

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

Gonzalez made sure to show up first to order booze. That way, she could spike Splitsvelcro's drink ahead of time with her own truth serum. She'd recently knicked the 9th commandment from the Museum of Goody Two-Shoes. With the help of her trusty cheese grater, she ground a hunk of it into dust over his Jim Beam Ice Water, and not a jiffy too soon. Splitsvelcro spotted the table from across the crowded room, but there was enough first-base business in the way to hide what she was up to. He marched himself over and nearly knocked over both their overpriced beverages with his pointing finger on its horribly mannered reach across the table.

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

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

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

"Yes, I bet you would. Have."

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

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

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

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

"Bottom's up, then."

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

Let the interrogation begin.

"How's it taste?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ashamed to say I could not."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ask and you'll get, then."

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

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

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

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

Imagine as best you can the next shenanigan happening in metric form, to the beat of a perfectly even hundred-forty quarters-per-minute tempo. Splitsvelcro shouted, "Ahoy, ba-bum!" and heaved himself onto the table before pretending to fire a machine gun and making the relevant sound effects. He ceased and saluted. "Army!" Then he marched one step forward with the gunfire routine. He did this a couple of times while Gonzalez wondered if everything he'd said so far was more

because of inebriation than serum potency. She should have known it would take more than a few pulverized pebbles to get anything good out of that old coot.

"Drawp 'n' gimme fiddy!"

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

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

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

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

Not one to miss out on good ol' fashioned violence for piffling sissy-ups, Splitsvelcro snatched the phone and watched with iron-clad fascination while Gonzalez corrected her mistake. He was busy. He didn't care about the rats, but all those Jehovah's witnesses scared him too much to noticed the stuff he now

guzzled like a soda at the movies, then stiffened out like a surfboard and did the loony-lips, among other things like firing car exhaust through his ears. Once the coconut-bikini hula dance was out of the way, he was all ripe for the interrogatin'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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