

# Prologue

Somebody had screwed with the plumbing. Nobody knew who did it or why, but one minute everyone on Whoops-a-Daisy Lane was watering their lawn, washing dishes, taking a shower, or filling up a kiddie pool, and the next there came spluttering out the abominable stinky stuff.

One house doing this would have been a surface-level plumbing problem, but a whole neighborhood? Something rotten was going down in the underground water network. Now, the "ugwan" was no plain old sewer. It had the usual slime and sludge you might expect to find down there, and it even recycled the water. But this was supposed to load the stinky stuff aboard a meta-toilet and send it down into the fiery underworld, not bring it back up for everyone to gawk at.

Naturally, everyone in the city had a theory as to who deserved the blame. The elite snob school declared "one of those heathen newcomers" guilty of espionage, out to make some political statement. The clergy expressed their belief it was a sign of worse things to come, and if anybody wanted to ward off the bad weather or mosquito bites, they'd better smear some of that muck over their front door (which they themselves didn't do; they hoped mud would be devout enough). Then there were the truckers, who figured the Whoops-a-Daisy Lanizens just threw too hearty a barbecue, and the aftermathical flush was too ferocious for the ugwan to swallow. The military school theorized that a rival from another school had invaded to sabotage the water supply. Rather than condemn him, though, they thought he had guts. They wanted to recruit him. "Not if I recruit the culprit first," declared the survivalists school's lady principal. She wanted to test his (or her) durability.

"Durability, huh? We'll see how durable he is once I get through with him." Carl Sanders turned off the radio. He wasn't quite the weight of a nuke, but he sure had the temper of one. "Damselwood, Arizona ain't loaded with brainiacs," he growled. "You bunch better make up for that."

Between him and his ten engineers, they drove three rangers on the freight elevator to the damaged site. Even the "ugwangineers" in a different vehicle shuddered in the intensity of their boss's seething. He definitely wanted to sock someone, be it the reporters who didn't mention him or the little cretin that started the problem in the first place. Neither were present. They were. He was right. They'd better outsmart Einstein on this assignment.

Once they drove up and opened the hydraulic hatch, they encountered a fearsome stench; it was like limburger on steroids going on a steamy date with an undead wet skunk. Their gas masks had saved them from the other sewage stink. These new hardy fumes blasted through.

"Phewey. I bet the devil himself couldn't stink up anything like this."

"Who said the culprit here was not the devil?"

The whole place was arranged the way the devil might lounge in. Apart from the smell and other lousy air conditions that boiled their sweat, it was dark. Coffin dark without their headlamps. All the light fixtures that might have guided them had been blown out by whatever happened here. The concrete walls were crumbling, the hatches to other tunnels were warped, and gaping pipes spilt out the latest flushes. A battle seemed to have taken place there. Liberal fur wisps floated throughout, and clawmarks and bullet holes constellated the walls. Condiments spelt out messages and signals, but they were in some foreign alphabet that nobody recognized.

The only thing missing was carnage; that stuff would have fallen down in the pit. Yes, there was no ground, only a pit; one so deep even their lights were too fraidy to venture.

"Just how deep is this thing anyway?" One of the men chucked a cylindrical block over. While Carl tried to figure out if giving him a black eye would teach him, everyone else awaited the conclusive clatter that would give them some estimatable measurement. It never came. He was about to throw a second one in just to make sure, but Carl intervened in time.

"Waste one more and I'm throwing you in after it. Get to work."

To put it all back to normal, they'd need to install new doo-doo grinders. They didn't have everything they needed for that; it would be at least a week before they could get in the required sludge slicers, tinkler transliquifiers, fezy fans, and ptoeey pterminals, not to mention the bridges they'd need to bring in the heavy equipment.

Some toiletorial spillage made them wonder why it was all coming back up, but more importantly, it reminded them that thenet had to come first. Apart from that one stooge who set Carl on edge, they weren't keen to lose anything.

As Carl blasted motivational death metal rock on the radio, the men got to work. They established ziplines by harpooning them across the diameter, hooked up pulleys and cables, then strapped themselves into harnesses so they could carry the net to the circumferential ends. Where they could reach, they hammered stakes through the net's gaps. With all the hammering and tugging until their joints were shredding, they should have had muscles stacked the size of a refrigerator. They certainly worked up a sweat. Their sweat drops started sweating, too. Even so, the unreachable areas proved crucial once Carl started dropping heavy objects.

It all started with a toolbox. "Found an insecure spot. Nail it in further. Did I say further? I meant at all."

Onegrineer relished a private glee at his preemptive decision to livestream their work, originally with instructional motives but now happy to use as evidence against a blowhard boss. His colleagues merely mourned the toolbox they'd never see again. This wasn't even the last thing Carl threw over. Every thirty minutes, as they hammered in the net as deep as their tools would allow, some falling object would undo as much as twice the work they'd put in since the last thing, followed by an order to nail it in further. These included and were not limited to a tire, an I-beam, someone else's lunchbox (without the lunch, duh), the heavy metal radio when he got sick of listening to it, and even one of the ugwangers. Blob of a foreman, thought more than one contengineer. Why can't he just throw himself in and rid us of his blowhardery?

Once the radio was gone, they all noticed how silent it was. Even the fearless departing doo-doo rain didn't have a lot to say if it didn't hit the net. They all stared in disbelief through the hole the ugwanger had made. That vehicle was the heaviest thing down here that was capable of mobility, and it didn't even poof. What was happening on the other end of their big blue planet? Was some czar down in China about to collect a smoking hot ranger was supposed to stay in Arizona?

Then the silence shut-upped to make way for a steady trickling sound. That shouldn't have surprised them; they were in the right place for it, they just wish the cringineer responsible would warn them first. Somebody might be looking.

Somebody was, in fact, looking where he had no business livestreaming this kind of streaming. They all knew on account of his erratic hardhat light and commentary. "Guys, you hear that?"

"Cut it out, Abe. Let the man do his business in peace."

"It got me right in the camera lens. It's not one of us, I swear."

"Hey what are you loafing for?" said Carl. "That net had better be secure."

"It won't be with you sabotaging it every five minutes. Seriously, who let loose all over me?"

He was right, securing the net was a waste of energy under Carl's management. In spite of further threats from their half-ton boss, they searched all over for that steady trickle. They finally spotted the stream, and traced it up to a fluid spilling from an open bottle, which in turn dangled from a super slick leather glove, worn by a secret agent in a trench coat balancing on a wire several yards above them.

All day long, they'd been filling up with compressed anger, like soda cans in the hands of a grossly mistaken maracca player. Their outermost layers were rubbed raw from the harness straps, their smellers felt like outhouses had been stuffed there, and whatever progress they made was crammed into a rocket and blasted right back to the drawing board. They unleash their nearby eruptions on their boss. That thing was invincible. But this spy up there? The one quite likely responsible for making the day's work necessary?

"I swear," swore Carl, "this is gonna get some men fired..."

"Yeah! Commence fire!"

They hurled whatever detachable object they could find. Power tools, powerless tools, wallets, keys, or phones, it was all ammunition now. There was gargantuan joy in store for them once they knocked the spy off his perch. They weren't olympian athletes, though. They had the lousiest aim on the planet. Projectiles collided with the backs of heads, and had it not been for the hardhats, they'd still be in a coma. They sure felt it, though, so they turned on each other until they ran out of stuff to throw, then unhooked their cables so they could whip each other, and by then their target was on his way out.

He followed the wire to what he hoped was the exit. He was too busy watching the brawl, though, so he collided with something round, pink, and hairy. Its compact, rubbery properties rocketed him into the revengineer fray. At first, they thought he was just more ammo, but when they saw his shady fashion, the livestreamer announced, "Hey, we just caught Damselwood's most wanted," and seized him. They were all friengineers again and joined in the common goal of tying his coat sleeves behind his back. That thing was way too big for him.

No one got a good look at their prisoner. Deep down inside, it was even darker than the pit below them. Even deeper, blame and accusations bounced around from plenty different body parts. "Darn it all, Gianni, why couldn't you look where you were going? But Coretta's foot was in my way. That's because Macaroni can't work the hands properly. There's one bottle of lighter fluid we'll never see again."

For once, they were glad there was a big hole in the net. It was just what they needed to get justice. They marched him over, and every step of the way, he was a total squirm worm, bending himself into ridiculous angles and continuing to argue with himself. "Whose idea was this? What about my bucket list? Quick, pick a religion. I told you we should have brought guns."

The revengineers dangled him through the hole. "Any last words?"

Out came a much louder, clearer declaration that completely overhauled his standing. "Wait, yes, I'm not the neoimmigrant you're after!"

They nearly dropped him in shock. Was he one of them, after all? Everything around them seemed to change color, shape, texture, temperature, and smell. Even so, some of them retained their grip, and brought him back up to confer.

Carl, on the other hand, was not the kind of guy to be mesmerized by politically correct gibberish. Once his gut stopped vibrating (for that's where most of his brains were, alongside lakes of beer reserves), he regained his bearings and called out. "Hey, couch potatoes, either put that new guy to work or get rid of him. The sewer's not fixing itself."

When they didn't even defy him, he put on his own specially made harness (wide enough to wrap around a buffalo several times) and cable (sturdy enough to carry an elephant). This he had to hook onto one of the ugwangers, one of the only things down there heavier than he was.

His entrance onto the net seemed to warp the gravity pull. Some say the pit below have his footprints.

They all saw him coming, and shuffled to the other end, all the while slacking, loafing, gossiping. This looked more and more like an elaborate scheme to get out of work. He ran out of cable just one foot short of punching range. He was just about to unhook his harness when an ambassador stepped forward.

"Boss, I've been conferring with my colleagues and we have come to an agreement. We think this fellow is telling the truth. You see, we've all been seeing creepy shinanigans on our shifts down here. Imagine the most antithetical affront to engineering possible. Multiply that by six, dunk it in scary sauce, and you will get a vivid triple X-rated snapshot of what we've seen."

Scary sauce sounded like the stuff coming out of the facets on Whoops-a-Daisy Lane. Carl shook his head and tsk'd. "And all it took to get you all brainwashed was that one word. You know full well it's just sissy-talk for outer space alien. In other words, you freaks."

"No, I swear, it's much worse than you think." The spy jerked free of the others' grip, but he didn't bolt for it. "Me and my family are only refugees from an intergalactic war. The planets, my home planet and our enemy, aren't even listed on the intergalactic travel federation's inhabitable list. Yours is, but it might not be for long. Hey, do you smell something? Shut up, don't screw this up for me. There's something terrible lurking around here in your sewer. Any damage done here on our part was out of self-defense. I promise you, all we want is a peaceful underground shelter."

"You'll be underground soon enough." Carl grabbed him by the collar and held him face to face. He pointed straight down. "Did you make that hole?"

"That was Mercuccio, wasn't it? Shh! Blame anything bad that happens on the Slumsters. Seriously, take a whiff. Aw, just our luck."

"I'm waiting."

His multi-voiced prisoner gulped. "Wasn't us, Mister. That was the scoundrel right above your head."

They all looked up and saw someone with just as shady fashion as their current prisoner, an undeniable case of wardrobe plagiarism. For bad measure, he even hung from his own cable. They couldn't quite see the contents of his bucket, but he was clearly up to no good.

"I'm not the scoundrel. You're the one who invaded our home and attacked us with a photonic synertransmuthenol grenade. Hey fatso, hold him up close so I can nix him."

He only got closer in the sense that Carl drew his concealed revolver and shot the wire holding him up, spilling not only this second spy but the contents of his bucket. It turned out to be mousetraps. Forty-six of them. They snapped and clamped all over everyone's tail, claws, hooves, ears, and muzzle.

While they all got busy howling in pain and prying them off, Carl grabbed the new spy by the collar and held him up for interrogation

"If I didn't know better, I'd say the both of you had something to do with that hole just underneath us."

One of them sobbed. "All we want is our mama. Please, sir, we are only abandoned children trying to survive on our own. And then these rats came along and shoved our territory to the puniest corners."

"Did not!" The other flailed his arms. "They tried to eat us. they'll try to eat you too, every last ton of you!"

That was way too much talking. He thought clunking their heads together would deliver enough brain damage to shut them up, but something horrible happened that he never could have predicted. When he finished cymbal crash coat clash, he was holding two empty trench coats. Their occupants were now piled at his feet. There wasn't just one person per jacket. Instead, at least twelve individuals had crammed into each one to take the role of a hand, a leg, a knee, a foot, or a finger.

The dazed team in one was made up of rats. Big ones, too. Definitely aliens if they had the brains to pull this off.

That was no more out of the ordinary than the zoo he already had working for him. But then there was the second pile, and he experienced some feelings he hadn't felt since his ex-wife served him her specialty casserole. They were beer bottles, and he somehow got the idea that they were the kind with no alcohol. Walking cigarette packages, somehow telling him that there wasn't a gram of nicotine in them. Worst of all, there was a swear jar, one that gave him the impression that it could whop out a big strong magnet and point it in the direction of his bank account.

"Our cover's blown, boys," said one of the rats, "scatter!"

They split up in all directions. Those headed for the engineers were in for a bigger stomping than the rousingest round of "Angry and You Know It" ever. They only meant to snuff out the fake beer and cigarettes, as the rats weren't so different from them, but even their point-blank aim was lousy. Members of both cultures wound up prey to a work boot, a naked hoof or talon, then plummeting to parts unknown, dark, and scream.

Twenty or so accidental strikes later, and they had the ugwan all to themselves again. Not every piece of those made-up spies had fallen through. A handful of either faction made it out. There had to be more of them. They could feel it in their bones. They could smell it in the future.

"We're doomed men," said the livestreamer. "We've made ourselves enemies, maybe even engineeremies, of both the scaries and the squeakeys. They're off to tell their headquarters how heartless we all are. And if they can blow a bottomless hole through the Earth, what do you think they can do to us?"

This distinctly engineering pile of words and sentences brought Carl out of his stupor. It annoyed him out of hisscardiness.

"Look, forget about holes with no butts. What are you so afraid of rodents and talking cigarettes that... gulp... might take over the local drug shop..." he slapped himself sensible. "What are you afraid of that hoo-ha for anyway? You got your arms, don't you?"

"What do you think we've been hammering the net in with?"

"Guns, you morons, guns! I wanna see your guns!"

They rolled up their sleeves and demonstrated their pathetic guns. Carl groaned.

"First of all," he rolled up his own sleeve and flexed. He sure had an impressive set, with all that fat piled onto it. "Second of all," he then used the attached fist to clobber his nearest lackey. "And finally," he then frisked the guy's paunch pouch, where he found nothing but disappointment and doom, just as the guy with the camera suspected.

"Phooey. But give me a break, one of you had to bring something to shoot with, right? I'd take a spitball shooter at this point."

They all shook their heads. I know what you're thinking. These guys all grew up in Arizona, and there wasn't a single gungineer among them? Except for their boss? A rumbling belch somewhere in the distance was all it took to make chickengineers out of them, and they went clambouring and trampling one another to make it off the net while Carl stood there and threatened to fire them.

The wrong force heard him say "fire." Carl's men came lumbering back, but with a missile on their tails. They dove into the net and the missile discovered the ugwanger holding Carl's cable, where it decided to explode and make room for a row of tanks and artillery. Likewise, rat soldiers with their unconcealed weapons marched from every other possible exit. One tank hatch popped open, and its driver approached the ledge and undrolled a big parchment scroll.

"Attention, suspects. We hereby declare upon you by way of this warrant a ratizen's arrest for reprehensibly unfriendly behavior. You have the right to remain violent. Anything touché can and will be used against you in a field of battle."

That sent them lunging right back into their feral instincts. And they were violent, all right. A goat tried to make a last meal of his own clothing while a hawk went after his coworking chameleon. A stallion kicked and bucked while a sheep flumped over and seized this chance to bleet a freak conversion. A lemming made for the rangerous hole and dove into the depths. The sheer ferality surmounted Carl's desperate sweaty command, and every last second of it showed up somewhere on somebody's computer with the help of the livestreamer.

It all came to a roaring stop when a mighty "Cowabunga!" heralded an anvil. It divebombed into the center of the net, proving that there was not only something heavier than Carl, but something way heavier, something that could snap cords in waves and send ten has-beengineers--not to mention Carl's gun--howling, neighing, cawing and roaring into the great unknown below.

"Slumsters!" The guy with the parchment threw it over the edge, where it bounced off a dangling and hapless Carl's hard hat. "I take it back, none of you have the right to remain violent, be peaceful so we can beat you, uh, Aaa!"

So much for friendliness The cave then lit up with ribbons of gunfire and grenade explosions. It was the rats verses unfairly stacked poker cards, roulette wheels with worthless prizes, and the former Mrs. Sanders's "Skinny Man Casserol." Now that his ugwanger was gone, he had no idea what was holding him up, but that deck manning the machine gun had sharp aim. If it suddenly developed a vendetta against his cable, there was no getting out of this place. Not in one piece, anyway.

"Psst, buddy."

Carl looked up, and on instinct, he measured the distance between a brand new rat scaling down the cable and his own swatting range. It wasn't long, that distance, but the rat in question was just far enough outside reach to evade Carl's flailing-but-failing reminder that they were not buddies.

The rat flinched a little. "Woah, hey there, don't go all feral on us, we're here to help. We hooked up your rope to your other car. Good thing you brought an extra one, we'll get you out of here in a jippy. Whatever you do, stop flailing around like that, or you'll slip off the loop."

There was still some leftover panic and injustice fueling his flails, and Carl wasn't used to being the one receiving imperative sentences. Nevertheless, this manly mouse stood his ground until a hand showed up on his shoulder.

"He needs a woman's touch. Go and set the car in the backwards direction. I will untangle the man."

The guy's colleague was so obviously a woman that Carl stopped flailing out of sheer shock. He could see under the light of all that gunfire and business her makeup and lipstick. What a place and occasion to be wearing nail-polish and show any kind of bother with her hairdo and fashion, yet that is somehow exactly what she did as she climbed down Carl's vest and began chewing off the intertwined parts of the net.

Carl was hard at work untangling his own knots. Knots of the believe-o-logical variety. He'd had a literal zoo working for him for the last thirty years, why should he be so skeptic about this? The mice biting through net knots answered his staring with steady, determined eyes.

"I know that look," she said. "That's the look of a man who thought the worst of it was over, only for a new box of pandemonium to be opened right before his eyes."

She made her way back up to his shoulder. He couldn't really turn his head to face her without knocking off. Besides, there was too much shoulder fat in the way.

"That's my family up there, firing their own weapons, too. We're not all good guys. We know we're not wholly welcome here. We only wanted to get somewhere we wouldn't have to put up with a war, and look where that got us."

The hardest thing to believe about this whole scene was that, although she didn't even shout, her words penetrated the noise all the same.

"You know," she continued. "A wise man once told me it takes two people to start a war; the person who won't share, and the person who wants to skip permission. And then there are all the people who supplement it when they take sides. But after all the starting, all the supplementing, it takes everyone to-"

The proverb was cut short because her partner oofed into her. They grabbed a hold of Carl's fly flaps just short of his waist.

"What are you doing?" cried out the woman. "I've been waiting all year to deliver my peace proverbs to someone who couldn't escape."

"Sorry Sis, but that's not Maccioni up there, it's Chupiccio."

Carl's words finally found their way out of his mouth now that names were dropping.

"Who the hay is Maccioni? Who's Chupiccio?"

"Well, Maccioni was the only guy who knew how to drive the car, and he's all tied up," explained the man rat. "But Chupiccio is the guy about to bite through that cable."

So close had he come to survival, all for it to be gobbled up by a slob with an appetite like an alligator. All he had to say for himself was, "Sorry, pal, just doing my job" before the cable finally halfed and they all fell screaming towards Earth's spicy inner meatball.