

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, or taking a shower, and the next there came spluttering out the ever fabled 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 beasts" 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 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 ugwangers on the freight elevator to the damaged site. Even the guys 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 be brainiacs 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 whether he'd need to throw the man in after it or just give him a black eye to teach the lesson, everyone else awaited the conclusive clatter that would give them some estimatable measurement. It never came. Just to make sure, this guy was about to throw a second one in, but Carl intervened in time.

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

He turned on the radio to death metal rock so as to speed things up. Most of the ugwengineers weren't numbskulls; they knew they were no safer from a one-way trip down the abyss than the idiot who'd just set their boss on edge, so they dove into their harnesses, strapped to high-powered fans, and got to work propelling around and hammering a net into the wall around the pit's perimeter.

It was achey work; they should have had muscles stacked up to a refrigerator within the first hour. Just when they thought they'd finished, Carl would heave

some heavy object onto it and undo their work in one area. "Found a weak spot," he'd say. "Nail it in further." He patrolled by popping in and out of various tunnels with a toolbox, a tire, an I-beam or, at one point, even a whole golf buggy. The men grumbled curses, but they redid their work. They just had to remind themselves it was for the good of Damselwood, even though exterminating the dirty rat who started this would have done Damselwood way better.

Then they heard a steady trickling sound. Something obviously liquid, a steady stream, something that, even though they were in the right place for, warranted a warning so as not to scar anyone. A quick looksy by the bravest (read: dumbest) guy among them led to the discovery that, in addition to this guy possibly being some kind of uncloseted peeper, it was coming from high above.

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

Forget the net. Now they knew the real reason why there was no carnage around. Whoever had demolished this part of the ugwan was still alive. Spotlights scurried all up and down the wall, but the one guy who knew what he was doing traced the unsteady stream up to a fluid spilling from an open bottle, which in turn dangled from a trench coat pocket, worn by a secret agent balancing on a pipe.

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

"Commence fire!"

They knew they'd get some reward out of capturing him, even if it was only the joy of tying him into knots. They hurled their tools as hard as they could. They

weren't olympian athletes, though, so their aim was lousy. Wrenches collided with the backs of heads and into fan propellers. Had it not been for the hardhats, they'd be in a coma today. Had it not been for the net, they might be falling today (they still thought that pit was bottomless) They still felt it, though, and were quick to return the injury. It wasn't long before the whole charade devolved into a petty power tool pelt.

The spy in the trenchcoat didn't think he was any safer, even with their lousy aim. He scampered along the pipe and made for 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, where his arrival inspired peace. Any leftover animosity was rechanneled towards pinning his arms behind his back and tying the sleeves together. This whole wardrobe, coat, hat, and boots, was way too big for him. They couldn't see the guy beneath it, even with their headlights.

Once his gut stopped vibrating (for that's where many of his brains were, alongside lakes of beer reserves), Carl turned off the radio. He'd been in the dark about the hub-bub. Now he could see that his henchineers had made an arrest. He was not impressed. Something about the Western frontier spurred them towards martial bravado, and that was not a qualification they'd been hired for.

"Whatever you got there, throw it down in the pit. Or put him to work, I don't care, we're not paying you all to wrestle."

"But boss, this is the guy who made today's work necessary."

"Then throw him in extra hard."

"But the net's too secure."

Carl grumbled. It was this kind of shirkery that forced him to take punitive action, and nothing tested foundational strength the way his own weight did. No propeller of any power would carry him; His harness was custom designed, wide enough to wrap around a lazy buffalo several times over, and it hooked onto a cable that could hold an elephant. The first step onto the net seemed to warp the gravity pull. Even the pit below would forever bear his footprints.

With their boss on the war path, they assembled a makeshift fishing pole out of some wire and piping. They'd have to stand clear out of clobbering range. Their captive seemed to know what he was in for; he was a total squirm worm, bending into absurd angles while arguing with himself in various different voices: "Whose idea was this? What about my bucket list? Quick, pick a religion. I told you we should have brought guns," and, when Carl was at the end of his cable and had to unhook it, "I'm not the neoimmigrant you're after!"

After that very last outburst, everything in the cavern seemed to change color, shape, and texture. Now, they weren't so sure this stranger was to blame. Was he one of their kind? Everyone was less hyped to put an end to him. In fact, they brought him into a huddle to confer over common experiences

Carl, however, was not one to be hindered by politically correct gibberish. "Keep that runt where I can see him," he warned. This looked more and more to

him like a convoluted scheme to get out of work. "Which one of you pebble brains' idea was this?"

After a few rushed whispers, they selected an ambassador and sent him 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 Macaroni, 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."

The guy got closer all right. Carl reared back and launched him, investing every muscle fibre and fat cell he owned. "I'll nix you, you invasive little cockroach!" This didn't knock the second secret agent down, like he'd expected. It did disarm him, however. Carl saw little metal contraptions raining towards him, and he seized his nearest lackey to shield himself. A few clickety clacks and anguished squeelings later, the spillage was over. The bucket was all full of mousetraps, now clamped all over his underling's snout, hooves, and tail.

"Hope I get a raise for this," he whimpered

"Already got one, but good idea." Carl turned to the rest. "The chucklehead who gets a hold of that other weasel up there gets half a raise. Whoever gets the weasel we lost a second ago gets the other half."

They didn't want to incarcerate the one who could be an ally, but they thought they should try to rescue him. The problem was that they couldn't tell him from the other spy; all they saw were two overdressed doofii having a sissy fight - slapping at the other's face and trying to outshimmy him. They threw power tools anyway, hoping to get a hold of the new one and interrogate him. Their aim hadn't improved since the last time this happened, though. The first instance of friendly fire was an accident. The second was for revenge, and the third for rerevenge, and by that point the friendly was all gone.

"You morons, cease fire," bellowed Carl. He only wanted them to cease fire so he could commence fire on their careers. Before he got to fire anyone, a well-aimed wrench clunked him on the bald spot. The cushiony fat and hard hat saved him from a busted skull, but after he turned to identify the mousetrap-clad culprit and relieved his duty, he collapsed unconscious onto the net. It really was secure after all.

A gunshot blast woke him up again. Next thing he knew, something was wiggling around in his belly button. Apparently the shot had split the cable holding up the two agents. They plunged headlong, and now all that taut flesh held them in a grip as mighty as Carl's gritted teeth.

The engineered swine blew the smoke off his gun. Their interest in personal retribution gone, his coworkers stood stunned and staring at the scandalous treachery. "I'll put a knot in your skull later," growled Carl, then extracted his catches and held them both 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 for Carl's taste. 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 the 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, two. 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 challenged him to an arm-wrestling match. 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!"

Both pile-ups split in all directions. The ones a shell short of a taco looked for shelter between the engineer leg forest, and by that point, they all forgot about alliances based on preferred terminology. Rats were icky. So were cigarettes and fake beer. They stamped like a round of "If You're Angry and You Know It." It was no use; even their point-blank aim was lousy. Whenever a claw, hoof, paw, or talon did in fact strike true, they shoved the target through the gaps in the net. Some of the beer caps burst open and zapped their fan-powered jetpacks, and one lame-braingineer even shoved the cigarettes through his colleagues' blades. When it was all over, no one had captured a single sip or whisker.

They were alone now. They were left to stare at one another in disbelief over the thing they could hardly believe just happened. They had no hint of what their next move should be. Even Carl needed a few seconds to remember how in-charge he was.

"Right, now that that hoo-hah is out of the way..."

"We're doomed men," interrupted one of his underlings. "We've made ourselves enemies, maybe even engineeremies, of both sides now that we've grilled their cheese and stomped them out."

Carl wasn't moved. "Well, that's no excuse for slacking. Beer we don't have to drink, cigs we don't have to smoke, and... gulp... jars we don't have to pay aren't gonna slow me down. You neither, if I have any say in it."

"They'll be on their way back, and this time they'll bring friends," said his coworker. "And if they can blast a bottomless hole through the Earth, what do you think they can do to us?"

"I can do a lot scarier than holes without butts," threatened Carl, and then everyone chickengineered out. They all picked a different tunnel to run down, only to come hollering back trying to outrun bullets, missiles, and other projectiles. Each tunnel coughed up one of two armies; either the artillery and tanks had rats behind the wheels, or the weaponry was manned by stuff like poker cards stacked against them or Carl's ex-wife's skinnier-man casserole.

It was like his ever-so-mighty rage was now a mere beer keg that someone had just uncorked, and it was spilling out all over the floor. Without it, all that was left was stupefaction. At least his underling still had the ability to move, mostly stabbing at the buttons on their fan straps until they remembered that they'd been ruined by beer and cigarette bits. Then they reverted to their primal instincts. A falcon tried to make a "last meal" of a lizard, who defended himself with hasty wimp push-ups. A sheep wobbled over to a bucking mule and attempted to extort

a conversion out of him. A walking anvil fell screaming into the middle of the net and tore a big hole, making everyone wonder where it came from a split second before they themselves started falling, screaming, and turned into has-beengineers.

Carl didn't fall yet; he was all tangled up in the net. He was still around to watch the opening firepower of these ill-organized encroachers. That wasn't much different from the battle business you saw in the rest of the world. They weren't after him anyway; they were all shooting at one another.

All of them, except for the two rodents staring down at him over the ledge. One was licking his lips and tying a bib around his neck, the other was sharpening a knife against a fork.

"Fine," grumbled Carl. "Eat me. What do I care? No one's getting out of this alive."

"Hey, no need to sizzle. It's the ropes you're all wrapped up in we're after."

They hopped down with little umbrellas and Carl's own cable while the spectacle waged on above them. Even if they had intended to rescue him, they'd be towing him back up into the line of fire. Still, there was some oddly squeamish yet tingingly warmth in the impact they made when they landed on his shoulder. They chowed down on the knots and tangles in the netting. They had appetites like gators.

"Huh, Markepsi should be backing up by now," said one of them. "Maybe the cable's too sturdy. Wait here, I'll go tell him."

He got back up to the ledge by opening and shutting his umbrella at an extreme speed. His friend took a seat on Carl's shoulder.

"Listen... I know you don't have any reason to trust us. That's my family up there, firing back. I know. There's starting it, and there's also participating in it."

If anyone had told him that morning that he'd end up dangling off a ledge in a net and have to be rescued by talking rats, he would have tied their tongue into a knot (his hands were big, but so would have been that person's mouth). The creature now sitting on his shoulder, obviously a girl, maybe even somebody's mom, was giving him more than a couple of words. She was giving him feelings; something that wasn't unbridled testosteronic fury. Something completely unrelated to the kind of things that made the guys above them shoot missiles at each other. Something that made him think there were more knots to untie than the ones in the net.

"Go on," he said.

"Well... everything I've seen up to this point has added up to this: It takes two people to start a war. There's the person who wants to skip permission, and the person who won't share. There's starting a war, and there's joining in. But I believe in one more thing."

She was only a few syllables away from listing the last item when they finally moved. It was just in the wrong direction. They didn't rise like they were supposed to. They dropped a few inches. This rat woman's partner might have given them a

reasonable explanation on his return, had it not taken the form of falling on her and knocking them both flailing into the pit below.

So much for getting rescued. Not that he'd get out looking like anything other than the Swissest of cheese anyway. His outer layers may have been compact and rubbery, but they weren't bullet proof. At least he knew the rats were the good guys now, and when he pulled out his cell phone, he texted his own boss to tell him as much.

"Hello, Mr. Cliffhanger. I'll have to resolve you now."

He was too busy typing to look up, but he assumed it was one of the bad guys, one of the things that looked like corrupted fun. He knew that woman's cooking might come to life through unholy possession one day.

"It's nothing personal, it's just that I won't get desert unless I make sure all our enemies go bye-bye."

The message he sent was thorough and vivid, sure to make any preacher or pacifist enlist and exterminate the real rats, the figurative ones rather than the literal ones. He had just enough time between hitting the "send" button and "going bye-bye" to look up and glare at his enemy.

What he saw was not a walking beer bottle. It was not a collection of poker chips. It was not an antithetical affront to engineering of any sort, or even the pukeware of the former Mrs. Sanders. No, the person who chewed through his cable and sent him on his way to the big adios was a rodent. An obvious relative of the people who'd been rescuing him a few minutes ago.

War was about to break out in Damselwood. And they'd been warned about the wrong people.