

# There'd Be No More Students

"That Pampered Princess Plastic Palace Playset is as good as mine already."

Mayoki beamed her way back down to Chastasia Onideran. She wished Samara was there to watch her do the bees knees in revenge for interrupting her prophecy booth, but she was still glad how punished she was. She'd have to remember to do it in front of her and make sure she cried. Then she played the air kazoo. She played the whole "Ode to that bimbo's misery" when she finished the beam.

Even though nobody, psychic or otherwise, could see her face through the exhaust fumes, Chastasia could sure see Mayoki on her way over. "Well? Has she boarded a rocket yet?"

"The grubby furball is on her way. Every reason she had for sticking around are gone, including that overgrown Yugoslavic mutt and any goodwill Dame Nosey-go-Pokey."

It was all good for the getting now. For some reason, though, no hulking plastic squalor materialized before her. What showed up was the phrase, "anything else?"

Where was a wheelbarrow when you needed it? At first, Mayoki had thought she'd need one to carry her reward. Now she thought it would come in handy in ramming the thing right into Chastasia's groin.

"Anything else? That's what I should be asking you after all that hard work I did." She got too busy tallying up the value of her own "services" to notice Chastasia was brewing up a volcanic eruption of her own.

"*Hard work!* Forgive my spontaneous assumptions, but if I didn't know better, I would say that grubby furball is not on her way, and whatever motivations she's had for it - because that's all they are, motivations, not movements - you have done nothing to contribute to."

All Mayoki's squalor dreams shattered. What was left was an active grenade.

"Why you stinkyhead, I ought to contribute to you staying in this yuckpit for the rest of her life."

A whole hot spring of indignity swelled beneath Chastasia's bosom. "Of all the insolent *nabbagufabbers* I have ever *hingleddeeforum* in my *havelthum*, this conquers the comberthrombus. You are an *abloblamblithbloth* little *feirfim*, and you *glithsonoglothum* all the time. You think you're so mmfumnimfumfumphuth, and yet you *jorbabeeboul* from here to yon."

"...Huh???"

The rest of the stuff Chastasia said was equally contorted and meaningless. It looked like she was suddenly faking a mouth disorder so she could weasel out of paying. There was only one way to fix her: find the most valuable thing in the room and smash it. This of course was impossible when the most valuable thing was a wad of used sardine guts.

But as she looked around, she noticed something even worse: an obvious drop in the number of sardine guts. And kibble guts. And the other kinds of things that wound up around here. There were these glittery mist clusters instead, hiding not just the compost but even some of those amorphous spirits waiting to get wrapped up in mucus and leave this nasty place. It sounded different, too. The usual ascending and descending drumrolls hid behind an unmistakable "Naa naa na Naa naa." The most obvious thing of all struck Mayoki when she took a nice healthy sniff. Fresh air. Not fish air.

"Smellara, or whatever your name is, I know you're in here!" Around any one of these lump hills, she could be bee's kneeing again, laughing through her kneecaps. "You won't get away with it this time, I'll bury you here!" She stormed around the place, long far away from Chastasia, but there was too much fog in the way. Even when Mayoki lunged through those, swiping nails and snapping her jaws, the only thing she attacked was empty space.

If her rival had followed her into her meditation session again, there'd be no finding her (much less giving her what for) with all the smog in the way. With all that aimless swinging she ran out of enough anger to conclude that. She also concluded she could lay on a lot more hurt if she went back to Earth and stoned the 5-foot human weasel there, especially if she were still in a trance.

She made up her mind. She spun around three times and recited the magic words, "Peepod juice, Peepod juice, Peepod juice," and she took off towards the esophagus.

On her way out, she heard the last words of Chastasia, which were definitely not scrambled. "You have a week before this offer expires." So she was angry again, but she had to deal with Samara first.

While she'd been meditating, a troupe of Duncaners, staff and student alike, had on Saturn's orders surrounded and primed her while she sat on a cushy purple sofa with silk golden tassels. There were a couple of guys polishing her nails, a girl brushing her hair, two hairy shirtless saffers fanning her with palm leaves, and another simp polishing her shoes. This was in the teacher's lounge, where pictures hung on the wall showing humans beating animals at swordfights, shootouts, and spelling bees.

"Just look at all this effort we're putting into her welfare," said the kid doing her shoes. "She's sure to be in a magnificent mood when she comes back around."

Her eyes shot open, and she kicked the shoe boy out of the way. "SMELLARA! Where is that odious tape worm!? I want her nose good and smashed up under my foot, and I want it NOW!"

Samara wasn't in the lounge. She wasn't anywhere out in the hall, either. And she definitely wasn't in Saturn's office. The head honcho was there, though. And Mayoki decided if she didn't fix the problem, she'd end up with a shoe fossil in one of those colossal butt boulders.

"We have a problem."

Saturn stopped clipping her nails and jerked her haunted whitening face up at Mayoki. "What's wrong? Does an alien takeover await us in the near future?"

"Maybe. I don't know, but you know why? That other psychic, the one that gets things wrong, she broke into my future-at-looking and sprayed smoke all over the place."

"You mean Miss Tamsen?" All the panic she was about to fireworks lost its fizz, as her face got all its color back. "Aah, she has no power. Father Sniffagl saw to it. She is locked by herself in a classroom, memorizing the creed you authored. Her celestial visitations have too much sin-sore smoke themselves for her to--"

"Well she blew some of that smoke my way," insisted Mayoki.

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible," taught Saturn. "The sin-sore smokes only conceal the secret truths from those who wrought them. Should they cloud your foresight, foresound, foresmell, and other fores, then they came from a transgression you brought about."

Mayoki was too stunned to argue. The idea that she might have committed some kind of wrongdoing was to her more alien than any talking animal.

"Not to worry, the Great Cosmic Wonder dismisses them whenever we confess and repent. Now, let's see... Which commandment might you have... er, well, bent in some way?"

According to the two shirtless grown men, it was the sin of bullcrapping. They barged in as bare-hairy-chested as ever, competing with one another as to warn Saturn the louder, "Whatever this glorified Devilspawn told you, she's making it up, now can I just go back to clapping erasers/mopping the floor/anything that doesn't involve giving this tazmaniac more treatment than she deserves?"

According next to Saturn, it was the sin of smokin' red hot sauciness. On the sight of their out-of-shape man boobies, Her eyes boinked off her glasses to ping-pong out their sockets until she grabbed a folder out of a filing cabinet and dumped all the papers out so she could tape it around her head as a blindfold.

"For Wonder's sake, cover your innocence before you corrupt this girl's sensibilities."

They took that as permission to drop the whole palm leaf business, and walked out of the office, free of their duties and shirts.

"Are you covered?" She took off the folder. "Oh, they're gone. That proves it. You set eyes on a precious secret that was not yours to share."

"What? I didn't tell them to take their shirts off, they did that while I was prophesying."

"Nevertheless, you have lost your innocence, and you must confess to Father Hikeyleg to regain it. Only then shall you purge your visage of censorious weather. I shall show you the direction."

Saturn steered Mayoki out of her office and down the hall, and Mayoki found herself plotting some tasty grilled blackmail. While the old fool had that paper over her face, she fished out a handful of nails out of the trash can. No one questioned Mayoki's behavior and got away with it. The trick now was finding the perfect place to meditate and exact some scrumptious tidbits from Saturn's afterlife.

So long as those idiotic clouds didn't get in the way.

Saturn boomphed some kid out of the way mid-confession. "Sorry, Evanrood, but Ms. Culbara's absolution is more important than yours." Pathetic little Evanrood tried to finish up his confession while failing to circumvent Saturn's wrecking ball badonks until they were both out of the bathroom.

Now, if only that weirdo in the other stall weren't there, she might have some peace and privacy. Instead, whoever was in there sniffed like in front of a cake. "Smell that? One of Mama's, all right. You sure? Haven't seen her down before. *Shush*, she'll hear."

"Who the fink are you?" There was a mail slot. When she peeked through it, she saw the floating disembodied head of Colonel Sanders. "I'm supposed to tell you I did something rotten and act like I'm all sorry about it. So let's get this stupid thing over with so I can go back to..." The smell finally made it down her nose. No mistaking it: Wet hairball.

She backed away into the sink. "Scared of us?" asked Sanders. She answered with a running air-kick into the door, which fell off its hinges and caused the Sanders head to collapse right on top of it. There were three freaked out shorties stacked on top of each - a dog, a cat, and a mouse. The important part that turned Mayoki's scalp into a stovetop was all the pink princessy accessories they were wearing, tagged with pictures of her own face crossed out in red marker.

"SCHOOL MAMA!" She snatched the mouse by the neck and kicked the cat into the dog into the toilet.

"Stop, we're your family!" They pleaded, but Mayoki was already out the door with the mouse in full view of everyone in the hallway. She never made it to Saturn's office. Another student pulled the alarm and the whole school went on lockdown, with everybody trampling one another trying to get away from the scary animal that might pregify anyone at any moment.

At the end of the period, The mouse wound up in a peanut butter jar so they could save its interrogation for later. They didn't poke airholes in it, but all that peanut butter was still there, so, go figure I guess. Saturn lay in the nurse's office over the scandal, as the skirt-wearing mouse they captured appeared to be a dude. And Mayoki did in fact try to snoop around the principal's afterlife, but all she got were a bunch of clouds chanting "Naa naa na Naa na" ather, so she was steamed. That forced her to believe in the whole confession thing, but with yet another fake priest in the row, confession was on the the downest lock at all. No one could go to confession. Not nobody, not nohow.

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All the same, Saturn had a bounty out for an engraved confession from her rival principals, and secured a warrant for their presence at the Last Breath Negotiation Center. The place was basically an avant-garde courtroom with a triangular table in the center, and instead of a jury, you had a bunch of security gaurds armed with slingshots, ready to fire corks into the mouths of anyone whose testimony went on too long. Some of these guards were neogs, much to Saturn's suspicion. Thankfully, the atmosphere was unsexy enough that she didn't have to worry about any humans getting the preggies.

"I am a man of the battlefield," proclaimed the principal of the military school, Cmdr. Conroy Splitsvelcro. "No one may exit the building until he has truly drawn his last breath."

"I concur," concurred Gonzalez. "That way, I can eliminate him from the fittest survivor inventory. Her, too." She turned around and looked at the security circle. "Are any females among you?"

"Silence!" Saturn picked up a gavel and dented the table with it. That startled the other two, so they listened up. "I call this meeting to order." She held up the peanut butter jar. "I have proof that one of you has been dispatching mashers. I will say at the outset, I will not have you starting a pregademic in my district. We will not foster mutants."

She thrust the jar forward whenever she said, "not." No matter how much she exhibited the stupid thing, all they saw was a jar of peanut butter.

At first, Gonzalez let loose a theatrical, unladylike laugh. Then all that laughter slid down into stone cold seriousness. "I thought for a moment I'd mistakenly set foot in a stand-up theater. Of course, I see there is no stage, no extra seating, and stand-up comedy isn't funny."

"A second generation of Duncaners?" bellowed Splitsvelcro. "Now that is an unmartial prospect if ever there was one. No Roderican of mine will be lily-livered enough to wear lacey silk gloves. If I were to dispatch for any reason, it would be to chop off-"

"Might I remind you, as indeed I will, that Duncan's Attaboys have won every gang fight against Diversity's Guts? At least, the ones I have allowed them to fight."

Splitsvelcro said something true: "So have Roderic's 'Sayanora Suckas.' And so have the Prison Pear Daycare's 'No Country for Newborn Weenies.' The Guts are hardly a means to measure combative sturdiness."

This time, Gonzalez chipped the table with the gavel. She'd sneaked it away from Saturn at some point during the dispute. "The Guts are not officially affiliated with Damselwood Diversity Junior University. Let's not wander from the peanut butter incident."

To Saturn's surprise and annoyance, she'd also snatched the jar. Then she unscrewed it. The blue shriveling rat within took such a deep breath that the guards all dropped their weapons and flailed at the air that had been stolen from them. Saturn slid out of her chair like a jellyfish. She crept around as if looking for stray air crumbs on the ground. Then you had Splitsvelcro, making the biggest show of all, mouthing things like "You shall not usurp my respiratory turf!" then knocking over his chair to claw his way towards peanut butter boy. He had his hands up in the strangle position when Gonzalez shoved him away with her foot. "Don't be a clown."

The rat exhaled, and everybody got their air back. "You can't put people in peanut butter like that," he gasped. "It's inhumane."

Humane treatment was not a concept that interested any principal present. Gonzalez picked up the hyperventilating sap by his pretty princess neckline. Everyone got back up and started breathing again, so there was enough air to carry her words all the way to their ears.

"Allow me to spell out a few calculations. Mouse spouse plus human hubby equals vomit-inducing pile of organic matter that would live for six seconds before someone decided to shoot it for its abominable properties."

While the mouse did its best to picket the idea of subjecting anyone's offspring to an impromptu firing squad, Gonzalez noticed, with all the air back, how much it smelled like a cat. "It must have been down a feline throat already. I pity it."

Having made her point, she tossed the poor guy back into the jar and screwed on the lid.

Splitsvelcro made as big a show of getting his breath back as he did "losing it." He swallowed bucket upon bucket of air, though he didn't boghart enough of it to asphyxiate the rest of the room, like the mouse.

"Speaking... pant... of shoot," he gasped, "praise be... heh-HUH-heh-HUH-heh... to firearms, and woe to those who ... huff-a-puffa... take their chances with the prowlers."

Saturn, panting just as ferociously, climbed back up her chair. "I... gasp... concur. More weapons would mean more ways of hee-AH-hur-HAH-hoowa... keeping your cadets out of my school."

This chance to one-up Splitsvelcro might never brighten Gonzalez's door again. "She makes a crucial point." She rattled the mouse in the jar. "This young Roderican has much to learn about carrying out covert operations."

"What? A Roderican? Wearing ninny pink wusswear? Utter sacrilege!"

He was gonna get up and go over and grab that jar right out of that stuffy dame's clutches, and it even got the guards alerted and aiming their corks right at his crotch. That would have been a regular Roman dynasty falling right there. But just when things were spicing up, the old army lug wussed out at the last minute and sat back down. Looks like someone's groin ain't as fortified as he thinks.

"Er... well, all levity aside, I thought he was one of yours. Mine wouldn't fail his mission so quickly. On the other hand, I have reports (he forgot to credit who told him, blabbering old crusty ingrate, unless of course he had a bunch of evil twins scamperig around so they could report all that hub-bub) of two of your

whippersnappers - the doughty one and the big-eared one - wreaking havoc that they leave for others to sweep up, and with no end goal in sight."

Gonzalez sniffed. "It does sound like the variety of antisocial wackiness my student body incites. Everyone has survived so far. It may be time to raise the bar a foot or two; to place them in a location less survivable than school."

"What about my school?" whined Saturn before she realized that it might sound like a suggestion. Duncan sure would be a lot less survivable with a bunch of guns pointing around. "No... don't send your riff-raff to my school. I swear, I shall shoot them."

"A hearty challenge if ever there was one," raved Splitsvelcro. He turned to Gonzalez. "What you said sounds vague enough to be the ugwan. I hear (again, from whom, he didn't thank) they have marching men down there with rifles. Bullets bounce off the wall. Whose head they end up in is a sheer roll of the dice."

Saturn put her finger up. "Should the Great Cosmic Wonder have Their say, they would pelt your scoundrel's heads and keep them out of our toilets."

Saturn's newfound preoccupation with firearms sounded promising to both of her rivals. All that risk of getting shot would be a great way to measure how fit and sturdy the kids were. Now that they were talking about toilets, though, that put Gonzalez on a different train of thought. She unscrewed the lid and everybody got déjà blue all over again.

When he blew all the air back into the room, Gonzalez held the lid just cracked enough to stop him from squeezing out. "Stay put, and I'll let you breathe for the next thirty minutes. Now, all three of us are aware that you belong not to Diversity, Roderic, nor Duncan. I want to know with whom you are affiliated. Come, now, need I put the lid back on lest the peanut butter within lose its freshness?"

She said this because he jammed his nose between the weency sliver of space she afforded him, but everybody in the room could tell any foodstuff that had a sewer rat rolling around in it was anything but fresh.

"I beg you don't. For Mama's sake, if I have to hold any more breaths my chewey inner void will cave in."

"Mama!" Saturn lurched from her chair and disregarded the corks suddenly aimed her way. "I knew there was a ringleader all along." She yanked the jar, lid and all, out of Gonzalez's hands, unfettered by the projectiles bouncing off her hind end. "Speak, you utter miscreant."

It wasn't long before all the corks were used up and maimed. All that the guards could do now was shrug at one another. They found the sovereign armor: Amanda Saturn's balumbum. You had to wonder if it was the sovereign weapon, too. At any rate, Splitsvelcro's almighty crotch wasn't in danger anymore. He shot up and helped himself to his turn to hold the jar and take over the interrogation. He wanted to do it the "Roderican" way. He dumped the mouse onto the table, gripped him around his whole body, and held him face to face.

"Who's yo mama?"

Saturn was armoring her own hand with a sanitation glove so she could get in a squeeze. With what breath he still had, the rat gasped out. "Mama... not a ringleader, but... supposed to.. agg... deliver we slumsters... agga... from mean mice... meany mice... eeny-meany land-miney... girk... mice... and more..."

Just when she'd finished gloving up, Saturn noticed the smooth buttery enticement Splitsvelcro had on his face. Gonzalez noticed it, too. Saturn noticed Gonzalez noticed it, too. What better opportunity would she have to type up a legal document and pilfer their signatures? None. So she did it. And in thirty seconds flat,

Splitsvelcro and Gonzalez had both absentmindedly given her permission to shoot any neog student who showed up within 100 feet of Duncan property.

The meeting was a wrap, as far as Saturn was concerned. The rat, though, had one more bean to spill regarding the elusive "mama."

"...foretold she... hulp... bring us peace YEEK! AND.. HARMO

"SACRILEGE!"

That was a wrap for the rat. He started breathing again, all the 300 miles per hour hip-hip-hooray trip out the door that Splitsvelcro sent him on. While Saturn chased after him with the peanut butter, blaming her rival principals for letting a suspect get away before thoroughly cross-examined, he clenched his fists hard enough to scream the writhing airs between them.

"If it's peace and harmony they want, we'll give it to them in the form of a nice quiet coffin!"

"If they don't give you one first." Gonzalez picked up one of the ammo corks and admire the deformities Saturn's booty inflicted onto it. "And if you manage to by pass ugwan security."

And then, his mention of marching men and their rifles like sixteen paragraphs ago popped her memory like a well-aimed slingshot and brought about the question, Wait, did you?

Splitsvelcro snatched up a cork of his own and pulverized it between his finger and thumb. "Well you think you can do better lady?"

And then, the way she slipped that peanut butter jar right out from under Saturn's sharp pointy nose... uh... (one, two, oh) thirty-four paragraphs ago gave him a sharp pointy poke in his metaphorical personal patio and barfled up the question, Wait, can you?

Old Splitsvelcro stared at the dame. Stunned Gonzalez stared much the same. The Last Breath's neogs and all the Breath's men scooped up their corks to start shooting again. Unlike the schoolkaisers, those boys weren't flipping like hotcakes theories in their minds about whether or not anyone had conscripted the Whoops-a-Daisy Nuker. They aimed their slingshots at the appropriate portions when the captain of the guards told them to hold their fire.

"Yo, Admiral. Seniorita. Get a room. That isn't this one."

"A room, you say?" cooed Gonzalez. "I'd say a table would do just fine for us."

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The table they agreed on was the perfect place to collapse madly in love at *Uppity Starts' Barongé for the Schmancy*. Neither of them wanted to do that, though. The table, perched on the balcony overlooking the Arizona landscape, was long far distant enough from nosey ears that they could weasel indiscretions out of one another, military, academic, or otherwise.

Gonzalez made sure to show up first to order booze. That way, she could spike Splitsvelcro's drink ahead of time with her own truth serum. She'd recently knicked the 9th commandment from the Museum of Goody Two-Shoes. With the help of her trusty cheese grater, she ground a hunk of it into dust over his Jim Beam Ice Water, and not a jiffy too soon. Splitsvelcro spotted the table from across the crowded room, but there was

enough first-base business in the way to hide what she was up to. He marched himself over and nearly knocked over both their overpriced beverages with his pointing finger on its horribly mannered reach across the table.

"I say, good woman, is that not a sight worthy of fifteen lengthy moments of your concentration away from your sweet vermouth on the rocks with a twist?"

She knew what he was up to. She anticipated he'd bring his own truth serum - battery acid from a polygraph test or something - and slip it into whatever she ordered while she admired the sun setting across the desert, the ablaze evening beams spreading over the grass and cacti like blomped ketchupy blood. She gave him enough time to finish ruining her drink before turning back.

She smuggled her phone out of her purse and glanced in the kitchen's general direction. "I never would have guessed you were one to admire scenery. I would have guessed you reserved your admirations for situations like the one behind you."

"Yes, I bet you would. Have."

And, after splodering the petrium castraphobutane through her cell phone, she was absolutely right. Splitsvelcro whirled around and gawked through a pair of binoculars as cooks and their smoldering puff hats sailed throughout the building. Gonzalez had ample time to toss the spiked vermouth over her shoulder into the windshield of the arriving ambulance.

Splitsvelcro was all done watching when the fire was out. The Barongé was very much versed in "the meal must go on."

"Now then, Lady Principal, to what rhompus idea shall we drink?"

"I always like to say a prayer and drink to world war."

"Bottom's up, then."

Both kept one eye on his or her own drink, and the other on his or her rival's drink to make sure the other didn't bluff. There were obvious consumptive differences - Splitsvelcro took a swig while Gonzalez only sipped. They were confident in their anti-lie juice, though. So long as it touched the lips, they supposed, the others' inner Pinnochio would be positively elephant'd.

Let the interrogation begin.

"How's it taste?"

"Dreadful," lied Gonzalez. "Acidic. Polygraphic. As if my ability to scramble the truth has been unjustly tampered with."

With Splitsvelcro, it wasn't like in cartoons. He was supposed to stiffen out like a surf board and take on this thousand-yard stare like an extra head grew out of her scalp. But whatever. All she had to do was test it out.

"You wouldn't be wearing underpants, would you?"

"Honestly woman, how else could I sneak in my contraband weaponry? My socks? Humbug."

Aha! No top secret tightwad would admit to such a thing. Looked like the serum was working after all.

In fact, it would work even better after his next swig, which he took before his own first question. "Think you could weasel contraband arsenal past the resteraunt's metal detectors in anything but your panties?"

"Ashamed to say I could not."

"Aha!" He drank another swig. "Then how could you ever dream of infiltrating the ug... wait, have you?"



Gonzalez wagged a long lady-like finger. "Tsk, Conroy. Tsk. It is my turn to ask a question. Now, have you not only dreamt of penetrating ugwan security, but actually gone through with it?"

It was kind of out of character for Splitsvelcro not to declare war on the apparent turn-based format of the evening, but the question she asked was so slimey he had to get that delictable little prospect out of the way immediately.

"Hardly any need to trapse across yon ptooeey-laden tunnels when I could dispatch my own..."

Before he could say "smokin' hot and thoroughly competent, omniscient, and overall intellectually superior weasel worm," he trailed off, either because he was too embarassed about someone doing a better job than him or because he was wising up to the serum swimmin through his veins. The thing apparently didn't give Gonzalez total control over his mind, but at least a few of his beans were spilling.

"Hold on just one pistol-pickin' second," he spat. "If you can't sneak in your own arsenol, how do I know you haven't got some big skinny wadd'n of your own doing it for you?"

Gonzalez was glad about the side effects. Drinking several grams of ground up Exodust made him waste his questions. "By using your crusty hard-boiled imagination. Now - wait, wadd'n? What's a wadd'n?"

"The Whoops-a-Daisy Dookey Nuker. You know, the one who started the whole ugwar in the first place. I thought everyone called him that. Don't you?"

"I suppose I shall now. Now, about this... Aladdin of yours doing your dirty work - your diaper dirty work - he's sure to have encountered a wall-bouncing bullet or two, as you've reported rampant gunfire down there, friendly and unfriendly. Am I to suppose he's relayed those whose hides they've penetrated?"

"You mean like his?" Splitsvelcro took a swig. "The boy's not there to collect tales of his own bullet wounds. He's there to scout for..."

But she already knew he was both carrying many a lead badge of courage and having a Dook Nuke look-look. Question is, had he found him? Question is, would he still be down there if he had?

Splitsvelcro gave her a cold sharky look, the look of a man doubting the potency of a Mickey he'd slipped in someone else's beverage.

He took another swig. "You're an information vampire, Fivanité. It's as if the more you get, the less I have."

"Ask and you'll get, then."

"Riddle me this, woman. If all your pupils are so fit, then why don't they go down and storm the ugwan?"

"Because they aren't so darn fit. They wouldn't need to go to school if they already knew how to be fit, then I'd have no more pupils."

Splitsvelcro's eyes stayed hard-boiled as down-the-hatch went another helping of Jim.

"Why are you so dagnabbed fixated on finding the fittest stooge? Oh of course -" He hiccupped. "The same reason I want the fiftiest stooges."

Imagine as best you can the next shenanigan happening in metric form, to the beat of a perfectly even hundred-forty quarters-per-minute tempo. Splitsvelcro shouted, "Ahoy, ba-bum!" and heaved himself onto the table before pretending to fire a machine gun and making the relevant sound effects. He ceased and saluted. "Army!" Then he marched one step forward with the gunfire routine. He did this a couple of times while Gonzalez wondered if everything he'd said so far was more because of inebriation than serum potency. She should have known it would take more than a few pulverized pebbles to get anything good out of that old coot.

"Drawp 'n' gimme fiddy!"

He finished his little jig and dropped to the table, just a few inches away from her face in imitation of a push-up. "I got me more than fiddy, lady. I got me a billion. One in'ny ol' 'gwan. One's at the supermarket. Heck, maybe even one under the table, jotting down our every word to post on the internet as part of some retarded plagiaristic amusement."

At the risk of falling for some sophomoric ha-ha made-you-look prank, Gonzalez lifted the table cloth to find no Roderican snoop whatsoever. Before she could shove her phone in Splitsvelcro's face and say, "The third graders just called, they want their lousy sense of humor back," she did however notice a big tall mug of you-know-what, complete with sediment sunk to the bottom.

Of course he'd anticipated a serum. How could she neglect to anticipate his anticipation?

She would fork over her phone, but it would be playing the rat video circulating all over PyewTube and HikoryTickoryToc. "Then they must have encountered this firsthand; at least a reasonable facsimile thereof."

Not one to miss out on good ol' fashioned violence for piffing sissy-ups, Splitsvelcro snatched the phone and watched with iron-clad fascination while Gonzalez corrected her mistake. He was busy. He didn't care about the rats, but all those Jehovah's witnesses scared him too much to noticed the stuff he now guzzled like a soda at the movies, then stiffened out like a surfboard and did the loony-lips, among other things like firing car exhaust through his ears. Once the coconut-bikini hula dance was out of the way, he was all ripe for the interrogatin'.

"Ah, that's the ticket. Nice and loose of the lips. Now, Conroy, Conroy, in that chair, who's the fittest chump out there?"

"Fivanité, fare of 'ex, the fittest one's name [would be something that rhymed with that if I'd ever finish this sentence]."

Which he did not, because some grappling crane dropped tied-up Principle Prissy-Panties onto him butt-first and crashed him onto the concrete below, where she splattered him like figgy-piggy pudding along a deep and steep crater.

Everyone thought it was neat. "Woah did you see that?" They filed downstairs carrying ribs and giblets in their shirts like picnic blankets so they could get a better look. Meanwhile, the maitre d' wasn't happy. It was not the ambience he had sunk several thousands dollars into cultivating, and he slapped along the back of everyone's head while they did a good job ignoring him.

Gonzalez peered through the fresh balcony hole. "Some oaf has sabotaged my interrogation strategy by dropping another oaf on the oaf I was trying to trick. Oaf? oaf! Shoaf. That is to say, show yourself."

If I didn't know better, I'd say that was no cue for that most magnificent reptilian freelance Justicer to part that Duque Dynasti beard he'd been hiding behind like a pair of Notre Dame stage curtains (much to the petrifying scandal of that beard's owner) and hop right out into the spotlight.

"Fee fie foe fum! Mishy-yon Aye compyulished." The snazzy iguana-lookin' ladin the leisure suit would not be handcuffed to any metric form. He strolled up and wiped a dapper green claw along the crater's rim to inspect some Splitsvelcro porridge. His choice of bomb cringed to be in such proximity to filthy galactic heathen. "Or should I say, Mush (yon) Demolished? Either way," he clapped the dust off his hands. "Target sighted and totally dealt with. Anyone up for a celebratory game of crotch shooter?"

"No, but I'm ready for a game of make the acid-trip dressed lagoon fiend non-existent," said the lady looking through the hole before she got scarce.

"That chick talking about me? I wouldn't say so much I'm existent as... *Rexistent*. Rex *Ringly*istent. Hey come back, you missed the clever way I introduced myself."

At least the maitre d' appreciated it. He applauded and said "good show" like someone from London.

"More than 'good show,' slick. Good show of force," corrected... I mean, *corRexted*.

"But gooder still," the maitre d' dug around in the back of his scalp, found what he was looking for, and pulled down a zipper. Everyone gasped, including Gonzalez, just then stepping out from behind the crowd and about to draw a weapon. "Isn't that guy's remains all splattered all over the hiney woman's home-made crater?"

Rex snapped his fingers. "Aw shucks. I should have known you'd send a decoy."

"But you didn't," puffed Splitsvelcro. "Comrade Ringly: Ugwan report."

Rex took a cursory glance at all the onlookers, still gobbling greasy surloin and briskets with their barenaked fingers like cavemen. He thought another shot at eliminating his combat-starved overlord would suit the situation better, but heck; one gross visual deserved another.

"So I don't have a perfect number but Lucas counted all the legs, arms, and heads, then Smith divided by five, and that's how we came with a billion. Don't believe me? I brought back a goodie bag." Nobody thought there was anything goodie about the bag he pulled out. It was all sordid renegade anatomy he'd pried, plucked or boinked off the departed (dearly and darnedly) down there. "See this? You got your finger, your eyeball, your toe, your nostril, your femur, and this grapey fuzz-thing I've never seen before but I figure I would have if the evening between you and the dame went on much longer. You own this joint? You might wanna think about offering barf bags. Sheesh, it's getting' all over the floor."

It was then that Gonzalez finally learned she'd been interrogating the wrong suspect. All she had to do was grind another hunk of old number nine into a beverage and hurl it into the komodo guy's face. Before she could do that, though, Splitsvelcro bowed his head and launched into a eulogy for the guy who lost that part of his anatomy. And the kids he would never have. Assuming he didn't have any already. Because Good Wondy those things are a handful. Then Rex gave the signal and a refrigerator fell on the new Splitsvelcro's head.

Seeing a seizing Saturn with Splitsvelcro splatter spread across her skin, Rex once again dusted his hands. "Looks like my work here is done," and he sauntered off. "Might as well give this giblets to that prophecy girl who hangs out at your school. The doofy one, not the squirty one."

He was gone before everyone finished hurling and yet another Splitsvelcro stepped out from within the refrigerator. Gonzalez never got a chance to fling her holy serum sample into his face, but it did make her curious. "Prophecy, eh?" She looked at this new Splitsvelcro, the supposed "real deal," who now stood saluting Saturn, still all a-seizured. "I predict that this Splitsvelcro here isn't the real Conroy, if there even is a real Conroy Splitsvelcro. I also predict that the ultimate test of the fittest survivor is to take place in the ugwan, in the dead middle of all that gunfire. And I predict," she took out a planner, "that the faculty's lesson plans over the rest of the semester will take place down there. And now to see if it all comes true."

\* \* \*

With every last ounce of academic wickedness, Gonzalez mapped out her plans of storming the ugwan. She didn't get far beyond "see who survives the upcoming debriefing" before the TV came on and there was little Miss Peacey-Pie.

Velveteen Allegra, up there on the little screen, waved the front page of a newspaper around and pointed to the headline about a Principa-cidal iguana on the loose. "Are you just going to ignore the fact that one of the people I'm trying to help just kidnapped someone and then committed murder twice? This is not good for PR."

Gonzalez tried to concentrate, but it was too late. Her train of thought broke. "Bad PR is good for you," she explained. "Bad PR means the police will ambush you, then you'll have a reason to learn to run faster, or fight harder. Or such is the case for those who live anywhere besides in front of a camera. How do you even get any exercise?"

Velveteen groaned. "See that?" she got up and turned the camera to face a treadmill in the corner of the room before returning the camera to its regular position.

"I'm afraid fresh air is lost on you, then."

"I don't have time to show you all the open windows around here. You saw this lizard guy up close, didn't you? He's ruining everything. People are going to read this story and think that we're some kind of race of murder demons."

Gonzalez looked up in disgust.

"Flatter not your people. Murder demons could handle a piffing little thing like out-of-shape pilm-palu faced vermin grabbers. The likes of you, young lady, can't even depart from... wherever that broadcast studio happens to be."

She-who-it-a-rest-could-not-give blew out a big ugly groan. "The point is, we're not all criminals, but what the iguana guy did will make everyone think we are."

"No, Allegra. The point is this."

Gonzalez hurled a pickaxe at the TV screen. It burst into a spectacular firecracker that would make a perfect circus act if she had time to sit down and eat peanuts, but she had some kids to go brainwash.

She opened the auditorium doors and there they all groaned and fidgeted, shackled, manicaled, chained, you name it. Most school auditoria had chairs. Damselwood Diversity had stocks, or those metal coffin thingies with nails poking into them so you couldn't move around. Some of the kids were in cages or on leashes, complete with the zap collar if they made too much noise.

As for the grownups, they sat smug and pretty in their protective sci-fi armor. Most of them had come in from a lesson they hadn't finished teaching, so they got to hide within their bee-keeper suits, or their mobile fridge fallout shelters. Appropriate, given the unpredictable content they would release from time to time. Gonzalez made her way to the stage, where sat some of the non-teaching staff; the lunch lady in a hazmat suit, the librarian in a collection of dust jackets, the nurse in a plague doctor mask, and, much to her disapproval, the IT commander in a VR headset.

"I'll have to do something about that."

She gave the microphone a few raps on the desk and jeopardized everyone's hearing. It made them stop talking, though, so she figured it did the trick.

"Glad I have your attention. Let's start with a riddle, shall we? What do you call this?" She then yanked the mic stand and opened a trap door just beneath the IT dope, and he howled all the way down to his stinky dark *pa/oo*sha.

"An entity unfit to survive," she replied to herself. "Or maybe he'll live. Who knows? I don't. Nor do I care. What I care about is testing the survivable fitness of you. Now, as I can see, all of you are still alive. I have lately checked the local obituaries and seen none of your names in there. This raises the following question: has Diversity's curriculum softened like the pillowy white wool of a lamb? I dread it has.

"It has come to my attention that Damselwood's surface environment no longer poses any challenge to your survivability. What I believe your peers call 'the real deal' awaits you down in the ugwan. Just take in all this carnage."

She pointed a remote control at the screen behind her and exposed the whole room to visuals like a funeral parlor, a butcher shop, and a taxidermy joint. Homo sapiens were included among that last place. Dead ones, all stiff and posed, and that made the teachers shed a sweat drop or two.

"That could be you this semester. Now, if you will all line up single file into the nearest male toilet, we shall begin our new curriculum in the underground water network."

For some reason, there was not immediately an orderly single-file line filled with begrudging little cretins. There was no line whatsoever. And when Gonzalez took a closer look, she realized that nobody could get up from where they were standing, except for teachers. The other reason she didn't find out until she shouted, "Are you listening? Single file line, you piffing vermin," but it was that nobody could hear her over the inner-ringing they'd been experiencing due to the microphone rapping earlier.

They probably weren't literate enough to read her lips, so everything she'd said so far probably went to waste. She could snap her fingers in morse code, but they probably couldn't read that either. The only thing left to do was to bring out the big guns. Only she just had the one gun, and it wasn't that big. But everyone in the world spoke that language.

The idea was to point it at one of the teachers and signal for him or her to unlatch the students. She ran into trouble when came time for her to decide which student to have Mr. Phlipyewauff free first. She could only decide this by turning around, aiming the gun behind her over her own shoulder, and firing. If whoever she hit survived, she or he would be the first in line.

From what she could tell, the first random target - a cotton haired phone addict held put in the stocks - was no more dead than usual, albeit a bit greener and rubbery than the human race usually produced. "You," she called out to the teacher, "unleash this thing and put her at the front of the line," forgetting that everyone was currently deaf. Then she remembered, and did the corresponding charades.

The stocks proved useless on this girl, as she'd apparently submitted a prosthetic head and pair of wrists for the stocking, and hit the real deal deep within her jacket. Remarkable.

The rest of the kids getting the bullet were just as verdant and epidermally unnatural, but no one's brains blew out, so they were sure to fare well down in the doo doo dump drains. She didn't have enough bullets to

land a hit on every kid in the auditorium, but by the time she got through, the message was loud and clear as to what they were supposed to be doing.

Before taking his place in line, one kid asked, "Aren't we at least getting snorkels or something?"

"Are snorkels an inherited evolutionary advantage? They are not? Then no."

Fit survivors didn't prove themselves through the enableness of modern conveniences, philosophized the principal. Those things were for fatsos, not fitsos. Still, now that the idea went from this runt's mouth to probably everyone else's head, she'd better make sure nobody was cheating. Ms. Takostewstay and Mr. Boquerm could watch it empty out. She had a mass flushing to supervise.

\* \* \*

They expected her to dust or something. At least that's the kind of tutu they forced her into. But Samara was under the bed instead. She had to find anything that wasn't soaking in pepto princess pink, and the furthest color away from it around here was dark pink, and that was only because of some shadows.

"I don't believe this," she grumbled. "First they take away my pass to the celestial plane, and now they make me do this, here."

She was in a penthouse. A "specially-made" penthouse. Mayoki was the occupant of it, and she had it decorated to match the toys she expected out of Saturn and her yes-priests. Where was that goon anyway? Samara crept out of the shadows so she could look out the window. The place was like twelve stories high, so she had a perfect view of Mayoki on slum street, kicking over trash cans and stomping the rats and bugs that spilled out. "Keep that up, you horrible goblin," hissed Samara. "Not only will all that sin cloud up your meditations, but I'll have plenty of souls to meet when I find a loophole out of your finangledy manifesto."

She could remember it clear as day, that hearing Saturn subjected her to. She'd been on her knees in the chapter house while Mayoki stood on a dresser, backed up by Saturn and an entourage of moral superhumans.

"Smellara Tazmanian," smirked Mayoki (and yes, she had the ability to smirk out audible words). "You are guilty of the crime of letting stinky vermin tutty tat and tutty tog in the pure sterilized environment of the Skinflint District. You are hereby sentenced to do all this stuff I had school mama write out because I don't know how."

Not knowing how to read either, Mayoki chucked the stupid thing at her - ten pages of rubbish declaring Mayoki's superior celestial prowess, and if "Smellara" ever wanted access to everyone's afterlife again, she'd have to agree to be Mayoki's indentured servant for the rest of her life. There were other stipulations listed, not to mention other wrong ways to spell Samara's name. Not once did the correct spelling show up, but Saturn and her minions agreed that all terms and conditions still applied.

Samara smirked out a few words of her own. "Shows how much she knew. The Great Cosmic Wonder has conditions of their own, and they just applied the fahoogleganger out of them right to her little stunt."

She didn't get to relish the sentiment much longer. All that pink was sinking in again, but when she turned around to hide under the bed and take a break from it, she faced a rousing round of someone hollering, "Hear ye, hear ye!" She didn't even have to play "where's Waldo" to spot her other nemesis. Saturn sat on a sedan, carried around by no less than eight poor musclebound stooges, four per cheek. She had a megaphone in one

hand, yelling, "Hear ye, hear ye, I am hereby an official victim of a foreign martian entity," through it.. In the other she waved around a black flag with the phrase, in big red letters, "I told you so."

"What a diva," thought Samara. "To rub it in the faces of everyone who already agreed with her. Of course, she can't leave Skinflint. Not only can't those booty-bearers, however bicepically endowed they are, carry her all that way, but she'd go amongst even more neogs who might plummet her like an anvil."

"Oh, I cannot remain in this place!"

No matter how many breaks she took, every time she came back to the terrorizing pinkness it would seep through her skin like a parasite. She'd already tried subverting the rules by smuggling in some dead parasyte, crayoning a pentagram on the floor, and lighting five birthday cake candles by smashing a lit light bulb. She was soon surrounded by not only censor mists, but several new species of it. It was like fiberglass insulation, shaved wool, cotton balls and something or another.

There was no breathing in a place like this. She tied up the bedsheets to form a parachute and kicked out the window pane. "Wheresoever I go, may the Great Cosmic Wonder lead me to everlasting fulfillment." And with that, she hopped out the window.

The only thing saving her from Skinflintizen's tattling eyeballs was how high up she was. She wasn't thinking about stealth on her aimless way to the nearest landing grounds; instead, she thought about how sacrilegious it was that any building should end up taller than mother Earth's grandstanding whelpings - specifically, Widow's Peak. She sneered back up at Culbara HQ and uttered curses at it. Those of course were as effective as planting quarters in your backyard thinking that dollar bill trees would grow out of it.

In the long run, though, she'd end up glad that she wound up on Widow's peak from the 'bove in broad daylight. Just try hiking up that thing after sunset, kid. Cool weather is no compensation for marauders.

Since that was the place she wound up, she might as well go consulting. Maybe the widow knew the soul of a deceased priest. If anything, she'd be away from all that pink for a while. "Oh, woe is me," she dramatized when she entered. Then she slung her wrist above her eyebrows. "The afterlife is astir with cottony mists, and my mission to bring good tidings of great joy unto all people is hampered thusly."

"Order, dearie, order." The widow smacked a hammer on a dresser. Splinters spat. She wasn't talking to Samara, though. She'd been holding some worthless trinket up to her mouth and mumbling words like an imbecilic ventriloquist. That was the thing she demanded "order" from, because she slapped it upside the "forehead" and then thrust it into a trash bucket.

"Pretty little court is in pretty little session." She tossed the hammer - yes, not a gavel, a whole frickin' hammer - over her shoulder and bust out a window. Taking in the state of the cottage, Samara noticed it did look something like a carnal bargain bin judgment day, something ol' Wondy would sling together with a row of old-fashioned footstools and tuffets. The jury was made up of random objects that the widow had knocked from her shelf that morning. The question was, who was on trial here?

"What's that you say, dearie?" The widow picked up a burnt matchstick and held it to her ear. "They interfered with your nixie summoning ritual? Well, we'll just have to hear what they have to say for themselves, won't we?" She dropped the match on the floor and scooped up a home-knit stocking. "What do you have to say for yourself?" She held it to her ear and mumbled something in... I don't know, like 20 octaves higher.

"What's that? You say the nixie they summoned had tucked away in its bosoms bare a secret that might have unraveled your world's fabric, as it was? Well one explanation asks for another, doesn't it, dearie?"

She picked up a grammy. Only Wondy knew how she'd get her hands on a thing like that. "Dearie, don't you think harboring nasty little secrets against another is a dreadful thing to do?" She only held the grammy to her ear for a sec before she gagged and dropped it. "There will be no secret spilling in this court."

Welp, there went the last of Samara's innocence. It looked like even from beyond the grave, some afterlife spirits had sour intentions.

"Why can't death teach them proper?" She sat hunched outside and stared at the ground. Maybe someone randomly etched all the answers in the dirt somewhere. "One would think a second shot at life would have them bring a renewed character." She thought about Daffodil, and the nine total lives she had, and started to wonder whether or not this was her first. "Daffodil... do you hold memories of the afterlife that I have not known?"

Then she stood up. Nope, no secret tidings scratched in the dirt down there. Maybe she'd hallucinate it in a nearby bush or something. She turned, and turned, and kept turning.

"What troubled times might the great bark park junkyard bring you? Don't you think I would have sheltered you then, like I always do?"

While she was "the-hills-are-alive"ing and "how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-Daffodil?"ing, her footwork left the porch and ballerina'd across the yard. She trampled an innocent tumbleweed and decimated plenty of ant hills without a single care for plain old Earthan life. There were probably few worm fatalities too before she lost her footing and crashed into a palmetto bush from where she had a perfectly horrendous view of Culbara Tower.

She pointed. She was about to utter a curse at it, but then she realized she'd help bring the little Satan-spawn into the world in the first place. And every warning that Daffodil had issued, she'd swept to the side like a measly used tissue. She had not done her part to shelter Daffodil. Not completely, anyway.

"Have I failed you, Daffodil? By letting into our midst one such as Mayoki Culbara? For I have failed myself, it is to be sure." She hoisted herself from the bush and skidded onto her knees. "Oh Great Cosmic Wonder, abandon me not in this darkled hour!"

\* \* \*

Good thing everything they needed to disguise Briefs as a couch was tucked away inside her. The little blue men would never try to drive furniture - that stuff didn't have wheels. There was a big drawback to this, though. A mustardy family of five boarded the top of the thing and fought over the remote. Maybe it was all Mo's fault for putting a TV up there to finish the picture, but they didn't have time to evict the stowaways. They needed to get down the ol' swirly-pool, and fast.

It was when Mo got a "jade alert" on his phone that things really fell apart. "The heck? I thought I put this thing on silence." His impenetrable curiosity took over to see just what news was so important to bypass his cellular boundaries, and it turned out to be real important after all, being about a *very* sexy reptile committing some *very* sexy crimes.

"Hey blindy you out of your mind???"



The less experienced bad driver took over the wheel and steered them straight into a fire hydrant. The family feuders slit off, but the resulting hydrant geyser kept them afloat so they could continue their battle.

Degravis yanked the phone away. "Now look what you made me do."

"Hey, I was reading that! There's a tall green principalnapper and principalicider on the loose. We got to get out of here."

"You runt. We would be out of here if you'd only just watched the road instead of mobile news network. And now we're surrounded by cops. Criminy, I hope Chief Officer Mama doesn't get word of us."

Degravis had spoken the truth. About six patrol cars circled the hydrant, pouring out cops armed with umbrellas, leashes, and steering wheelcuffs. Degravis squinted and shaded his eyes. As far as he could tell, this Chief Officer Ma of his wasn't around to bust his dumplings right away. That didn't mean she wasn't waiting right back at the station with any number of lethal discipline implements. The leading lieutenant recognized him right away.

"Well well well. If it isn't the Stonegravel misfit. Your chief officer mother's going to hear about this first thing."

She didn't. There was so a big badonked commotion all over headquarters that Lt. Brounozir had to leave all three new arrestees sitting on the bench next to the interrogation room.

Degravis was just about to kick up a few rounds of the blame game when some wobbling seismic activity got in the way. Across the hall paraded a traveling caravan, four of them carrying a colossal booty with a person attached to it. This person spanked its escorts along with a big tacky flag and had them leaving shoeprints in the ceramic tiles.

"Jackpot!" Mo ushered a begrudging Degravis back into Briefs and rolled up behind the titanic behind. There was enough shade there to obscure them both, along with the covert conspiracy they kindled on the way.

"A behemothan butt like that is bound to call for an equally legendary crapper," proclaimed Mo. "We just gotta follow its owner around until she has to take a plomp, then we can finally get on with our mission."

"Question is," doubted Degrav, "how long a journey is it from its mouth to its ptooeey port?"

There was so much coming out of its mouth (usually having to do with getting rid of intergalactic vermutants) that hopes of launching a high-fibre diet down its face-flap seemed dim. On the way to wherever it was they were going, Mo let Degravis take the wheel while he dug a fishing rod out of the delivery compartment. He used it to snatch some awestruck rookie's clothes and then leaves off a fake plant just outside the line-up room.

"Now make sure none of those space-hoodlums linger about," ordered the owner of the ferocious fanny as they crowded through the doorway. "They're sure to be in cahoots and spoil my identification prowess."

Mo got back to the front seat. "We're gonna have to get at an angle close to its mouth. You know, the part where food goes in-"

"I know what a mouth is, dope. And I hope you have a plan for what to do if Chief Officer Ma blusters in."

Mo tossed the uniform at his face. "That's where our disguise comes in. You'll have to be the legs. Your ma won't recognize me - or what I'll show of my peepers; just enough to get a good look at the room around us."

Degravis grumbled as he playdoughed himself into the too-tall pants. "Make it quick. Even if Chief Officer Ma won't recognize you, she'll recognize there's a suspiciously stubby newbie her boys haven't completely hazed yet."

Mo wasn't exactly a beanpole himself. Not relative to the shirt he had to put on, anyway. Piggybacking Degravis and hiding beneath a cop uniform didn't show anyone so much as an inch of lankiness. They didn't have time to go on a diet. They had a booty queen to give diarrhea to.

The first problem Mo saw when he stepped out and got a good look was that everyone in the escort was wearing a gas mask. How in the holy slammer was he supposed to smuggle anything past that? The second problem had to do with the line-up. They looked like tattlers. All-seeing ones at that. The kind who'd get their breadrolls buttered by pointing at him and saying, "Hey, look at that deformed guy and the no-good he's suddenly up to!"

But then he noticed something even more sinister. That sweltering sauciness torrenting from every pore of their being, if lizards had pores, those slinking postures straight out of one of those movies he had vague memories of Papa Manzoni watching while Mama wasn't around... This was the iguanian principalicer from the jade alert. No doubt about it. No other entity could ooze so much leachery as much through a mere description from a news alert as face-to-face in a police line-up.

"Uh-oh," He nudged Degravis with his heal. "Those guys in the line-up over there, I heard about them, they like to get down into some real unfriendly ac-Oww!"

'Cause Degravis gave his tail a good yard yank. "Don't talk to me, and who cares? We're here for the bahooty babe, aren't we? I want to get this over with before we're caught by-"

"Chief Officer Gigi Glamourstomp Stonegravel has crossed the line-up room threshold!"

An ample example of the police's modern-day leaning towards matriarchy rumbled in with her finger high up in the air. Could've busted out a lamp with it. She swept her gaze across the room like a mighty searchlight following a jailbreak alarm. "There's something rotten in the state of Arizona, and I intend to find it and bust its big rebellious dumplings, and the dumplings of any accomplice it might have recruited."

"Silence, you," said the thing with the biggest dumplings in the room (seriously, the only reason Chief wouldn't bust those had to be they were about to bust on their own). "I'm on the trail of intercepting something even rottener. And you are sabotaging my concentration!"

Chief scowled up. "The rottenness I'm hunting for is twice your rottenness." She spread her splayed fingers wide to show how rotten it really was.

Butt-thing toed one of its underlings in the back of the bald spot. "Father Peekaboo, concentrate for me. As for you..."

While the two swollen entities hurled rottenness measurements back and forth, Degravis gored Mo in the ribs. "Get a move on! Any moment, Ma's gonna glimpse us and you can forget about both finding me my gang and whatever it is you get out of it."

"I'm trying," retorted Mo. "With all that talking, you'd think I'd get an opening, but there's no getting past that golly-darn mask - and I don't even have a thing to get its plumbing goind anyway. You're gonna have to go-"

"Stop toeing me, woman! You can see as much of the hooligan as I can, perhaps more from your vantage point."

"Sass me not, Father, for I won't be silenced by the heathen that lie outside Skinflint."

Peekaboo groaned and snatched Mo by the collar and forced him into plain view. "You, deformed deputy. Mak yourself useful and describe to Principal Dr. Saturn the creatures behind the glass."

Degravis stumbles about trying to regain balanced while Mo windmilled himself back into the closest he could come to a natural standing position. "Oh... well, they all look the same, pretty much."

"More detail! And make it vivid."

But his new location got Chief Gigi's attention.

"Hmm! You look familiarly unfamiliar. How could you become so stubby and disproportionate? Are you on a diet?"

This interrogation shouldn't have been any different from the ones his foster mom put him through, but the idea of being on a diet put him off guard. He tried to get what to say from Degravis by tapping on his shoulder in morse code, but neither guy knew an itty bitty dash of morse code. So Degravis did the only thing he could think of. Even though he didn't have a lot of ventriloquism experience, he ventriloqued back at Chief Ma the reply, "Why? Are you on a diet? You don't look like. More like all the empty space around you's on a diet."

With backtalkers like that, Chief Mama typically wadded them up into laundry meatballs and bowled them into the line-up. She got the first half of that done, but when she turned to face the suspects, she froze. Writching before her and everyone else in the room was the dreaded "Mall-Wart" dance. The lizards' backs were turned, and they rocked left and right, stretching the straps of backpacks with copyrighted characters on them, like Bunge-Pablo and Snora the Extra Bore-ah.

"Hey cops, I'mma tell you a secret. My fit slays. It absolutely slaughters!"

"That's so deq!"

"Everybody's really feeling usselves. Come stick your ba-boinga-boings in here so we can feel those too."

They did not stick in their ba-boinga-boings. They declared war on their eyes for seeing that wondyforsaken dancing and their ears for hearing words like "slay" and "deq." Their eyes and ears fought back, and in the midst of the fray, McGravo Stonezoni fell from Chief Ma's bowler grip and bounced away.

Neither boy had a reasonable idea of what was going on. Mo's view mainly featured Degravi's toe, and Degravis's vision starred wide-angle Mo crotch. Yet deep down inside all that tangle, Mo dug up the sense to get back on track. It wasn't easy, with his muzzle buried into what smelt like Degrav's armpit, but as clear as he could, he asked him to maybe squirm his middle finger forward so he could corkscrew his own tail out and scoot them back towards Briefs. Degravis's ears, one full of, what, Manzoni bucktooth? And the other stuffed with his own elbow, heard the instructions as "Mhff ffhmm? Hmma fmm smmm smma sffdwmm." If his right leg wasn't crammed down Mo's nostril and his left into his own eye, any movement he would have made anyway would have been more in the direction of kicking that stupid rat right between his dumplings.

It was about to get way worse.

In one ear each, something akin to a slithery straw slunk in and said, "Oh even I know how these things work." Then they got picked up and shaken. "Will Suzie take me to the prom?"

There was no mistaking that voice, something that came straight out of the sleaziest of game show hosts. And yet it was so saucy. All the more proof to whom it belonged.

"Suzie won't take you to the prom," growled Degravis, "but I'll take you to the morgue, you boogery wad of snot and armpit goo."

"Hey, that's not a friendly thing to say," objected Mo.

Of course, all of these words were muffled and stuffy, but the power behind them made them slightly more comprehensible than they would have been, powered by years of lost gang fights and good home Wonderistian values, respectively.

The entity that held them was, of course, Rex, Ring-leader of Sir Roderick High's Sayanora Suckers, not to keen to accept titles like "boogery wad of snot and armpit goo."

"Tsk tsk. You know cop, you are both cringe and Ohio at once. You won't be taking me to the morgue, but I'll be taking you to a place that smells really close to it. And that piece of postal junk, too."

So he loaded them aboard the ptooeey palace express and drove the thing to the biggest, stinkiest toilet he could find. It was a toilet where bulls did their business, of course. And it wasn't too hard to find either, being as big and stinky as it was. He left them in the luggage compartment. And for anybody wondering, he had in fact squirm-wormed his way between them to make sure they could hear him talking when he shook them like a magic eightball. When they got to the bottom of the drain, he'd creep back out, stick a straw or snorkel or something between them and blow up a nice big air bubble between them so they'd pop out of that knot they were in, then saunter off having claimed another score for the Sayanora suckers. For now, all he did was put on a diaper, flush the toilet and say "Molky go down duh pwatty! Hooman go dwown duh pwatty!"