

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To Saturn's surprise and annoyance, she'd also snatched the jar. Then she unscrewed it. The blue shriveling rat within took such a deep breath that the guards all dropped their weapons and flailed at the air that had been stolen from them. Saturn slid out of her chair like a jellyfish. She crept around as if looking for

stray air crumbs on the ground. Then you had Splitsvelcro, making the biggest show of all, mouthing things like "You shall not usurp my respiratory turf!" then knocking over his chair to claw his way towards peanut butter boy. He had his hands up in the strangle position when Gonzalez shoved him away with her foot. "Don't be a clown."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Er... well, all levity aside, I thought he was one of yours. Mine wouldn't fail his mission so quickly. On the other hand, I have reports (he forgot to credit who told him, blabbering old crusty ingrate, unless of course he had a bunch of evil twins scamperig around so they could report all that hub-bub) of two of your whippersnappers - the doughy one and the big-eared one - wreaking havoc that they leave for others to sweep up, and with no end goal in sight."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Come, now, need I put the lid back on lest the peanut butter within lose its freshness?"

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

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

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

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

"Who's yo mama?"

Saturn was armoring her own hand with a sanitation glove so she could get in a squeeze. With what breath he still had, the rat gasped out. "Mama... not a

ringleader, but... supposed to.. agg... deliver we slumsters... agga... from mean mice... many mice... eeny-meany land-miney... girk... mice... and more..."

Just when she'd finished gloving up, Saturn noticed the smooth buttery enticement Splitsvelcro had on his face. Gonzalez noticed it, too. Saturn noticed Gonzalez noticed it, too. What better opportunity would she have to type up a legal document and pilfer their signatures? None. So she did it. And in thirty seconds flat, Splitsvelcro and Gonzalez had both absentmindedly given her permission to shoot any neog student who showed up within 100 feet of Duncan property.

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

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

"SACRILEGE!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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