

The Outlaw And The Gangster Should Be Friends

Somewhere in the near galaxy, two space critics were observing Mo through posh-noculars, shaking their heads, tsk'ing, and saying stuff like, "most uncharacteristic, I daresay." Here's the Degraves version: Yanking that blam clipboard out of Mo's hideous little claws and fuming over all the lame places he thought up to look for gang recruits.

"For cryin' out loud squeeks, you came from the truck crowd. I thought you were butcher than this."

They were at the bowling alley. Mo had been sizing up the unshaven bare legs of a retired dad by the moniker "Even Steven" when Degravis had enough. Maybe even enuff. All that steam coming out of his ears lowered Mo's Confidence.

"We don't have to stay here, you know," he offered. "What's next on the list?"

"Something even lamer. You put the Calamity Kudzu funeral home? I wish you'd get serous." Uh-oh. "I could find tuffer tuffs at Prison Pear Daycare."

"I'd tossed the idea of going there around, but you really think they'd let in a couple of big boys like us? I hear they're mighty picky about age limits there."

"Who cares? We're not going."

Before Mo could ask didn't he mean who daycares, Degravis heaved himself up and stormed outside. Mo followed him out to find him in Brief's driver's side.

"Taking on trucking? That's great! Everyone appreciates a good bad driver."

"Get in, dummy. I want to show you what a real gang member looks like. When he's not getting his butt kicked."

Not sure what Degravis had in mind, Mo played along. He started getting apprehensive when Damselwood Diversity popped up over the horizon, and Degravis showed no sign of changing his direction. "Aw man, not school. There are people here who want to interrogate me."

"Shut your face flap." Degravis pulled up next to a window, where students hopped from desk to desk, pushing one another out of the way to dodge snake bites. Every once in a while, the teacher would peer out from a secret compartment behind the chalkboard and use an extensible claw to throw out another cobra, asp, or rattlesnake. The students, meanwhile, hurled their "Shape-Upology" textbooks at the ground. Too bad there wasn't a class on "Big Honkin' Piece of Literature Hurlingology." Really would have improved their aim.

"So that's what they do at school. Not bad, though it just doesn't have the outlaw arena's flare. Where are all the trucks? Besides the one we're driving, I mean."

Degravis gave him the Kubric death glare. "They are supposed to be out-of-sight-out-of-mind, unlike the hoo-ha I'm trying to show you now." He grabbed Mo's head and nearly unscrewed it forcing it in the direction of the windows.

"You see all those snakes, right? The ones trying to take bites out of ankles? That's the kind of gang I'm looking for. Except with arms for punching and feet for curbing."

"Gee whiz!" Mo's eyes saucered up. "You're not really curbing anyone, are you?"

Degravis let go of Mo's head. "No. We can't get anyone to lie still long enough."

Speaking of doing anything still enough, the two peep-inners were there long enough for the teacher to spot them and fume over somebody not being within attack range. It was time to hit the road and look in another window while Mo wiped his brow. "Phew. For a secemd I thought you guys did violent stuff."

"What do you think a gang is, cheese doodle?"

Mo blushed a little at his remarkably blind remark. Of course they did violent stuff. Violent stuff was happening through the window of every classroom they visited, most of it having to do with nature's hungry side. One class was full of mountain lions taking swipes at kids hanging from the ceiling fan. Another one had two-foot spiders blasting mozerella cheese whiz over everyone. Then there were pointy little greenies lobbing expensive equipment everywhere. There wasn't a teacher in this room, only a biology skeleton with a bib and a delicious plate of four-star resteraunt steak that it hadn't started eating yet. They weren't all zoo chaos, though. Some of them had desks floating around in lava or toxic waste. It was great and all, but it still didn't exactly deliver the same umph of the outlaw arena. It sure wouldn't be the same without Trucker. They had to save him. That

was the whole reason behind this concerningly long gang member quest, of course.

At each window, Degravis took a good hard look at every student as though auditioning them. Once he was done gagging over the sheer wussery on display (all those demands for bandaids and acid-burn removal would never fly in his gang), he'd drive mo off to another window, and find some other batch of weenies to pick the lone trooper out of.

He pulled up to a window with kids taking wasp lessons. While almost everybody in there was slapping him or herself silling with ping-pong paddles, the one kid with brains had a sting-resistant suit and face mask. He'd trap wasps in a teapot, and whenever one crawled out, he'd catch it and wad it up into a little ball with his fingers.

"Finally someone with moxie. Whatever that is." Degravis was about to formulate a way to force an alliance with this guy when he turned towards the window. Gruff. "Figures," Degravis grumbled.

Their eyes locked as Mo glanced between Degravis and the classroom commotion. Gruff got up from his desk. The teacher wouldn't mind. She had her own opaque bee mask, behind which she did what looked like an Egyptian interpretive dance, as if to say, "Don't you wish your bee mask was... here, like... mine?"

Gruff opened the window. "What do you want, a goodbye kiss?"

"Pretending you didn't just say that, I want to see who's tuffened up since the last time I didn't ditch."

Mo pulled his cap down over one eye and sized up the bird. "Degrav means biz, see? Hear how he said tuff?"

Degravis slid Mo an exasperated glower. Gruff tsk'd. "No one ever tuffens up around here.. They cheat, get expelled, ditch, or just stand it like yours truly, but in case you forgot, our score in the big bad gang ware was a big fat zero." A wasp emerged from the spout, so Degravis caught it. "If I didn't know better, I'd say one of you were lonely or something."

Degravis got even glarier. "I totally miss being surrounded by butt-kicking hooligans. Which I never was."

"Yeah well neither was..." Something bright and vicious blossomed in Gruff's eyes. "Oh yes you were, remember? Seven of them. Home sweaty home. And oh boy, could they ever kick-" he flicked the rolled-up wasp- "butt."

It may have been contorted but it was still alive. Mo found himself quickly acquainted with that fact when it shot right up his nostril and went ballistic trying to find its way out while Mo jammed his finger up the other nostril and booger blasted away. Plenty of the yellow shot out, but if the wasp was wrapped up in any of it, it didn't feel like it.

But nasal feelings were nothing next to what was going on outside the car. They were in the building now. Mo could see in the mirror a panties-shaped hole in the wall wear Degravis had floored it in, and Gruff, feathers flying off in an

erratic stream, was half a foot in front of them beating-no, pummeling-the air around him as Bomb-Your-Briefs neared scoring her first roadkill.

"Degrav, stop, this isn't how I want to raise my gal!"

But there were mad spinning spirals in Degravis's eyes. "What say we see how durable you really are, bird brains??" The car tore past screaming staff and students, all demonstrating their survival skills by lunging left and right into drinking fountains and janitor closets. Mo couldn't intervene. He was practically vacuumed to the back of his seat and losing weight with how fast they went; he didn't even know Briefs could floor like that, and he couldn't help but feel an inking of pride over it.

He could help even less feeling the avalanche of suffering that came with crashing through the wall. Gruff finally worked out the goody gumdrop sense to pull up, and right in front of Lady Principal Fivanité Gonzalez's office, no less. He took one parting look at the rubble covered duo, guffawed, gave them the hand gesture named after his taxonomic class, then strutted away.

As for Gonzalez, she was rather taken aback. She was having such an extravagant conversation with one of those preteen pushy point provers who do all their activism from behind a camera when suddenly there was a big pile of architectural guts. Two spiral-eyed faces wobbled from beneath it. Gonzalez's skype partner was the one to identify them.

"Manzoni? Stonegravel? What are you doing here? I haven't seen you at school in... well, I actually can't remember because of all the hamsters and mice you send as an alibi."

Mo shook himself serious. "You know my name?" Then he remembered; there was no mistaking that long distance political campaigning. "Say, I know you. You're from that remote interference class I never go to. Vel, isn't it?"

She nodded. "What are you fraternizing with a Gut for? Nobody, least of all a neog, lasts long in a gang."

Mo didn't explain right away. He knew too little about Gonzalez to be sure she wasn't the kind of adult to put a stop to their ambitions. Meanwhile, Gonzalez was on the phone. "Hello? Standoffish 'Sterminators? There is a large rat in my office that I'd like you to come and annihilate."

"Wait," Mo heaved himself out of the rubble. "I'm not a rat, I swear. I can talk, see?"

"Make that a large mutant rat." A sly smile crept up her taut handsome cheekbones. "And bring a bible. It might even be possessed."

Mo groaned. He supposed skipping all that church must have somehow led to this, so he started chewing a hole through Gonzalez's filing cabinet so he could hide in there.

Velveteen, upon overcoming her incredulity, said, "Wait, Lady Principal, this is exactly the thing you should put a stop to."

Gonzalez gave it the frenchman's wave. "How else might I measure his fitness? By all means, pitch an equally reliable alternative."

As Velveteen listed safe (read boring, action-free) ways of assessing someone's fitness, Mo spat out the last strip of metal that would have made a hole chubby enough for him to squeeze through. He didn't get to try it out. Another avalanche of wood, plaster, glass, and whatever else made up the walls spilled into the office on top of him. At least he was out of view.

"Oy!" He bellowed. "Whea that yellah-belly vamunt, maybe?"

"Between the delapidated remains of the wall you just demolished, although he may already be dead now, rendering your further services unneeded. Be so kind as to check anyway, and I won't sue you for property damage."

The exterminator nodded and drew a broom out of his quiver. As he swept away, Velveteen picked up where she left off.

"...Sports matches, written exams, career prep-"

"We have everything you just listed, Ms. Allegra."

"But all your exams and matches take place in a gladiator arena."

"That, young lady, is what it

During this little political war, the exterminator uncovered his target and gazed down in triumph. "You must be the rat. Well meet your unmaker, ratty-tat!" He whooped out a big protoplasmic firearm hooked up to some jetpack. That got Mo right out of his dusty haven and running as torch blasts chased him out of the

office and down the hall. Harrowing screams echoed off the walls from those poor people who were just starting to get up from the traffic scare.

Gonzalez was done with Velveteen. She changed the channel from the "naggy news network" to the school's security cameras so she could watch the excitement unfold. There were certainly a lot of flames; she'd get a handsome compensation from the insurance payout, if not Standoffish itself. There was a curious lack of barbe-cued rat in all this. Just when she was starting to wonder if Mo had what it took, some tremendous mound moaned and stirred nearby.

Gonzalez stood up to inspect the rubble pile, the one that had interrupted her conversation with Velveteen. Of course, she should have known that nothing so measly as a single whiskery runt could take down a whole wall. It was the combined force of the runt, a go-kart, and a big honkin' human boulder shaped like a child. Peculiar... yet inspiring.

"Hmm.. You survived. Improbable, therefore astounding." She paced from one side of the vehicle to the other. There was damage, sure. Exactly what she liked to see in her student body's students' bodies. "It's hard to believe anyone could survive in a vehicle like this."

Behind him, a panicked distress call whizzed past while blue blazes and the man who fired them followed suit. Degravis coughed out a puff of plaster dust and rubbed his eyes. He glowered at the adult standing over him. "Yeah that's great. What do I get, a good grade? A real good grade? What's it to you, lady?"

"Lady Principal," she corrected. "Damselwood Diversity takes great interest in the most durable members of its student body." She took his chin and moved his head around until he rebuffed her. "Quit a lot of mass. I wonder how much of it is muscle tissue."

"You're not finding out by turning me into a posable action figure, because you're not doing the turning, either. Bottom line, please."

The smile that slithered onto Gonzalez's lips subsisted entirely on the stinky stuff. If she had a significant other, they'd get escherichia coli. "There is a prestigious intergalactic academy up on the ghost town planet Anesphon. You will have the opportunity to lead your own army up there, but entry requirements involve a further demonstration of your fitness and survival. I will be observing you in numerous perilous situations. Pull through, and I will enlist you there. All of your human classmates will be disqualified upon your acceptance."

There went those screams and flames in the background again. This offer sounded too good to be true. An army? Not just a gang, but a whole army? Degravis wasn't used to that much control, but a certain swarm of "feminine" sadism would tease him if he couldn't get a hold of it.

"Sounds suspiciously like the thing I've been hunting down all my life. So what's the catch?"

A shifty shimmer flashed across her eyes. "Don't you know? Or are you one of the students who survives school by staying away from it?" That burned him up a little, she was about to call him a chicken, and he'd hurl talons if he had to.

"Graduation in the Damselwood Diversity fields always comes with the risk of a fatality and therefore denied entrance into Anesphon's prestigious academy. Now, if you lack.... what is it your generation calls it? The guts?"

There went the screams and flames again, and not just the ones down the hall. "Perhaps I could interest you in a pea-shooting playpin at the Prison Pear Daycare Center in the Pillowfight District."

Degravis glared at this feckless woman through boiling red eyes. "You wanna see guts, lady? Wanna see your guts?"

Briefs shot out of the office into the rear wall. His crosshairs were on Gonzalez, but twitching on the ground right before him was the exterminator and his smoldering equipment. Mo, still in escape mode, checked behind him and came to a screeching halt. With no one on his tail, he finally had room to stamp out the fire that was there instead.

This groaning wreck of a man wasn't the intended target, but he'd do. Degravis hadn't exposed any guts though. He tried to fix that while curious onlookers watched, but even after seventeen trips back and forth - "Get out here you literal guts and face me like a man!" - no luck.

"Degrav, what are you doing?" Mo waved the clipboard. "We can't conscript this man's innards!"

Degravis was just coming to terms with the obvious fact that he didn't have any, in spite of all the hooting and cheering from the crowd, when Gonzalez showed up to investigate. Her disturbingly appetized inspection of the groaning

man now sporting bone-deep tire tracks disturbed everyone else. They chicked out and dispersed, everyone except Mo. So much for roping in any of those people.

"Impressive." Gonzalez bent down to take a closer look at the mangled exterminator.

"Mate," he croaked, "that'll be... three-twenty quid, mostly to cover the medical billaridoo."

"You pitiful thing," Gonzalez strapped a bandaid over the biggest looking bruise, spread clear across his neck.

"I must say, Mr. Stonegravel, I seem to have underestimated you. You certainly have superior fitness over this..." she nudged the whimpering manglery with her foot. "But is it superior to our ugwansurpers? If it were, I daresay you'd be on your way to Anesphone's Academic Army soon enough."

"So..." Degravis looked from the now sobbing shell of a man, to the dumfounded why-didn't-I-think-of-that Mo, to the scheming, hungry-eyed Gonzalez, "what, you want me to go pulverize a sewer hobo or two?"

"It would certainly shine up your entrance application. Of course," she pulled out her phone and dialed three numbers, "I would also need to see your survival strategy in terms of facing higher-ups on the food chain. Hello, police? I'd like to report a case of vehicular assault."

His strategy was to grab Mo and scam.

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"It'll knock out two headlights with one hubcap," raved Mo. "I can't believe I didn't think of it earlier. We'll storm the ugwan, you get your gang, and I'll snatch Trucker out of his lawful duties."

This runty criminal wannabe's enthusiasm was not contagious. He was the one driving while Degravis brooded over his situation. It was starting to look like finding new gang members was more trouble than it was worth, and the last thing he needed in his life was one more megalomaniacal female dangling something good and juicy just out of reach.

It wouldn't be that way for long. The next step was to storm the ugwan. They'd need a pair of ultra-strength peashooters, but they were on their way to collect them now. They'd dismantle the guards barricading the ugwan elevators by firing solid projectiles into their little special places. He just hoped they were all dudes.

Mo snorted in a deep breath and sighed. "Ah, gasoline. When I start my own gas chain, I'll call it McGurmobile." Degravis thought that was a weird thing to say in front of a novelty juvenile mischief shop, but that's not where they were. They were parked at a Smell station.

"What are we doing here? I thought we were going to infertilize the infedels."

"We are, right after we load up on kaPoocha." Mo hopped out and eyeballed that nauseating fatcat soda. "We'll be driving all up and down the ugwan, and I don't think they have soda stations down there. Now, you go in and distract the

checkout lady while I pull off the sneaky part. We won't be the only ones here forever, so get goin'."

Degravis grumbled, "You'll owe me for this," and walked through the door. Mo slid up directly behind him, back-to-back. It was a good thing he wasn't skinny; he had enough bulk to conceal as many as ten Mos.

Now, how to distract this lady? True, it was hard to notice anything else when you had a nice hard fist coming at you right between the eyes, but he wanted to save it up for whatever awaited down in the ugwan. She was nose-deep in some kind of fashion magazine. Men with nearly identical pecs, abs, and things writhed around in nothing but underwear. Pathetic. And yet, somehow inspiring

He cleared his throat. At first, all he got was a raised eyebrow before she went back to the magazine, but when he rolled up his sleeve and flexed his arm, she began getting curious. There was a big scoop of rubbery fat on top, but just as much rock hard muscle underneath. She dropped her magazine so she could fixate on it.

"And now, the thigh-cep." Degravis pulled up his pants leg and hurled a firmly clenched shin over the counter. The muscle beneath there might also have been hidden under soft flabby armor, but there was no mistaking it was there nevertheless. He could have sworn spirals were starting to swirl around her eyeballs. "Get a move on, Squeaks," he muttered, but it was already showtime for Mo. He was down the soda aisle, stuffing bottle after bottle into his backpack.

"Herc... ah..."

Degravis turned back to the cashier. She was still enamored, and was starting to swing her hands in a slow motion clap. "Herc... ah... *lees*... Herc... a... *lees*..." Perfect. He demonstrated the inflatability of other muscles as this lady's clapping and chanting accelerated. "Herc-a-*lees*! Herc-a-*lees*!" There wasn't much he could show of his abs, there was just too much belly in the way. Who needed abs anyway? She was just as smitten with everything else.

Twenty-tree bottles ought to do the trick; he sure couldn't fit any more in his backpack. He was just about to turn tail and run when the doorbell beeped. In walked Big Bun, followed by Ernie, Hans, Junior, and Cedric wearing plastic novelty beef arms. Mo stopped dead in his tracks. He was about a centimeter short of blowing his own cover. *Good green nose gravy, he thought. Criminal minds really do think alike! Hope they don't recognize Degravis.*

Upon seeing the lackluster security, they dispersed to help themselves to the loot. Cedric, however, took Big Bun aside to whisper something in his ear. Mo observed this drama from between two Cigarabbette™ packs on aisle 3. Big Bun raided the nearby shelves with a disturbing urgency, so Mo thought he'd better not linger. *Hoist the kaPoocha in the car, signal to Degrav it's time to go. That's all I have to do.*

But on his way to the end of the aisle, he noticed that he wasn't going anywhere. Big Bun had snatched a hold of his tail. "Going somewhere, punk? Other than heck when we're done with you?" The next thing he knew, Mo was crammed deep into a backpack, coughing up cigarette ash and gum wrappers. The

only edible thing down here was a McItclown Slob Cream, and it had lost most of its flavor. It must have expired months ago.

Meanwhile, all Degravis saw was a crowd of juvenile hicks trying to look way cooler than they actually were, West-Side-Storying their way out of the store, single file. After noticing Mo was nowhere in sight, he abandoned his post, only for an SUV to ram into him and send him rolling down the dusty yellow yonder. It was Ernie driving the SUV, of course. He was the lookout while Cedric and Big Bun interrogated Mo in Brief's mail compartment. "Boom!" Nobody was around to hear him declare his hit, but he enjoyed saying it anyway.

Meanwhile, Mo didn't defend himself. While Junior and Hans sat in Brief's cabin, Big Bun and Cedric tied dumped him out in the "junk truck. Cedric coiled him up to a chair, Big Bun smacked him upside the head with an electric fly racket, and they both said, "You know what you did." He knew he deserved it.

"Okay fellas. I admit it. I let the cops get a hold of D'Roarz. I failed the outlaw honor code."

He got another whap upside the head. "We'll mow you like grandma's lawn for that later. That's not what we're here about."

He pulled out his butroid phone and played a video. In it, other intergalactic mice were taking part in a rumble against a mixture of ordinary citizens and - this made Mo's hair stand on end - were those reformed outlaw truckers?? Utter sacrilege!

"I want to know who these rats are. And you know what'll happen if you tell me you don't know."

"Uh... you'll ask me again, but way more mad?"

That was such a stupid answer that he smashed a big fat cactus branch over his head. "More like that, only way more hurter."

Mo was in a bind, and not just the literal one made of snake tightening around his middle. One thing was for sure, he was about to be a lot thinner.

"You got to believe me," he pleaded. "I don't know those guys, not the mice or the citizens, and I hope to *hondub* that I don't know the truckers."

All this did was narrow Big Bun's eyes. "Well. If you won't give us any answers, we'll just have to squeeze 'em out of you."

He snapped his fingers.

It was not, as Mo hoped for, the prelude to a break and a sing-along. It was the signal for Cedric to give him... the *bizniz*. His coils tightened. Mo's innards shifted in directions where there should have been more room. He squirmed like an imprisoned sardine eager to usher in a little more wiggle room, but it was no use. Any budge was an invitation to bring on tighter constrictions.

Big Bun looked down on him, arms folded, foot tapping, eyes harsh and unfriendly. All he saw was a chump about to explode with all his informational stinginess. It came to the point where even if Mo had any beans to spill, there was no room to spill them out. His face turned bright red. His cheeks blew round and shiney. His crotch swelled with organs and jellies that belonged higher up in his

body. His tail shot out stiff and rigid. Even his fingers struggled against internal matter that shouldn't have come there in the first place.

Just when he was about to burst into a pile of pizza dough, the truck lurched and send Big Bun staggering into them. He knocked Mo backwards onto Cedric's head, and in shock, the mighty snake released him to get his balance back. Mo wasted no time in grabbing a hiding place. It took a little stretching and gulping, but he found himself back to his normal chubby self by the time the rear doors swung open, and the buick-bellied silhouette of Degraavis loomed against a sunny blue backdrop.

"I swear when I get my hands on that runt I'mma..." Mo wasn't in direct view, but Cedric was. He met Degraavis, and wound up in a knot. "...do something like that. Gah why'd you have to show up? I was saving all my rage, now I spent half of it."

Through suffocated gasps, Cedric gagged out something like, "You fiend..." Even after what he'd tried to do to Mo, his fate seemed a little harsh. Mo stepped out from his hiding position.

"Uh... does this mean I owe you three gangs?"

"You almost owe me a divorce lawyer. I got trafficked and that gas lady's granddaughter came after me in a bridal gown with a gold ring. Now where's the orange guy?"

"Who, Ernie?" Big Bun was just getting to his feet. "No sense wasting any muscle power on that twerp."

"Yeah, well, I want to." Degraavis was about to set foot in the car, but common sense told him that was a good way to get locked in. What's more, the orange freak Ernie would probably be the one to do it.

"Speaking of wasted muscle power, where's Junior and Hans? I thought I told them to keep guard."

"You did. They were bad at their job. Or else, I'm really good at mine."

Big Bun sneered. "Are you, now?" He marched towards Degraavis and stood over him. "I thought big beefy guys like you liked to take on big beefy challenges."

"For your information, me and that squirt you were toothpasting are on our way to the ugwan. That beefy enough for you?"

"I got something beefy." He hopped out, clean over Degraavis's head. "I'd like to see you take on the manchine challenge. Tonight. Outlaw Demolition Arena. You know where that is?"

Mo, who'd been snacking out of a nut jar to be sure his middle was properly filled out, spat out a cheekful of chewed-up cashews. "Are you out of your mind? That's only for crustacean or armadillo neogs, not people!"

"Butt out, buttcheeks," snapped Degraavis. "I can take on anything your cotton-tailed booty throws my way."

"Sure," scoffed Big Bun. "We'll see. All right then, you're on. 7:30 at the outlaw arena. Do not disappoint me."

"And when I win," added Degraavis, "you'll do whatever I say until I get a sturdier gang."

Big Bun picked up a big skinny stick and started digging around Cedric's torso knot. "Actually, when I win," retorted Bun, "we go back to squeezing crucial information out of your master." Predicting the pulverising this was about to get him, he did the two-finger whistle. Before either Mo or Degravis even realized there was anyone close enough to hear him, they both skidded face first into the ground with bumperprints across their booties.

Indignant and fuming, Degravis plucked his head out and turned around. Lo and behold, it was the SUV driven by the little orange idget. Right next to him were the two quivering goons holding each other tight.

"Step on it, Ern! You don't know what this guy's capable of!"

"Yes I do, losing to me."

"Save it for tonight when everyone's watching." Big Bun gave up on Cedric. He opened the door and catapulted him inside before boarding himself. "We got cars to steal and tickets to sell."

That was that, guessed Mo. In one turn of the wheel, they were gone, leaving him to figure out how they were going to handle the situation in less than three hours.

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"I like the combination of personalities those guys have, eager enough to join us in the ugwan and brash enough to peashoot police peepods," mused Mo, "although I wish we'd struck alliances in friendlier weather."

"This is as friendly as it gets," grumbled Degravis.

They had three hours to train, so they were on their way to the arena.

"You don't have anything to worry about," assured Mo. "You pulled through after two SUV attacks, and you didn't even win. Now if that's not endurance, I don't-

"Why should I care about the blam SUV? I want to pulpify the citrus boy and serve him with a side of eggs and biscuit."

It seemed the pep talk and commentary was only stirring up further anger. If he spent it all during this conversation, Degravis wouldn't have any left over for the match. Mo thought he should give it a rest. They were in front of the arena anyway. He smashed through the empty ticket booth - yes, the ticket vendor had been drafted too - and parked Briefs in the middle of the arena.

As luck would have it, everything he needed to train Degravis was in the mail compartment. He found a tricycle, a paper bag, and a sharpie to draw an angry face.

"So here's what I'll do. I'm going to pedal towards you as fast as I can, and you jump out of the way. Ready?"

Degravis, all safe and sound beneath an umpire's chest protector and face mask, watched as Mo blazed towards him, then slapped over the trike with a catcher's mit.

"Not bad, not bad," Mo brushed himself off. "Although I don't think you could do that to a whole truck."

"Why would I need to?"

"Well... after all, a manchine match has a guy driving a car versus a guy not driving a car. I didn't get a chance to explain it back there."

"And I'm supposed to be the one without a car, huh? Figures." He stripped himself of the gear. "Where do these guys live? Especially carrot face. He's way long overdue for a piece of my mind. I'll show him what I can do without a car."

"Survive a guy with a car," reminded Mo. "And speaking of mind, let's exercise that now. Sit on the ground cross-legged, close your eyes, and go 'ummmmmmm' like you're about to start a big stinky pointless argument in a PewTube comment section."

Mo led the way. It was a very refreshing thing to do up until he heard brief's engine start and got pelted with a wadded up piece of paper that said, "sorry, squeaks. I settle scores my way."

"Wait!" Mo hopped up and chased after him. "You don't even know where he lives!" Mo didn't either. He wasn't ever really a part of Big Bun's circle, or that of his kid butler/chauffeur Ernie. All he knew was that they'd burst Brief's tires on sight if Degravis came roaring into their neighborhood like that.

For a split second, he seemed to have a change of heart; he swerved back around a meter short of making like a fat man's pants. Then Mo saw what he saw. There was a patrol car on its way there. It was pepto bismol pink where it should have been white, the siren was magenta and glittery, and it had bows and ribbons tied up just above the windshield. He instinctually suspected the police of adopting some new forward-thinking policies. In any case, Degravis was back, and he rolled down the window.

"All right listen up: As far as you're concerned, I ain't here. Got it?"

He didn't wait for a reply before cramming himself under the dashboard. In any other trespassing scenario, Mo might have gone for "dumb Earthan mouse" mode again, but he'd already been spotted. He opted for "casual mode." He fished a broom out of the back, along with a variety pack of Steal-Ohs, Lie-Ohs, and Leave-a-Flaming-Ptooey-Bag-at-the-Teacher's-Door-Ohs. He couldn't spin yarns on an empty stomach.

The siren nearly splodered his ears. He covered them over his face as they sped his way. When it stopped wailing, he opened his eyes and saw they'd halted about four centimeters from squishing him. Then they came out.

Even though two of them were more than double Mo's height, he could see they were not adults. Their uniforms, gloves, and caps were designed for way bigger bodies, hands, and heads. The third one might have even been shorter than he was, at least by a few inches. He couldn't see a speck of skin on any of them.

Harsh, weasely eyes peered out at him from behind their overgrown wardrobe. They exchanged glances with one another, nodded, and surrounded him.

"Have you seen this crook?" One of the talls thrust a wanted poster at him. The "crook" therein was a sweaty, glowering Degravis, gagged with a bunch of heads torn off Burpy dolls and chained up to telephone pole. A bucket full of hot coals hung above him by a nail, but he noticed a long string tied to the nail leading off screen, ready to pull the nail loose. He also noticed that the cop asking him, based on her voice, could not be an adult.

"Can't say I have. He sure wouldn't do much damage tied up like that anyway."

"Well how else could we get him to stay puh... I mean," The other cop's yellow eyes narrowed. "You can't, or you won't?" She snapped her fingers. "Check the premises." She only got cooperation from her metrical equal. The teeny tiny cop just stood there with his or her arms folded. "Okay, if you're just gonna stand there-"

"WANT!" Shorty pointed at Mo.

"WON'T! Give, that is." She yanked the broom out of an awestricken Mo's claws. "Not yet, anyway." She ushered her obstinant colleague back into the car, and into one of those child safety seats, no less.

Something fishy was going on. "Why aren't you in the ugwan? I thought everyone had been drafted."

"No, duh." The cop inspecting Brief's mail compartment came out with no results. "There are still crooks up here, see?" Again she showed him the poster.

"You oughtta check down below. All the outlaw truckers are down there, and they're crooks, too."

While the poster cop tried to stare some satisfactory clues out of him, her companion came over and nudged her. "We're not getting any answers here. Keep your tail out of trouble, Squeaks."

A few seconds later, after they left, Mo prayed with all the determination in his body that they hadn't noticed him gasp. The stakes were getting too high for his liking. He pounded on the side he thought Degraavis was hiding. "The cops are gone."

Degraavis kicked open the door and tumbled out. "Those weren't cops, cheese brain."

"At any rate, I think this is getting too dramatic. You want to just leave a dummy in your place here?"

"AH-HA!"

Just as quick as they had departed, the pink patrollers zipped right back and smacked Mo about ten feet underground at a slanted angle. While he tried dragging himself back up to the surface, he heard them recite the following cockamamy pledge:

Prepare for trouble; Make it double.

To expose our brother to big fat torture

To unite us sisters, richer or poorer

To denounce the evils of peace and quiet

To blow up all spats to rage and riot

Shakaren!

Kasharen!

WAAAAAANT!

That last line didn't sound like it belonged. Mo, having emerged out into the open, saw it came from a frothing, red-eyed toddler charging at him full steam. He was about to dive right back in when a metal fish hook seized it by the collar and reeled it back. "No, Taqueena, no, rhyming schtick first, just the way we rehearsed it."

Amidst discarded police uniforms stood two teenage girls, folding their arms and kicking outwards. One of them had a fishing pole, by which the dangling baby continued foaming at the mouth and clawing in Mo's direction.

The Twin Sisters Stonegravel are here to slaughter.

We wouldn't have to if you'd been born a daughter.

WAAAAAANT!!!!

Degravis picked himself off the ground. "And what do you two nimrods want? You're supposed to be babysitting."

"What do you think we're doing right now?" The one with the fishing pole, Kashannon, pointed at the tazmanian toddler.

Shakaren leaned forward with her hands on her hips. "We heard you ran over a guy."

"Yeah, I ran over a guy. What's the matter, jealous?"

"Pfft. If you gave a mouse a biscuit for every buzzard, snake, and roadrunner I roadran over just on the way up here-"

Degravis cut her off. "No, jealous of the man who got under my wheels."

Neither sister had a comeback for that. "You'll be so sorry you said that." Kashannon thrust the toddler pole into her twin's hands and took out her phone. When she was done toying with it, she said, "I just sent an E-vite to tonight's execution. Everyone at school knows about it now. You can bet Nalucy, Quanina, Jamimi, and Lajeannie will show up, too. By the way, we stole our own tickets."

"Hey, not to butt in or anything," said Mo, "but there's no execution scheduled around these parts. Degrav's gonna take on a whole truck empty-rided."

Shakaren shrugged. "Same thing. Anyway, we never thought Degravy here had the guts."

"You wanna see guts?" Degravis pulls out his own phone. "I'm sending an E-vite to the whole Damselwood Police Department. Bet Mom'll even put Dad on parole so she can bring him here."

"But what about the training?" said Mo.

Any training that Degravis might have done would have to be on his own. The thing they called "Taqueena" broke free from its fishing hook and put him in a headlock. All its babysitters could do was shrug. Whatever Taqueena *WAAAAAANTS!*ed, Taqueena got. While he was stuck there, one of the twins fished *Briefs'* keys out of his pocket.

"Found some goodies. Let's practice driver's Ed, Edd, and Eddy while we're waiting."

* * *

You could bet your buttcheeks that every schmoe who wasn't blundering around the ugwan showed up. Cops, criminals, neogs, ordinary Earthmen, aristocrats, and even homeless bums who couldn't afford tickets had a seat in the stadium because The Sisters Stonegravel, Shak and Kash, made sure to compound the "humililation" as high as possible. See how they spelt it? They meant seruz biznez.

"Uh-oh urrrrg, if everyone in town's here, that means urrrrg Wayne and Wanda are here too urrrrgh! Hey, sis, take it easy will ya urrrrggg...."

Through slight squirms and wiggles, Mo made moves that he thought would let him escape Taqueena's clutches, or at least convince her not to constrict his airways. Nothing doing. Everyone who spotted the struggle clasped their hands

and went "Awww!" Of course, all that grunting meant that the Stonegravel sisters couldn't have her up in the broadcast booth.

"We'll have to draw whiskers." Shak yanked one right out of Mo's bun and Kash followed suit. What followed was a debate over which one was actually longer, and after they settled that, they disputed whether the longer one meant she got to broadcast or had to babysit. The debated concluded with a clattering boot upon the bleachers. Shakaren turned, and so did Kashannon. Taqueena, her grip ever so secure on a curious Mo, turned to face the owner of the boot.

"I'll have my butler keep watch." Big Bun indicated the obsequious Ernie, ready to fill the teeny tiny role of personal yes-man. Just as he stepped up, so did the rest of the Stonegravel dynasty. There was Vapenny, out to conquer her fair share of Manzoni territory by tug-of-warring at his arm. There were her parents, Nalucy and Denicholas, taking their seats and too neck-deep in collegework to pay any attention. There was Jamimi and her boyfriend, kssing their way to an adult responsibility neither was ready for, and Quanina, single and grouchy, yet 2 months away from the aforementioned responsibility and facing the unbridled demands of, "Yo, Ma, swallow me down a lasso so's I can get me a holda soma dat mice spice."

"Not on your life!" Ernie abandoned his teeny tiny roll and split the scene, only he soon noticed that he wasn't going anywhere. Big Bun had him by the collar.

"Oh no you don't." The next thing he did was shackle the orange boy's leg to that of the bleacher's. "Don't move from this spot until the match is over. Make sure Ricky Rat over there stays put just like you."

"Bullpudonky! How'm I supposed to catch him if he makes a break for it?"

"You aren't. Sic the feral kids on him."

Some sadistic folks ate popcorn and cheered at the tussle going on over Mo. It sure was something to compete with. The Stonegravel twins made their way to the broadcast box, where Bun's other gangmates played with brass instruments and cigarette lighters.

"All right," ordered Shak, "time to get this commentary started. Where the cars at?"

They were all lined up, as Hans pointed out, behind the doomsday gargoyle gate of a bull pin. You got your Yawnda Civic 2047, your Bord Pathsigher 2038, your Sleepssan 2055 go-to-sleep-while-you're-driving diaper cushion heaven angel, the girls were just about to go into a coma.

"You couldn't even vandalize them? Those colors are boring. They look like plain old traffic."

"Hey cut us some slack," said Cedric. "All the real outlaw trucks are tucked away behind titanium reinforced garage doors. We had to nick all these out of a parking lot. It took long enough to do that, pry off all the license plates, and cram them into Manzoni's kiddie truck. It's not like anyone'll recognize them."

"Nick, you say?" Kasharen got eerily sly. "As in quite possibly deNick?" She glanced towards where the rest of her family sat, particularly Denicholas.

Cedric, however, had never met them, let alone learned their names. "We're not giving them back, if that's what you mean. The criminal background should add a layer of spice."

"It sure would," agreed Shakaren. "Gravy's even got a wanted poster up at the station. I brought it here with me."

Anyone who'd saw it at a glance might have mistaken it for an atlas. When she unrolled it, Degravis wasn't the only one in it. It was actually a family photo, taken there and then at the Damselwood City Slammer, a number of years ago based on everyone's height in the line-up room. Don Dad wasn't in the photo; he was in solitary confinement for giving the warden a free spur-of-the-moment "dental checkup." Officer Mom wasn't in the photo. She was the one taking the picture. Everyone else down to Degravis was there. His preschool visage was circled in shiney red ink with the caption, "this kid, only like... 6 or so years older. Maimed an exterminator we dispatched to DDJU."

"Imagine the looks on their faces when they recognize him. Where Gravy at anyway?"

"My bad, I'll signal the match." Junior heaved the mouth of a tuba into the microphone and blew some note that didn't belong on any musical staff or place that wasn't soundproof panties.

The twins' lips and tongues joined in until a nearby wooden drawbridge burst to splinters, and out fee-fie-foe-fummed some blob in a piñata mask. It was sort of in the shape of a bull, with two biblical skyscrapers making up the horns. He had a toolbelt with various objects holstered around, like a crowbar, a nail gun, a pair of binoculars, and a juicer.

He hollered like Tarzan and beat his chest. "They call me Babylon Breath!"

"No we don't, we call you putty-pulp." Kasharen wasn't sure if he'd heard her, because all the cars tried to floor it onto the arena at once. They smashed through their own wooden barrier, and as satisfyingly dramatic as that was, it led to more car carnage than brother besieger.

You had your long-neck sticking his head out the window, overenthusiastic tongue flapping in the wind until, not looking where he was going, his Dullvo snuggled up next to the Flamry driven by a Chocolate Grizzly before both cars lost their natural halves. You had your tar-black sharptooth in his Snorsche trying to pop a wheelie, having to mounth the open tailgate of a Sighssler to get anywhere, and then doing such a good job of it he wound driving upside down smack into a Toyoduh. You even had your Eggplant-colored hippo thinking that all these crashes were some kind of opening act, then imitating a bowling ball in his Teslame, only to end his merriment with a smushed-accordion engine.

"What is wrong with you dummies?" Shakaren clapped her points. "Single-file line!"

"I sure would hate to own those cars," empathized Kasharen. "Anybody here own those cars? I'd sure hate to be you about now, just about as much as I'd hate to be Gravy. Not quite."

After a quick sneer up in his sister's direction, Degravis examined, through a pair of binoculars, a black pick-up truck roaring towards him. It was not the orange igmo who'd ploughed him earlier that afternoon. What a letdown. His goal throughout this whole ordeal was to ignore every car until he spotted the one driven by "fruit boy." He would get serious, smash in the window of that car, then juice the tart and tasty pulp out of him before serving with a side order of bacon and omelets to anyone he didn't hate.

For now, though, he'd just have to go after this bird brain's tires. It wasn't orange boy, but the shrimp's buzzardy boss. He drew the nail gun and pulled the trigger, only for a sharp pointy nothing to come out. "Blammit, I thought I told that pisqueek to load this stupid thing." The more dry air he fired, the closer the eagle roared, until he slammed the gun on the ground and cartwheeled towards the bleachers.

"Boo, you missed him!" jeered Shakaren. "My twin sister can drive better than that."

Kasharen gave her a loving shoving. "Taqueena can drive better than you can."

"Which means she can babysit herself. I hope that orange squirt is good and hovering covering for us. I wouldn't loving it if he weresn't."

Orange squirt? That rung an ugly little bell in Degravis's recollection. He'd have to locate Taqueena eventually. For now, he had to make sure he was in great shape to deliver the desired pulverization to her substitute sitter.

Back in the cockpit of the pickup truck, Gruff glared up at the mouth that mocked his missing. He felt like hissing at the sassy sissy, but he had to make sure his target he didn't missy. He veered about face in a screechy banshee loud circle, revving up a dust cloud until the big bloating blob was back in view - who could miss him? Gruff sure didn't. He sailed right through him, only for a wooden smack sound effect to reveal all he'd done was take down a cardboard cut-out. It glided along the breeze in flakey strips.

Everybody up in the bleachers cheered. Gruff did not join the revelry. In fact, he clobbered his dashboard. "Why you nincompoops, that wasn't the real deal! What are you all so blim-blam happy about???"

All Kasharen could do was tsk. "Missed again. Are we gonna use Gravy's grave tonight? Not 'cause of Eggy Eagle."

"Speaking of which," added Shakaren, "you think we made it wide enough? The last Gravy grave we dug didn't work because," it was her turn to give a shovin', "somebody made it two feet too skinny."

"Hey, you made the measurements. Hope you learned to read ruler tape by now. Besides, we got to make a good pogo trampoline out of him, didn't we?"

"No we didn't, because somebody forgot to stand guard while I went and got the pogo sticks. Speaking of Gravy getting away, where he at again?"

He was hiding behind another cardboard cutout, having another go at firing the nail gun. Of course, Gruff wasn't the only vehicacidal off-road rager in the arena. A dozen or so other cars had entered the arena. They wrecked around smashing through other Degravisian cardboard replicas just waiting for the moment they eliminated enough clones to flatten the real deal. It was getting edgy. He figured he'd better disguise the one he was hiding behind, so he pulled its shirt over its head. That did the trick. Then he had to figure out why his nail gun wasn't working. "Where's that chubby little weasel when I need him?"

The chubby little weasel was getting skinnier and squashier by the moment because of the iron-clad grip the Stonegravel gremlins imposed around his midriff. Even through his respiratory struggles, the urge to warn Degravis about the safety mechanism made its pilgrimage up from his gut and into his brain. It didn't quite make it out his mouth though. Vapenny had her claws around that.

Okay, tail, it's up to you. His tail slinked its way into his backpack and dug around. It didn't pull out the megaphone he was looking for, but it did come out with some costume jewelry bracelet - a leftover from Briefs' mail compartment. He hula-hooped it around his tail until it caught the Stonegravel's attention, and they gave up their grip on him to fight over the shiney new pink jumble of rocks.

All that new freedom made Mo a little giddy, but he had a job to do. He dug out his Gigaphone. "Degrav," he shouted, deafening two dozen startled people in front of him. Their glares told him he probably ought to phone from the front row.

"WANT!"

Yeah. Definitely the front row.

With the object of their combined wanting out of sight, they needed something to blame. Mo wasn't around anymore. But Ernie was still there. And what do you do to an orange? The same thing we do to bananas.

"FAULT!"

Degravis didn't need any warnings about the nail gun having to snuggle up against something before its nails did their job. He heard his name bellowed from somewhere up in the bleachers. He saw Mo, the object of forty irate facial deathrays, scampering along with a big yodel-cone. More importantly though, he saw behind him fiendishly familiar faces, making all the scornful contortions involving lips, tongues, and cheeks you might see at a mardi gras circus. Home movies streaked through his mind. Home horror movies, mind you. Paddling Oars. Batons. Air Horns. Handcuffs. Fat free "donuts." He forgot where he was for a moment, and could only sweat and jitter before the feminine high-heel power jeering down at him.

But then he saw Terrible Taqueena and Vicious Vapenny holding down that runt, the real runt, he'd been waiting for. They had just peeled off the first layer (clothes) and were ready to go after the second.

"Hey you miniature hoodlums, save some for me!"

And he heaved himself as far up the wall as his many weight-pounds would allow: Three inches. There had to be a better way. He was about to consider

staked up what was left of his cardboard decoys when something snagged onto his belt loop. The ensuing adventure got him intimately acquainted with the arena ground. It was a bit dusty and scrapey for his taste. His face couldn't keep its grip on the Babylon mask, and as his identity's last fleeting veil of protection took off with the wind, he glimpsed the person and patrol car stringing him along by a fishing rod.

"Whoop whoop whoop!" came the unnecessary siren imitation from Lajeanie. Yes, the stupid siren was going off, he'd just been too enraged to hear it. Her boyfriend Quade, though driving, stuck his head out as well. "Whoop whoop whoop!"

"You bet whoop whoop whoop, and now," she brandished a "whip whip whip!" It's a good thing they were all in motion. Otherwise, her aim might be a bit more accurate. All the same, she cackled like a nitrous oxide aficionado. She wasn't in it for the marksmanship, but for the kicks.

The Stonegravel sitters who didn't know better might say that this particular patrol car looked like the one NaLucy scored in a rock-paper-scissors tournament with her Aunt and Uncle cops and mob lackeys. The Stonegravel sister who did know better acted on the fact that it was indeed that very car. To far away times went frivolous faces, to the floor spilt the homework so she could call aloud her own whoop whoops, and to the safety screen leapt Nalucy herself, throttling that which she could not climb since she'd never run an obstacle course a day in her life.

"Oh, there he is," said Kasharen. "And look, there's Laj and Nal. Ooh, she mad about the car."

"Hey don't wreck it, you peepee head, I want to drive it next!"

"What? You're not driving it next, I am."

"Brisket breath, you can't even drive a used tricycle. Remember that time we hogtied Gravy and you missed him?"

"But you used jump ropes, and I told you we needed the cuffs from Officer Ma's handy-bag."

Nalucy wasn't deaf to the broadcast booth bickering. She had a car to recolonize before any more unauthorized personnel weasel their way behind the wheel. The front row police force were getting nervous about her shading the safety wall, though, so they stood up, ready to confront her about it. But then they noticed the kid without that ridiculous wrestling mask on, and thought he looked familiar.

"Bern, haven't I seen that same face somewhere up at the office?"

"Come to think of it, Warren, I think we've seen that face off and on for six years."

"Well what do you think, Uncle Officer Bern??" Nalucy whipped out her phone and shoved it in her uncle officer's face. Alarmed and scandalized by the picture there, he relayed the gesture to Uncle Officer Warren. And through his puffy black eye, he saw a chubby little four-year-old in a family line-up photo

(minus Don Dad and Officer Mom), circled with a read marker and caption detailing a certain exterminator he'd run over earlier that day.

With such barely containable judicial indignance, what could they do but join in the "Whoop whoop" and barrage of the fence? Besides roping in the rest of their municipal colleagues with a phone-induced black eye, I mean.

"Things are sure getting out of paw," observed Mo. He was tucked safely away beneath the front row bleacher, watching all those police phone-smacking one another's faces before assaulting the safety wall. He had to get Degravis out of there and quick. Now, where was the last place he'd seen Bomb-Your-Briefs?

Stomp went somebody's heavysset foot on his tail, and he nearly splodered trying to hold back a yelp of pain. When he looked back to see who was in such a hurry, it was one of the Stonegravel sisters. "I've got the preggies," she lamented, "and Nal expects me to do the sitting. Who do I look like, Mary Pops-in?" And the voice from her innermost womanly core called out, "You're about to merry-pops all over the place if you don't let me out so I can see what all that WANT hub-bub was about."

"Pipe down in there! The twins are responsible for this. And so is Laj. And Gravy, too. I can't think of a way to blame Jam yet but I'll come up with something. You down there!" She thumped her boulderous expectation and it bounced and bellowed like a timpani. "Pull your weight for once and do some thinkin. Come up with a way to railroad Jam while I knock some twin heads together."

Of course, the twins had to know what happened to briefs. Mo scurried along close behind, keeping tabs on her whereabouts using the continual prenatal complaints about having to do seventh grade thinking while in negative sixth-and-a-half grade. He ran out of bleacher to hide under, so he had to come out in the open. The shenanigans at the safety screen gave him adequate cover. Still, he couldn't help but pause at the sight of... ahem, Lady Principal Fivanité Gonzalez enjoying the spectacle alongside a grizzled old military veteran.

He couldn't afford to linger. Degravis could afford it even less. He flumped along the ground, evading the whip but rubbing red raw. For a moment, Mo caught Gonzalez glancing his way. One instantaneous meeting between their respective eyes, and he bolted for it.

"Well my Degravy disciplinin' makes me special."

"Well my Degravy discipline makes me happy."

The twins had by now completely forsaken their broadcasting duties as the Bun Boys watched them dance a sassy jig at one another. In burst Quan and her incubation. "Why'r'n't you sitting?"

"Get out of here," sassed Kash. "We're broadcasting."

"You go sitting if you want to so bad."

"What do you think I'm doing here?" And she presented the thing still complaining about the unreasonable responsibilities placed upon him. Mo positioned himself right outside the door, distant enough to keep out of sight but close enough to catch every single syllable.

"Aw, poot pile, you're not about to babysit us are you?" worried Shak.

"Yeah. We're old enough to drive, you know. How do you think we got here in the first place?"

"I'm tellin' Officer Ma and Don Pa what you's up to. Then they'll throw a fit. How did you get over here in the first place?"

"None of your slick shiney butt skin," sassed Shak. "I'll take the patrol keys, and there's not a flying booger morsel you can do about it."

"No, I'll take the patrol keys," argued Kash. "You can have that letter truck we took from the rodent.."

"What letter truck?" said their sister's yet-to-be. "Ma I wanna drive too!"

"Hey is that a boy down there?" queried Shak. "He can have the letter truck. It's the least we can do before he gets the Degravy Detreatment. It's down near the joint behind the outhouse. Fetch."

Quanina was too busy refuting anyone giving her boy-down-there any treatment unless it came directly from Queen Quan herself. She failed to catch the keys and they flew right over her shoulder, right into Mo's personal crosshairs.

"Jackpot." Now was the time for action. He swooped out of his hiding spot and snatched the keys on his way to the saloon. If any sister tried to chase him, she'd have had to dive between any number of leg pairs and slide through closing bathroom doors to keep up, but just as the twin had stated, there was Briefs, barely able to hold in all those license plates.

"Where'd all these come from? Phooey, I got no time to think. Degrav's losing layer after layer of skin as I speak. I gotta get on there, fast."

That he did, completely forgetting to close the mail compartment doors so that license plates spilled out the back. His entry into the arena caught the attention of Junior, who, bored with all the back-and-forth sister sparring in the broadcast booth, thought the mouse's own obliteration would add a little more spice to the mix.

"Hey Hans, look. If it isn't our own little rebellious rat looking for a little fame. What do you say we help him out a little? Give his patronship a boost?"

They redirect the jumbotron from Degravis, now, trying to pull himself aboard the patrol car, to Mo, and the numerous license plates spilling out the back of his car. Cedric had been dozing off, but one look in his cohort's direction got him up in proverbial non-existent arms.

"What are you chuckleheads doing?" He sprung into action. "Don't you remember what we stuffed that car with? We'll get busted!"

Gasps of recognition erupted within the audience. Familiar numbers had them glancing from the jumbotron to the cars that were no longer in commuter shape, road trip shape, or any other shape besides city dump shape, and they assembled their own stampede towards the safety screen.

It was getting weaker. Mo could tell its sway was getting more and more extreme. Navigating the wrecks, he leveraged a mailbag outside his window.

"Wondy, I ask with all my heart, soul, mind, muscle, fur, tail, and fat that this bag is sturdy enough to carry all of Degrav's heart, soul, mind, mus-"

That request got its test the moment he crossed Lajeanie's patrol car. The fishing line went taut, and Mo hurled a license plate at it like a Frisbee. It snapped, and so did the safety screen for all attending Damselwoodizens to raid the arena and reclaim what they could of whatever was left of their battle 'bliterated vehicles while Degravis flopped and flumped out of sight in a mailbag.

* * *

They parked at a Shove-offron station to refill their kaPoocha supply. For the rest of their time on the surface, they'd have to drive under false colors. Deep down in the mail compartment, Mo got out the paint he was sure would convince everybody else Briefs was a humble moving van, which is to say, he painted the words "Muveeng Wan" on the side.

"More like, honey-I-shrunk-the moving van," grumbled Degravis in between winces.

Mo shrugged. "A moving van for smurfs. Who'll know the difference?"

They had to hide their identities anyway. The quickest thing Mo could find himself was a "wandering amigo" costume designed for someone much much taller. Degravis wore an igloo. He needed the ice, however long it would last beneath the Arizona sun.

"What's say we grab some food?" Mo pointed to the McCheapGrub's that adjoined the service station. "I'm famished."

One look at the wandering amigo, and they learned the rumors about the skinwalker were true. He must have been on a diet or something. They all dove through the windows making the correct assumption that whatever was under all that sagging skin wasn't human. Degravis was a little less embarrassed to come in after that. He'd noticed the only customers around had been Native Earth humans, the species most likely to recognize him.

The employees, including the Hub-bub McCheapGrub clown, had run for it, too. Nobody was around, so they could take a break from disguising to help themselves to fries and soda. Then they took a seat.

"You know, big guy, I can't even remember who owes who how many of what. I think your baby sister really did a number on my memory."

If Degravis was better at math, he didn't offer a demonstration. All he did was blow a contemptuous puff of air. "Try getting it from all six of the older ones and their boyfriends, husbands, and exes every day."

"Your folks didn't stop it?"

He suddenly learned how dumb that question was based on the glower he got. "Never say the word 'folks' again. And with Officer Ma breaking up jailbreak plans and Don Pa orchestrating protection rackets, tell me where there's time to give a zombie poot about girls bein' boys, beatin' boys."

That tough, surly exterior never went anywhere, and yet, Mo saw his big hulking comrade in a much different light. He was so fierce and formidable around his peers, but he was miles down the food ladder in his own home. No wonder he wanted a gang so badly. He wasn't out to lead a crusade or conquer turfs; he was seeking safety.

Something Mo needed a little less of.

Wanda's name showed up as his phone rang. He was glad he couldn't see the look on her face. He bet his right buck tooth and the Snowflakesy Blast he was about to dig into that she was fifteen daily good turns away from pleased with whatever she thought he might be doing. All he could do was mute the call and text her, "cant say where im but promise good n safe." He was about to assure Degravis he was all too familiar with the oppressive half of the human gender when he heard a spectacular flush, one that could have created a black hole right there in the joint.

"Company at three o'clock!" Mo threw the amigo back on while Degravis dumped ice all over himself.

Out of the bathroom lumbered a bull in full flannel. He checked his phone. "Looks more like eight o'clock to me." He then looked around the burger stand at all the broken windows. He asked of the disguised Mo, "Some kind of opera competition happen while I was in the can, ordinary-looking Native Earthan citizen and out-of-place ice block habitat?"

Mo checked Degravis for possible suggestions. Getting none, he hypothesized, "I think the food had an argument with their tongues and tums."

The bull shrugged, then shambled on his merry musclebound way. The flush he'd left behind still sighed. Mo got up and noticed that the bathroom he'd left was neither the men's nor the women's, but a toilet designated specifically for bulls. He could hardly believe the size of the commode within. You could cram an 18-wheeler down there.

And that ignited the blazingest of lightbulbs.

"That's it! That's our ticket to the ugwan!"

He skipped back to their booth.

"Degrav, you ever been flushed down the toilet?"

Degravis was not amused by the question. "Getting flushed down the toilet was the first thing to ever happen to me."

"Oh... well, this time there'll be a great big gang at the end, so you'll never go down it again."

"Huh... well, I supposed there are bigger badder huffier puffier candidates down there than there are at the bowling alley."

"That's the spirit. Now come on, we gotta board briefs."

Briefs, however, was on her way down the road. Through the side mirror, the boys caught a glimpse of her hijacker, a little blue man in white.

"Hey what the... where's she going?" cried Mo.

"Haven't you heard?" Another blue man hanging his head in shame hammered an Out-of-business sign into the wall. "McCheapGrub's out of business. We had to pack up our wares. Take them to busier trails."

"Call your hombre back," ordered Degravis. He picked up the little blue man by the shirt and shook him. "That is not a moving van."

"Simmer down, Degrav," said Mo. "Told you know one would know the difference, just... Mister, if you could call your pal back, yeah, you're not out of business, my disguises are just a little too convincing."

The little blue man had fainted. All the boys could do now is chase after her, hoping she'd run out of gas faster than they did.