

The Crown — Hacks and Tagging

By: Rye Fields

When there weren't any pizzas being made, the kitchen in King Leon's became a series of hums. The ventilation system had an echo to it, amplified by the loose, rattling fans that failed to purge the smells of burnt bread and cheese. The heating rose and fell in bursts as it tried to keep the place at room temperature. When not in use, the ovens and food preparation equipment let out a low hum, as if to remind you they were still working.

When Gavin had started working at King Leon's, the kitchen noises had all blended into a mess he couldn't be bothered distinguishing. Years later, and he could tell in an instant if the slight change in ambient tone was from the pizza oven shutting down or the fridge running colder than normal.

It wasn't a skill he took pride in, despite the occasional benefit.

The mouse sighed as he heard the register up front crash. He walked over to it and confirmed the screen was solid black and not a jumble of text, then pressed a button to restart it. Less than a minute later, it was back up and running, ready to crash later. He returned to his spot in the kitchen.

His job involved far more babysitting than customer service. Like all fast food joints, King Leon's was almost entirely automated. The bulk of their orders were handled online, and even those who ordered in-store used self-serve kiosks. The manned register was a last resort, one of the many reasons its programming was second-rate and prone to crashes.

Every aspect of the cooking process was handled by machines. They measured out the dough for pizzas and rolled them to the precise thickness mandated by corporate. They added the sauce and toppings, though the latter involved a degree of randomization to add a personal touch. Cooking was automatic, as was boxing. Gavin didn't see the order himself until he was opening the box to do a quality check. As long as it wasn't burned to a crisp, it passed.

Outside the kitchen, small robots handled cleaning, denying Gavin the boredom of mopping the floors or dealing with whatever horrible atrocity had been committed in the bathroom.

A sharp tone alerted him of an incoming order. A pizza with a side of breadsticks and a drink, about as generic an order as possible. He confirmed the order with the press of a button, and the machines started up to make it.

All Gavin had to do then was keep a passive eye on the machines to make sure they didn't catch fire, and pass along any other orders that came.

On a slow day like today, with only one order at a time, the job could be painfully boring. Staring and listening and shaking his head to make sure he hadn't zoned out. It was marginally better than peak hours, when a tidal wave of orders would leave him

rushing around the kitchen to make sure everything was actually made. They were the only times he really had to deal with customers, far too many of whom were eager to personally blame him for the slow prep times. It didn't matter that he was at the mercy of the machines; yelling at a pizza maker didn't give them the same satisfaction.

Gavin checked on the order's progress. The pizza's toppings were still being added, and the breadsticks were on hold so that they'd finish at the same time as the pizza. The drink would be last. Two seconds of active work and he was back to being bored again.

Unfortunately, looking around the kitchen didn't offer any better entertainment. The various automated machines took up most of the room, crammed into whatever space had been available when they were installed. The franchise owner hadn't invested in a full remodel of the kitchen in years, and the employees were left to suffer for it. Cabinets and shelves for ingredients were so spread out that nothing was convenient to get to.

Being in the kitchen was the only time Gavin was ever thankful for being small. Ethan—the big gator who worked the overnight shift—had to hold his tail close to his body whenever he slid past the pizza maker on his way from the front to the back. He still tended to bump into everything, and had a nasty scar on his tail from backing into an overheating machine.

A two-foot-tall hologram of a lion appeared on a nearby counter. Their fur was golden brown, and they wore royal robes and a crown. "Keep up the good work my loyal artisans!" Gavin jolted back. The motivational holograms of the King Leon's mascot never failed to startle him. "Your diligence keeps my kingdom happy and fed!" The mascot bowed before flickering off.

Gavin thought of how some exec in the distant corporate headquarters had probably received a sizable bonus for suggesting King Leon holograms be installed in every kitchen to motivate the workers. He regretted not knowing who exactly to curse.

"I'm doing this for the paycheck, not to keep people fed," Gavin mumbled. He'd found the buzzwords and glorification of his job amusing at first, but now it just annoyed him. It all meant jack shit if he was still being paid the bare minimum to survive and treated like a pariah whenever he called out sick. Even the mascot made him scowl. Despite being portrayed as constantly scarfing down whole pizzas along with everything else on the menu, they were fit and trim, an athlete in the guise of a gluttonous king. That kind of diet was one of the reasons he was still chubby. No one ever slimmed down working at King Leon's.

Realistically, the mascot should've been at least *sort* of fat. He had been, in the century-old ads he'd stumbled across once. They'd put a lot of emphasis on him being jolly and sending his knights to deliver pizzas to the masses. Then he'd been revamped into a pin-up model who did more eating than giving. Maybe it was Gavin's turn to provide marketing advice.

Diane had gone home a half-hour before and Ethan wouldn't be there for another hour, leaving Gavin alone. He hurried out of the kitchen and into the break room, where he retrieved his bag from his locker. He sat cross-legged on the floor and pulled out a modified respirator mask and a rolled-up keyboard computer. Both were booted up, with the computer connecting to the holographic screen of the mask.

Gavin's greatest passions in life were art and hacking. Both had begun as hobbies when he was young, and gradually escalated as the years progressed. His art had gone from rough doodles on his tablet to detailed sketches and paintings. He'd jumped to tagging on a dare, and it'd quickly become a favorite.

His aunts had given him programming games growing up, which had led him to jailbreak random electronics around his house. His parents hadn't appreciated him reprogramming the fridge's ice-maker to create giant cubes or adding games to the oven. It wasn't long before he found ways to get past website security and advance his fun to the next level.

After high school, Gavin had found out how to blend art and hacking into public stunts. To tens of thousands online, he was known only as Netsqueak, a mysterious hacker infamous for prominent works of graffiti and flamboyant videos. He could proudly claim he was the most prominent hacker to ever come from the city of Grandview, and likely one of their better artists.

Gavin had snuck into the system of King Leon's months before, and still had access. All he'd done was check private reviews of himself and his coworkers, and tweak a few bad reviews left by asshole customers. Nothing that tested his skills.

The master model for the King Leon hologram lacked protection, much to Gavin's relief. He had no doubt he'd have been able to force his way past it, but he didn't have the time to fuck around in the system for too long. Every holographic advertisement and motivational display in the company maintained a net connection to the main system so they could be updated en masse. Usually, that meant changes to the mascot's clothing or voice lines, personalizing the hologram to the time of day. Each individual hologram kept a copy of the King Leon model, which it regularly uploaded from a district model, which was regularly uploaded from a region model, which was regularly uploaded from the master model.

It was a pretty chain an exec could show off in a presentation to prove the company valued efficiency, while in reality it only added unnecessary steps and weakened security. Oblivious shareholders would clap and nod in approval. Company stock would go up a point. Gavin doubted anyone had considered how easy it would be for such a system to be messed with by a bored or malicious hacker.

Gavin found the model file for the district he was in and turned off its automatic update feature. Then he opened it. He'd dabbled with modeling for his videos and knew how to edit models. The first thing he did was expand the lion's waistline, giving them a cartoonish ball gut to match their gluttony. He expanded the rest of the model so their

middle didn't stand out as much. After a few minutes of adjusting sliders and snickering at his work, he managed to transform the fit lion into a rotund royal. Most of the enhanced model's animations still worked, though there was a bit of clipping. It didn't need to be perfect, just funny.

Silly corporate vandalism was a core part of Gavin's brand as Netsqueak. It earned him plenty of positive attention while limiting public outcry. There was less pressure to figure out his real identity and arrest him. A stunt involving drawing a dick in lights on the side of a building had gotten him a bounty, but it was so small and insignificant he couldn't imagine anyone bothering with it. He didn't even think Grandview was big enough to have bounty hunters who did anything aside from hunt bail jumpers.

For a quick edit, Gavin was happy with the result. Now King Leon actually looked like a lion who could down entire pizzas in seconds. Finally, truth in advertising.

Gavin saved the file and watched as every King Leon's holographic program in the district updated its own accordingly. He then began adding security of his own, protecting the district's model files with layers of passwords so his changes couldn't be reversed on a whim. It was security the company should've had in the first place—not that it'd have stopped him for long.

While changing the King Leon model company-wide would've been fun, it'd also have been noticed instantly. His encryption wouldn't hold up against the full resources of a major corporation, and his work would be undone within hours. They wouldn't prioritize the franchises and ads of a small city on the edge of civilization. It could very well be weeks before they bothered dealing with it.

Gavin backed out of the system and shut off his mask and computer, returning them first to the bag and then to his locker. He returned to the kitchen in time to confirm the order had been finished and moved it to a warming rack to await pick-up. No new orders had come in while he was gone, and the kitchen had reverted to its usual standby of hums.

He went up front to the counter and checked in on the dining room. Bright lights illuminated empty booths. A quiet, jaunty tune played over the radio, a low effort attempt to provide a medieval atmosphere. He didn't know why they even bothered, as the rest of the decor was all modern. The only other hint of a theme was the large hologram of King Leon sitting happily on his throne at the back of the room.

The mascot now filled his throne, his sides clipping a bit into the arms. His cheerful demeanor hadn't changed at all, and the king appeared rather pleased with his new size.

The same portly, jolly lion would now be sitting in every King Leon's franchise in the city, starring in every outdoor advertisement, and cheering on a multitude of very confused employees. Gavin could only imagine the bewildered looks the sudden change was getting. People might think they'd witnessed the debut of a new ad campaign or

rebranding. He couldn't wait to see the ads himself, and the reactions.

With his mood mildly improved, Gavin went back to watching the order screen. It was almost an hour later when a work email buzzed his phone. The email mentioned that an unexpected glitch had switched the hologram model of King Leon with that of another mascot named Prince Don, who was part of an upcoming marketing campaign being worked on. It reassured employees the model would be fixed in due time, and to politely explain to concerned customers it was simply a glitch and not to worry. If any reporters or news outlets called asking questions about the situation, they were to be redirected immediately to a corporate PR number.

Gavin snorted. A whole hour and the best excuse they could come up with for their mascot model getting hijacked was to claim it was a glitch. They'd likely workshop it for a bit longer before making a public statement about the situation, but it was already off to a bad start. It'd sound even more ridiculous once he released a Netsqueak video gloating about the prank and exposing their lie.

He started thinking of the jokes he'd include in the video. Maybe something about the kingdom needing to expand or "heavy is the gut that rests upon the throne". As long as it got people laughing at King Leon's expense he'd be happy.

Ethan arrived for the overnight shift a few minutes later. The hefty gator stared at the dining room's new and improved King Leon hologram. "Oh, that's what the email was about."

"Our liege got a bigger upgrade than usual," Gavin smirked.

"Are they all like that?"

"Yeah, even the ones in back." The kitchen hologram activated, proclaiming the benefits of a quiet workplace and how excess chatter could lead to accidents and missed orders. In the past, its idea of excess chatter had included greeting customers, relaying orders to coworkers, and belching.

"Weird," Ethan said. Gavin backed against the counter as the gator passed through the kitchen, holding his tail up. The only thing he bumped into was the station with the King Leon hologram, which had reactivated to greet him to his shift. Everyone groaned when that personal touch had been added. Ethan returned shortly from the break room after putting away his things and changing into his work uniform.

"Nothing really to pass along, aside from the model," Gavin said, gesturing towards the large hologram in the dining room. "Drink machine was sputtering a while ago, but I think it's fine now."

"Cool."

"Alright, I'm out. Have a good night."

"You too."

Gavin snatched his bag and squeezed past Ethan as the gator settled into his quiet shift. The King Leon hologram popped up. "Goodbye, Gavin. The kingdom will await your return."

He shuddered. His silly edit to the model wasn't enough to make him forget how much he hated his job. At least he'd be having fun elsewhere that night.

Gavin tapped his key on the door to his apartment and heard the lock scrape open. It'd been making the noise for a month, but maintenance considered it a low priority and had blown him off. They'd done the same thing when his light had shorted out and when his toilet seat had come off, so he doubted they had the budget to treat anything short of burst pipes or a fire as a priority.

He stepped into his apartment and closed the door behind him. It was just a room, really. His bed was at the far end, below a large, poorly insulated window. A blackout curtain protected him from the bright lights of the holographic ad projected onto the side of the building most nights. To his left was a mini-fridge, the microwave, and a desk, all built-in. The bathroom was to his right, little more than a compartment packed tight with a shower, sink, and toilet. Everything was painted eggshell white. The only color came from his sheets and the few posters he'd hung on the walls.

The capsule apartment was far from ideal, but Gavin couldn't afford anything better, not with how much he spent on equipment for hacking and art. A studio apartment wouldn't be much larger, and a one-bedroom unit was beyond him, even in the worst neighborhoods of Grandview. He needed privacy for his hobbies, so finding a roommate was out of the question. He didn't need more space, anyway.

Gavin dropped his bag on the cushioned bench next to his bed and retrieved his gear. He'd figured out an idea for his art piece that night a few days ago, but his prank against King Leon's had shifted his mood. He wanted the art to connect to it in some way so people would know he was responsible. It'd also make the prank seem premeditated rather than a whim, and deter authorities from suspecting a King Leon's employee was involved. Instead, it'd be another Netsqueak original, and they'd continue being oblivious to his true identity.

He sketched out a few ideas on his tablet while checking the net for responses to his prank. People online generally suspected it was a hack, despite the official corporate comments of it being a glitch. His name wasn't being tossed around yet. They were more interested in saving recordings of the altered ads than figuring out who was behind them. Once he officially took credit their tune would change, and the praise would flow in.

Completing the design took two hours. It wasn't anything groundbreaking, just a repurposing of concepts he'd done before. Every work didn't need to be a masterpiece. Sometimes he simply needed to get out content to remind people of his existence and maintain his brand. The prank would get more attention, anyway.

Once he'd saved the design he got ready to head out. He stuck to dark pants and

a hoodie, something that could give him a hint of anonymity without making him stand out as overly suspicious. Being unrecognizable didn't mean jack shit if the first cop who spotted him pulled him over immediately. His respirator mask wasn't very subtle, but they were popular right now and he liked the look too much to give it up. The tech he'd outfitted it with would be invaluable if things went to hell, anyway.

A chill ran up Gavin's tail as he went outside. Grandview was always cold at night. His mask stopped his breath from becoming a puff of white and kept half his face warm.

Ads, neon signs, and bright storefronts lit up the night. The area of Grandview Gavin lived in never seemed to go to sleep. Brief lulls in activity occurred in the early morning hours, when the bars and smaller retail stores closed. There were still twenty-four-hour places to eat, arcades that blared noise no matter how few games were being played, and the global retailers who only shut their doors during disasters.

The people on the street were a mix of drunk, exhausted, and excited. Their conversations blended with the noise of traffic and automated greeters calling from stores. Someone was complaining about a cover charge. A restaurant advertised its newest menu item. Sirens blared as a cop car blew past. Gavin's ears twitched as he made sense of it all.

He'd lived in Grandview all his life, and had an apathetic relationship with the city. It'd given him friends but stuck him in a job practically designed to go nowhere. The anonymous fame he'd built made him proud, but he felt like a big fish in a small pond. His reputation didn't extend far beyond the city's borders. It certainly didn't reach Birchwater, up north. He was never sure he wanted to be *that* well known, though. Building a wider audience meant pulling off larger stunts, which would inevitably get him attention he didn't want, the kind that could land him in prison. But at the same time, the potential praise was alluring.

A crowd had formed further ahead, slowing the flow of foot traffic as it grew. They were all looking across the street at a giant holographic ad for King Leon's pizza. King Leon—in all his rotund glory—was slaying a massive dragon made of pizza. The armor he wore was distorted and clipping non-stop, having been designed with his normal, leaner model in mind. To the creator's credit, it held up admirably considering the circumstances, its flaws only adding to the absurdity of the scene. Once the dragon was slain, King Leon chomped down on a slice and cheerfully declared that nothing worked up an appetite like a hard day's work.

People were laughing, their phones held up to take pictures and record the altered ad. Gavin grinned behind his mask. He rarely got to see the reactions to his work up close. Online posts were nice, but they were nothing compared to hearing the laughter and knowing everyone there would be telling friends about the prank.

Gavin silently basked in his success before continuing onward. A part of him wanted to boldly take credit for the prank on the spot and be showered in praise. The adoration wouldn't be worth the consequences, though. A few high fives before the

police booked him for hacking and digital vandalism, putting an end to the short, glorious career of Netsqueak. If someone wanted to catch him, they were going to have to work for it.

Gavin left the main avenue and walked down increasingly quieter sidestreets. The lights and people grew less omnipresent, while the ads remained, cycling through their messages over and over. He could hear the distant sounds of the highway.

After messing with King Leon, he'd decided to stick to the theme. He'd spray paint a whole scene on an overpass depicting a wedge of cheese with a crown and scepter sitting on a throne. Behind it would be a banner with the stylized mouse face, the closest thing he had to a logo. The cheese and face would make the piece instantly recognizable as one of his. The royal imagery likely wouldn't stand out until he also revealed he was responsible for changing the King Leon model.

Gavin reached a small park bordering the highway within sight of the overpass. The park offered little in the way of comfort. A few sickly trees with large patches of dried-out pine needles were surrounded by dirt and dead grass. The concrete path winding through the park was cracked and overgrown with weeds. The lone garbage can was overflowing, and the benches were covered in graffiti. The highway barriers weren't enough to disguise the noise from passing vehicles.

It was deserted, with few windows facing from neighboring buildings. He'd scouted it out a few weeks back and added it to his dwindling list of safe places to work.

Gavin set his bag on the ground and unzipped it. "Activate drones," he said, quietly. A confirmation message flashed on the projected viewscreen of his respirator mask.

A series of whirs echoed out from his bag, and four small, spherical drones hovered out. They were about as simple as drones could get, capable of following automated instructions as long as they didn't get more complex than "go here" or "initiate a program". They were cheap and fragile, but he needed them to be disposable in case the cops interrupted his work and he had to leave them behind.

"Start draw program."

The drones raced off. They followed the path at first, before turning off it and reaching the edge of the park. They dipped above a low fence and continued out of sight toward the overpass. Gavin brought up a camera view of the lead drone so he could keep an eye on their progress. They handled well in open environments, but were easily disrupted by large obstacles. Fortunately, there was no debris in their way, and they reached the overpass without incident.

Upon arriving, the four drones split up and started drawing in yellow spray paint. They painted with absolute precision, recreating every flourish and flaw in the design Gavin had programmed into them. They weren't limited by height like Gavin was, nor would they tire out while working on the large design. They were harder to spot, too.

Using the drones didn't have the same feel as painting in person did, but caution

was the only reason he wasn't in jail.

Gavin had only been arrested once, well before he'd adopted the Netsqueak moniker. He'd just been another bored teen tagging walls with mouse faces and the occasional cheese. He'd gotten cocky and tried to finish up before the cops arrived. A minute earlier and he might have gotten away. Instead, he was tossed to the floor, tossed in a patrol car, and tossed in a cell. He'd spent a lot of time getting thrown that day.

As a minor and a first offender he'd gotten off light with community service and an uncomfortable talk from his parents. After that, he'd vowed to be more careful.

The last drone finished painting. Gavin had it back up so he could get a better view of the completed work. It was far from his best piece, but he'd have no trouble talking up the symbolism and boosting his views.

Flashing lights made Gavin wince. A cop car had stopped right before the overpass. A police officer exited the car and released a small drone that shone a spotlight on Gavin's work.

"Shit timing," Gavin muttered. He'd wanted to get some panoramic views of his creation, but sticking around wasn't an option. If he recalled the drones they'd be followed, and he couldn't outrun a police drone. His drones weren't smart enough to disperse and hide, and losing four at once would sour the evening. He had to at least try to save them.

Gavin quickly designated the cop as a new surface and ordered his drones to spray them. The cop took a step back as the drones rushed over and swarmed him. They circled and sprayed him, dutifully attempting to cover every inch of the new surface with paint. The cop stumbled away from the barrage and pulled out his stun baton, which he swung wildly. The police drone hovered nearby, providing light and a monotonous warning of a crime in progress but little in the way of aid.

Gavin started searching for nearby signals until he pinpointed the one coming from the police drone. He couldn't take control of it on the fly, but he could still overwhelm it. He targeted the signal with hundreds of generic commands, auto-repeated faster and faster. The police drone was forced to address and report every single access attempt. None of them had any chance of getting through, but the drone couldn't tell the difference between a legitimate attack and pure spam.

Suddenly the police drone dimmed and fell, bouncing heavily on the ground. Gavin cackled. He'd never tried such an attack on a police drone before, and could barely believe it'd worked. The Department would be having a furious talk with their equipment provider after tonight.

The cop hadn't had any luck against the spray paint drones. He was waving the stun baton and shielding his face with his arm. Red lines crisscrossed his uniform and the ground.

Gavin ordered the drones to return to him one by one, leaving the cop swinging

at nothing. The cop looked over at his fallen drone and mouthed a curse. He didn't pursue.

Gavin crouched down and opened his bag. "Deactivate drones." The drones returned to the bag, which he quickly shut and tossed over his shoulder. He left the park at a brisk pace so he wouldn't look suspicious. He took as many turns as he could, his ears alert for any noise that resembled sirens. Fifteen minutes later he finally relaxed.

Aside from the unexpected interference, Gavin's late-night adventure had gone smoothly. His art was in place, his equipment was safe, and he wasn't in cuffs. He could ask for little else.

Out of curiosity, he tuned into the police dispatch frequency.

"Damn thing's bricked!" someone growled.

"Do you need backup, Turner?"

"No! Fuck these fumes, I can barely see straight."

"I can be there in five."

"I don't need backup, damn it! I scared the fuckers off already. Just a bunch of kids and their paint drones."

Gavin snorted. Of course the cop would lie to cover up their embarrassment. He couldn't let anyone know he'd been spooked by a few drones barely capable of anything more than painting. The official report would probably mention a whole gang who went crying off into the night, never to mess around in the area again. Bodycam footage would magically disappear, and any footage from the police drone would be deemed incomplete.

The lie would fall apart if Gavin included footage of the incident in his next video, though. Since he didn't get many good shots of the graffiti itself, tagging the officer would make for nice filler, and increase his views as well. He could already imagine backing the shots with some fast-paced music, maybe a few split-screen segments to show the painting from every drone's view. He'd have to come up with a witty name to give the tagged officer; they were as much a Netsqueak original as anything else he'd done that night.

The rush of tagging the overpass and dealing with the cop was swiftly fading. He stopped worrying about sirens or strangers glancing at him for too long. The danger of the job was over, so he could silently revel in his success and plan his next move.

Hacking and art weren't Gavin's only ways to escape the tedious life he'd fallen into, but nothing made him happier. The popularity and praise fueled him and let him feel like there was something better in his future. He even craved the criticism, whether he used it to improve his work or to laugh at those who believed he was nothing but a flashy vandal. Gavin was just a fast-food employee who played a lot of video games in his downtime. Netsqueak let him be someone with a hint of importance, someone memorable outside of local arcades.

Netsqueak passed the fluctuating crowd still watching the King Leon's ad. None

had even the slightest clue the perpetrator was a few feet away, listening in on their laughter. They could guess his identity all they wanted, he was too good to be caught.