

**Strictly SALSA<sup>©</sup>**

“One-two-three-and-hup! Five-nine-eight-and-hop! Come on, pick up paws!”

“Ow, you hard task-master, Gordon! Me no go so fast!”

“Faster, faster! And hop! Now, what come after eight?”

“That nine, Gordon.”

“No, no, no: nine come before eight, stupid. You remember - nine-eight-and-hop?”

“Um - must be seven, then.”

“Oh, you no help! Let me check my SALSA<sup>©</sup> - that tell me.”

“What SALSA<sup>©</sup>?”

“That new HamLabs<sup>™</sup> gizmo, dumb! Don’t you know nothing? It a Sophisticated Aid for Learning Serious Arithmetic, of course!”

“It tell you what come after eight, then?”

“Course it will. That what it for. Let see...press this button here, that button there, then twiddling this and -”

A flash of blue light and a sound like fireworks going off sent the hamsters running for cover. In the middle of the floor, the SALSA<sup>©</sup> smoked a little and then went sadly ‘phut.’

“Broke, then,” observed Broccoli Bill glumly. He chewed at a piece of carrot for comfort.

“HamLabs<sup>™</sup> no be pleased about that,” said Patty Perkins in a smug voice. He began to chant: “Gordon broke the SALSA, Gordon broke the SALSA!”

“It broke self,” claimed Gordon Bleu. He cleaned his face for a while. “Anyway, you say nothing about that, then I say nothing about that HOKEY COKEY<sup>©1</sup> what you -”

“That not me!” squeaked Patty, anxiously looking around. “That lost before I even touched it!”

“Oh,” said Haricot Bert, “so HOKEY COKEY<sup>©</sup> got lost before Patty saw it, then? How you do that, then, Patty? If was lost, you no touch it. But you touch it, so it no lost. You no fool anyone with that story!”

“Well then, Mr. Clever-Clogs,” countered Patty Perkins, “if you so smart, how you explain what happened to the BOLERO<sup>©2</sup> the other day?”

“I no explain nothing,” replied Bert stoutly, “not until Gordon Bleu admit he break SALSA.”

“And I no admit nothing until Patty owns up,” said Gordon.

The three hamsters glowered at each other for a minute, baring their teeth. At last Gordon Bleu turned away and cleaned the fur on his back, very carefully indeed. Haricot Bert scrubbed at his ears. Broccoli Bill chewed some more carrot. Patty Perkins jiggled his head in a told-you-so manner, and turned his attention to a pile of yoghurt-drops that had been brought along as emergency rations.

At length, Gordon Bleu looked up.

“We no got time for this. It already Friday. We go back to work. Let be having you, slow-coaches! Now we practise conga. Four-four-six-nine-nine-hop!”

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<sup>1</sup> HOKEY COKEY: Hamsters Only Key for Cryptography

<sup>2</sup> BOLERO: Ball for Exercising Round and Round

Patty Perkins sighed and pouched the last two yoghurt-drops. The hamsters pattered to the centre of the floor and set about it again. But after a few moments Haricot Bert sank to the floor, panting.

“This too much hard work,” he gasped. “Not good for hamsters do lot hard work. Hamsters need long rest.”

Broccoli Bill looked at Bert angrily. “You nincompoop,” he hissed. “How we expect to win contest if we no practise?”

“We never win contest anyway,” groaned Bert. “We not good enough.”

Gordon nipped Bert’s tail sharply. “You want skinny humans to walk off with contest, then? That what you want? You want for hamsters to lose face?”

“Ow,” moaned Bert, “that no fair! Leave me alone.”

“Is fair,” chittered Broccoli Bill. “Look, we brush up conga, maybe do bit more on limbo - hamsters good at limbo!”

Patty Perkins scampered up and down. “Yes, hamsters good at limbo. It all down to our lithe muscular frames.”

“That the spirit, Patty!” exclaimed Gordon Bleu. “Hamsters have natural rhythm. Hamsters have contest in bag.”

“Bag, and all the chocolate drops we can eat?” asked Haricot Bert hopefully.

“Every one,” confirmed Gordon airily.

“We get on with it, then!” squeaked Bill excitedly. “What we waiting for? We no get voted off! Pick up paws and dance! One-two-four-and...whatever!”