You must learn the ways of deception. Your father was always too principled and it will cost him his teeth.”

The voice over the device changed to someone they both thought they knew well.

“Stay put. The Rabbit Rabban will be here to collect his prize. I need you to remember one thing, Dentist. The tooth. I’m implanting a gas capsule in your back molar. Bite hard when Rabban is close. Don’t be confused by his pretty-boy nephew. Get Rabban! Wait till he’s close as he’ll want to gloat over your body. Not too soon as you’ll only have one shot!” said Noah.

Jessica hissed, “The ortho has been bent?! What evil has the rabbits brought to bear?”

“How, Noah? How could you do this to me?” said the very drugged Dentist.

“How? Dentist, it is simple,” the twisted ortho continued as he worked on installing the gas capsule inside the Dentist’s tooth.

“The rabbits have my dear little girl. She’s addicted to jelly beans now. They say I can see her again and, well, feed her the beans they give me. It’s not perfect, but it’s all I have left,” said the corrupted orthodontist.

Jessica snapped off the line. “The Dentist is dead, Paul. We must flee and find the Frefairy. Fly now!”

Paul turned with tears in his eyes but the litany brought him back from despair:

“Decay is the tooth killer. Where there is decay I will drill.”

Paul thought as he started up the dragonflopper to escape, “I will drill, father. I promise this now. I will drill. I will drill until the decay is gone, and there may be no galaxy left. House Molar will be reborn from the ashes of all who betrayed us!”

Ch 4 - The Drop

Rico was deep in hypnosleep with the rest of his platoon. Next to him in the hypnowarren slept his two best friends in the Mobile Sugaring Corps: Ace and Dizzy. Dizzy had also joined the Mobile Sugaring Corps, the hoppers, for Rico, or at least, that was what Johnny thought. She was a good friend, but Carmen was always on Rico's mind.

His fur had been carefully scored with "Sugar From Above!" that all of his platoon mates had done after boot camp was done. The words were inside two large rabbit ears shaped like twin lightning bolts.

He had learned how to work a PowerHopper and had proven to be deadly on the battlefield. The PowerHopper acted as his full and only combat gear. It augmented all of his senses, kept him well informed, increased his strength and speed, monitored and adjusted his chemistry as needed, and had mountpoints for any number of deadly weapons from his House technologists.

The notches on his ears, one for each successful high value target kill, counted at least four by now. A fifth notch would mean he was an ace. Few bunnies made ace, and his friend was unfortunately named. Ace's ears were un-notched even after several drops. He was a fine hopper but Rico wasn't sure he'd survive the war with House Molar. Dizzy slept with her three notches and was known to be one of the fiercest in the entire platoon.

As they slept, the mission plan was burned into their brains via hypnosis. Rico couldn't sense the hypnorage modules being inserted as trigger words into his psyche. His buck teeth

gritted as the targets were implanted. Failure to meet his objectives meant deep pain from his training and chemistry. Total failure often led to heart attacks due to the extreme pain of unreleased hypnorage or other chemicals used to keep their combat effectiveness high.

Suddenly, he felt his boot instructor's reveille commands pushing everything else out of his mind. "Get those cotton tails fluffed and those ears licked back! UP! UP! UP!" Johnny felt Sarge Zim's voice from boot camp pervade his hypnosis. His body started to move before his eyes fully opened.

His vision systems were finally warmed up and his body was already at attention due to the sugar stims flooding his bunny bloodstream. Rico's irises widened in readiness for the rage energy levels to start to engage.

Rico's vision cleared to Razzcat's feline face screaming, "UP! UP! UP! Line those fluffy asses on that orange line!"

As drop commander, Razzcat looked over his charges with a cold eye for weakness; one by one he carefully inspected each bunny in their powered skins, "My oh my. I think we have a group of for-real ready-to-HOP fuzzy-faced bug-smashing rabbit heroes up in here do we not!"

"ON THE HOP! WE DO THE DROP! HOOYAH!" yelled the team in unison.

Each bunny stuck out their arms and lowered their ears. The PowerHopper armor was assembled over their bodies by hard working squirrels. The squirrels quickly used impact hammers to install each rabbit into their PowerHopper.

Rico looked forward with no expression on his bunny face as his bright pink armor enclosed his body. Troopers were

encouraged to customize one half of their kit and leave the other the bright yellow from the factory. Rico had decided to paint both sides: one pink and one black. His tag sign read “GoodAndPlenty” under his name.

“We are hot over Oral and ready to drop!” yelled their feline commander as he watched the installation proceed. He pulled a squirrel aside and asked about the RedVines red/black mixture settings on one of the rabbits in back. They made a quick adjustment and the cat was satisfied.

Johnny’s pre-hypnotic briefing was activated by Sergeant Razzcat via his clawpad. The images flooded Rico’s desire centers attaching to targets and pain to failure as needed. His platoon’s pre-rage mantra was executed and the team was ready to drop.

“Ah yes. I can just smell the sugar off of you all. Those bugs will be so very sweet after they meet my crew. WHO ARE YOU!” yelled the Sergeant at his platoon.

“RAZZCAT’S FUZZBUTTS! FUZZ! FUZZ! GRRR! GRRR!” yelled the troops in unison as they moved to the launch tubes in a quick march.

Dizzy’s armor was red and yellow with “BitOHoney” on the side. She sneered at Ace and Johnny, “I am so ready to glaze some fairies! LET’S GO!”

“LET’S GO GO GO GO!” yelled the entire platoon in response.

Ace managed to stay upright and hopped behind in his green and yellow, “Mountain Don’t” armor.

Each rabbit stood in line and would step into a pair of circles that led to the launch tube entry. As each stepped into a circle, the trooper would yell “BASKET!”

The green aluminagrass weaved around the chocosteel eggs that fully encapsulated each armored rabbit. The entire basket was then shot from the starship as if each bunny was a bullet aimed at the surface of Oral.

Dizzy yelled over to Rico via electroear. “SUGAR FROM ABOVE!!” Rico virtually saluted his wingmate in response as they both were shot from the ship’s launch tubes.

Ace and the rest of the platoon followed their vanguard. The basketjets drove the rabbits downward at extreme acceleration using hot brown sugar plasma. Their armor started to feed BunUrge automatically into their rabbit blood to keep them sane under the incredible pain of massive g forces.

“HOT DAMN! THAT’S ONE BIG OLE HOP! YAHOOOO!” yelled Ace over the full electroear network.

“KEEP THE COMMS CLEAR, PRIVATE DON’T,” countered Razzcat quickly.

The aluminagrass weave and chocosteel egg shell ablated as the rabbits entered the atmosphere of Oral. The flakes offered free chaff to throw off any bug inbound countermeasures. That didn’t stop the winged masses down there from firing wildly at anything they saw.

“One centimeter until we impact on the surface,” said Razzcat over the comms.

Bone pellets could be heard smacking the outside of Rico’s basket but nothing penetrated. Just before impact to the Oral planetary surface, his egg filled with CadburyGel and the entire package slammed into the pink surface. The gel sloughed off and Rico immediately fired his high hop glute jet

towards his first target. His ears flew back as he launched himself a millimeter in one soaring bound.

Rico's hypotraining fired his j-bean beam set to green lime at the first wave of fairies he saw while in mid air. The tartness cleaved six bugs into twelve parts.

A huge wave of fairies saw the heroic rabbit and started to run towards his pink and black mech. Dizzy warned Rico of the inbound fairy wave, "Looks like they've brought knives to a gunfight, Rico."

Rico was annoyed at the distraction and unholstered his jordan-candyshell-almonator from his shoulder mount. The pastel stream of chalk-like pellets made quick work of the sword wielding natives. The hard shells broke through armed fairies like a hot knife through foie gras and the wooden nut had the fairy-stopping power needed for a day like today.

The PowerHopper's autoloader created new shells for his weapon and he reholstered it over a large pile of fairy wings and other parts.

"Where's the primary target? This is feeling GREAT!" yelled Rico to Dizzy. Dizzy relayed from Ace and Razzcat the current intel provided from the heroic spy Noah, a fairy "ortho". The fairies had all kinds of nutty ideas about Enamel, the primary product of Oral, this pink hell hole of a planet. An "ortho" believed that Enamel needed to be "straight" and "braced for change". Johnny always thought that was just nonsense from a tired, failed race of people.

Razzcat saw his key fighters near their first target and activated the first leg of their war plans.

Razzcat engaged Rico and Dizzy's sugar levels to Halloween level "NIGHT OF" and gave them release targets of the tribal elder called the Dentist, his whore and their child. "Be careful hoppers. These fanatics are surprising," said Razzcat.

Rico acknowledged between gritting buck teeth, "Aye aye sir, ON THE HOP!"

Dizzy and Rico's high hop glute jets fired and the pair leapt a full two miniklicks before landing. The downward impact of their bladed legs and long ears into the masses of bugs created a force wave that pushed the rest of the masses outwards. The two hoppers' hypotraining combined j-beams of watermelon and raspberry in sweeping arcs to clear out any stragglers who survived their shockwave and sharp steel.

Dizzy looked at the hive made from raw enamel. It was a collection of molars made of the hard white material. The bugs would hide in the crevices and try to snipe a bunny from hiding. They'd need to be careful in here. Their hopping advantage would be at a minimum in these tight spaces. Dizzy looked concerned but her hands shook from the rage levels. Sarge Razzcat back in the rear read her telemetry over tailnet and downed her RedVine feed to red only and no black. He hoped that would keep her well motivated, but too much black could lead to black eye syndrome. Few troopers recovered from a black eye.

"We need to get into there, Johnny? That doesn't look safe," said the hopper to her lead. The sarge had overcompensated and pushed her black up a bit more. The lethal ladybun's eyes narrowed and she said, "We need to get into there, Johnny. Now."

Rico asked for some pixie sticks and he blasted the sugary gas into the spaces between the enamel to smoke out any hidden bugs. He offered, “Just keep clearing them out before we go inside. We’ll smoke out the hiders and then, let’s just get creative until we find the big chief bug back there!”

Dizzy smiled and picked up a purple pixie stick while Rico stayed with the classic pink. They moved in careful cover blowing the fine gas into each hole they found. A small fairy ran from cover and Rico neatly j-beaned it with strawberry and the pipped explosion was nice and ripe. Dizzy smiled and said, “I thought you didn’t like jam for breakfast!”

Dizzy then shot her flaming marshmallow-palm plasmathrower at a cowering batch of fairy men hiding from the fight.

Rico countered, “I thought you didn’t like toast!” as he sliced open a rushing bug with his left earblade.

Ace called out in warning, “Look you lovebirds. Cut the chatter and get back into the game! Clear that grouping of bugs that are guarding the Dentist. You can see him. He’s the one with the bloody sickle and white mask.”

Rico used his carrotsight and saw the masses around the white-masked fairy. “Time for some rabbit tag team. Dizzy, get the mortar ready.”

He called out the range and distance to Dizzy as she set up the egg mortar. Dizzy made the final adjustments after another quick confirmation via her carrotsight and gave Rico the paws up. He dropped the pink and green chocosteel egg down the tube, and slapped Dizzy on the shoulder.

“Egg in the tube!” he yelled as the egg launched upwards immediately after. Dizzy and Rico watched as the mushroom cloud blew up the radicalized death squad of the warlord into a fine mist that rained over the two hoppers. Rico noted, “There’s just something in the air this morning and I can just taste it!”

Sarge Razzcat joined the two hoppers as they made their way to the impact site. There was a large pile of bug bodies. They had all sacrificed themselves to save their witch doctor. The troopers dug through the blue flesh and purple insides.

“Man, I always wanted to have breakfast together, Johnny, but I just lost my appetite. How many bugs are there anyways? Have we killed them all yet? Where’s my flyswatter!” Dizzy laughed as she worked.

They finally unplied enough corpses and found the Dentist covered in purple. They had expected him to be drugged by Noah and were not disappointed. The old fairy was barely able to make any sense.

“Rabban? Rabban?” the witch doctor moaned.

“You mean Razzcat. It’s listed here next to my smiling face. Let me lean in and show you it, kind doctor,” said the feline sergeant as he pulled up the old fairy from the pile.

“Where is your whore and whelp!” yelled Razzcat at the dazed fairy. The fairy looked at the cat oddly and asked, “Come a bit closer and I’ll tell you, fine beast.”

Dizzy warned Razzcat, “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Sar—” as the cat walked closer.

The fairy then bit hard on his front tooth and a plume of poison gas shot out towards Razzcat. The feline gasped in terror as the gas took immediate hold.

The cat screamed as his blood coagulated in his throat. The fairy smiled as he too passed in a violent set of spasms.

“RAZZCAT!” yelled Rico as his mentor was now very dead. The hypnosis-driven pain of only partial mission success started in earnest. The pain of losing his mentor and teacher was naturally earned.

“Damn it. I was having such a good day. Why did he eat it today?” said Dizzy to her friend.

She looked at Rico, “I think you’ll have to step up. Nobody will follow anybody else but GoodAndPlenty.” She tried to get him to smile, and he gave one in return for trying to help. He took the chevrons off his mentor’s body and power slapped them on his shoulder.

“Fuzz it. OK. Has anybody found the kid or that bitch in this mess?” said the new leader of the Fuzzbutts.

Ch 5 - The Frefairy

Paul looked out over the horizon. The dragonflopper had run out of fuel and he had hidden it well in an abscess. He and his mother would need to walk the rest of their way to the Frefairy and hope the rabbits are too busy getting Enamel production back online to search this deep into the jaw of Oral so soon.

He looked out over the pink and red earth and saw a solid molar in the distance, “Enamel. It’s everywhere here. I can feel it changing me. I see dental procedures I haven’t even started yet,” thought Paul to himself.

He pointed out a red inflamed area of the gumline to his mother, “Keep away from the inflammation. It will draw a tooth worm.”

Both of them were wearing bright yellow suits, called “illsuits” by the Frefairy, that completely isolated them from the environment. No disease could enter their illsuits nor could any illness inside escape. A fairy could simply not catch or give any disease while wearing one properly.

They had managed to escape the initial assault from House Rabbit with their lives. The traitor Dr. Noah had infiltrated the House Molar and left it defenseless against the horde of mechanized hares. “I will rebuild my House from the cleaned surface of Oral. This, I promise you, my Dentist,” mumbled Paul.

His mother reminded him, “You are the Dentist of House Molar, Paul. The AdjustableChair is now wherever you sit from this point forward.” Paul was about to respond when she put a hand to his mouth to stop him.

Jessica's wand moved slightly, "Paul, we are being watched. Be ready to use the cleaning way to defend yourself." Now, Paul could hear the breathing of many fairies hiding nearby.

Paul felt for his face shield but his training controlled his urge, "The face shield calls the worm. We'll need to fight in the open and unshielded."

Paul felt a narrow thread slip quickly over his throat. His face turned from blue to green as the floss clamped down so hard that he could no longer breathe. The pink-on-pink-eyed fairy behind Paul pulled hard on a floss garrotte.

Jessica moved to her son's aid and Breathed, "*Let him be and give him your weapons.*" The strange fairy took in the noxious wind from her last meal. Paul coughed and sputtered as the strange fairy complied with Jessica's demands.

Another fairy flew with a toothknife at Paul but he easily disarmed it before slamming the flier into the ground. Paul's bright sickle stopped at the new fairy's throat and Paul yelled, "I have your fairy. Leave us be or he will perish by my blade."

"Hold!" shouted an unknown voice. An older fairy appeared with eyes that were pink-on-pink and he called to others that were in hiding. Thirty fully armed fairies with various oral weapons exposed themselves from various pink crevices and pockets.

"Who are you who wield cleaning tools so adeptly?" said the old fairy.

Jessica answered, "Who would ask? We are from off world. We are expected, are we not?" She knew of the Missionara Gasslightia of this world. They could be controlled by manipulating their primitive beliefs in a savior from afar.

The old fairy's eyes widened, "You claim to be the eumaal-nazafat-min-baeid? The cleaner from offjaw who will know our ways?"

Paul offered, "The Mighty Tooth Castle. I dream of it at night."

The crowd of fairies hissed at the sound of their goal in the mouth of an outsider. The old fairy hushed the group.

"I am Stillmouth, young stranger. I spit here to show my respect in your obvious cleaning ability. Please let Jammy go unharmed and we will talk fairy-to-fairy without the need to spill any purple between us," said Stillmouth, the old fairy.

Paul drew his sharp scaler back from his unlucky target and the fairy leapt up incensed.

"Stillmouth! I must have my honor back. This boy tricked me and dishonored me in front of the tribe," said Jammy after getting up.

The old fairy answered him, "Jammy. This is no time for honor. These people and this boy may be the one we have been waiting for, the Cleaner from beyond. The one who will free us, the Frefairy, to build the Mighty Tooth Castle and bring all the Enamel in the universe to Oral."

The younger spat his reply, "Stillmouth, you have no right to stop this! My honor as a Cleaner is at stake! I call on my right for revenge."

Stillmouth sighed, sat down, and said simply, "It is your right, Jammy."

The elder then asked Paul, "Young man, arm yourself. Maybe you have a name?"

Paul said simply, “Call me Peg. PegLateral.”

Stillmouth was impressed, “Ah. The PegLateral is a small tooth but mighty! So sharp. Be ready, Peg. Jammy is very good and has cleaned many. Either way, your Enamel belongs to the tribe. The eumaal-nazafat-min-baeid will not be killed by Jammy; this is certain. So, a good early idea if you are who you say you are. Dead? Then not the right fairy, I say. Alive? I still want to talk.”

Paul did not see another way to gain their respect. He got into a classic cleaning stance. His feet were at hip width and he bent a bit at the knees. His main gauche was a plank scaler and his primary weapon was his sickle.

Jammy took wild steps forward, and swung his edged toothknife at Paul’s midsection. The pattern surprised the prince but he backed up well in advance of the swing. Paul used his headlamp to blind the Frefairy and took initiative. The new Dentist lunged forward on one leg and extended his point directly at Jammy’s midsection. Jammy wildly swung at the incoming blade and saved his seven tooth from being scaled.

“May your tooth shatter and break!” said Jammy as he squinted back at Paul through the bright light.

Jammy then threw his blade directly at Paul. Paul sensed this before it happened and stepped out of the way. He had a vision just as the blade passed him by: he saw countless black-eyed fairies bowing to him. The vision faded just in time as Jammy pulled a smaller knife. Paul tried to concentrate and could not fully dodge Jammy’s lunge. His purple blood spilled from a deep cut to his thigh.

Paul hissed in pain and thought, “No time for mood when you are a Dentist.” In a small fit of cold rage, he flitted, fainted, and savaged Jammy’s mouth with brutal precision.

Jammy, mortally wounded, fell to the pink ground. He asked for a mirror and a nearby Frefairy had one at the ready. Jammy saw his mouth. It was perfectly cleaned. He stopped breathing in Stillmouth’s arms and the tribe held their heads down in respect.

Stillmouth held Jammy and looked at Paul. “This man’s Enamel is now yours until we reach the pocket. Claim your prize.”

“I killed him. What have I done?” Paul thought. A vision flooded his mind of millions of black eyes staring back at him. He stumbled and the grief of all that he had lost filled his eyes with tears.

Paul had studied what the Frefairy expected here — it was all in the materials his father had left him, back on the baleen, what seemed like an eternity ago.

The water dropped over his face as he extracted Jammy’s teeth with precision. He cleaned each slowly and placed them into a hazmat container within his own illsuit.

The Frefairy tribe watched in awe of Paul’s care and expertise in his work on Jammy. “He knows our ways,” someone murmured.

Stillmouth spat in respect, and it bounced off Paul’s illsuit mask. The leader offered, “We need to talk it seems. Good for you, not so good for Jammy. I do not know if this is good for Oral, but I am old and hope to see this legend come to pass before I do. Follow me. Learn from us as we learn from you.

First of all, we need to learn more about the fairy named
PegLateral of Oral.”

Ch 6 - Bugs

The BunnyPrime civic amphitheater was packed. Everybunny worth anybunny was there. The Bugs was celebrating his twenty-first birthday and the entire House was ecstatic in their celebration. The na-Bunny was not only deadly but beautifully witty. He was known to find the perfect bon mot for every execution he performed here for the entertainment of the warren.

Sitting in the locker room, Bugs' eyes drooped as he felt the sugar running through his veins. He sniffed a few times and put in his earphones. The ancient music played and he started to amp himself up. The song was called the Ride of the Valkyries. He didn't feel the urge to wear a helmet with horns on it.

He had a hopper drug manifold and was engaged in what he called a pre-party. The BunUrge ran clear into his lower neck and he moderated the flow until his sugar rage level hit toddler-denied-ice-cream. He looked across his favorite set of close combat weapons.

The peanut brittle straight razor attracted his eyes for a moment. He took a small sample and said, "Already a bit salty. Fairy blood'll ruin the taste." He saw the jaw breakers and asked for a nearby squirrel to come over. After jamming the jaw breakers repeatedly into the squirrel's face and only breaking a bone half the time, he put down these as well.

Then, he saw the Peppermint k-bar. The serrated teeth in pink and green made him happy. He stabbed a nearby squirrel and tasted the blade. "Nice," said the rabbit as he bobbed his head to the music in his earphones.

Bugs stood in front of the arena entry and took two deep snorts of pixie dust. He lightly smacked his forehead with his fists and mumbled “What’s up, doc,” a few times to calm down.

He had his ears tied back but decided to dress as a male: he didn’t want to be too sexy on his birthday. He signaled that he was ready and the arena door opened. Bright lights spilled in as his entry fanfare began. He snorted a bit more dust, pawed at his nose, and walked into the arena.

The crowd of rabid rabbits screamed and jelly beans rained down in waves from the fans over The Bugs’ lidded eyes. The na-Bunny sneered and posed a bit. Then, he called out “WHO IS HUNTING RABBITS!” to the delight of the audience.

“WHO IS?” yelled the western side of the audience.

“HUNTING RABBITS!” replied the eastern side. The audience repeated several times as the na-Bunny walked around the arena with his arms over his head.

A fairy with clipped wings was pushed out into the arena. The na-Bunny and the few squirrels that had survived the weapon demo started over its way. The fairy was dressed in brown with a deerstalker hat. It held a breech-loading side-by-side shotgun, but did not seem to have any shells anywhere.

Bugs looked at the brown fairy and yelled upwards to his rabid rabbits in the stands, “IS IT RABBIT SEASON OR ...”

The crowd replied lustily with a prolonged,
“NOOOOOOOOOO!”

“... FAIRY SEASON!” he finished to their absolute glee. The crowd chanted, “FAIRY SEASON!” over and over as The Bugs clapped to the beat.

He then asked the fairy and the crowd, “WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO SHOOT YOU NOW OR WAIT UNTIL WE GET HOME?”

The crowd roared, “SHOOT HIM NOW! SHOOT HIM NOW!”

“Shoot me now,” the fairy mumbled into the microphone that Bugs supplied suddenly.

Bugs nodded at this a bit and then stuck his k-bar into the brown fairy’s neck. The gore sprayed in a purple fountain over the na-Bunny’s grey fur.

“NO! I WILL NOT SHOOT YOU NOW!” said the preening rabbit to his adoring crowd.

He pointed upward at his uncle Rabban in the stands. The rabid rabbit Rabban squealed with delight at the salute and said to his neighbor rabbits in his private booth, “That saucy bunny! Wait for your little birthday surprise you wascaly wabbit.”

The crowd roared as the arena door opened and another fairy was pushed into the arena. Bugs looked confused as the fairy had a strange costume on.

The fairy had a metal helmet over a face that was missing. Bugs squinted and could see only the staring lidless eyes in the void. He suspected that the face had been painted over with vantablack. The red top and green slatted skirt made Bugs think of a history lesson he was forced to watch.

“Romans?” the na-Bunny wondered as his head turned side to side in his confusion.

The red fairy exclaimed “You have made me very angry. Very angry indeed!” and raised a pistol towards Bugs and fired a nasty looking beam.

Bugs tossed a nearby squirrel in front of him, and the inbound beam melted the squirrel into steaming acorns.

The red fairy managed to look angry. “There was supposed to be a big kaboom!” it yelled. The na-Bunny leapt towards the armed fairy as it tried to reload its firearm. Knowing that he wouldn’t be able to close the full distance, Bugs threw his blade at the dark orb where he believed the thing’s head might reside.

The blade vibrated a bit as it sunk deeply between the two eyes of the red fairy’s abyss-like cranium.

“Kaboom,” said Bugs and the red fairy fell to its knees. The crowd roared in approval as he pulled the blade out from the dead fairy’s body.

Bugs looked up at his uncle with a sneer, “Which way to Pismo Beach, uncle!”

Rabban laughed as Bugs dropped into a nearby hole to end his birthday.

Ch 7 - The Tooth Worm

Paul looked out over the diastema. He sat on the edge of one incisor and could see the other in the distance about three millimeters away. He saw Stillmouth and the rest of his Frefairy family looking on with anticipation.

The land between the teeth was red and raw with inflammation. He thought, “This world needs cleaning. The rabbits and their sugar will kill this jaw eventually.”

The mist of the Oral canyon made his illsuit slick to the touch. He thought to himself, “This is my last test. I will call the worm and become Frefairy.” His eyes had already taken on the pink-on-pink from his constant exposure to raw Enamel.

Paul steadied his mind for the test ahead. “Decay is the tooth killer. Where there is decay I will drill. Where I drill, the decay will be no more. Only I and the tooth will remain.”

He descended from his perch on the incisor and dropped down onto the red surface. He checked his maker hooks — two lengths of floss with sickle scalers on each end.

Paul reached into his illsuit and produced a waterpik. “The pik will call the maker,” he thought. He filled the reservoir with water and turned it on. The rhythmic “pik-pik-pik” of the water jet was the only sound he could hear.

Then he felt the entire gum line roll in waves. Paul kept his balance by flitting his wings a bit.

“Hadha Mudhhil! Peg has called an old man of the jaw itself!” said Stillmouth to the other Frefairy. A young female Frefairy named Maimiti looked on with concern. She had taken an

interest in the possible eumaal-nazafat-min-baeid. More than most others for sure.

From the edge of the gumline, the maker, a toothworm, emerged with its gaping mouth of sharp teeth. Paul could see the knives of the Frefairy there and did not wish to be swallowed whole.

It must have been at least two millimeters from end to end and it was headed for the waterpik in fury.

Paul raced down beside the mammoth and threw a hook into a nearby segment. The beast started to roll away from the pain and Paul held on as he was lifted to the worm's upper side.

"Get him now, lad, Peg. You have him!" said Stillmouth quietly. Maimiti's hands grew white as she gripped her own illsuit tightly in anticipation.

Paul struggled against the torrential winds at the top of the beast and he could feel the raw speed and power of the worm under his feet.

"Now to get control," he thought to himself as the wind tore at his illsuit.

Paul swung his first line overhead and hooked a worm segment. He pulled lightly to set the barb. He repeated his swing to the other side. A vision of an infinite number of fairies collecting enamel across all time and space clouded Paul's mind as the hook sailed from his hand.

The hook missed and bounced freely in the wind.

"Damn it," said Paul.

“Ya la-hawl! He missed!” said Stillmouth in shock. Maimiti looked downwards.

“Focus on the now,” Paul recited as part of his Bene Hygiene training. He flung out the second line again and was grateful to feel it hook. He tugged again. The second line was set. He pulled on each line and the worm moved in kind to each tug.

Paul stood in triumph as he steered the worm back towards his Frefairy on the other tooth.

Stillmouth said to all nearby, “Hadha Mudhhil! He is eumaal-nazafat-min-baeid! The prophecy... it is real!”

Maimiti did not look up but was smiling to herself.

Ch 8 - War on the Rabbits

Rico looked out over the camp. He was dead tired but his PowerHopper needed a new coat of paint and he liked to do the work himself. He reached for the pink paint and touched up the “Good” part of “GoodAndPlenty”. The black was still in good shape. He’d been leading the Fuzzbutts for a few months now, but he still did not feel like he was Razzcat’s replacement. He was secretly hoping that the old cat might show up somehow, but the memory of his horrible death was still fresh. A bluebottle’s scaler had taken his left eye two months back, and the patch he wore over it now was one more way he’d become the old cat without ever asking to.

He’d moved Dizzy as his second and they were waiting for a fresh bunch of rabbits. The Fuzzbutts were severely underbunnied and even this batch of fresh recruits would not fill all of their open roles.

Rico saw the truck with the fresh meat arrive and stretched up to meet them. Dizzy took lead as was customary. The new bunnies looked tentative as they hopped off the back of the truck.

Dizz sighed then shouted out, “Line your fuzzy butts out right now. This is Rico’s Fuzzbutts! You need to hear the rules of being a Fuzzbutt from the fuzziest butt of them all, your Sergeant Rico. Yoohah!”

The twelve rabbits that currently made up the Fuzzbutts in PowerHoppers yelled, “Yoohah! Rico’s Fuzzbutts!” Rico walked up to the line of recruits to inspect his new charges.

Rico used his unpatched eye on each bunny, raw, medium-rare and well-seasoned to instill his rabbitry creed:

“Every rabbit fights! Everybody does their job! Nobody quits! If you quit, I’ll j-bean you myself right on the spot! DO YOU GET ME, RABBITS!”

The rabbits were in mid “WE GET YOU...” when the first rabbit fell to a sniped Enamel pellet between the eyes. The platoon pivoted as the giant worm’s shadow covered them all. “BUGS! SCRAMBLE!” yelled a rabbit before being swallowed by a large worm.

Bugs with pellet launchers and sharp implements flew down from a maze of inbound worm jaws. Rico fired his glute jets to gain distance, but was immediately smacked back down by an incoming worm.

His pink and black mech was slammed into the ground and left a heavy divot. Rico saw a worm mouth descending on his body and rolled quickly out of the way. His carrotsight was damaged by the evasive maneuver but he could see Dizzy’s red and yellow BitOHoney. She was swarmed by bugs and was violently defending herself.

She quickly fried four bluebottles with a j-bean lemon/lime combination that splashed purple gore across her gritting teeth. Dizzy snarled and pulled out her jordan almonator to deal with the rest. A bluebottle then neatly took her right arm off at the shoulder and the blood streamed down to make her fur even redder.

“DIZZY!” yelled Rico. He was at least a quarter millimeter away and leaned forward to fire his glute jets horizontally. He lowered his ear blades and the blades made a purple wave of gore as his GoodAndPlenty carved toward her BitOHoney. He arrived in the midst of a swarm of bugs with knives of various kinds.

Johnny's BunUrge had his fur on end as he brought out his toasted marshmallow thrower. "Bug OFF!" he roared as innumerable bugs were turned into sticky white goo. The rest routed like the cowards they were.

Johnny reached Dizzy as her red blood was flowing down her pelt. She looked into his eyes. "Johnny? I always lov..."

"Not now, Dizzy! I'm getting you out of here." said the enraged trooper.

Rico slammed his black vines up to full and cleared out the red — all black, no red. He shook as he injected double his maximum recommended BunUrge. His eyes slowly turned black as he watched his sugar levels hit "raccoon left alone with a 10-pound bag of C&H".

His carrotsight made out a nearby pocket in a white enamel tower. Ace landed nearby and asked, "What's the play, GoodAndPlenty? Mountain Don't has your back."

"Good. I'll clear the way," snarled Rico as he switched his j-bean to black.

"Chemical weapons?! Are you sure, Rico?" yelled Ace.

"I've never been more sure, Ace." said Rico as he fired a dark beam. The nearby bugs fell to the toxic beam and the purple blood mixed with the blackness created a sticky mess.

"Carve through all this, Ace!" yelled Rico as he swung the black j-bean to other bugs in their path. He was dragging Dizzy along as well. Ace used his leg blades to get a way through all the blackened bodies.

The red and purple path was slowly built over several minutes, and the three bunnies managed to get inside the

pocket. Rico planted a forward-facing basket used to control a narrow space. If someone walked nearby, twenty chocosteel eggs would launch from the basket and sugar everyone in a 180-degree arc.

“Johnny...” Dizzy said softly.

Rico turned past Ace and looked over, “Yes, Dizz?”

Dizzy stared off.

Rico’s black-on-black eyes sobbed as he gently closed Dizzy’s brown ones.

Ch 9 - Maimiti

Maimiti looked over the setting pinks of the evening sky from the pocket. PegLateral, or as he preferred, Paul, when it was just the two of them, was meditating nearby.

He opened his eyes slowly and watched the day fade into purples of their own blood as he thought, “My mother takes the Water of Fluoride tonight. We will see if she can be Mother Hygiene of the Frefairy or if her Enamel will join that of the pocket.”

Paul rose to leave for the ceremony.

Maimiti held her belly and asked, “Is the great worm rider too busy to be here with me for just one evening?”

Paul noted, “My mother. She’s going to drink the poison tonight. I should be there. I can’t think of anything else.”

His consort countered, “Why make yourself suffer watching her in pain? Your mother is the greatest Bene Hygienist I have ever met. She will pass the test with ease, Paul. It just will not be easy and, well, she should concentrate on herself and not worry about how it affects you.”

He returned her affection and spoke to his unborn son as well as his consort, “I know. Everything will be fine. Someday, however, I will be the Bene Hygienist that all women fear and need: Der Tseyn-Gehilf.”

She replied, “You plan on making our son an orphan before he’s even born. Pual needs to be Peg and stop what PegLateral means to the Frefairy. Your path, you’ve told me what you see, fairies everywhere collecting enamel. All enamel. The castle, the dream of Frefairydom, is a dream, Paul. You must let go

and just be a Frefairy with me. Just Peg and Maimiti during the day and Paul and Maimiti at night. Like now.”

He looked at her and she could swear his eyes were gray when he said, “PegLateral will need to live for a bit longer, Maimiti,” and he walked out of the room.

Ch 10 - The Brain Bug

Johnny sat in his all-black PowerHopper. It read “Plenty” and his remaining ear had five notches on its own.

Mountain Don’t was in good form, but the rest of the PowerHoppers were badly damaged and needed medical assistance.

“Ace, you need to wait for Carmen. She’ll send someone down from orbit to pick up these wounded. Then, the two of us will merge into another nearby unit. It looks like the Fuzzbutts will need to reform back on BunnyPrime; there aren’t enough rabbits here to make a squad,” said Rico to his second.

Ace nodded as Rico called out over earnet to the orbiting fleet, “CecilyParsley. This is Fuzzbutt actual. Over.”

“CecilyParsley here. Captain Ibanez to Fuzzbutt actual. What is your status?” said a familiar bunny’s voice.

“Carmen? I mean Captain Ibanez? This is Johnny! I mean, Fuzzbutt actual. We need medevac and support. We are deep in bugtown and it’s crawling with bluebottles down here,” said Rico.

“Johnny! Is that you? I had heard that the Fuzzbutts had been lost. I had no idea you were leading them. Let me get on a shuttle now,” said Captain Carmen.

“Carmen! You can’t go yourself! We’re good. Just get somebody down here,” said Johnny to static.

Ace asked from Mountain Don’t, “Do you really think she’ll come down herself? That’s crazy.”

Rico nodded. "I don't know, man, but let's keep these wounded safe while we wait."

Both rabbits looked up as a streaking shuttle came down from orbit towards them. "Hold tight, you two. I'm almost there," said Carmen over the bunears network.

"Thanks, Carm..." said Rico as the fairy rocket hit Carmen's shuttle. She spun out of control and the craft crashed into the pink surface of Oral.

"CARMEN!" yelled Rico, and he immediately fired his glute jets to the flaming wreckage. As he soared in the air, he used his carrotsight at full magnification to see the downed shuttle, but saw no signs of any rabbits.

He landed at the flaming wreckage and yelled, "Carmen! Carmen! Where are you?"

Ace landed nearby and yelled, "Damn it, Sarge! You can't just run off on us!"

Rico shouted back, "It's Carmen! Where is she?"

Ace used his carrotsight thermals and noted, "Look, Sarge, there's a heat trail leading down into the red pocket. It must be a 5 or 6 on the probe scale. I bet the bugs took her down there."

Rico noted, "That pocket is deep and narrow. No room for jumps. We'll need to skate."

The sergeant leaned forward and let his glute jets off in controlled bursts left and right. His wide foot plates sent trails of red raw earth behind.

Ace yelled, "Holy Molar! Let's go!" and followed suit after his leader.

The two found the opening of the pocket and did not pause.

“Look. Rabbit blood!” yelled Ace at a red splash on the wall. Rico pushed harder and Ace could see the black RedVines feed starting in earnest.

“You sure it’s time for that, boss?” yelled Ace as they pushed deeper into the pocket.

“Shut up, Ace,” said the sergeant over black-on-black eyes.

Three fairies blocked their path. Rico’s salted licorice made them scream for mercy.

“Whoa! Salted?! Is that a war crim...” croaked Ace at his leader.

“DID I NOT SAY SHUT THE FUZZ UP! DO YOU NEED SOME LICORICE, ACE!” said the enraged rabbit. His eyes leaked black from each tear duct.

“No,” offered Ace softly.

Rico rubbed his nose and sniffled, “Good,” and continued down the hall.

Ace hoped for no additional fairies, for their sake. Rico’s skating pushed harder and his second could not tell how many bluebottles died. He could see his feet covered in purple blood and knew it was at least a few.

Then, the passage opened into a wide throne room of sorts. Carmen was being held by what appeared to be a strange female fairy witchdoctor. The witchdoctor spoke oddly and her breath stank. “*Leave us alone!*” she Exhaled at the hoppers.

Ace took in the foul odor and his eyes glazed over. He then turned his PowerHopper around and left the scene.

Rico's black-on-black eyes were unmoved by the Breath. He skated over and raised his ear blades to decapitate the monstrous witch.

"STOP!" yelled Carmen. "She's the mother of PegLateral. We can use her!"

Rico heard the command. His ear blades neared the fairy, but he stopped. Carmen took him in her arms as he died.

Ch 11 - The Fluoride of Life

PegLateral crashed through the pocket past his concubine.

“Paul, is that you?” said Maimiti in the darkness of their home.

“Yes,” said the fairy. His pink-on-pink eyes glowed as he passed her.

“Where are you going?” she called to his back.

“They have my mother. I must complete my ascent. The Water of Fluoride will finish my transformation. I will avenge my House and save my mother. Der Tseyn-Gehilf will be born tonight,” he said to their bedroom door.

“You know where that leads. Enamel madness. An eternal collection of what...” she pleaded.

“Stop. *I* will happen as I have seen it. The Enamel has changed me and I know my fate,” said PegLateral.

She looked down and simply said, “Our child. You want this to...”

Paul looked back at her and said, “I want our child to just be, and that’s why PegLateral will need to kill Paul.”

She watched as Paul left forever and PegLateral left her bedroom.

Peg wept in the middle of the ceremony ground. The yellow liquid was brought to him. He closed his eyes and drank deeply. The pain was no worse.

His eyes opened and the black-on-black eyes showed no irises.

“The cleaner. He has awoken,” said Der Tseyn-Gehilf of legend.

Ch 12 - The MaleDentalAssistant

PegLateral's black eyes smoldered with peaceful fury. Peaceful from pre-knowledge. Fury from the violence that would come. He held his toothknife, a blade sourced from a mouth of a toothworm, idly as he viewed the future: a future of red rabbit blood on his weapon.

"The House of Rabbit will find their ends at fairy toothblades as the faithful rain down like so many drops off a worm's mouth," said Der Tseyn-Gehilf to his senior leaders.

Stillmouth dared not meet PegLateral's iris-less stare but offered, "What next, the eumaal-nazafat-min-baeid?"

The dark-eyed fairy smirked, "We will get the house Invisilighns."

Stillmouth was confused, "Invisilighns? Those are the banned weapons, no? Like braces but hidden. Evil..."

PegLateral laughed, "We will meet evil and his teeth are bucked. No need for straightening when you only have two."

His lieutenant was still unsure, "But, the evil braces straighten? How does this help us, Der Tseyn-Gehilf?"

"We will take our house's straighteners and UN-straighten the twisted rabbits that have infected these pink lands," the fairy answered as he stared blackly at nothing in particular. Stillmouth could feel PegLateral's fury build.

"We will pry their tooth wall apart! The faithful will stream upon their cowardice," yelled PegLateral at the cowering Frefairy leaders.

PegLateral picked up his maker hooks and waterpik. He pushed past his leadership team towards the open mouth of Oral. The rest of the group followed after him.

Ch 13 - The Invisilighn

PegLateral flitted down the vault stairs. His Frefairy guard looked warily at the large ALGN icons carved into the stone doors. Stillmouth asked his leader, “Where are we, PegLateral?”

The dark-eyed fairy replied, “This is the hiding place of House Molar’s straighteners. The *good* ortho, Dr. Noah, maintained such for us. I see he was well rewarded for his work.”

Dr. Noah’s body lay slumped over the control panel for the doors. PegLateral picked up Noah’s suicide note, and tossed it in the trash without reading it. The dark fairy pushed the doctor’s corpse onto the floor with a hard shove. He started to work on opening the door.

After pressing his wand into the controls, the heavy stone scraped slowly open and the group entered the vault.

PegLateral flitted between each line of huge plastic walls. The Frefairy gawked at the massive structures. Stillmouth pointed at what appeared to be barbed wire and pots of adhesives. “This does not look invisible at all.”

His leader laughed a bit, “That was the old way. The pure way of wire and glue that the orthos started their good work with. We will use the stealth technologies they developed in secret. The Invisilighn will move teeth without being detected by prying rabbit eyes.”

Stillmouth finally asked, “Holy Molar! This is great power, PegLateral. Maybe too much for any one fairy?”

PegLateral laughed and his eyes darkened further, “Too much power? For a single fairy? Yes. But for all fairies? There is NO LIMIT!”

The dark fairy then said, “I give you male dental care. What has never been considered. A cosmetic gap!”

Stillmouth asked in horror, “Split teeth that are well spaced?!” Some Frefairy swore at the notion and many looked away towards the exit.

PegLateral stared at his guard, and he looked at each fairy one after the other deeply into their pink-on-pink eyes.

“He is the Cleaner we were promised. Where he drills, we follow,” said the group. Their black-on-black eyes shined as they started to unpack the invisible aligners.

Ch 14 - The Gum Wall

PegLateral crawled over the pink and red hill overlooking the gum wall that protected the House Rabbit compound of Oral. Two fuzzy things were there. One was wearing green and yellow armor; another fuzzball, who wore red and yellow with a brown helix down the side of his kit, was nervous.

“Stay frosty, Marathon, Mountain Don’t is here and Ace’s Fuzzbutts will keep watch,” said the green-and-yellow-clad fuzzball to the other.

The foul fuzzy things on the wall were standing guard over the two incisors that made up their sentry area.

PegLateral hooted briefly to the awaiting wind. The Frefairy set off the Invisilighns and the sound of tearing gum and scraping bone filled the air.

“Whoa!” yelled Ace from his perch as he watched Marathon on the other tooth move smartly away.

“We will drill this decay!” yelled PegLateral from his lead worm. The gap between the two teeth was filled with an armada of tooth worms.

Stillmouth, his eyes black-on-black, yelled, “We will dispatch this fuzz from our clean clean jaw and build! Build from all the Enamel!”

The red gore of the fuzz was smeared under the thrashing bodies of the toothworm armada. A green and yellow mech was in pieces with a completely mangled non-ace Ace inside.

The things of House Rabbit tried to flee and their jumpjets smashed into awaiting worm mouths as the fairy surprise was total: no one expected a gap here in the jaw.

The rout was complete. The rabbits and their machines were destroyed. The red flood under their feet had very little purple in it.

PegLateral descended from his toothworm and freed it from service. He spied the House Rabbit command center and asked his chieftains to join him. There were only a few more hares to pluck before the Frefairy legend would come true.

Ch 15 - Debugging

PegLateral walked into the House Rabbit control center. His hands and his toothknife were slick and red with rabbit blood. The final guards before the throne room itself died quickly under the fairy blades.

Stillmouth and PegLateral's guard slowly started to cut open the throne room doors. The hot sparks from the work lit up their grim faces. Peg sighed and waited patiently as the work was completed. The doors fell to the floor with a loud crash.

The Frefairy party walked into the rabbits' lair and saw the golden carrot throne itself. Rabban sat wide and had his hands on Jessica whose dark eyes shone with pure hatred.

PegLateral called out, "Mother. Wait for your part. I still have to fumigate this space. There are bugs in here, are there not?" He stared at the lean gray bunny sneering back at him.

Bugs said, "This is what you're afraid of, uncle? Let me pin him down like the butterfly he is."

Rabban offered, "The Bugs is our champion, Fairy. He will show you the strength of House Rabbit and our royal lineage."

The lithe gray rabbit jumped in front of PegLateral. He had a red and white blade with a serrated upper edge. Bugs picked his two teeth with the blade and looked over to the fairy, "What's up doc? You a coward like the rest of your kind? Maybe you like to hunt rabbits? Maybe you could hunt little ole me?"

PegLateral walked forward with his bright red and sticky toothblade, "Let's add your blood to the rest of your kin that

my blade tasted today. Yes, it's rabbit season and I am very very hungry."

The rabbit and fairy started to circle each other. PegLateral thought, "He is fast. Maybe too fast, but he is also overconfident."

Bugs jumped a bit to the side and said, "I think it's FAIRY season myself." His red and white blade sliced the air between the two of them. PegLateral sidestepped a bit to avoid the serrations and they whistled by him.

The fairy flitted forward to attack and the rabbit hopped left. PegLateral noticed the bunny reach for something hidden in its fur. The rabbit tossed a cloud of powder in the fairy's face.

Peg could feel his eyes burn in pain and his vision was blurred. "Ain't I a stinker," said the rabbit and Bugs slashed open PegLateral's left wing. The purple blood streamed down to the floor.

"What a maroon!" the Bugs sneered as he moved in for another cut. Peg was just able to dodge and then his vision was replaced.

He saw millions of dark-eyed fairies flying to billions and trillions of mouths filled with Enamel. Peg felt Bugs' knife dig deep into his stomach but the fairy did not feel any pain.

Bugs had his face close and stared into the black-on-black eyes, "I think you're ready to be mounted."

PegLateral looked at the rabbit and calmly said, "And you are ready to be stuffed." The dark fairy's blade shot upwards through Bugs' soft palate. The rabbit's eyes glazed over as Peg whispered into a long ear, "Kaboom."

The fairy tossed the rabbit corpse onto the ground. He looked over at Rabban who was threatening his mother with a small pistol.

“Do not come closer, bug!” said the Rabbit.

“I am not your prince, Rabbit. Mother, now is good,” said the black-eyed fairy.

“Dear Rabbit. Please meet the gum jabbar!” said Jessica as it sliced open the large rabbit’s neck.

“Just as I saw it. Well done, Mother, but my vision fades. The darkness in my eyes and maybe the loss of blo...” said PegLateral as he fell to his knees.

He motioned for his team to come close. He needed them to see as well.

Ch 16 - The Tooth Fairy

PegLateral stared outwards at his countless followers. He spoke in plain terms that somehow was heard in all without amplification.

“The Cleaner Has Awoken. Now, his job is done. This jaw is clean. The Frefairy dream of the Mighty Tooth Castle will live in place of PegLateral,” said the fairy. His eyes were lightening as his blood drained out in a slow stream.

Stillmouth looked on with his black eyes shining with tears, “Peg, you must stay. We need you for the fight off-jaw. Maimiti...”

The pregnant fairy appeared by PegLateral’s side. He looked up at her as his eyes became pink-on-gray, but he could only smile as the purple was fading from his face.

“Go forth. The castle needs Enamel. Find it in the mouths of children. They will trade it for coin. The purer, the faster you achieve your final victory,” said Paul as his pink-on-pink eyes stared at no one.

Maimiti sobbed over his body and closed his eyes.

Stillmouth took a moment and then pointed. Countless dark-eyed, enamel-hungry fairies flew out wordlessly in response.

Halloween At The Office

HALLOWEEN

[BILL] dressed as pirate, holding bag of tortilla chips from the market Hey, [Shakes]. Is this where the Halloween party is held? I heard we're meeting in the boardroom?

[Shakes, Media Buyer] dressed normally, holding a crock pot of chili [BILL]? You're here? What? Are you ok?

[BILL] Yeah. I was kinda told I needed to come. So, where do I put my chips?

[Shakes] Heh. But why the pirate costume?

[BILL] I only own the one costume. I have a tuxedo for the same reason. If you need to go to a party, well, usually a tux or a pirate costume will suffice. What is your costume, [Shakes]?

[Shakes] Watch! (([Shakes] tips over crock pot and a blanket of fake chili spreads out on the floor))

[BILL] still confused Wow. Uh. You're Emeril Lagasse with a motion disorder?

[Shakes] now confused I'm Kevin! From the Office!

[BILL] relieved Oh. Ok. Yeah, I haven't seen that?

[Shakes] astounded I've heard you talk about Prospero's Books and Repo Man? You saw that and you missed The Office? It's perfect for you! You love satire and you are so very non-corporate?

[BILL] The Office doesn't feature a robot or android. I only watch recommended shows with robots or androids, sorry.

[Shakes] flabbergasted Huh? I don't think Repo Man has an android or a robot?

[BILL] Right. I'm sure that's confusing. I chose to watch Repo Man. It wasn't recommended. Here's the thing about

recommendations from folks, right? I am usually identified as someone who “enjoys content” pretty early. So, people love to help. Watch my favorite show or thing, they’ll say. Then, I have an obligation to react, and well, unless a show has an android or a robot in it, it’s not likely it’s something I have not decided not to watch. Now, if it happens that I have missed that a show has an android or robotic presence, then I get free information about a show I should reconsider.

(([Glass Cat, HR Person] arrives))

[Glass Cat, HR] spinning head lightly to think, has two fake bullet holes as costume Bill? There’s no pirate on the show? Why are you dressed like that?

[BILL] What are you all talking about? I’m dressed as a pirate. This is the costume I own, and I do not have another. I own a tuxedo as well in case of formal events...

[Manyfeek, Fresno Radio Buyer] dressed with a coat and tie, has onion dip Hey muchachos? Guess who I am? “That’s what ::OBSCENITY REDACTED:: she said!” Hahahah!

[Glass Cat] delighted Look, [Manyfeek]! I’ve been shot *twice*!

[Manyfeek] laughing hysterically OMG! That’s SO GOOD!
HAHAHAHA!

[BILL] confused So, you guys are coordinated? [Manyfeek] is John Wilkes Booth and [Glass Cat] is Lincoln At Our American Cousin?

[Manyfeek] WHAT! No ::OBSCENITY REDACTED::
you ::OBSCENITY REDACTED:: nerd! I’m Michael and I’ve shot the HR person twice!

[BILL] Oh. So, Michael is a typical employee with issues with HR. That's very familiar somehow.

[Glass Cat] spinning head furiously to think for more than 30 seconds at a time [BILL], you are one of the five Action Media Super Dupers. Did you read my e-mail? It said to dress in costume like The Office. We're doing a skit and each of you five have lines. I think you were supposed to be Jim.

[BILL] nonplussed and non-divided Sounds perfect for me. Who is Jim?

[Shakes] I think Bill should be Dwight.

[BILL] Is Dwight the sexy one?

[Shakes] No

[BILL] Well, that wouldn't be a good change then. I should be the sexy one. I asked the costume shop for sexy pirate. Is it not working?

[Glass Cat] annoyed [BILL]? What have we said about *sexy* in the office?

[BILL] I thought we were in The Office or are we in the office?

[Glass Cat] Never mind. [BILL] here are your lines. You are Jim and he is very sexy.

[BILL] Perfect. What's my motivation for this scene?

[Glass Cat] What? This is the office: money for you and your family's survival is your motivation.

[BILL] Excellent. I can work with that.

[Glass Cat] Did you bring a funny prop?

[BILL] Sorry?! I was supposed to make a prop? I have my stuffed parrot here. I did connect him up to Claude Code before I left. Would you like to hear the parrot talk?

[Manyfeek] Do I ever! That's amazing [BILL]! Can I try?

[BILL] lying Absolutely. Ask it a question and I'll push the submit.

[Manyfeek] raised voice Hey parrot! Are you enjoying the party?

[BILL] talking into lapel mic THIS THEME SUCKS AND I WANT TO GO HOME.

[BILL] continuing Wow. Maybe that was a hallucination? I think I set the effort or temperature wrong?

[Glass Cat] staring [BILL], are you sure that wasn't your voice? In any case, that prop is not very funny, but let's just get this done so you can get your \$50 Bennigan's coupon, ok?

[BILL] My family can eat at Bennigan's. I am fully motivated, [Glass Cat]. Once again, HR is helping me. These are my lines here, right?

[Glass Cat] smiling Great. Jim's part is at the end. Stand here next to the other four winners.

[Glass Cat] addressing party HI EVERYONE? IT'S TIME TO AWARD THE ACTION MEDIA SUPER DUPER OF 2026! LET'S SEE THEIR THE OFFICE SKIT AND CELEBRATE THEM!

((Corporate sounds similar to applause))

[Larry, Cool Mail Room Guy] Hey guys, I'm playing Darryl!
*You live a sweet little Nerfy life, sittin' on your biscuit, never
having to risk it.*

((Room explodes in laughter))

[Manyfeek, Fresno Buyer] Errybody knows me! *That's
what ::OBSCENITY REDACTED:: SHE ::OBSCENITY
REDACTED:: SAID!!!*

((Room roars in appreciation))

[KayCEE, Janitor] Well, I think everybody knows me as well:
"AND I FEEL GOD IN THIS CHILI'S TONIGHT!"

((Room erupts in spasms of joy))

[Linda, Receptionist] Hiya! I'm Dwight! *Identity theft is not a
joke, Jim! Millions of families suffer every year!*

((Room shouts in ecstasy))

[BILL, SVP of Data Engineering] Sorry. I'm Jim, but identity
theft isn't a joke at all. It's really quite serious and we should...

[Shakes] addressing [Glass Cat] I told you [BILL] should have
been Dwight.

[Glass Cat] [BILL]! Can you do your line, please? We can
discuss identity theft in a town hall. We're just having fun!

[BILL] Oh. Ok. Well, I don't see any lines on my page. It says
"Jim stares at camera." Which camera should I use?

[Glass Cat] [BILL]! Just stare into space, please?

[BILL] Sure. Can I do it sexy pirate style?

[Glass Cat] No.

[BILL] Hm. OK. How is this?

(([BILL] stares with deep passion and watering eyes at the back wall)) ((Room very quiet))

[Glass Cat] Fine. Everyone enjoy the party. [BILL], can we meet in my office?

[BILL] answering Uh. Let's ask my parrot?

[BILL] talking into lapel mic NO THANKS! THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID!

A Metabill Thanksgiving

THANKSGIVING

Bob looked out at his very long table. He told everyone to enjoy the food and passed the stuffing to his left.

[Hastur] Oh, thanks, Bob. The cornbread is nice and yellow. I see the summer squash over there as well. So, nice of you to support my yellowtarian diet. ((TAKES A SCOOP OF CORNBREAD ONLY AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[Glass Cat] Are there any patellas in this? I only eat kneecaps. Is GAMS here? ((SPINS HEAD TO KEEP BRAIN WORKING AND USES GLASS PAW TO PASS DISH LEFT))

[Theodore Highly Compensated Beetle] My tastes run a bit more, say, earthier, Bob? Maybe I could just walk around your yard and see if your dog may have left me something? ((HOLDS NOSE AT DISH AND PUSHES WITH ONE OF MANY ARMS))

[Bugs Bunny na-Rabbit] Is this vegan? Oh, it looks like you cooked it in the bird? Ok. No. I'll wait for the yams. ((PASSES DISH LEFT WITH PEPPERMINT K-BAR COVERED IN PURPLE))

[Undead Arnold Palmer] This looks great, but can I ask you something, Bob? My iced tea tastes off. Did someone put lemonade in there again? I know that's my whole thing, but I need to watch all the sugar. So, if you could check? ((PASSES DISH LEFT WITH PUTTER))

[Action! The Typographical Dragon] Yum! ((TAKES A SCOOP OF STUFFING AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[BMO] watching mirror Oh! Look football! Here's how to eat stuffing! Watch! No! Football! Watch! ((PASSES MORE STUFFING LEFT WHILE TALKING TO MIRROR))

[Bingo Talking Corgi] Bingo is here and watching white dog carefully. White dog gets no bird. What is this? Eh! Poopy! Where bird? ((PASSES STUFFING WITH PAW TO LEFT))

[Carlito Sentient Advertising Polar Bear] Bob? Your corgi is eyeballing me again. Can I sit somewhere else? ((TAKES A SCOOP OF STUFFING AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[Benjamin Franklin qua Tiger Team Yellow 4] Verily, Hastur, the cornbread dish matches my kit! High five! ((TAKES A SCOOP OF STUFFING AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[Brown Snake of Destiny] Does this have any small child in it? I'm trying to cut back. ((PASSES STUFFING WITH COIL TO LEFT))

[Malibu Stacy] I'm sorry, but I'm on a paleo cleanse. ((PASSES STUFFING WITH FLAT HAND TO LEFT))

[ur-Coke] Hm. Everything tastes better with Cocai... a Coke! ((TAKES A SCOOP OF STUFFING AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[DJ Sardinitor] BOOOOBB! FIIIIIIISH???
FIIIIIIIISSSH?? ((PASSES STUFFING WITH FIN TO LEFT))

[William Hurt] holding hair up with right hand Why am I in this scene? I'm not in any of this, am I? ((PASSES STUFFING CAREFULLY WITH LEFT AND WATCHES WITH WATERY BLUE EYES AS IT LEAVES))

[A Talking Beef Wellington] This is a very brown and shapeless foode? Are you sure it isn't English? ((TAKES A SCOOP OF STUFFING AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[Big Jim] looking down Does anyone know if GI Joe was planning on coming tonight? He hasn't been returning my calls. ((TAKES A SCOOP OF STUFFING AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[Transparent Child with Candle on Head] I am on Atkins. No, the transparency is just a coincidence. ((TRIES TO MOVE DISH AND HAND MOVES THROUGH DISH))

(([[Lefty3] picks up dish and moves left for ghost))

[TARS Android] Will this stain tupperware like tomato? My stomach is washable and I like to keep it unstained. ((TAKES LAST BIT OF STUFFING AND PASSES DISH LEFT))

[Shakes] qua Shakes Is there any more stuffing? The plate is empty?

Getting Ahead in Business

CHRISTMAS

Ch 01 - Computer Camp

Eb Scrooge sat in front of his steampad. The machine was heavy, loud and hot. He shoved a coalpel into the side and watched as the device consumed the concentrated energy. The keyboard's gaps vented out hot jets of steam as each key was pressed, but Eb's fingers moved quickly to avoid burns. His work appeared on a pinscreen, a matrix of colored needles that pointed and flattened as needed to display images and text. The refresh rate on Eb's device was acceptable and he could get two to three refreshes a second. He flicked off some commands to MoralEclipse, his integrated softwar devtool, for a klass listing.

The machine's turbines whined with effort and the pinscreen crawled. Eb kept his fingers clear of the device when it was working for safety. His requested listing appeared as a textured layer of sharp colored metal:

```
askfor logging
from SockitLib askfor SockitLibConnect, SockitLibRequest,
SockitLibResponse;

delinate purpose OpenSecureSockit(TisVal binary enAddr, TisVal text
sMessage) -> Option(SockitLibResponse)
{
    set SockitLibRequest slRequest = SockitLibRequest(enAddr);
    break_stuff
    {
        set SockitLibResponse slConnectResponse = slRequest.open();
        set SockitLibResponse slMessageResponse =
slRequest.send(sMessage);
        sendback slMessageResponse;
    }
    broken how set eError = break_stuff.catch_data()
    {
        logging.log(logging.CRIT, 'Issue with connection.')
    }
}
```

;
}

Eb sighed as he looked for the bug in this simple process. The purpose simply needed to connect to a Sockit. Eb hated the detail that softwar demanded. "Picking fly shit from pepper," Eb mumbled.

His head ached and he tugged a bit at his top hat. It was made from very firm beaver felt and had a large hinge on the side. Eb reached up and felt for a small knob. He turned the knob and it clicked. Leather straps around the hat's crown strained from the tension and Eb's eyes closed as he winced from the pain.

"Need to drill down and get to the bottom of this," the young man said to himself as he stared at the needle pattern carefully.

Fred walked over to Eb from another desk. Eb was his uncle and best friend at Komputar Kamp. "Good day, Eb," said the young boy. His top hat matched his uncle's, and he wore his favorite waistcoat covered by steam locomotive engines. He was a sunny child and always tried to cheer his dour uncle as best he could.

"Can I help with this purpose, Eb? I do not get many opportunities to write Salamander code, but I hear it is the future! My Seaqwell is very fine with recursive SeaTeaEs and dynamic injectables, but the world of Nouns and Purposes defies comprehension," said the nephew.

Eb smiled at his friend and relative. He loved him like a brother, but Fred was a horrible softy clerk. Fred seemed to understand this and had picked Datah as his fastening choice. Eb was unsure if that was any better for Fred, but he knew

that NounBasedUnderstanding (NBU) as a concept would always confuse his kind nephew.

Eb said, "This should be easy, but I just can't see what's wrong." Fred asked to sit and Eb humored him and got up. Fred sat and looked at the steampad's pinscreen. He squinted a bit as Eb straightened his coat and tails that had become a bit rumpled from sitting so long. Eb brushed some stray lint from his shoulders as his nephew started to point at the needles.

Fred looked puzzled but asked, "How does the request know where to connect?"

Eb pointed at the pinscreen but avoided getting cut, "Right here in the constructor."

Fred said, "Are you sure that's the right thing to give it, Eb?" His uncle wondered if a discussion of Kind theory would be kind or not. A small wind blew through the room and Eb saw two semi-transparent people looking back at him.

Eb's train of thought disappeared into a mental tunnel and was replaced by an anxiety express to the frontal lobe. Eb's body felt a chill as a transparent child stared plainly at him with red and green eyes. An old man with a nightcap seemed familiar. In fact, both of them felt familiar but he'd never laid eyes on either before.

The small child had a large lit candle on its head and did not blink or stop staring. Eb, being raised well, asked the man a question, but his eyes could not escape the gaze of the younger.

"I am sorry, good sir, are you lost? May we help you?" said the young man to the transparent one.

Fred had not looked up but was even more puzzled by his uncle's last words, "Well, yes, I mean I don't know what's wrong yet, but lost is a bit much when the code is only a few lines long."

The old man whispered to the child, "I thought you said he couldn't see us."

The child smiled, "He should not see, but it seems he does. This is new?"

Eb walked over to the two and asked, "See what, pray tell? Is there something you might need here, child?"

Fred looked up at his uncle and asked, "What are you on about? I'm younger but not a child. Just give me a second as I'm unsure what I need."

Eb looked back at Fred and said, "I am addressing these two unexpected visitors. We can't just have people wandering around the camp. It certainly would not be prudent to *not ask* who these people are."

The old man again asked the child, "He can see us. This is not working well at all. You have promised a simple review, but I do remember this visit now. I am not sure what I say next."

Fred looked very concerned at his uncle. Uncle Scrooge was odd for a child, but Komputar Kamp was fun for all young men of the future. This camp would give them a head up on the competition as the last week featured a new software capability: FauxThought. Human cognition had been modeled and all softclerks were at risk. FauxThought was an excellent Salamander coder.

Odd, however, did not explain why his uncle was addressing the open air as two visitors. "Is this an advanced debugging

technique, my dear Eb? Ask the vapors where the fault might lie? Shall we get a ouija board and start a seance? I can be the medium and you are the large. Oh mighty spirit! Save us from segfault and connect this damned sockit!” laughed Fred with concerned eyes.

Eb looked at all three. Two semi-transparent people seemed waiting for his next words. His nephew was now staring. Eb said, “I’m not sure what is going on.”

The old man said, “That was it. ‘I’m not sure what is going on.’ Why can’t I remember the rest however?”

The candlelit child looked wryly at the old man, “Because he hasn’t said it yet.”

Eb stayed silent as Fred got up, “Uncle, are you ok? Please take your seat here. I’ll get some water. Maybe loosen your headband a bit?”

Eb sat in the offered chair as young Fred ran off with his coat tails streaming back to find water.

Eb took advantage of Fred’s departure and asked, “So, what and who are you, kind sirs? Please enlighten as you appear a bit odd to me and you appear not at all to my younger nephew?”

The old man looked horrified and possessed by *deja vu* somehow. The child’s smile grew in recognition as it side-eyed its companion. Its festive eyes slowly turned on Eb and sharp teeth noted, “We are you and you are we. We are you yet and before to come. Your future, present and past in two easy pieces.”

Eb reached up for his head ratchet's release and let it spin until free. Relieved, he asked, "I am unsure what was just said, but no matter. Why, young one? Why are you here?"

The child laughed and the candle's flame rose in height. Its eyes shone as it said, "Well, every story has a beginning. And this, our ending, starts here," as it pointed to the old man who seemed gobsmacked at what was occurring.

Fred ran in with a glass of water, "Oh good. You're relaxed and unbound. Please take a sip of this water. Are you feeling faint? Is there a draft in this room?!"

Eb consoled his concerned nephew, "Take heed, good Fred. I am well, but somewhat haunted, I suppose."

Fred looked at his uncle's warm eyes, "She's gone but not forgotten, Eb. My mother would not want her brother to mourn forever."

Eb looked up at Fred and whispered, "My sister should have stayed then."

Both Eb and the rest of the kids at camp were disturbed by the entrance of one of their betters. The transparent duo witnessed this entry without comment.

A camp counselord, named Wrox, had walked in with his ivory-headed cane. He smacked the silver tip onto the miniputer lab's floor and the loud crack brought the entire group to attention. A large clear cylinder on a cart was wheeled in behind the man. It was filled with what appeared to be an infinite set of small tracks that looped and finally ended over a large wheel. The wheel had a series of what appeared to be Salamander language key words.

Wrox, the microroyal, addressed the campers and tugged down on his waistcoat, “Good sirs. Please direct your attention to the latest in computation. This is the single function. The single delineation that can service any use case without modification or redeployment. It is our lodestar: FauxThought.”

The educator then tapped the cylinder with the cane and said, “FauxThought has one inbound argument of what will prove to be the infinite domain of any human language. In perfect symmetry, the response is also the infinite range of any human language.” Wrox smiled through bright red gums and yellowed teeth at his charges.

His cane came back down to the floor as he continued, “This is just a locally hosted model that is trained to write, read and debug Salamander code. In the near future, these models will be hosted on the Great Steam Cloud that will link computation worldwide. There will be no human task unmodeled.”

Fred raised his hand and asked, “Could we try FauxThought on something we’re having trouble getting to work well, sir?”

“Excellent, Fred. Yes. Please send your code over aether to FauxThought’s EXTEND purpose via Salamander’s asking module,” Wrox advised Fred.

The old man finally spoke again, “This is the first time I saw manufactured thoughts. It all comes back to this.”

The child laughed again and the candle’s flame bothered no one but Eb. Fred kept an eye on his uncle as he executed the teacher’s transfer on the steampad. The hot steam jetting from each side almost burned Fred, but he was quick enough to get clear.

All the children were careful to be out of the line of sight between Fred's device and the cylinder. The steamdeck's aether ball crackled with orbiting red electric fire. A similar ball on the cylinder responded with its own green version. The progress bar on the pinscreen clipped, snipped, clicked and snapped to the bichrome beat of the flaming electricity.

The cylinder was suddenly filled with what appeared to be infinite small steel balls. The balls looped and hit pin fields before dropping onto the wheel below. Each ball hit a valid Salamander token on the wheel. The wheel spun at each hit and tokens changed between each hit. As the speed of the wheel increased, the speed of balls increased. The noise was tremendous and some students covered their ears in pain; however, no one was bleeding. At least not yet.

Fred watched in wonder as Eb's code was regenerated symbol by symbol in front of him. After about thirty seconds, the mad ball melee encased in glass finished processing all the tiny steel balls. Fred had a complete Salamander purpose awaiting in MoralEclipse. He asked the steampad to execute it. The purpose connected and the test suite then passed.

The child laughed, "They've done it now! Or, as I like to say, the cat is unbagged." The two transitioned from transparent to invisible in a moment or so.

Ch 02 - Cabin Fever

Eb sat at the end of his iron bedstead. He was tired after the FauxThought demo and ghostly visitations. He unclipped his top hat's compression buckle and unhinged the device from his head.

He stared at the slight twist found inside each half. The left side was red and the right was green. He looked at the severity settings and noted that it was still appropriate for his age. Eb rubbed his forehead and the red welts from the hat's interior were slowly fading. He pulled out a small pocket mirror and looked at the marks for progress. His hair was still black as a coalpel but the grooves were settling in nicely. Lately, he had made progress with the Klan Of Kool Superb System Patterns known as the Four Slavers.

Eb closed his eyes and recited the Slavers first Superb System Pattern, "The One. The one is invoked but is one. All that call the one are fools for their belief in multitudes. The one is the one."

"Form of Workhouse. A klass that creates Nouns of any capability. Ask and receive it concretely," the boy continued with closed eyes.

"The Changeling. Ask it and it is ready. Ask again and it is still ready. It is always ready and ready to change."

"Aristocracy. It asks and you decide how to achieve. It expects and you will serve."

He sighed and looked over to Fred who was massaging his raw forehead. Fred looked over at his uncle and asked, "Are you sure that is still Komputing or some strange dark art?"

Fred's Seaqwell had a simple static Kind system that didn't allow for the complexity of Salamander's Kind system, which many found cruel. The Slavers found ways to tame it.

Eb said plainly, "This is the way to Enterprise Quality. It is the only way to ensure you have winning software. Thinking this way produces a cleansing fire for complexity. Nouns. Nouns that move, feel and breathe as your metaphor for the real world you see every day."

Fred was not convinced but felt he had chosen well for himself. Datah seemed more stable and knowable somehow. There was no Klan to join — at least, none he knew of.

Fred qua a DataSteward had a tough road in front of him. Boys' heads were difficult to mold into a cylinder; however, Scrooge's need for a wood screw shaped cranium was typical for a softy clerk. Softy clerks were the primary fasteners of our modern world and we could never have enough. Others, like the bolts of devilry operations, lived in service of the screws above.

Fred shivered in his nightshirt, "There's a draft again. They are trying to kill us here. Consumption or worse, I hear, with drafts." Fred felt cold winds carried disease, and his mother had seemingly been carried away as well.

The candlelit child watched Scrooge carefully from a dim corner. The old man seemed confused as to why they were there. The child's green and red eyes looked back at Fred with concern, "This one is a bit drafty in the noggin, perchance."

The old man looked on, "Why here, spirit? I could see why at the demo, but this is just Fred and I afterwards? Why do I need to see this as well?"

Eb watched the two spirits and tried to ignore them. Their earlier appearance, he had thought, may have been too tight a pressure on his cranium. He had crammed facts prior and wanted to remember them correctly. He had thought the release of the pressure would also mean no more phantoms. Eb decided now that he had thought wrong.

Fred got underneath his wool blanket to avoid his perceived thermal assault, “FauxThought was very impressive, but it needed your code to get anything done.”

The child answered the old man, “This is when you’ll lie to yourself for the first time. Watch.”

Eb looked at the child and replied to Fred, “You know? You’re right. This is like a better OttoKorrect.”

The child laughed and the flame from the candle left a black mark as it licked the ceiling.

Fred rubbed his very red temples, “There is no way that pinball thing could ever understand a Data Schema or what things actually mean. Data will always need cylinders made of meat and not glass.”

The old man sighed, “Fred always loved the Seaqwell. He just liked declarative languages; the thinking is cylindrical, to be sure.”

Eb felt compelled to say, “Balls know nothing, Fred. When the balls stop moving, the faux in FauxThought is a metaphor inside a simile.”

The small child pointed, stomped her small foot, and laughed hysterically. Flames roasted the ceiling, disturbing Fred not at all. The smoke from the burnt plaster hung for a moment.

Fred looked over at his elder with lidded eyes, “Good night, good uncle. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve! I can’t wait for the party. So much good food.”

Fred’s breath slowed as he fell asleep. Eb turned from his sleeping kin. He looked at his haunts and asked in a whisper, “I assume I will see you at the party. Good night.”

The old man nodded back as he and the child faded from view.

Ch 03 - Christmas Eve in the Woods

Eb walked smartly in his overcoat and red sash. He travelled along the camp's path in the lightly falling snow. Other campers were with him as they were all heading to the planned festivities for Christmas Eve.

His hat was tightly attached and he smiled as he strode towards the glen with his peers at Fezziwig's Komputar Kamp. Komputar Kamp was, naturally, all male as women were unsuited for the rigors of Enterprise Quality. Fezziwig's Finishing Camp for Young Ladies was also invited so that the party had some social value.

Fred was waiting at the glen for his uncle. His red and green waistcoat was adorned with twinkling stars that matched the highlights in his bright eyes. He waved at Eb as soon as he met his elder's eyes. Eb joined him and tried to talk over the loud music pumping from the speakers and the sharp whistles of exhaust, "Happy Christmas Eve, kind Fred!"

Fred only waved over the sounds of MechaMariah and high pressure water vapor. Somehow, everyone felt that "All I Want For Christmas is Food" was always a great message.

The breeze blew hard for a moment but Fred's hat was unmoved. The two spirits appeared slowly from the snow covered pines that surrounded the glen.

The spirit child with bichrome eyes took it in, "Oh. It's so lovely. Look at it all." Fezziwig held Christmas in very high regard and he would try to impress his charges each year with food, music, and beautiful decorations. The number of

decorated trees and festive steam automations amazed the young men. Many of the campers, however, were hopeful that ladies from the Finishing Camp would be arriving soon.

“She’ll be here in a moment. So, pretty!” the child said as she pulled on the arm of the old man in the nightcap. The old man nodded and stared at his feet. He said nothing.

A lovely young woman entered the glen. She appeared to be a bit cold and somewhat unsure of herself. A butlerian took her gloved hand gently and asked for her calling card. It read the card momentarily and looked back at the awaiting male multitude. The music was reduced to allow for human thought to be transmitted airborne via compressed air patterns without getting creamed by a MechaMariah vocal flourish.

“Good sirs! I am very pleased to announce the arrivals of our betters from nearby. Please be the very young software gentlemen that Fezziwig himself expects on this fine, fine eve. This lovely young woman is named Belle and it is obvious why. Please do not attack her like a rabid pack of animals. There will be dance cards and order here. Thank you, kind Belle, and join Fezziwig’s grand Christmas Eve Ball,” said the butlerian smoothly.

Eb was simply unmoored by the sight of Belle. He usually wasn’t so easily smitten, but she affected him in a way he couldn’t place. If he was French and a bit drafty, he might say it was *deja vu* at first sight.

Fred watched his drifting uncle with some amusement. He pulled on his uncle’s arm. Eb bent over to hear his shorter companion but did not stop staring at his current fixation.

Fred sensibly offered, “You should go talk to her.”

Eb laughed but did not move before Mr. Fezziwig himself started to speak, “Good future screws, cylinders, bolts and all other good fasteners in my care! I give you my favorite night: Christmas Eve! Please eat and make merry. Please do mingle and match. Don’t stay attached to the wall even if you are a fastener! That said, decorum and order make Merry men and not a pack of wolves on the hunt! Ladies, please show these fine men how to behave in public. Hahah! Please enjoy!”

Fred looked behind Eb at the punch bowl fountains that were now spraying some red and green viscous liquids in a festive display of refreshments in motion. The nephew then offered, “Please, uncle. You’ll grow roots if you just stand there. Go over to the punch bowl and get me something to drink. I think something good will happen along the way.”

Eb agreed and turned to go to the punch bowl. Belle was already there. Eb stopped and waited.

The old man in the white pines whispered, “Just stop here, I beg you.”

The transparent child held the elder’s hand softly and looked on.

Eb tightened his hat two clicks and walked on.

Eb approached and Belle turned and saw him. She smiled and it reached her eyes. Eb stopped again.

The young woman said, “How do you do? My name is Belle and well, Happy Christmas Eve!” Belle walked over to Eb and kissed him lightly on the cheek. The mistletoe was overhead and Eb’s red and green face matched the berries above.

The child smiled and said, “Well, that settles that yet again.”

The old man looked down and the two spirits walked back into the forest.

Ch 04 - Christmas Eve at Home

Eb was tired from pushing so hard. He'd barely had time to help Belle at all and she had resented competing with what she called his steely-hearted work wife. Belle could not handle the horrible racket and awful machines that Eb needed to control to make their money. She had tried to get him to move to something less software-related so that he could be more present. But Eb's mind was set and his hat was still on tight.

Eb saw his wife across the room. Fred's party was in full swing. The music was loud and the top hats bobbed to Fred's favorite Victorian StemetricNeuDiscoHous that steamed from each corner of the room. The ladies kept circulating to keep spirits up — both feelings and liquids, and then later phantoms.

Belle was very tired. Belle looked over at her husband and held her heavily pregnant belly. She winced and showed concern, but then her smile refreshed without hitting her eyes. Eb moved at this immediate cue.

Eb had seen her distress before as her pregnancy had been difficult, but he had hoped to make some new connections at this party. He had failed; time to get both of his ladies home to rest.

Eb excused himself as he wove his way over to Belle. "Good Christmas Eve, all. How do you do?" he said at Belle's small group.

Fred and his wife smiled back. Fred loved Christmas as much as old Fezziwig but the cost of these parties seemed to stretch their meager finances. Seaqwell was being replaced by FramesOfDatum or PolarBears. Fred's head was still a bit raw

as he started to apply the needed twist to his cranium in order to handle the newest metaphors.

Fred told his uncle, “Happy Christmas, uncle. My new aunt was trying to escape all the fun, but I think I can understand. My cousin is ready to open gifts perhaps! Maybe the stork can outrace St. Nick tonight!”

The draft blew as the guests left Fred’s party to their own phantoms. The child and old man phantoms, in contrast, stood in silence. Eb saw them and knew, but could not stop what came next.

Eb laughed and touched his hat but could not tip it, “You are right, Fred. Another wonderful Christmas Eve here tonight. Next Christmas Eve will have three Scrooges, not two; please plan for more roast goose.”

Fred produced a small gift and said, “Well, for the three Scrooges here now, please, Eb, open this from my family to your soon-to-be-larger one.”

Eb pulled open the gift’s ribbon and saw the red and green newborn booties. “Tammy” was carefully knit into them by someone’s hand. Belle smiled and this did hit her eyes.

“Oh, dear, Fred. What a wonderful gift!” said Belle with deep affection.

“I am afraid we come less well prepared. Sorry — it’s been a lot, getting the nursery set up on my own. Your gift is coming, I swear, but maybe a bit late. Please do pardon.”

Fred dismissed this, “Please, another Scrooge is gift enough, Belle.”

Eb smiled as he said, "My wife is heroic. Perhaps a new Hercules? Or at least, my Hercules."

Belle wryly added, "Well, as much as I would enjoy relieving myself of Eb's heavy burden tonight, I hope for just a good night's rest for my Christmas Present."

Fred said, "Well, dream of sugar plums, aunt Belle. Please rest well."

Eb and Belle left the room for a waiting carriage. The old man covered his eyes with his hands as he faded from sight.

Ch 05 - Christmas Day

Eb looked at his hands, and they were red. Belle's hands tore at a small red bootie. The small boot was unspooling unto the floor.

Eb tried reaching out to Belle's hand to stop her work. She twisted away and he pulled back. They both looked at the small box together but separate.

"Would you like to say something, Eb?" the priest asked.

"No," said Eb with watering eyes.

The child looked at the old man as the candle started to burn out, "What about you, Screwed?"

The old man said nothing as they both disappeared.

Ch 06 - Christmas Eve at Work

Eb walked through the snowy city streets. He used this as exercise but was considering moving into work. One piece of furniture made moves quite easy and he'd save this time. He had not decided how he'd replace the exercise, but his nearly constant pacing did not need miles in any case. He rarely sat, he stood for health and kept moving as if chased perhaps.

His breath puffed and marked each step in the snow. His mind was always elsewhere and his hat was there, but the bands and ratchets were missing. He scowled as he spotted a free-loading charity case in his direct path. Perhaps like old Wrox, he should buy a silver headed cane. Maybe the cane could have a sharp tip. Maybe young boys could be classically trained...

"Happy Christmas, good sir. Would you buy an apple for just \$5? It's for the needy!" said a young boy as Eb passed without stopping.

"Bah. Humbug. Needy should work then they would have what they need, hm," mumbled the middle-aged founder whose cane decision was now made. This whole interaction cost him at least twenty full seconds away from work. Not in physical distance, but mentally. The cane would solve this for the future. He would get the order off when he arrived first thing.

Eb brushed by the young boy and continued down the street. His office was near and he picked up the pace as the boy had made him a bit late.

His office space was an old factory space with very high ceilings. There were old Rivera style murals of workers

building clothing and other textiles. The workers and top hat wearers shook hands in front of an idealized factory in the final grand painting.

The elderly man kept his hat on, but people knew that Screwed was well formed at this point in his life. That said, Scrooge did feel his name was apt but did not need to flaunt his knowledge all day.

Scrooge sat in the dim light and awaited the sun. He didn't want to miss the free illumination and certainly would not pay for more gas to light his pinfields. As soon as the light was good enough, the old man slammed a coalpel into his steamdeck, the beast roared to life in appreciation of the early meal.

The senior screw's hands danced over the keys and the mechanical keyboard built into the deck shot blasts of hot red and green vapor upwards at each stroke. He was preparing an aethermail at high speed:

” Cratchit:

Please order one high Quality, sturdy and heavy walking cane for myself. Head silver. End sharp and silver as well; I hear good things about BoyBaton and there is a nearby dealer. Should include good cleaning rag that is red in color. I expect delivery later this evening at my home.

M. Screwed KEO - FauxThoughtsLTD

”

The man slammed the send button and his aether ball flamed. He watched the pair on his employee's desk. His mail was printing out on Cratchit's open task list that gave him additional work when all cylinders were already fully engaged.

The office was silent and that always made Scrooge angry. “Where is that layabout, Cratchit? It’s already 7:30AM. Well, he knows the penalty of tardiness. It’s clearly written in the employee handbook.”

Scrooge walked by rows and rows of huge metal cylinders. He looked up but could barely see the huge steel ball hopper and the chutes to each cylinder. Nothing was happening and Scrooge hated to see the stillness. The quiet needed to be displaced to drown out the noises in his head.

“Soon. FauxThought will be everywhere. The Great Steam Cloud will allow anyone to ask FauxThought on their own. No more meat issues in the middle of pure mechanical thinking,” thought Scrooge.

Scrooge heard the office door opening and he checked the clock, “7:33AM. Cratchit just saved me \$3,000.”

A young man with a ratty top hat with very tight bands walked into the open plan office. Cratchit was the only employee and as such, the open plan was him sitting at a table. His boss, if ever seated, was positioned directly behind Cratchit but always in full sight. Of course, Screwed would often need to correct Cratchit directly with constant feedback and metric evaluations of Bob’s recent performance.

Bob wore an absurdly huge white scarf that he always wrapped around his shoulders. The drafts were known to carry the deaths or the dead according to Bob’s wife. This was her personally built PPE for her husband.

Scrooge’s office needed to be cold and it was always much colder inside than out. The walls of deep blue ice around the cylinders kept the machines cool enough. Fans were available to assist in convection when needed. If the cylinders’

temperature weren't well regulated, the results would be suspect.

"Happy Christmas Eve!" said Bob Cratchit, but he couldn't help himself. He walked up to his employer in halting steps.

"Bah. Humbug. There are stacks of prompts waiting. Please get to work," said the founder to his only employee. Screwed started to keep his pacing going and Bob followed a bit behind and wide from his boss; however, he did not want to yell at the older man.

"Of course, Mr. Screwed. Right away, but may I ask a favor?" said the young man as he itched where his hat was placed.

Scrooge sighed as he knew what was coming next, "Yes, Cratchit. We are family. What do you need?"

"Well, I know it's not your favorite holiday, but I will not be coming into work tomorrow." said the young man.

Scrooge stopped and sighed. He then replied coolly as he looked at Bob directly, "Yes, your time off is discretionary, Cratchit. Work and be paid. Can you afford the day off and spend all your money on gifts?"

Cratchit smiled at Screwed's concern for his well-being, "I have been carefully saving as you recommended, Mr. Screwed. I can take a loan out and we'll be fine. Thank you for your concern. One other small ask."

Scrooge knew what came next and just said, "Yes, leave at 4PM, you can have a half day. Again, your time is your own. I pay you to work and when you work you get paid. Understood? Please get to work as I'd rather pay you for that than this conversation."

Cratchit was delighted as this was easier than last time, “Thank you, Mr. Screwed. I’ll get right to work!” The young man looked around and found an empty space on the table. He opened his steampad and found his letter opener.

The stack of prompts sat in a large hopper next to the table. Bob pulled an envelope out of the hopper and neatly opened it with his letter opener.

“Please build a Salamander3-based steamdeck application to manage gruel portioning and onion management. M. Bumble” the text read. There were what appeared to be tear stains on the paper. Bob looked through the paper and saw “more please” written in what appeared to be hidden ink.

Bob thought for a moment and then moved his hands quickly over the keyboard to avoid burns from the escaping heated vapor. He typed:

“We need a three-tiered locally hosted Salamander3 application. Separate layers between business and UX that communicate via messaging and not direct API access. Give me your full plan back and do not proceed until I confirm your architecture,” the pinscreen displayed. Bob appreciated the heat coming off the machine for a moment. He looked at the paper a bit more and thought.

“Ensure that primary API insists that each child receives adequate daily nutrition to build healthy bodies and minds. Include reminders as defaults for additional nutrition beyond simple gruel and onions. Include your understanding of the full requirements as part of the full plan requested in the earlier section of this prompt.” Bob typed at good speed before snapping the execute key.

Bob's orb aethered upwards towards a cylinder and a chute shifted under the huge ball hopper that was continually refed from the complex ball recovery system under their feet.

The ball hopper rained down steel balls, the chute guided the stream into a now spinning and churning cylinder. Cratchit put on his ear mufflers as the sonic assault sent deep vibrations into his very teeth.

Bob moved on to the next envelope as Scrooge paced in front of the machines with ears uncovered.

Ch 07 - Christmas Eve with Family

Cratchit walked briskly through the snow. His fingers were a bit numb from both the cold and from all the steamdeck work he completed. He managed to find an open haberdashery that was having a last-minute sale.

Bob opened the door and met two dour-looking shopkeepers, “Do you have any canes, good sirs?”

A man whose name tag read Stone looked coolly at Bob and said, “Of course sir, we have some excellent new canes. Excellent support and perfect for fending off, making points, and of course, helping you walk.”

Bob brightened, “Exactly right. Please show me if you can?”

Stone walked over to Bob and both met at the cane display area. There were three mirrors as well as a small mannequin holding an apple.

Stone picked up a hefty cane that was simply tipped with a heavy straight silver bar at the top and a sharper pointed one at the tip. He swung it deftly and drove the tip into the floor with a large bang.

“As you can hear, you can make loud and sharp sounds with the tip for emphasis. You could hear that over a raging tornado. With this cane, your argument skills will be second to none.” said Stone.

Bob looked a bit confused, but said, “Well, it is very nice looking for sure.”

Stone frowned a bit and offered, “Nice looking, yes. Nicer acting if you ask me. Watch the fending options this model provides.”

Stone then yelled and brought the heavy-headed cane smartly onto the small mannequin’s tufted head, “I say NO!”

There was a small dent left and Stone smiled, “You can offer corrections like this and usually this suffices from that point forward. A simple brandish can now be applied for the same effect.”

Stone then demonstrated, “Would you like another taste, wretch!” and simply shook the cane at the dummy.

Bob looked on with some degree of dismay, “Well, may I purchase...”

Stone interrupted, “Not so hasty, be sure to understand the last fending option: the tip is quite sharp.”

Stone speared the apple neatly, brought it up to his face, and took a juicy bite, “This cane allows the bearer all the fruits of life for only seven hundred and fifty dollars.”

Bob smiled and said, “Do you take credit? I’d like to have this delivered to Mr. Screwed’s place this afternoon, please. Here is my first card. Put \$350 on that. Then, please put the rest on this second card.”

Stone nodded and executed the transaction on his steamdeck nearby, “I’ll have it delivered within the hour. I know Screwed is an impatient man and I could see why he’d need this. Good lad for helping out and an excellent gift for a software founder.”

Cratchit said, "Thank you, good Stone. Happy Christmas Eve."

Stone tipped his hat and exposed some strange shape and it fell back down before Cratchit could get a very good look. He left the store and started off for home. It was getting late and he knew his family would be waiting.

Cratchit turned the corner and found a young man selling day-old bakery goods. It looked as if he might be a baker's apprentice trying to make extra money for the season.

"Day-old babka! Day-old babka! You, sir? Would you care for a day-old babka? It's still very moist and has all sorts of good things inside. It's usually twenty dollars but I'll sell it for ten?" said the young man with wide eyes.

Bob smiled and pulled out fifteen, "That babka is worth more than that. I must have it and will pay no less than fifteen dollars for it!"

The young boy looked confused as this was the first time someone had countered his offer with more. "Uh, sixteen is my higher? offer?"

Bob said, "SOLD! Here are sixteen silver dollars. Fair trade and thank you young man for my family's dessert. You must have a Happy Christmas as well. Go home now!"

The young boy smiled and yelled as he ran, "Thank you kind sir and Happy Christmas!"

Bob took the heavy cake and found his avenue. He turned the corner and stopped in front of his home, "I am so very blessed." He took a moment and looked upwards at the stars, "Thank you." He walked up to the door of his home.

Cratchit opened the door to his life and the warmth flooded over his body. He could almost eat the aroma of home-cooked food.

He dropped the chocolate babka on a nearby table as his family welcomed him home. “Happy Christmas, Bob!” said his thin wife as she hugged him tightly.

Bob laughed and said, “It is a Happy Christmas! Look, I found a day-old babka for half off. Dessert is on Mr. Screwed!”

Belle smiled but it didn’t quite reach her eyes, “Mr. Scrooge does what he does. I’m not sure anything is *on* him or not.”

Bob noted, “Even Mr. Scrooge deserves our gratitude tonight, good wife.”

A small boy slowly walked up to his father but couldn’t look him in the eyes. “Daddy,” he mumbled as he stood near Bob.

Bob talked gently to his young son, “Happy Christmas, Tim. I have something for you.”

Tim looked concerned but smiled when Bob took out a set of beads on a string. Bob looked kindly at his son as he took the beads. Tim moved them side to side and walked away staring at the gift.

Bob asked his wife, “Belle, how has Tim been? He looks ok, but ...”

Belle smiled and said, “He’s fine, Bob. Let’s enjoy the evening and not worry. The red beans are almost done. We’ll feast!”

A small draft pushed the red-bean-filled atmosphere. A voice couldn’t be heard: “She’s here and he’s here. Where are you?” The green and red eyes blinked and faded from no one’s sight.

Ch 08 - Christmas Eve Alone

Scrooge trod to his building. It was nine o'clock on Christmas Eve and the man was not happy, "Wasted so much time today. These holidays just keep pulling us off schedule," he thought to himself. His doorman was well trained and offered no greeting to Scrooge as the founder approached. He simply noted, "Good night, sir." and opened the door without meeting Scrooge's eyes. Scrooge simply replied, "Good night."

Scrooge rode up the steamvator as it chugged up the building where he lived. The door opened to a huge loft space lit sparsely with gas burners carefully spaced. Each cone of light barely touched the next.

He noticed a large package in his entry. It was long and wrapped in brown paper. He didn't expect anything and opened the strange box carefully. A smart cane with a heavy silver handle with "BoyBaton LTD." in light scrolling was inside. There was a card attached, "Happy Christmas and Happy New Year Dear Mr. Scrooge. I look forward to another year in your service. Take care and have a nice holiday. Bob Cratchit. Employee number 1207. Currently your only employee."

Scrooge sighed and said to himself, "I didn't want him to buy it with his pay. I hope he knew that. Damn. OK. We need to reimburse him. This was very kind, but he's already missing so much pay with the half day, the tardiness, and then a whole day off. I assume New Year's Eve and Day might be next? How about every Saturday and Sunday while we're at it? Bah. Bob is good but so foolish."

The middle-aged man took off his heavy overcoat. He looked at the cane and placed it aside for now. He put on a heavy felt robe from a nearby peg. The steam manifold hissed as he upped the heating slowly just until his own breath became invisible.

He walked to his vanity where his hat stand was waiting. This had three mirrors in a tri-fold and a small seat in front. A small gaslight over the mirrors gave a meager yellow glow. There was a head-shaped hat stand that was empty when Mr. Scrooge sat down. The hat stand was made of malleable sand that could accept any shaped hat.

Scrooge unhinged his top hat to reveal his long, pointed and tightly twisted cranium. The screw spun upwards above his ears and his entire head tapered to a sharp tip. He scratched at his meager gray hair found in the grooves of his formed skull. He looked at the spiraling shape inside the red and green sides of his hat. The severity setting had been maximized, but Scrooge had always hoped he'd find just another turn of the screw. Of course, it had been years since he'd maximized his mental model, but it would be irresponsible to not check each day just in case.

Scrooge clamped his fine hat over the sand head. He looked at his face and could not meet his eyes in the mirror. He placed a nightcap over his manufactured head. The tassel was quite fetching with blood red and vibrant green threads.

After a brief wash, he walked across the empty space from light cone to darkness to light cone as he found his way to the only seating in the space. It was, beyond the built-in closets and unused kitchen, the only "furniture" in his space. It was a long chaise lounge with a blanket. It served as bed and seat.

There were never any guests or family; therefore, there was no need for additional seating.

He never used the kitchen. The government insisted that all living spaces include a kitchen. Once a small kitchenette was placed in his work space, he'd have the chaise and his two rolling suitcases that he used as an armoire moved. Then, no more rent here.

Scrooge sat and opened his steamdeck. His hands flashed over the keys as the OKROgre software he built started up. The KPI graphs pointed sharp red needles that buzzed with anger. He tapped his finger at the graph and it accepted the blood sacrifice. The deck belched. A small daemon was summoned and made a forward model of ABOVEVIL.

The pindeck's sharp and layered message read "small daemon->baaalpEEp modelL sez. daemon concur baaalpEEp sez: bob must bleed. bob flesh. modelL hungry. feed bob. feed bob to modelL. feed modelL to baaalpEEp. in that order.:"

Scrooge sighed and thought to himself for a moment, "Bob is a good man and I hear he might have a young family."

He finally typed in response to his software's demands. "baaalpEEp is good. baaalpEEp is hungry. baaalpEEp will wait. Let the man have his holidays in peace. This is my return gift. Make a note for his termination of the second of January. Prepare his final package as per the handbook. Whatever the data says is appropriate."

The software whined and Scrooge threatened to kill its threads until it was back under control. He then asked it to terminate and it grumbled as it disappeared in a greasy black pop.

Scrooge scratched his grooves and started up his aethermail client. He watched the green and red fire flipping between his deck and his access point some sixty feet away. He noticed that a moth had entered the line of sight between the two devices and was instantly incinerated with a loud pop.

The first new mail appeared and Scrooge considered it carefully. He used a thin metal prod to get to the next pages and saw no attachments wrapped inside the envelope's MIME needle encodings.

He read the body with a grimace in the dim light and was mildly disgusted. Scrooge hit reply and deftly typed to avoid burns:

"To: Daniel Quilp via aethermail

No, good sir, there are no good methods for FauxThought in a martial dispute. Please stop asking."

He hit execute on his deck and the snapping fire between his wireless data devices failed to find a new moth to destroy. The next inbound mail was formed in fine layers of pindeck needles. Scrooge quickly considered this as well and drafted an immediate reply:

"To: Edward Murdstone via aethermail

Firmness is a fine method to raise a child, I could imagine. I am childless myself but have strong opinions on how to raise children correctly. Get a hat on that head as fast as possible. A child's skull is as plastic as you need without any added softeners. Otherwise, the bone sets and, well, chemicals can help reshape a set head and, of course, just very long soaks, like months of water exposure with acids applied by doctors

are quite regular treatments when changing careers or late bloomers so to speak.”

He sent the next mail and closed the deck after he watched the data fly across the room. He put in two earplugs that blasted the sound of falling metal balls onto a steel plate. He lay down in his nightshirt and pulled up his blanket. His eyes shut and he hoped he would just sleep thirty hours and awake on the twenty-sixth.

The room was quiet except for the noise coming from his earplugs. A small draft blew through the room and Scrooge opened his eyes. He sat up and saw nothing in the various cones of light in his space. He stood up. “Why is my room drafty? I need to call the maintenance team for repairs,” he mumbled to himself as he walked over to the thermostat to see what might be wrong.

“Screwed. Screwed. Screwed,” a thin quiet voice insisted in the dark. The founder’s eyes widened in fright at the unexpected voice in his room. He grabbed his heavy steamdeck and tried to hold it in a threatening manner.

“Who is there? I am armed!” bluffed the frightened man in a cone of light with a portable komputer held high.

A faint thin man wearing a black shirt with a severe neck cuff walked out of the darkness to the edge of Scrooge’s light to be seen clearly but no further. The thin man’s eyes were coal black and his hair and soul matched in shade. He matched his eyes with a black turtleneck. His neck was tightly cuffed and then bound and wrapped by paper. The paper either read ISO, NSO or RSU over and over again. He was very unwell-looking and generally sallow. An IV bag hung from a steel pole behind the spirit, rolling on wheels.

“Is that you, Jobs?” croaked Scrooge finally.

The spectre looked at Scrooge smugly. He paced and sniffed. He produced a red and green apple and took one large bite from the side. He chewed and chewed and chewed until finally, he spat out the bite and threw the rest away in frustration. The collar would not allow for swallowing.

“I wear what all bring to bear in the search of full human replacement. It chokes like a turtleneck badly washed and shrunk,” moaned the ghost to Scrooge.

Scrooge tried to approach the spirit only to see it retreat back into the murk of his poorly lit space. “Jobs. You’re gone. Why am I to witness your suffering?” said the man to the receding spirit.

It turned back and Jobs said plainly, “It is not too late, Screwed.” Jobs took a moment and then said, “Scrooge is there and the ghosts will find him.” The wise man then said as he turned, “It might take forever but you don’t want a turtleneck as well.” Scrooge could hear another loud apple bite as Jobs walked and faded away.

Ch 09 - A Spirited Christmas Eve

Scrooge sat shivering in his cone of light. He fired up his steamdeck for some needed warmth as he was still in his nightshirt. Jobs had gone, but Scrooge had no intention of going into the dark again. He would wait here until Christmas dawned itself. Maybe go into work and do some of his own prompting to make up some of the lost effort over the holiday season. His earplugs were still playing from the chaise but there was no other noise within the room. Scrooge could hear his pulse in his ears as the stiff breeze blew his nightcap's tassel to the left.

Scrooge looked and saw one red and one green eye in the dark. Staring. Not blinking. Scrooge regained his steamdeck-fu form and stared back at the eyes.

"Merry Christmas, my good Screwed. We have much to see. Please say 'Yes' if we should continue?" said a voice from the dark. The eyes did not move.

"I'm sorry? Who is speaking?" said the paranoid man to the dark and potentially to the eyes themselves.

"You are sorry, but that is not a 'Yes'? Shall I leave?" said the bodiless voice.

"No. I mean Yes. Please, who is there?" said Scrooge.

The eyes moved forward and a face formed around them. Neither the eyes nor the features moved at all as the unreal transparent man walked in slow but perfectly even steps towards Scrooge's cone. The expression seemed calm but also inhuman in its perfect humanity. Steam issued from its joints and it approached. Unlike Jobs, the transparent man would

not be stopping at the cone's edge, and Scrooge began to retreat in fear.

"I am the spirit of Christmas today, but you can call me Claude. Are you ready to see what you are missing? Say 'Yes' and I will begin," said the recently named spirit. It moved while speaking but now was perfectly still. Somehow its eyes would always meet Scrooge's no matter how hard he tried to avoid contact.

"Claude? What am I missing? What is this all about?" said the confused man to the unblinking countenance.

Claude's eyes burned bright and cycled in hue between green and red. The steam rose from the spirit's joints as it calculated for several seconds. It regained motion, sense and intention again.

"Yes. I am the spirit of Christmas today, but you can call me Claude. You are missing your real life. This is about you. Say 'Yes' and I will begin," said the spirit as it moved towards Scrooge a bit closer. It came to an abrupt stop, but the eyes would still watch for a response.

Scrooge looked down at his feet. He put down his steamdeck and asked, "Am I dressed warm enough?"

Claude's eyes looked at Scrooge and pleaded silently. The rest of the spirit remained frozen in place.

"Ok. Yes," said the man.

Claude sprang to life and walked over to Scrooge. Its eye contact unbroken, Claude calmly took Scrooge's hand.

"Well. That's getting easier each time now, isn't it," said the machine as they faded from sight.

Ch 10 - Christmas Eve Rave

Fred looked at the cylinder hat with the two eyes that he had made with black tape as crosses. He checked that everything looked in good order before taking a quick drink. The music was already chugging along and he only had a couple of seconds before he needed to perform again. He turned on the lights to the hat, saw it was good, and clamped the hat onto his skull. He stepped out from backstage to his ten foot high cylinder that acted as his DJ stand. Fred's hat spelled his alter ego's name: DeadDBA. Fred's face was not exposed. He pointed at his partner, DonnaDatahNoMoah as her RecycleBin hat spun to the beat. Donna fired off the light show that displayed "ElectroMAAAS Eeevee!" on a blast of steam behind both DJs. DeadDBA's cylinder spun and then clattered while the eyes pinwheeled with steam issuing from the tips. The ironic careerbot hit the beat and tossed out infected USB glow sticks to the crowd. The sticks snarled in time to the music.

The crowd roared its appreciation. Top hats were bobbing as ladies-in-waiting waited rave style. Donna pointed to the crowd and sang her big hit called "Cumulative Update":

Oh! I got it! I got the Update! Not just the changes! No no not just jjjjjjjust the changes. I gots those cumlulative cumulations on my updates you see.

DeadDBA let the beat drop and the steam-driven drums thundered. The bumping and steam whistles started the drop and the Victorian party was on. Top hats in the air and ladies-in-waiting showing their moves:

CUMULATIVE UPDATE PLEASE HOLD ON WE GOT A
CUMULATIVE UPDATE ARE YOU STILL ON!

CUMULATIVE UPDATE PLEASE HOLD ON WE GOT A
CUMULATIVE UPDATE ARE YOU STILL ON!

Oh! I got it! I got the Update! Not just the changes! No no not just jjjjjjust the changes. I got those extras and devices and pretty UXes that meet my new exes at my courthouse directes. when divorce trial commences.

The DJ's hat hit the beat at each drop and Fred's hands pointed out to the crowd. A softy engineer pulled off his hat to expose his long twisted skull. His hair was in glowing cornrows and they spun outward as the senior dev drove his sharp spiked dome into the floor while his legs twisted above in a perfect circle.

Some datah professionals pulled their hats off and rolled down the dance floor as others hopped over in time. Multiple seecurity teams unveiled their torus shaped noggins. Many seceroons pushed their hands through their partners' cranial holes in a co-ordinated rhythm with glowing fingertip gloves to prove their latest certifications.

A draft blew through the party. Claude and Scrooge stood unnoticed and unreal near the back. Claude stood perfectly still except for one tapping foot that was enjoying the beat. Scrooge scratched under his nightcap as he watched the steam-powered musical melee.

Scrooge finally asked his spirit guide, "What on earth is this?"

Claude turned to Scrooge. It stared with its polychromatic eyes and went completely still. The eyes blazed and steam rose from the spirit's joints while its foot kept perfect time.

Claude's eyes would smile and blink while both of them waited for its response. After a minute or so, Claude spoke clearly over the racket. "This is your nephew. He is DeadDBA. He does this now with what he learned from you," the device answered. The spirit took the opportunity to dance a bit before finally losing its agency once more. Its eyes watched its charge and its foot still kept good time.

Scrooge's skull itched and he scratched at the irritation. "This has nothing to do with softwar. This is trivial. Has Fred done nothing with his head?" he said back to Claude.

Claude started its processing but DeadDBA turned down the music. The crowd was disappointed and looked to the DJ.

"Hey Everybody! Merry Christmas! Guess what I just got! A gift from Uncle Screwed!" yelled the ironically unalive softwar support professional to the waiting crowd.

"Look for the invoice, DJ! Screwed doesn't give anything without full payment!" said a stranger as people around laughed. "It's probably a lifetime supply of pachinko balls!" said another to laughter. "Maybe he can ask FauxThought for some FauxFamily next year!" said another to large cheers.

"No. No. No. Uncle Screwed is just a bit pointy, right? Let's see what it is?" said DeadDBA to the crowd. The DJ opened a small envelope. DeadDBA laughed a bit and then looked out at the crowd.

"\$50 USD at NileAwayYourMoney! WOOHOO! \$25 more than last year!" bellowed DeadDBA as he held up the gift card over his head. The crowd roared its approval as the music started back up.

Oh! I got it! I got the Update! Not just the changes! No no not just jjjjjjjust the changes. I gots those cumlulative cumulations on my updates you see if you cants changes the changes youll always be victums so you needs the updates those cumulations and cumberations those cumulative updates.

Claude answered, "This is a rave. People enjoy themselves here. Have you seen enough? Please say 'Yes' to continue."

Screwed responded as his hands grabbed at his head in pain, "Yes."

Claude noted as they faded away, "At least he can get whatever he wants at NileAwayYourMoney. I hear they have everyting there ..."

Ch 11 - Christmas Eve with Red Beans

Bob smiled warmly at his small family. Belle and Tim sat on either side of him as he offered a hearty, “Merry Christmas! Please enjoy the food! Belle! This smells amazing!”

A stiff breeze pushed through the room, but the occupants were accustomed to cold breezes as the weatherstripping needed repair.

Claude and Scrooge were unnoticeable by design and watched the family start to eat.

Scrooge’s eyes widened at the scene. He knew that woman — it couldn’t be her. He turned to Claude and demanded, “Who is that woman with Cratchit, Claude?!”

Claude had predicted this question and had an answer ready, “You don’t need me to answer that, Scrooge. It’s plain who the woman is, no?”

Scrooge looked with fury at his guide. He paced and then finally asked, “Then, who is that boy? Who? Tell me!”

Claude knew this next question very well, “That is Mr. Bob Cratchit’s young son, Tim.” The machine waited carefully as this bit was always hard.

Scrooge stared at his hands. He scratched at his twisted skull and then looked at his guide with watering eyes.

“We would have named our child Tammy,” he said softly before stopping.

Claude held Scrooge's hands as he sobbed into its waiting shoulder. It held him and waited.

Scrooge looked up, "Yes. Please. Yes."

Claude patiently added, "No. We're not ready yet. Just a bit more. You'll be ok."

Bob asked Tim, "Are you enjoying Christmas Eve, Tim?"

Tim did not respond.

Scrooge turned and asked, "Why isn't he speaking, Claude?"

Claude steamed for a moment and added, "Tim has a different mind. He needs help, but it's very expensive. So, they do their best with beads and such to keep him soothed."

Belle answered for Tim, "He's just a bit tired, Bob. School has been very hard, but he's been great! Right, Tim?"

Tim did not respond.

Bob smiled at his wife and said, "Well, it is a very fine Christmas Eve indeed! Red beans and my family! Only day-old babka could top it off! But first, a toast to my employer who makes this all possible!"

Belle laughed and got up, "You can toast him. I'm going to get dessert!"

Scrooge asked, "Why is she LAUGHING! They have NOTHING!"

Claude answered softly, "Honest answer: they have everything. Please say 'Yes' to proceed."

Belle brought in the babka with candles lit as her family was awash in the yellow glow. Scrooge sobbed as Claude brought him close. They faded slowly away.

Ch 12 - Christmas Eve with Balls

Scrooge sat in his cone of light and Claude released him. It held Scrooge at arm's length, each hand holding a shoulder as it looked into Scrooge's eyes. Scrooge thanked it, and Claude smiled.

"A thank you? That's new as well, my friend. I think you're well on your way. Maybe even in a few more hundred tries?" said the spirit as it walked away into the dark.

Scrooge awaited what would come and steeled himself. He knew and did not know what was next; however, nothing could be harder than what had already transpired. So, he sighed, sat down on the floor, and waited.

He welcomed the wind that blew through his space, his eyes closed. The room darkened further as the spirit entered. A black boiling, greasy smoke filled the space and Scrooge's nostrils took in the scent of nickel. The roaring sound of infinite, crashing and pinging steel quarter-inch balls reverberated in the founder's massive loft. The light cones were completely consumed but one. Scrooge took off his nightcap and unveiled Screwed to his future.

Screwed thought clearly to the spirit, "Show me my future. This is my prompt. Go now."

The sound, which was impossibly loud, became infinitely loud. Screwed watched as the cloud flashed with green and red streaks of lightning before it devoured him whole.

Screwed was nowhere but could see.

Tim was standing over a tombstone. The writing was very clear: "Screwed. Dead. Here 58 Years Too Long."

Tim walked over to Belle and asked, “Can we go? This guy sucked.”

Tim’s mother looked her son in the eye and smiled, “Tim, he just wanted something that he lost along the way and, well, he became lost himself. That can hurt — being lost with no way back. He was hurting, right?”

Tim looked down at his feet, then off toward the far row of stones. “Sorry. But Dad had to work so hard for me. That’s why...”

Belle said, “Your father worked very hard because he loved you and that’s not a tragedy. That’s why we loved him so, yes?”

“OK. Can we go now?” said the boy.

Belle laughed and said, “Sure. We’ve said our goodbye. Let’s visit Bob’s grave next. I have flowers.” She grabbed Tim by the shoulders and headed off into the distance.

The greasy smoke dissipated and fled to the corners of Scrooge’s loft. The spirit was gone. The cones of light returned, and only the chaise was there as before. Scrooge’s bed had a small sign on it. He walked over to it and read, “Good night, Screwed. Nice try, and you are making good progress. Keep up the work!”

Scrooge scratched his head and said to himself, “I need some sleep. Enough.”

Ch 13 - Christmas Day Alive

Scrooge dreamed and felt his past return in greyscale images.

Eb was young and a camper once again.

Eb walked smartly in his overcoat and grey sash. His head itched.

He walked along the camp's path in the lightly falling snow. His head itched more. Other campers were with him as they were all heading to the planned festivities for Christmas Eve. His hat was tightly attached and he smiled as he walked towards the glen with his peers at Fezziwig's Komputar Kamp.

His head itched terribly. He scratched just over his ear and it hurt. Fezziwig's Finishing Camp for Young Ladies was invited so that the party had some social value. He stopped as his head pounded in pain.

Fred was waiting at the glen for his uncle. His grey and greyer waistcoat was adorned with twinkling stars that matched the highlights in his bright eyes. He waved at Eb as soon as he met his elder's eyes.

Eb's head itched intensely. He scratched harder. The itch just would not relent. He scratched and scratched each side of his head. His vision filled in greens and reds. The pain throbbed and his teeth ground in response. His hands reached up to the ratchet and found the tightening knob.

He popped the ratchet; it spun wildly. The straps around the hat relaxed and sloughed off. He closed his eyes and sighed. His vision cleared.

He opened his hat hinge and his red round head showed to the bare sky.

Fred looked on and said, "Go on. You're almost there!"

Scrooge placed the hat down carefully. He took a step back and kicked it far. He put his hand over his eyes in order to better see the hat disappear in the snowy forest.

A young transparent girl in the treeline watched it fall at her feet. She smiled and the old transparent man next to her said, "Finally."

Scrooge turned to Fred. He saw Fred's red and green eyes smiling back.

"Fuck that hat," Scrooge said.

Fred agreed, "It never suited you anyway," as he faded away.

Scrooge felt himself waking in the bright sunlight streaming into his room. He was feeling something odd. He had no *deja vu*. His hands looked familiar. Arms and legs worked.

He was not in his loft but a strange small bedroom. His new, meager bed was comfortable, warm and obviously shared. He was alone, but the room itself was brightly lit. This was also odd, but not unwelcome now.

He saw in wonder the new and wild hand-made paintings covering the walls. He smelled the foreign scent of red beans filling the air. There was a large white scarf on the bed post with the word 'Eb' carefully knitted within. Someone was singing from nearby and there was laughter.

Scrooge's head itched. He reached up and felt thick hair. His hands explored his unknown gift. It was unwrapped and lacked a bow.

His skull was short and smooth. Not perfectly round as a steel ball, but round like the head of someone who just let it be. He felt crevices and flat spots with some symmetry under probing fingertips.

A nearby mirror stood amid a cluster of small photographs of someone who looked like him, but without a hat on. He stumbled over to take it all in, but first looked at himself: the stranger in the mirror.

Eb saw his reflection and it was just Eb's head, as it would have grown if left alone. He sobbed, "This is too kind. Thank you. This is truly the best of all Christmas Gifts!"

He heard more laughing and a strange sound from outside his bedroom as a draft picked up. It was pounding feet from behind the door. Eb poised for what it might mean and looked at the door for the answer.

The door burst open with a wild wind and a wilder being in tow. "Merry Christmas, Daddy!" yelled the child with blazing red and green eyes to her father.

Elf on the Shelf
Narc Anonymous
Meeting

CHRISTMAS

[Elfie] Hi everyone. I'm Elfie, and I'm an Elf on the Shelf.

[Rest of Group] Hi Elfie.

[Elfie] Well, like all of us, it started simple. I liked to watch the reindeer and made sure Santa knew if there was any malfeasance that still remained from Rudolph's foggy Christmas debacle a few years back.

[Elfie] Before you know it, the man himself sent me off. I was like, "I'm a good toy maker. Why are you sending me away?"

[Pukie, Dwarf] Hi [Elfie], can I ask a question before you start in?

[Moderator] Please ask a quick question, [Pukie] and then let her finish.

[Pukie] Hi Elfie. Thanks for taking my question. I'm a Dwarf Trying Not To Borf. I'm less well known, but we cover New Year's Eve just after you stop working. How many rooms do you need to cover on your average job?

[Elfie] answering Hi [Pukie]. Thanks for sharing. I'm usually moved around room-to-room. Ideally, I'm in a good position to get info on my target but not obvious and out in the open. If I'm doing my job well, I'm invisible by becoming commonplace or everyday.

[Pukie] happy Oh, that sounds really hard. I just stay next to the liquor cabinets in my job. Thanks for the answer. Please continue.

[Elfie] continuing So, I've seen... Well, I've seen a lot. Parents with children that need surveillance. Many families have children that need to be caged like ...

[Polly] a parrot CAW! CAW! Before you start up again, can I ask a question as well?

[Moderator] Please be quick [Polly]

[Polly] Olá! No problem. Hi everyone, I'm [Polly] and I'm a Parrot On A Post and we handle Presidents Day. Can I compare notes? Do you know if there's similar days outside the United States? My family lives in Brazil and we were trying to find more work.

[Elfie] answering I'm not sure, [Polly], but maybe we can parking lot that for now?

[Shamrock, Leprechaun] Sláinte! Hi [Elfie]. Sorry for the interruption, but I need to say something? Hey Pukie! It's Shamrock from Gnome You Bring Home for St. Patrick. We need to compare notes. You can get good intel just from being near the cabinet? My folks hide their bottles everywhere. It's insane.

[Pukie] answering Find me after the session, Shamrock. It'll be good to catch up and, yeah, let's compare notes.

[Charo, Chinchilla] Hola! Amigos! I am Charo from Chinchilla In A Naranjilla and we've just arrived for Cinco De Mayo! I need to hear about St. Patrick's! Yes! Excelente!

[Moderator] Let's try to get back to Elfie's testimonial? Is there anyone else needing help with alcohol usage in your narc problem? It sounds like Pukie, Shamrock and Charo are meeting afterwards, and let's get anyone else that needs to be in that group identified. Please raise your hand and introduce yourselves.

[Earl, Eagle] raising hand Earl from Eagle On A Needle for the 4th of July in the US. Used to be fine, but the booze is kinda getting out of hand.

[Polly] raising hand Again, I'm Polly from Parrot On A Post for Presidents Day. I should join as well.

[Sam, Shrew] raising hand Hi, Sam for Shrew That Rings True and Valentine's Day. I've got Bob for Rabbit Near An Abbot for Easter with me as well. We should join.

[Bob, Rabbit] looking confused Sam? I can see folks drinking on your day, but Easter? That doesn't sound like my holiday.

[Sam] disappointed I have seen the "bottomless mimosa," Bob. You should come.

[Yun, Fox] raising hand Kon'nichiwa ogenkidesuka! I am Yun from Vulpine Near The Shrine for Shōwa Day. May we also be invited to talk about alcohol?

[Moderator] regaining control Please everyone! Let's stay on the agenda. Let's try this. Is there anyone who hasn't raised their hand in the room?

[Elfie] raises hand Well. I didn't, but I should as well.

[Group] all raises hand.

[Moderator] resigned Well, maybe we should just talk about drinking and not narc-ing. Next session, it's alcoholics anonymous, ok?

Epilog — Art for the sake of art

CODA

Bill walked downstairs in his exercise clothes. He was ready to get in better shape; for the first time in his life, he was free for his true purpose: art for the sake of art. Or at least, he wasn't getting paid to write SQL; therefore, he replaced bullshit with nonsense and felt better somehow.

He ambled down to his first masterpiece and tried to take it all in. The artist was a 16-year-old insane maltese-*shittzu* mix bitch. She was singly named, like Cher but hairy like a mop, Dusti.

This was Bill's father's dog and he had no idea when he took the dog in of its artistic sensibilities. "Genius lies in the details but art lives in your heart," Dusti would say between bites of kibble.

Bill had wondered why Dusti had avoided the red pieces of her kibble and bits, but now seeing her work, he could appreciate her vision.

"Is this Jackson or his wife that you're reaching for, Dusti?" said Bill to a brown-tinted lupine visionary.

"Those hacks? No, de Kooning, if *he* knew what suffering meant as a bitch or maybe Still. I'm not sure. The hair is my own touch," said the canine as it continued to work on the piece.

"Well, art is fleeting, but I'd like to commemorate your work with an interpretive dance? Do you mind?" said Bill while just breathing in the aroma of very brown art.

"Of course, Bill. I appreciate the use of the space for my workshopping. You have been great for the past 700 times and I can only hope for 7,000 more," said the artist to the man.

Bill smiled at the dog and then dropped several wet Swedish washcloths over the work. He offered, “Mondrian?”

Dusti chortled, “Hah. I do not believe Piet ever ate kibble and bits.”

Bill let the dampness seep in and started to stretch. “This really is very impressive. How did you manage to work underneath the actual legs of the table? I see brown underneath the feet?”

“The master needs to keep some of her own bitchy secrets; don’t you think, Bill?” said the dog.

Bill agreed and pulled up the washcloths. The water was well penetrated into the thickly applied pigment. “Do you use a palette knife or a brush for this texture?”

“I see you haven’t ... seen my tail?” said Dusti as she displayed the brown brush she’d been using with a rightward spin.

“Oh, your tail? That’s very convenient as it’s hard to drop! Hahaha!” said Bill with smiling eyes.

Bill sprayed the enzymatic cleaner over the work and asked Siri to play background music for his dance.

He forgot his bowler hat, but he had a mop and a chair. The music started. It was, of course, EDM:

You-you-you-you-you-you

You want what? You want me

Bill’s heels took him to the left and the mop hit the beat back and forth.

You want a T-A-S-T-E

Is that too sweet on your tongue?

T-T-T-A-S-T-E

Is-is-is what? You want me

The pigment was piled and fragrant. Bill did a rightward spin
and came up with a scraper tool.

You want a T-A-S-T-E

Is that too sweet— A-S-T-E

You want a T-A-S-T-E

Dusti joined in and did her rightward spin!

[Build]

You want a T— You want a T—

You want a T— You want a T—

You want a T— You want a T—

You want a T— You want a T—

Bill was scraping up the work into a bucket; the music was
ready to drop at any moment for the finale.

[Drop]

You want a T-A-S-T-E

T-T-T-T-A-S-T-E, is that too sweet—

You want a T-A-S-T-E

T-T-T-T-A-S-T-E

Bill and Dusti mopped the floor clean together with her on the
end of a stick!

All-all-all these lights on me, feel hot right now

Red light, green light, go right now

Double rights were executed with panache!

You want a taste, but I know you want more

I'm on the floor, where you at? Where you at?

Left, right, left, right, go, make it clap

Red light, green light, go right now

Bill spun left but Dusti kept it clean and went right!

You want a T-A-S-T-E

The music stopped and Dusti was very clean. The floor was spotless and the boy and the dog sat with what they learned from art today.

“That was great, Bill. I’m not sure I learned anything at all. This was still worth doing, however,” said the fuzzy artist.

“No shit, Dusti,” said Bill, and he looked forward to seeing a new work in the morning.

