

hMail

When Mrs D. finally got connected to the Internet, at the seventh attempt, there was a bright flash and a bang. Startled, she sprang back to the centre of the room, eyeing the computer nervously. A great cloud of smoke wafted about, accompanied by a considerable amount of fizzing.

“Oh dear,” she muttered, “Must have forgotten to disable one of those option things...”

Gradually, the smoke drifted away and the screen re-appeared. Rather miraculously, everything seemed to be exactly as it should be - except for a star-shaped scorch-mark; and some small dark objects sitting on the mouse-mat. Mrs D. approached cautiously.

“Hamsters have e-capability!” announced one of the dark objects proudly.

Mrs D. peered more closely. There were indeed three rather smoky looking creatures sitting on fat bottoms in front of the screen. Three pairs of bright eyes peered up at her.

“That the skinny human?” enquired one of them, blinking.

“Look like it,” muttered another. “See if she got broccoli or drop-things.”

Mrs D. put out her hand and touched one of the three black objects rather gingerly.

“Can it be Haricot Bert?” she asked.

The thing snorted rudely. “Me not Bert.” A smoke-blackened paw waved at one of its companions “He Bert. Me Bill. That Patty.”

“Human not got long memory, eh?” sniggered the one previously known as Patty.

“Hamsters got memory,” it added.

“Hamsters got memory?” asked Bill. “Since when that happen? Me no remember!”

All three hamsters - for it was they - rolled about, wheezing with laughter.

Mrs D. waited for the humorous disturbance to die down. “You look a little off-colour to me,” she said, folding her arms and looking at them critically. “I don’t think you can possibly handle a chocolate drop...”

There was a flurry of worried activity. “We no off-colour!” exclaimed Patty, “We only suffer slightly from partial file-corruption in download!” Swiftly, the three hamsters fell to a thorough and deep cleansing of the fur. After several minutes, the three smoking, blackened objects revealed themselves in their true colours - light-brown, grey and dark-brown respectively, with pink paws, and what would have been pink noses if they had remembered.

Broccoli Bill stood firmly to attention: “hMail hamsters reporting for duty!” he announced. “Where chocolate-drop?” he demanded.

“hMail?” queried Mrs D.

“hMail, slow-witted one. Like gMail or eMail. Only hMail.”

“But surely you didn’t come through the computer?”

Bill snorted. “Human have no technology,” he muttered to his companions. “What she know?”

“Humans know nothing,” confirmed Haricot Bert, nibbling at a spider-plant which was conveniently placed next to the computer.

“No, hamsters know no humans no know nothing,” agreed Patty, looking a little confused. What with the surfing, and the information super-highway and all that, he had not had a nap in two hours, and his brain was reeling. He curled up on Mrs D’s lap for a sleep.

Haricot Bert explained. “Human switch on computer, right?”

Mrs D. nodded.

“Human click to Internet?”

She agreed.

“Hamsters arrive?”

Uh-huh.

“Then what problem? Hamsters have e-capability, hamsters download from Internet!”
It was plausible: there seemed to be little doubt that there was some kind of connection between the events. But what it was, Mrs D. could not quite fathom.

“But,” she said, looking at the three hamsters, “You’re all quite big hamsters -”

“Very large hamsters,” corrected Bill, chattering his teeth in annoyed manner.

“- very large hamsters indeed. And my computer does not have a very fast modem. So how come you download so quickly?”

Broccoli Bill looked puzzled. “What she mean? Modem? What that, Bert?”

“Never mind madam, modem,” stated Bert, dismissively. “Main thing - HamLabs™ do it again!”

Mrs D., however, persisted. Not for nothing had she been studying the mysteries of computers these past few weeks. “But you must have downloaded in about five seconds flat,” she said. “And you are quite - very - large hamsters; maybe six megabytes apiece, I’d say?” She narrowed her eyes and made a rough estimation. “Seven or eight megabytes, I’d say, yes. And that should take about forty minutes each?”

“Bites, bites?” asked Patty Perkins excitedly, waking up and scrubbing his nose until it shone. “Who got bites?” He peered around and then began to nibble at the cord for the keyboard.

Mrs D. gently prised him away from the possibility of further explosions. “No,” she explained. “A megabyte is one million bytes. A byte is one character. And that’s how files are measured.” She looked at them sceptically. “Or didn’t HamLabs™ tell you that?”

“Course they did,” said Bert airily. “What you think - HamLabs™ know nothing?”

“HamLabs™ know nothing,” agreed Broccoli Bill, muttering from the depths of a quiet snooze. “Ow!” as Bert bit him on his stubby tail. “What you do that for? Take that!” A short fight ensued, in which Mrs D. thought best not to intervene. It only lasted about ten seconds, at the end of which the two combatants considered the victory to be theirs.

“So, what you’re telling me is this,” asked Mrs D. “And correct me when I go wrong, won’t you? That HamLabs™ has found a way to use the Internet for the transportation of hamsters?”

Bert nodded eagerly.

“And that you three downloaded from - the HamLabs™ web-site?”

Bert smiled smugly. “www.hmail.com.”

“Straight into my computer, in about five seconds flat?”

“Human not so daft after all, Patty,” murmured Bert.

Mrs D. thought this one over. “And this technology is called...?” she asked.

“e-Pouching”, announced Haricot Bert proudly.

“The ‘e’ standing for ‘electronic’, I take it?”

There was a barely-concealed snigger from Patty Perkins. “e for ‘electronic’??” he mocked. “You know nothing? ‘e’ for extra, daft human!”

Broccoli Bill reared up on his hind-legs. “You the daft, Patty! ‘e’ not for ‘extra’! Where you get that idea from?”

Patty Perkins looked crestfallen. “But that what promised! ‘Patty’ they said, e mean extra. e-Pouches mean bigger ones.’ Look, my pouches much bigger!” He puffed up his cheeks to their greatest extent, which was, it has to be said, remarkable. Mrs D. stood back nervously.

But Bill was having none of it: “Same size,” he said shortly. Disconcerted, Patty engaged in a thorough examination of his ears.

Mrs D. noticed that Haricot Bert was also deeply interested in his whiskers and ears. “You too, Bert?” she asked quietly. Bert averted his eyes, but nodded unhappily.

“All dafties,” sighed Bill. “‘e’ stand for expandable. Expandable pouches. That what me told personal by expert HamLabs™ scientist, Sunflower Sid.”

Mrs D. looked seriously doubtful. “I believe that ‘e’ stands for -,” she began. Then decided not to bother. “- excellent chocolate drops downstairs. Would you like some?” There was a furious nodding of heads at this proposal, accompanied by an expectant cleaning of whiskers.

“Well, if I were to go and fetch them, and come back to find that all evidence of explosions had vanished, then I think we could fill those extra, expanding, excellent e-pouches in no time at all...”

And by the time she came back, all the scorch-marks were cleaned away, the faint smell of smoke and ashes had been replaced by the rich aroma of de-pouched carrot-tops and brussels-sprout leaves, and three fat hamsters sat innocently and expectantly beside the computer.

“‘e’ is for ‘excellent’,” agreed Patty Perkins, pouching as many drops as he could manage. “e-Pouching good for hamsters.”