

Mathemagics

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Prologue

Over the years he had formed a habit of checking Vera's underwear drawer for unsuitable objects.

No matter how often he explained to her that a habit of nibbling on sweets would only exacerbate her weight problem, she regularly concealed boxes of chocolates in the underwear drawer and he as regularly threw them into the trash. Here, too, he found the worldly magazines like Redbook and Good Housekeeping that she sneaked home from the supermarket and the sleazy dangling earrings that he had explicitly told her to throw away—so unsuitable for the wife of a man of God. Hiding these things under her panties was Vera's little act of childish rebellion, and he didn't begrudge it her; women had to be allowed their trivial outlets. And at least she had better sense than to complain when her inappropriate possessions disappeared.

But this! Boatright drew the book slowly out of its hiding place. Raised gold foil letters shrieked out a

title against a scarlet background: Love's Tender Promise. Beneath the letters were two half-naked figures entwined in a shameless embrace, the woman with her eyes closed and leaning back in the arms of a blond brute whose intentions were all too clear. . . .

This time Vera had gone too far. Here he was, as head of the American Values Research Center, fighting the good fight to keep smut off the bookstands and out of the schools, and she was betraying him by smuggling the stuff into their own home! He couldn't just pitch this thing into the garbage can; this time, sterner measures were called for. He would commit this book to the flames. And he would leave the little pile of ashes in the middle of the patio, to let Vera know exactly what he thought of her latest transgression.

Box of matches in one hand, book in the other, Bob Boatright marched with almost military precision towards the flagstone patio where he barbecued steaks on weekends. The September sun glared down on his head, almost hot enough to burn the book without help; already the long Texas summer had turned the grass around the patio to clusters of dry, shriveled stalks. He dropped the book on top of the barbecue grill and held a match to its lurid cover.

The match flickered and went out.

No doubt that glossy stuff they put on the covers made the books harder to burn. No matter; the pages inside would go quickly enough. He had only to lay the book face open on the grill . . .

It fell shut again as soon as he let go of it.

Bob Boatright's lips narrowed to a thin, determined line as he wrestled with the book. Eventually he was able to wedge the back cover and pages 301–346 under one of the greasy wires of the barbecue grill, the front cover and pages 1–30 under another wire, cracking the spine and leaving pages 31–299 fluttering wantonly in the warm September sun.

"Now," he said, and again applied match to paper.

Page 218 burst into flames most satisfactorily, blackening and curling as it burnt until nothing could be read but a few words right at the spine of the book. Pages 216 and 219 also caught fire, but burned only halfway into the book before slowing down to a grudging smolder. The pages between them slowly blackened. A breath of wind fanned the grill and small blue flames burst up for a moment, then died down again.

The pages must be jammed together so tightly that there was no oxygen for the flames to consume.

Boatright found a branch in the grass and poked at the book, first gingerly, then more firmly. Each prod was rewarded by a brief spurt of blue flame and the sight of a few more pages blackening.

Sweat rolled down his forehead and splattered his glasses. He looked at his watch. He had been standing in the September sun for nearly half an hour, in front of a blazing fire—well, no, not exactly blazing, that was the problem. It was taking forever to get rid of this one miserable paperback. How had

Hitler managed those famous book-burnings of the thirties? Wrong, of course, a different thing entirely, everybody knew the Nazis had been evil; still, Boatright thought wistfully, they knew how to get things done. Mussolini made the trains run on time, and Hitler burned thousands of books. Well, hundreds anyway.

What was their secret? No halfmeasures, that was it! “Ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire. Deuteronomy 7:5,” Boatright intoned. He grabbed the can of fire-starter fluid and sloshed its contents liberally over the book, the grill, the ground, and his shoes. Then he backed away and threw a lighted match into the middle of the barbecue grill. Flames shot up.

And around.

And all over . . .

The untended stretch of weeds between the patio and the neighbor’s fence, golden-dry from a long

Texassummer, blazed up more gaily even than page 219. Boatright watched in horror as the fire reached the neighbor’s new wooden fence. The sun-dried boards crackled and blackened in the heat; a gust of wind swept a shower of sparks over the fence to catch the dry grass next door. There was a clanging sound in Boatright’s ears, a howling that seemed to come from all directions at once, as if Satan Himself and a hundred devils were mocking him.

Actually, there were only three fire engines. But Boatright never noticed when the devilish howling of the sirens ceased; he was being pushed out of the way by large, crude men in protective gear, who shouted orders at one another and dragged heavy equipment across Vera’s autumn garden and soaked his shoes when he didn’t move out of the way fast enough.

And when the brush fire had been reduced to a soggy black mess covering most of the Boatright backyard and the two neighboring yards, the men who’d put it out spoke very crudely to Boatright himself.

“What kind of a damn fool burns trash outdoors after a four-month drought? Haven’t you ever heard of the fire ordinance? Oughta write up a citation, but I don’t have time for the (obscurity)

(obscurity) paperwork. Anyway I figure it’s gonna cost you enough getting that fence rebuilt for Miz Riggs. And you are gonna pay for it, right, you (obscurity) (expletive) jackass?”

Bob Boatright nodded and croaked agreement.

When the men had gone away again, he waded through soot and mud to satisfy himself that he had at least cleansed the world of one filthy thing that day. The charred, vaguely rectangular lump on top of the barbecue grill could no longer be considered a book . . . could it?

When he picked the thing up, greasy ashes covered his hands, fell away in clumps and stained his pants.

The pages of the book were a blackened clump of ashes, but the lurid cover leered up at him, charred but still indecent: wisps of pink and scarlet, lush female flesh and floating veils. Boatright crumpled it in his hand and marched toward the back door just as his wife opened it.

“For mercy’s sake, dear,” she exclaimed, “whatever is going on? Was there a fire?”

Vera’s powers of reasoning were apparently undiminished. She could recognize a charred backyard and a burnt fence when she saw them.

“Are you hurt? What happened?” She looked down at the blackened object in his hand. “And what

have you done with my book? Darn it, Bob, I hadn't finished yet! Now I'll never find out if Maura married Kenneth and reformed from smuggling!"

"You'll be better off not corrupting your mind with such filth," Boatright said. "What if our little Becky had found it? Did you ever consider that?"

"But what have you been doing? It looks like the whole backyard is gone."

When tried beyond endurance, even a decent Christian man can yell at his wife. "It wouldn't burn!"

Boatright shouted, and stalked past his wife into the house. His feet left sooty prints on the beige carpeting.

Chapter 1

I was just shoving a cart around the supermarket, trying to figure out where the new manager had hidden the star anise and Szechwan peppercorns, when he reared up in front of me: a big blond hulk with thews to die for, piercing blue eyes, gleaming chest and shoulders bared to the blast of the

Frozen Foods section.

"Vordo!"

I dropped the package of Bagel Bites I'd been considering as an after school snack for Salla. My right hand went to my hip, automatically. But there wasn't anything there except my blue jeans.

Wallet in front pocket, Swiss Army knife in hip pocket. Even granted that the last time I'd seen him he had been running the other way, I wasn't about to go up against Vordo with nothing but a pocketknife.

Except, of course, it wasn't Vordo. In the flesh, that is. It was only a life-sized cardboard picture of him, propped up in front of the magazine stand at the end of the aisle. He was brandishing a short sword in one hand and holding up a girl with more hair than clothes in the other hand—I mean, that was the pictured pose.

And I felt like a damned fool. If I'd been armed, I might have been startled into attacking a picture. As it was, I'd already acted silly enough to get more attention than I wanted.

"Riva, what's the matter with you? You've gone absolutely white—well, as white as you can get," tittered Vera Boatright. I knew her slightly from school; her daughter Becky played with Salla whenever she could get sprung from the family regime of homework, housework and Bible study.

"She's found her ideal man," suggested someone else whom I vaguely remembered seeing at

PTA meetings; a perfect Junior League size four with one of those hundred-dollar sculpted haircuts, a “jogging” suit that probably cost more than my monthly grocery bill, and bright maroon lips pursed into an expression of permanent discontent. The pouting look was what jogged my memory. She had to be that little pill Orrin’s mom. Louise, that was her name.

“I know him,” I blurted out. “What’s he doing here?”

Vera giggled. “He’s not here, silly, that’s only a picture.”

“Of course you know him,” Louise said, “he’s on half the covers in the romance section.”

“He’s the hottest male model for romance covers since Fabio,” Vera put in. “Just having him on the cover doubles the sales of a book, they say.”

“You must have seen his face every time you walked past the paperback books,” Louise added.

“I never look at the romance novels,” I said.

“Oh—well—neither do I, of course,” Vera said immediately. Her face turned pink. “My husband—

I mean, our church doesn’t approve of all that filth.” She leaned towards me and whispered confidentially, “You wouldn’t believe the sort of dirty stuff they print in those books. Why, in the very first pages of Love’s Tender Promise—”

“I mean,” I interrupted Vera without waiting to hear about the erotic promises of Love’s Tender

Promise, “I know him. From . . . a long time ago.” Two years. And that wasn’t nearly long enough.

What was Vordo doing on this planet?

“Oh, suure,” Louise drawled, “and I suppose you used to date Vordo.”

“That’s his name.” I nodded. “Vordo. Though if I were him, I’d have changed it, after the way he behaved.”

Louise sighed and rolled her eyes upwards. “Give me a break, Riva. Of course you know his name, I just told you. That doesn’t prove anything. You’ve never seen him except on book covers, just like the rest of us. You’ve got to learn to distinguish fantasy from reality.”

“It’s not as easy as you might think,” I muttered as she wheeled her cart away. I put the Bagel Bites back. September in Austin was too hot to risk putting frozen foods in the trunk of the car when I had another stop to make on the way home. It shouldn’t take long to straighten out this mistake at Salla’s school, but even ten minutes would be enough to turn the Bagel Bites into Melted Cheese Slurps.

I had a bad feeling about this meeting at the school as soon as the principal’s secretary requested me not to go to Salla’s home room. “We prefer to conduct confidential meetings in here,” she said, showing me into a cubicle slightly bigger than one of Duke Zolkir’s prison cells.

“There’s nothing delicate about it,” I said, waving the letter I’d received yesterday at her.

“Somebody made a mistake, that’s all, and I’m here to help you straighten it out. Probably a computer

error,” I added, remembering the magic words Dennis used whenever he called the bank.

“Ms. Stankewitz will be with you shortly,” the secretary said. “We’ve found that the services of a professionally trained counselor are invaluable at stressful times like this.”

She closed the door before I could tell her that the only stressful thing about this interview was having to wait in this little box of a room while my groceries cooked by solar heat in the car trunk. It was a flimsy door, too; in my home reality of Dazau I’d simply have put my foot through it, then stood on the woman’s throat until she fixed what was probably her mistake in the first place. But Dennis really liked me to conform to his people’s behavior standards, and after the third time he’d had to bail me out I’d promised to act like a Paper-Pusher woman unless Salla or he were in actual physical danger.

Getting a stupid letter from the superintendent of schools and having to wait around to straighten it out probably didn’t qualify.

With a sigh I smoothed the creases out of the letter and read it again. I’d thought I was making progress in reading English, but I couldn’t make any sense at all out of this—probably because it had been supposed to go to somebody else, somebody whose kid was in trouble.

“Dear Parent:

“This school district is required to inform parents if their child has been determined to meet one or more criteria for being at risk of dropping out of school. Some of these criteria are: failing the TAAS, not being able to speak English fluently, emotional or psychological problems, engaging in delinquent and/or rebellious behavior, and lack of family support.”

None of that applied to Salla. I’d have been told if she’d flunked the TAAS; her English was better than mine, or at least more fluent—I still tend to slip into ki-Dazau to enhance the limited range of expressions available in English. As for family support, well! Here I’d been commuting back and forth between my job on Dazau and a rent house on the Planet of the Piss-Pot Paper-Pushers just so

Salla could go to a good school in a good neighborhood. It was only during the last couple of years, thanks to Dennis’s inspired negotiating after Baron Rodograunnizo tried to have me offed by wizardly tricks, that I’d been able to afford to stay here and study math while Salla went to school.

And the money he’d got from Rodograunnizo was running out. . . .

I yanked my mind away from my personal problems and went back to reading and rereading the letter. The second paragraph was as bad as the first.

“All Austin administrators and teachers are dedicated to providing the support your child may need to stay in school and be successful. Transfer to the Alternative Learning Center, in-school tutorial or counseling sessions, or placement in an EBD classroom may be required. You are encouraged to call the school counselor to learn what is available to help your child and what you can do to help.

Sincerely,

[illegible scrawl]

Superintendent of Schools”

The door opened; a short, dark-haired woman in a blue suit waddled in. “Ms. Konneva? I’m Erica Stankewitz. I’m so glad you could find the time to visit us today.”

“I can only see one of you,” I pointed out. “Are your colleagues invisible?” It was the sort of dirty trick Vordo would have pulled, getting a wizard to disguise his buddies under a cloak of invisibility so that he could claim to’ve beaten up an entire troop of brigands singlehanded. But I didn’t think the Paper-Pushers knew how to do that. Besides, as Dennis had explained and explained, they didn’t use physical force in most of their combats.

A pity, that. I could have taken this woman with both hands tied behind my back. I thought about that while she smiled and explained that she was speaking for the School when she said “us.”

“We haven’t seen much of you here, Ms. Konneva,” she said. “You didn’t come to the Back-to-School Parents’ Party, did you? Or drive on any of the field trips this year?”

“I study during school hours,” I told her.

“Oh,” she said. “How nice for you. Still, most really concerned parents make some effort to appear for important school functions.”

The field trip to the Nature Center . The field trip to the antique shops of New Braunfels . The field trip to watch the Dallas Cowboys practice . . . It was only the end of September, and already Salla’s class had been on six field trips. I contemplated suggesting a minor change in school policy; how about we switched roles, so they taught my kid Earth history and literature, and I took her to the zoo? Wasn’t that the way it was supposed to work?

But it wasn’t what I was there about.

“Look,” I said, “we can discuss the proper role of parents in the schools some other time, okay?”

What I really came about was this.”

Ms. Stankewitz nodded and jotted something down on her note pad as I handed the letter over.

At last, I thought, we can get this cleared up.

“It’s the standard form letter sent to all parents of at-risk students, Ms. Konneva,” she said after a brief glance. “I’m very glad that you’ve finally found some time to think about Sally’s problems.

Now, if you’ll just sign these simple forms, we can get started on applying the test instruments.”

Applying the test instruments? Sounded like something Duke Zolkir’s chief interrogator would have said while his flunkies were greasing the test instruments and heating them up.

And the “simple” forms were a stack at least three inches thick.

“She doesn’t have any problems in school,” I said. “This letter was sent by mistake. You’ve got her mixed up with some other kid. She’s in your Gifted and Talented program, for Nauzu’s sake!”

“A placement error,” said the pasty-faced Stankewitz, “which can be rectified as soon as you sign—”

“It. Is. Not. An. Error,” I said. “This is the error.” I jabbed my thumb at the letter on top of her stack of forms. “There is absolutely no reason why Salla should be considered at risk of dropping out.

Now just check your files and find out who should have received this letter, and we’ll be done here.”

“Oh, she meets plenty of the district criteria,” Ms. Stankewitz said, flipping through a manila folder full of papers. “We’re talking about Sally Konneva, right? Sixth grade? Margaret Fishbeck’s class?”

“That’s another thing I meant to bring up, as long as I’m here,” I said. “What on earth is Ms. Fishbeck doing in charge of the G& T class? We were told Cathy Harper would be teaching the sixth grade G& T class this year.” Cathy was a friend of Dennis’s, as close as this world got to a wizardscholar.

She’d written a dissertation on Central Texas folklore and European mythology that was published as a popular book and earned, she said, far more than she’d ever made teaching. Salla had been looking forward all summer to taking Cathy’s special unit on myths and legends in world literature. She complained that Ms. Fishbeck had watered the material down and narrowed the focus and—well, I didn’t understand everything she said, not being any expert on this world’s mythology, but Salla had not been happy.

“Here we are!” said Erica Stankewitz triumphantly, delving into the depths of her manila folder and coming up with a single typed sheet. “Sally qualifies for the Alternative Education Program under District Codes GT–103A, SD–22, F–1, and F–33b. It’s really very fortunate that we caught her problems in time, Ms. Konneva.”

“Would you mind telling me,” I said as sweetly as I could, “exactly what those codes stand for?”

Erica Stankewitz looked down at her paper. “GT–103A stands for Gifted and Talented, type 103, category A.”

“So you admit she’s a smart kid.”

“Yes, indeed. That’s one of the problems that alerted us,” she said earnestly. “A child who is so far ahead of her class often becomes bored with school. She can be a disruptive influence in the classroom; in fact, that problem has already been reported. SD–22: Rebellious attitude toward authority figures.”

“You’re going to flunk her for being smart and having the wrong attitudes?”

“We don’t ‘flunk’ children in this school, Ms. Konneva. We do feel it desirable to adjust Sally’s attitude.”

I was feeling a powerful urge to adjust Ms. Stankewitz’s attitude. Kneeling in front of me while I prepared to behead her would have been a good attitude. True, I’d left my sword at home, but I was prepared to make some modifications to my usual procedure.

“According to Ms. Fishbeck, Sally has been marking up her homework assignments with red ink—‘correcting’ her teacher’s grammar and spelling.”

I couldn’t quite see the problem in this. “So, were there mistakes in Ms. Fishbeck’s writing or not? And if there were, isn’t she glad to have a student alert enough to catch them?”

“Moving on to the remaining at-risk codes,” Erica Stankewitz said briskly, “F–1 is the code for a dysfunctional family situation.”

“I’m functioning just fine, thank you,” I assured her.

She raised her eyebrows. “According to Sally’s file, you are unmarried, Ms. Konneva?”

“So?”

“And you were never married to Sally’s father?”

“I should think not,” I said. “Bad enough I let that sleazeball—well, never mind.”

Erica Stankewitz sighed. “And he does not provide child support or communicate with his daughter in any way?”

“Just let him try!”

“You seem to be missing the point.” She ticked off what she considered the relevant points on pudgy white fingers. “Single-parent household, history of early promiscuity, no father figure.”

She had a few of those facts wrong, but I didn’t see any point in correcting her; it probably wouldn’t help Salla’s situation to point out that in fact I was sharing a house with the eighth-grade math teacher at this very school, and that Dennis was as much of a parent to Salla as I was.

“And,” said Erica Stankewitz, swooping on her last point with a gleam of triumph in her beady little eyes, “parenthself a dropout—there’s no record here that you finished high school or even middle school, Ms. Konneva.”

They didn’t have high school where I came from. But that probably wasn’t relevant either. I decided to go for the big picture.

“This,” I said as clearly as I could, “is a load of crap, Ms. Stankewitz. How dare you presume to judge my daughter on the basis of what you think you know about our home life and what an incompetent teacher says about her? Doesn’t her academic record have any place at all in this discussion?”

“F–41A,” Stankewitz said, jotting the code down on Salla’s file, “parents not educationally supportive of their child’s teacher or administrators.”

“You’re dyvopto right I’m not supportive,” I snarled.

“On the basis of Sally’s emotional disturbance alone,” Stankewitz said, “I can recommend right now that she be referred to an EBD class.”

Those initials had been used in the letter. “Translation, please?”

“Emotionally and Behaviorally Disturbed.”

“She is not emotionally disturbed.”

“Just look at this picture!” Erica Stankewitz flipped the folder open and shoved it towards me.

“When Ms. Fishbeck asked all the children to draw a picture of their home as the first six-weeks report on the mythology unit, this is what your daughter came up with!”

I vaguely remembered Salla grousing, that weekend, about how she wanted to write papers and do research, not play with crayons like a little kid. Now, that seemed weird to me—as if school wasn’t enough trouble without complaining when once in a while it was easy. Once I learned enough mathemagics to apprentice to a wizard on Dazau, there was no way I was going to open another math book, much less work problems or write papers.

Salla had chosen one of her favorite places to illustrate—the Fall of Nauzu’s Blood, in the mountains of Zemaury near my home village. She’d captured the splashing of the red-tinged water and the rounded smiles of the great slow-boulders so well that I felt a prickle of nostalgia as I looked at it. She’d even drawn in a cluster of chattering, three-legged krelyk winding around the trees that overhung the waterfall.

“It looks fine to me,” I said. “Okay, the colors are a little off and the perspective could have been better, but what can you expect of a sixth-grader?”

“Colors!” Ms. Stankewitz snorted. “Perspective! I’m talking about the subject matter, Ms.

Konneva. That place looks like nothing on Earth. A river of blood hurtling over a cliff, three-legged snakes, rocks with faces? Your child is in serious trouble, and it’s about time you admitted the fact!”

Her pen jabbed at the paper before her with short, angry downward strokes. “Code EB-4,” she announced. “Emotionally disturbed as a result of dysfunctional home situation!”

A bell clanged in the wall over my head. “That’s all,” Erica Stankewitz announced, standing up and collecting her papers.

“Oh, no, it isn’t,” I said. “We haven’t settled anything. I’m not satisfied that you understand

Salla at all.”

A smirk distorted Erica Stankewitz’s pasty face. “On the contrary, Ms. Konneva. I’m afraid it’s you who don’t understand. We don’t need your consent in a serious case like this, you know. If you’d spent more time at the school earlier, volunteering like the other mothers, perhaps your daughter wouldn’t be predelinquent now. Wild assertions to the contrary won’t help your case.”

“In fact,” I said, “you don’t consider yourself answerable to the parents at all, do you? You people will do whatever you dyvopto please to my child and I’m not supposed to have anything to say about it?”

“We consider ourselves advocates for the child’s best interests. This file will convince anyone that Sally should be referred for mandatory counseling, antidelinquent programming and an EBD classroom.”

“Fine,” I said, taking it from her, “I’ll take it home and read it and see if it convinces me.”

“Wait a minute!” Stankewitz’s voice rose to a pained squeak. “You can’t have that—it’s school property!” She made an ineffectual grab for the folder. Somehow her nose accidentally came into contact with my elbow.

“Abd the codtedts are codfidedtial!” she squeaked while fishing out a handkerchief to stop the blood.

“I promise not to send it to the local newspaper,” I said. Stankewitz edged around the desk and tried to block the door. This was a mistake. I accidentally stepped on her fat little black foot and she tripped and fell into the desk. I left her squealing about assault and battery and theft of school property and went to see about my groceries, which were pretty thoroughly cooked by this time.

Chapter 2

I fumed at the idiot school and the idiot counselors all the time I was putting away the groceries.

It was beginning to look like my whole plan of commuting to the Paper-Pushers’ planet so Salla could get a good education had been one big mistake. I’d been lulled by the last two years, when things had seemed to be going so easily. Now everything was going wrong at once. Where had I gone wrong?

I didn’t know, but I did know that standing in the kitchen counting Dennis’s Szechwan cooking supplies wasn’t going to help me figure it out.

Our bedroom had been about the size of one of Zolkir’s prison cells before Dennis moved in his collection of classic science-fiction paperbacks. Now, with floor-to-ceiling shelves lining three walls, it was more like a walk-in closet. Sasulau, my sword, hung in her sheath from one bedpost, and the rest of my old fighting gear was stashed under the bed in a cardboard box from the Container Store. I shucked my Paper-Pushers costume, hung the jeans and shirt on a handy bookcase, knelt on the floor and fished around under the bed for the box.

“That’s a beautiful sight to greet a man after a hard day of eighth-grade math,” said an appreciative voice behind me.

“Mumph murph phttt,” I said. One of us really ought to do something about the dust bunny collection under the bed. I backed out, dragging the box of armor by one hand, and saw Dennis leaning against the door. “I’m going to work out,” I explained to him.

“I can think of better workouts than fooling around with that sword and shield,” he said, reaching for me.

I could, too, but not while I was so mad at the school. “Hold that thought,” I suggested. “I need to—we need to talk, too, but—Nauzu klevulkedimmu! I’m too angry to do anything but work out right now.” I kissed him. It was meant to be a brief kiss, but Dennis managed to involve his hands and my bare rump and a lot of small muscle control around the mouth, and by the time we broke off I was breathing even harder than I had been when I left Stankewitz’s office.

An entrancing image of the counselor’s head on a pike swam before my eyes. It would be a waste of good lust to jump into bed with Dennis right now; he was a man who kept his mind on what he was doing, and I wanted to reciprocate, not get side-tracked into fantasies about Stankewitz’s blood.

“Really,” I said. “I need to work out. Besides, Salla should be home any minute.”

“I’ll cook Szechwan for dinner,” Dennis said. “Did you get the star anise?”

Fiend. He knew exactly what star anise, Szechwan peppercorns and chili oil did to me. Dennis’s Chinese cooking is a sensual experience equaled only by—well, as I said, Salla would be home any minute. And I was still too steamed up over Stankewitz to enjoy life’s normal pleasures.

“I don’t want to feel happy and relaxed,” I muttered. “I want to slash, hew, maim and destroy.”

The star anise is in the brown paper bag with the paper towels, and Norah gave us some habañero peppers from her garden.”

“Wonderful! I’ll improvise.” Dennis went off to the kitchen, humming under his breath, and I put on some of my fighting gear. It was too hot for full armor, and anyway I didn’t need the protection when I was just running through exercises on my own. On the other hand, it was important to keep in training to fight with the full weight of armor. I compromised by putting on the basics—your standard chain-mail bra with welded D cups, crotch guard and shield—and adding jogging weights at ankles and wrists.

I started with some basic stretches, then went through a full cycle of boklu against an imaginary mirror-fighter. Dennis says this looks like something he used to study called Ty Chee or something like that, but it seems unlikely to me that there’s any real connection. Boklu prepares your heart and mind to cleave through any obstacles in your path bare-handed if necessary, always assuming you aren’t already in that frame of mind just from waking up alive another day on Dazau. From what I’ve observed of this universe of the Paper-Pushers, they aren’t much on cleaving either opponents or obstacles. They just wrap them up in red tape.

Which was exactly how I felt now—encircled in a wizard’s web of words. One might as well fight clouds as try to get sense out of people like Stankewitz. Nothing she said meant anything real until the end, when she’d as good as told me they could do whatever they wanted with Salla and they didn’t need to answer to me for it.

My Dazau life had been simpler, if harder. I earned a day’s pay for a day’s fighting and then gave back most of it to Furo Fykrou to pay for the costs of transporting me to Paper-Pushers’ each afternoon by the time Salla came back from school. What was left barely covered rent and groceries in the Paper-Pushers’ neighborhood where I’d established residence as Riva Konneva so that Salla could get the schooling I’d never had.

Just two years ago that way of life had begun to feel like a trap closing in on me. We were just scraping by, but the future did not look bright. As a swordswoman gets older, her earning power diminishes; just when Salla would be needing even more money to pay for higher education on Paper-Pushers’, my take-home zolkys would be dwindling to nearly nothing. That was if Duke Zolkir kept me on at all. If he didn’t, I’d be just another middle-aged freelance swordswoman, always on the road, and Salla would have to leave her schooling to come with me; I’d never be able to afford Furo Fykrou’s transport fees on the odd jobs I would pick up as caravan guard or merchanters’ security.

The only way out of that trap was to find another way of earning a living, and I didn’t have time to learn a new profession while working as Duke Zolkir’s top swordswoman.

Then I met Dennis.

We got stuck together chaperoning a fourth-grade field trip to my workplace. It seemed like a bad idea at the time, but I'd learned it was no use arguing with the earnest, dull young women who organized these things. It seemed like an even worse idea when we arrived in my home reality—after paying exorbitant fees to Furo Fykrou for transporting the entire class—and discovered that I was scheduled for a revenge duel with Vordokaunnevik, the acknowledged champion fighter of all Dazau. And it seemed like an absolutely terrible idea when the duel started and Vordo announced his intention of turning me into something suitable for Chinese stir-fry.

It was one of Salla's classmates who saved my butt that day. The kid was called "hyperactive" and "difficult" on Paper-Pushers'; what that meant was that he noticed absolutely everything that was going on around him and insisted on discussing it. At the top of his voice. When he noticed that Vordo was flickering with the activation of a magic shield every time I tried to land a blow, he discussed that in a loud clear voice. Once I realized that the magic shielding was being provided by Baron Rodograunnizo's new house wizard, a sleazeball if ever I saw one, it was a simple matter to work Vordo around so that the wizard couldn't get a clear view of him. And when the wizard Mikhalleviko, his name was—started throwing differential mathemagics directly at me, Dennis integrated every one of his incantations right back at him.

When the dust cleared, Vordo and Mikh had both run for it, and Dennis talked Baron Rodo into paying me very substantial compensation for having lured me into an unfair fight. (My patron, Duke Zolkir, and about half of the Bronze Bra Guild helped persuade Rodograunnizo to pay up.)

The zolkys I got from that fiasco had been enough to support Salla and me here on Paper-Pushers' for nearly two years. And now that I had some free time, Dennis offered to teach me enoughmath so that I could go back to Dazau and apprentice to a wizard. (An honorable wizard, needless to say, not a scumbag like Mikhalleviko—even supposing he ever dared show his face in the trade again.)

It had all seemed to be working out perfectly. After a few months of late-night tutoring sessions,

Dennis moved in with Salla and me so that he could tutor me all the time when he wasn't at school. In practice that meant he went over the math texts with me first thing in the morning, I sweated out the problems he had fiendishly devised while Salla was in school and he was teaching, he corrected my work in the afternoon, and our nights were free for more interesting pursuits. Did I say "working out perfectly"? Make that better than perfect. Dennis is a very creative man, and he concentrates his full attention on whatever he is doing. Also, he cooks greatSzechwan food, which is the only cuisine on

Paper-Pushers' that I consider truly superior to Dazau cooking.

It's a dynamite combination of talents, let me tell you.

When Dennis picked up the Chinese cleaver and began chopping the ingredients for dinner, I took up Sasulau and matched his rhythm with my own fybilka practice—short, fast strokes to mince the air around my imaginary opponent while coming closer and closer to her skin. Fybilka was one of the classic arts of swordcraft at home, something every Guild member studied but that few of us mastered. A swordswoman trained in the art could literally flay her opponent by inches. Even those of us who'd passed the final exercises seldom got a chance to put the art into practice, though; hiring a fybilka killing is expensive, and most of our patrons prefer the cheaper and quicker methods. And even back home, there aren't that many people who really deserve to die that way.

I could think of one now, though.

“There—and there—and there!” I shouted at my imaginary opponent as my sword took precise shavings of skin from her pasty cheeks, one pudgy thigh, the tip of a fat white finger. I could feel Sasulau humming with pleasure as her blade whizzed through the motions of a fybilka execution.

“That’s how you’ll answer to me, Stankewitz!” Fybilka was too slow; I plunged forward to drive Sasulau through the spot where her heart would be if she were facing me. Always assuming she had one.

The screen door slammed and Salla came down the steps, munching an apple. “Why are you yelling at Stinky Wits?” she inquired through mouthfuls of Golden Delicious. “You didn’t really run her through the heart, did you? That would be too cool for words.”

“You know Ms. Stankewitz?”

Salla shrugged. “Yeah, I hadda go to her office one afternoon last week. She’s always asking these dumb questions, like, you know, she goes, how do you feel about puberty, and aren’t you confused about boys, and really gross stuff about like private things, you know? And I go, like, I’m just a little kid, ma’am, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“She called you in for counseling without asking my permission? Oh, I forgot. They don’t have to ask permission.”

“Mom,” Salla said indistinctly through a bite of apple, “don’t snarl, okay? Like, it’s no big deal.

She’s like, we do this with all the kids, it’s just like a routine checkup, like seeing your doctor.”

“And does she call in all the kids?”

Salla shrugged again. “Enough of them that I knew what to expect. Why do you think we call her Stinky Wits? She’s best friends with Fishbreath,” she added. “About all they use the computers for is to e-mail back and forth about what rotten kids we are. I think Fishbreath hates our whole class.”

“Ms. Fishbeck to you,” I said automatically, “and how do you know what teachers say in their private e-mail?”

Salla smirked. “Never mind,” I said hastily, “on second thoughts, I don’t want to know. I want you to take your sketch pad into the front yard and draw a picture of our house. This house,” I emphasized. “This plain, ordinary, Paper-Pushers’—I mean, Earth-style house. Four windows. One door. White siding, green trim, tree in front yard.”

“Why?” Salla demanded.

“Because you were idiot enough to draw a picture of Dazau as your homework assignment for the first six-weeks report, and Stinky Wits—I mean, Ms. Stankewitz—got a hold of it and claims you’re emotionally disturbed and she wants to have you moved to a special classroom for problem kids.

“Mind you,” I added, “I’m impressed by how well you remember the Falls of Nauzu’s Blood. It must be, what, five years since I took you there for a picnic?”

Salla had that totally blank expression she puts on when you cut too close to her feelings. Well, I was sorry if she was hurt by finding out that she was on the verge of being bounced out of the Gifted and Talented program, but she’d be a lot more hurt if it actually happened. “So you’re going to draw a nice

normal boring picture of this house and I'm going to substitute it in your folder and say Ms. Stankewitz must be emotionally disturbed herself to imagine such wild fantasies."

Salla looked at me with more respect than I'd seen since I gave up sword work to study mathemagics. "Like really sneaky, Mom. I didn't know you had it in you. But don't worry about Stinky Wits. For the next assignment I'm doing this like wizard report on the Female Quest. See, I'm gonna like rip Joseph Campbell and his sexist theories to shreds. Even Fishbreath has gotta give me an A+ on this one."

Well, I told you Salla was the one with brains in this family; I didn't have the faintest idea what she was talking about. "Just draw the picture, okay?"

"Okay, Mom. I never argue back to a lady with a sword in her hand." Salla flipped her apple core into the bushes and sauntered back inside.

< center> * * *< /center>

After dinner Dennis had papers to grade. Salla holed up in her room to practice her new computer skills (like reading other people's e-mail?). And I went into our bedroom to activate Call

Trans-Forwarding through the universes to Furo Fykrou.

"It'll cost extra," Furo Fykrou said, predictably, when I explained what I needed. "You can't just transimage the papers to me; I'll have to have them in their physical form. And you want it done tonight? Did you know the Wizards' Guild has approved a minimum Express Magic fee for overnight work?"

"I still have credit with you from the compensation Rodograunnizo paid me," I reminded him.

"Not that much. You've been having a lot of it translated into Paper-Pushers' green stuff. Now, let me see, at forty zolkys for the round-trip cross-universe transform of the physical papers, plus the fee for mathemagical alterations indistinguishable to the mundane or nonwizardly eye . . . You wouldn't want to buy the Anti-Wizard-Detection Warranty for just an extra ten zolkys, would you?"

"I would not," I said. "There aren't any wizards here. If you can fake up the transcripts to pass mundane inspection, that's all I need. But I need them back before 7:00 A.M. on Paper-Pushers'."

After a little discussion of the Express Magic fee, Furo Fykrou announced that the zolkys I'd left with him would, surprise surprise, just cover the cost of magically altering Salla's transcripts and returning the improved file to me by tomorrow morning.

"There might even be a little over," he said. "A few kauven, at least."

Furo Fykrou made a point of never fleecing his victims—clients, I mean—of their last copper kauve. He said it created ill-feeling. All the same, the thought that my assets now amounted to about \$1.56 in Paper-Pushers money did not fill me with a tide of warm feelings towards Fykrou. I cut off the Trans-Forwarding call before he could think about charging me for that, too, and flopped down on the bed.

"I wish you'd take your armor off before collapsing," Dennis said when he came in. "It's hell on the sheets. What was all that about?"

I lifted one hand to unhook my chain mail corselet and decided it was too much trouble. Besides,

I could probably get Dennis to do it for me. “I’m broke,” I said. “But by tomorrow, Salla’s transcripts will show that she is an emotionally stable, responsible, respectful gifted child.”

“She is,” Dennis said.

“Not according to her files. Do you know a counselor named Erica Stankewitz?” I filled him in on the afternoon’s events.

“Bitch,” Dennis said when I finished. “I quit referring any of my problem kids to counseling a few years ago when I noticed that they were coming back more mixed up than they went in. Now I know why.”

“So,” I said, “tomorrow I’ll return the files to Stankewitz and go look for a job.”

“Why?”

“I’m broke. I told you. Furo Fykrou is skinning me of my last zolkys to do the transcripts up properly.”

“So? I make enough for us both to live on. In fact, now that you mention it, why don’t we make this arrangement legal? Solves everything.” Dennis beamed at me while reaching one hand around to find the clasp of my bronze corselet.

“I can’t let you support me!”

“I don’t see why not. You’re finishing your studies. Lots of women work to put their husbands through school and nobody thinks anything’s wrong with that.”

“Yeah, well, most of those women are counting on their husbands to get high-paying jobs after school and support them for a while . . . not that it always works out that way,” I said, remembering

Norah Tibbs and her ex. Dennis had the top half of the corselet unfastened now, but instead of doing anything about it, he was trailing his fingers along the chain mail fringe. The man made it very difficult to concentrate.

“I thought you were going to get one of those high-paying jobs when you’d learned enough math,” he said while investigating the lower edges of the fringe. I shivered and felt my stomach muscles tightening.

“Umm . . . there are some complications I didn’t mention when we started this project,” I said slowly. “Because they weren’t complications then, but now they are. I think. See, I don’t just need the math; I need the magic, too. Normally I could learn that by apprenticing to a wizard. But that means living full-time on Dazau. An apprentice has to serve the wizard day and night, whatever hour she’s called on. Some of those spells have to be checked every three hours for weeks and weeks. I couldn’t do that and come back here at night. I’d have to live there.”

“For how long?” Dennis asked.

I shrugged. “For however long the wizard decides it takes, I guess.”

“Sort of like grad school,” he commented, “only worse. No, I take that back; one year I roomed with a guy who was doing his Ph.D. dissertation on oats. He had to get up and measure how much the baby oat seedlings had grown every three hours. How come you didn’t mention this little fact when I started

tutoring you?”

“I didn’t think . . . it would be that important.”

“Or when I moved in?” Dennis’s voice had an unfamiliar tone, one I wasn’t sure I liked; and he’d quit exploring the boundaries of my corselet. “When I was hauling all those boxes of books into your house? You don’t think that might have been a good time to mention this little matter?”

“Hey, I carried as many boxes as you did, and they were your books,” I pointed out. “Anyway, I guess . . . I guess I was trying not to think about it. I didn’t want to . . . I don’t want to . . .”

“Go on,” Dennis said. “Say it.” He sounded as though he was bracing himself for a doublehanded sword blow.

“I like living with you,” I said miserably. “I don’t want anything to change. I . . . oh, all right. I love you. I think. Sort of.”

Dennis propped himself up on one elbow and studied me intently. “I want to remember this moment,” he said fondly. “Riva the Invincible, Riva the Amazon Warrior of Dazau, waffling and sidestepping an issue. What’s the matter? Were you afraid I wouldn’t be willing to come to Dazau with you?”

I gasped. “You’d do that?”

“I’ve always wanted to travel,” Dennis said blandly.

“Well, I haven’t. I’ve done more than enough traveling,” I told him. “And I’m not even sure I want to go back to Dazau.”

“Fine. We can do it either way. We go back to Dazau and you support me in idle luxury, or we stay here and get married and I support you in—well, okay, a teacher’s salary isn’t exactly luxury, but we can live on it. Plus, once you’re married they won’t be able to tag Salla with ‘dysfunctional family’ and ‘single-parent household,’ and all that other garbage. Solves everything.”

“It does not! I told you, I can’t just let you support me.”

“Why not?” Dennis lay back down and pulled me towards him. I discovered that he had, in fact,

been doing something practical all the time I’d thought he was just fiddling with the fringe on my corselet; he’d opened every one of the leather-bound fasteners. The armor stayed on the bed. I sprawled over Dennis. “See?” he murmured in my ear while caressing the areas that had just been freed from the armor. “I’m supporting you right now, and it doesn’t hurt a bit, does it?”

I couldn’t answer that for a few minutes. Finally I pushed his hand away. “Did I ever tell you how I happened to join the Bronze Bra Guild?”

“Later,” Dennis murmured, reaching for me again.

“It’s relevant.”

“So is this.”

“Mmmm, yes . . . but wait a minute, would you? I want to tell you about this. I . . . when Salla was born, I . . . “

“Your ears are turning pink,” Dennis said. “I didn’t think anything could make you blush. I’ll have to try harder.”

“I thought I was apprenticing to a wizard,” I said. “I was fresh out of the mountains, dumber than a box of rocks, didn’t know you have to pass Elementary Mathemagics and Linear Transformations before you can even seal a binding apprenticeship contract. This sleazeball says,

‘Apprentice to me, do exactly what I say, you’ll learn magic and make a good living.’”

“Is this going to be a story about sex for grades?”

“It’s a story about a dumb mountain girl who thought everything the slimy sleazeball did was making magic. And who believed he was using contraceptive spells. Then when I found out I was pregnant, he said that needn’t interfere with the apprentice training . . . until Salla was born. Then he smirked and said he’d be perfectly willing to support me, that I didn’t know enough to learn wizardry and had no talent anyway but that he’d let me stick around to keep house for him and cook his meals.

On Dazau,” I explained carefully, “the rules are basically the same as here, only they’re a little more explicit. If you take support from somebody without providing services for it, you’re his property.”

“And housekeeping and cooking and child care don’t count as services worth paying for?”

“Do they count for that here? If you’re married to the person providing the services?”

Dennis sighed. “I see your point. But I’m not like that. You should know that by now.”

“So. I was a dumb mountain girl, but I was big and strong. The Bronze Bra Guild was willing to give me an apprentice loan while I learned fighting, and they’re one of the few guilds that provides decent child care. So I became a swordswoman. And,” I added after a few moments of silent reflection, “rather a good one, if I do say so myself.”

“That’s not the only thing you’re good at,” Dennis said. “How does this leather panty thing come off?”

“You know perfectly well,” I said. “I have to wriggle out of it. Like this.”

“Uh-huh,” Dennis agreed. “And I like to watch you wriggle.”

For quite some time after that we didn’t argue about anything, partly because our mouths were otherwise occupied. My armor got shoved over the side of the bed, and I felt guilty about that—no way to treat a perfectly good set of armor—but not guilty enough to stop what we were doing and put it away properly.

We were drifting companionably off to sleep when I remembered the other thing I’d forgotten to tell Dennis. “Guess what,” I said. “Vordo’s here!”

“What? Where?”

“Not here. Here,” I explained. “Somewhere in this reality. Probably somewhere in this country.”

I told him about the display I'd seen in the supermarket. "And Louise Pilkinton knew his name and everything. It was definitely him. Where do they make covers for romance novels?"

"New York? That's where the publishing industry is."

"Then that's where Vordo is," I said with some relief. New York was nice and far away.

"You sound worried."

"Not about Vordo," I said. That was absolutely true, if not quite complete. "He was running for his life last time I saw him; he wouldn't give us any trouble here even if he did know where we were."

"But that wizard who was working with him nearly got you killed first. Maybe it would be a good idea to find out exactly how Vordo got to this universe."

"Yeah, well," I said, trying to sound bored, "mathemagics doesn't work in this world." At least not as far as I knew. "So even if the wizard came here too, he can't be any trouble. But you're right, we might as well check it out. Let's ask Norah Tibbs to dinner and she can give us the scoop on the romance publishing industry." Because it had just dawned on me: even if Vordo was way off in New York, that didn't necessarily mean the wizard who'd helped him was there.

And I would very much like to know whether Mikhalleviko had transported himself as well as

Vordo to this reality, and why, and what he was doing here.

That sleazeball.

Chapter 3

The secretary was a statuesque Hispanic girl with good legs, which she advertised in lace tights and a very short skirt. The long, firm thighs with their sleek lines of muscle reminded Mikh of Riva.

Unfortunately, the top half of the secretary didn't match the promise of the bottom half: she had greasy hair and protruding teeth. In his two years on this world, Mikh had yet to get used to people like that. Why didn't they go to a wizard and get themselves fixed up so they weren't so painful to look at? He knew there were equivalents of cosmetic wizards on this world. They were called plastic surgeons. He had learned a great deal from reading; at least that part of the transform spell had worked right, bringing him to this world dressed like a superior businessman and able to read and speak the local language.

Some of the other improvements he'd made to the spell hadn't worked quite as he expected.

Mikh looked down ruefully at the palm-size Leibniz Personal Assistant in his right hand. This little black

box and the accompanying manual were a poor exchange for his wizard's staff and book of spells. Of course all the magic power that had been stored in his staff still had to be in the Leibniz.

Somewhere. The trouble was, in two years he still hadn't figured out how to release most of the magic functions. And an ability to read English was less help than one might have expected in deciphering the manual.

Now, if only he could figure out how to operate the Veil of Illusion function, he would at least be able to cast an appearance of glamour over this woman so that she was a little easier on the eyes.

He might even be able to give her the outer semblance of Riva; the basics were there, the long black hair and coffee-colored skin. . . .

Mikh surreptitiously consulted his manual. Most of his magical spells had been translated as Special Functions, briefly described in an appendix. "To activate the Veil of Illusion," he murmured under his breath, "touch function key F6 twice, then direct the infrared beam of the Leibniz at the item to be veiled and call the appropriate virtual functions." What in Nauzu's name were "virtual" functions? Oh, well, it was worth a try.

He punched F6 twice, then pointed the Leibniz at the secretary and ran the tip of his finger over the touchpad at the top of the Leibniz while remembering the luscious shapes of Riva's contours.

The secretary's face popped out in large, lusciously contoured red boils. Hastily Mikh touched the Undo key and saw the boils disappear.

"You don't have to keep staring at me," the woman snapped. "I told you, Reverend Boatright will see you when he has time."

"My appointment was for nine o'clock," Mikh pointed out. It was 9:45 now.

"Reverend Boatright is a very busy man." She swiveled her chair away from Mikh and touched the intercom. "Reverend, I've sorted all those signed petitions you brought in and entered the names into the database. Would you care to go over them now?"

Mikh felt his wizard's temper rising. This woman was no more than a bondservant to the man he'd come to see; how dare she treat him so lightly?

At least he could use the only magical function he'd regained to teach this impudent female a lesson. While she was still facing away from him, he pointed the Leibniz at the stack of petitions she'd been sorting with such care and pressed function key F2, button A, and the little green knob at the bottom of the Leibniz.

The stack of typed papers vanished. The hand-written signatures didn't of course, but with no paper to support them they merely fell onto the bare desk in a little pile of dried ink crumbs.

There was an incomprehensible crackle from the intercom and the secretary sighed irritably.

"Very well, I'll send him in now. You can go in," she mumbled without looking at Mikh.

The walls of Reverend Boatright's office were covered with a melange of framed diplomas, letters, and posters in primary colors. The poster behind Boatright's desk read, "The Bible isn't a good idea—it's

God's idea." A single bookcase held a collection of books with titles like A Call to

Righteousness and Secular Humanism—Satan of the New Age. Boatright's desk was bare except for a computer, a speakerphone and a couple of battered textbooks. Mikh read the titles upside down: Make Friends with Mr. Euclid and Families of Our World. If the Reverend Boatright was as busy as the secretary implied, he must be very good at keeping his paperwork organized and out of sight.

Boatright was talking into the telephone as Mikh entered. He gestured for Mikh to sit down and went on with what sounded like a prepared speech, something about the importance of supporting family values and fighting creeping humanism in schools and public life. He was in the middle of a sentence when the person at the other end hung up on him. Mikh could hear the buzz of the dial tone, but Boatright didn't stop talking. People in this reality had relatively inefficient hearing; probably Boatright didn't realize Mikh knew he was talking to empty air.

While he waited for the Reverend Boatright to run out of steam, Mikh glanced around the narrow room. The one window overlooked a parking lot and a convenience store, somewhat detracting from the dignity of the framed diplomas and testimonials that covered the walls. He saw that Boatright had a Ph.D. in Physical Education from the College of Holy Works, a doctorate of theology from the same institution, several letters praising his untiring work in support of American values, and a large brass plaque thanking him for the contribution of the Boatright Wing to the chapel of the College of Holy Works. The signatures on all the letters seemed remarkably similar, but Mikh didn't have a chance to examine them in detail; Boatright hung up the telephone and turned to Mikh with a beam of satisfaction on his face.

"So gratifying to bring another sheep into the fold," he said. "Mrs. Rylander didn't actually commit anything to our cause, but I could tell that she was deeply touched by my words."

He pressed the intercom button. "Sandy, send one of our brochures and a petition to Mrs. Rylander. She's very interested in the cause."

"Hey, Rev, about them petitions, I gotta tell you something—" Sandy's voice crackled through the intercom.

"Later, my dear, later." Boatright switched off the intercom and leaned across the desk, fixing his eyes on Mikh. "Now, Mr. Levy, what can I do for you?"

Mikh launched into his prepared speech about being impressed by the great work done by the

American Values Research Center and his desire to offer his skills to the cause. He proffered the sheaf of references he'd brought, praising him for his contributions as a political analyst in various California campaigns. The references were no more bogus than the framed letters on the walls of Boatright's office, and considerably better done.

"Ah—yes, I see, I see, but we aren't really looking for a political analyst at this time," Boatright said. "I advertised for a programmer analyst." He waved at the computer. "I could do it myself, of course, but the Lord said to me, He said, 'Bob, you need to spend your time on My work, not on fiddling around with computers.' So I'm looking for someone who could sort and classify the data Sandy has been collecting and direct our next efforts. Now, if you could program computers—" Mikh sighed. "Can't everybody? But it would be a waste of my talents. I can do considerably more for you than mere data analysis, Mr. Boatright. Why, a simple extrapolation from the figures in your last mailing tells me that your expected return on mailings can be increased exponentially with a probability of."

Boatright blinked and looked impressed. Mikh suppressed a smirk of satisfaction. At least mathemagics worked to this extent on the Planet of the Paper-Pushers: you recited an incantatory formula and people backed off and looked impressed.

It was really unfortunate that anything more solid than impressing Paper-Pushers required the power stored in what used to be his magic staff. Mikh felt sure all the magical functions were there; he'd sweated toads and salamanders on converting the transport spell so that everything he brought with him would be transformed intact and in a form appropriate to this world. But he hadn't counted on his book of spells being transformed into something that no human brain could decipher. He'd spent months experimenting with the arcane Paper-Pushers' formulae of "point and click," and "drag and drop," and he still hadn't managed to get more than a handful of the most elementary mathemagical functions to work for him.

Quickly, before Boatright could stop goggling, he added, "A simple finite-horizon dynamic programming model can determine the precise modality which will establish the American Values

ResearchCenter as a serious political presence in contact with the mainstream of grass-roots

American activism." He wasn't sure that actually meant anything, but these Paper-Pushers didn't seem to notice as long as one took their favorite words and rearranged them in a pleasing syntactical order. "In other words," he went on, "by using my skills as a political analyst to redirect and focus your efforts appropriately, you can have . . ." He slipped into the sort of terms he would have used in Ki-Dazau. "Power. Glory. All the wealth and lordship of the world."

Boatright nodded. "Good man. That's from Proverbs, right? I like a man who knows his

Scriptures. What made you decide to relocate to Austin, Mr. Levy? According to these references, you were doing quite well in California ." He glanced down at the resume in front of him. Mikh considered this one of his finest works of fiction. He had typed it only the night before on a computer at the public library, targeting his "background" specifically to this idiot's tastes. It wasn't the ideal job, but he had to have some source of income while he stayed in Austin , and this pretentious little preacher had seemed like the kind of idiot who would skip details like checking references. "The governor's race, personal advisor to Senator Waxman, fundraising for the League for Human Decency . . ."

Mikh leaned forward and fixed Boatright with an earnest look. "Reverend Boatright, the state of

California is a sink of iniquity, a Godless Sodom whose citizens care only for filthy lucre." And very lucrative he'd found it, too, but it was only a stopping place until he located what he'd really come to this world for. And what a dreary task that had been! Every time he tried to invoke the Searching Eye function of the Leibniz he got back "NO DATA FOUND," instead of the clear images the globe topping his magic staff had once given him. He'd been forced to resort to purely mundane means.

Reading telephone directories. Tapping into computer data bases. Fortunately, Riva hadn't disguised herself very well: once he worked his way down to this nowhere town in the Bible belt, it had been easy to recognize "Konneva, Riva" as the Rivakonneva of Dazau.

His Riva.

None of which was any of Boatright's business. "As for settling in Austin ," Mikh lied easily,

"This is only one of several possibilities that I'm considering. Some of the larger politically oriented

Christian foundations have offered me very significant remuneration.”

“Mal and Norma Gainer!” Boatright’s fist clenched. “They’re always one step ahead of me!”

“It would be unprofessional of me to reveal the names of the other groups bidding for my services,” Mikh said smoothly. “Suffice it to say that I have chosen you, Robert Boatright, because I desire to work with a man of proven insight and great leadership potential. Working together, we can make the American Values Research Center a force to be reckoned with in national politics, and you can assume your rightful place as founder of the center. I’m afraid you might be required to take on a rather more public role than you would choose. I know you prefer to work behind the scenes, Reverend Boatright, doing your good works in secret and taking no credit for them—”

Boatright looked downright crestfallen. Yes, he was definitely on the right track now. “But,”

Mikh went on with a flourish of his Leibniz, “I’m afraid you will now be called to stand forth as the leader of your group and all the good American values they stand for. You may even have to make the deep personal sacrifice of immersing yourself in party politics. Your party needs new leadership, responsible leadership, moral leadership.” He couldn’t quite remember the names of the political parties in this part of the world, but it didn’t matter; the statement was doubtless true of both sides.

All three sides. However many there were.

And Boatright was puffing himself up like a feathered dillydeec in heat. “If God wants me to go out in public,” he said, “if God says to me, ‘Bob, I want you to become a public figure,’ then my answer to God is, ‘Okay, Lord!’ Do you think I should run for mayor?”

“My dear Reverend Boatright! Your talents would be wasted on such a minor role. Congressman

Boatright has a better sound, does it not?”

“Senator Boatright . . .”

“High Duke . . . er, I mean, President Boatright,” Mikh put in.

Boatright shook his head vigorously as if to clear it of these wisps of glory. “You really interpret the—uh—dynamic programming that way?”

“It’s a simple recursion on the optimal strategy. Nothing could be clearer,” Mikh assured him.

“There are special analysis functions built into my Leibniz, you know; I had it custom-made for my particular specialty.” True enough. The fact that he couldn’t access those functions was hardly relevant at the moment; neither was the fact that they had nothing to do with political science. The special functions were about mathemagics, and mathemagics was power, and that was what he and Boatright were both talking about.

“Really? Let me have a look.” Boatright reached for Mikh’s Leibniz.

“The numbers are, uh . . . not in a user-friendly format,” Mikh said, but not quickly enough; he’d made the mistake of setting the Leibniz down on the desk in front of him while he used both hands to sketch out the kingdoms of the world in the air before them. Now Boatright had his hands on the disguised magical

staff.

“It’s okay,” Boatright assured him, “I know all about these things. Read an article in the Journal just the other day. It said the infrared data transfer function works without any wires or disks or anything. You just point the Leibniz at your other computer, push the right function key, and off . . .we . . .”

“Not F2!” Mikh cried out.

Boatright’s broad thumb came down on the F2 key and the A simultaneously.

“Nauzu klevulkedimmu! Whatever you do now,” Mikh said, “don’t touch the . . .”

“It’s not transferring data,” Boatright said. “Oh, I see. You need to press this little green knob at the bottom to activate it, don’t you?”

The battered textbooks stacked beside the computer disappeared. Boatright’s eyes swelled outwards. “What the Sam Hill--?”

The Leibniz dropped from his nerveless fingers and Mikh scooped it up before Boatright could do any more damage. “I did tell you,” he said, “that this model had been specially equipped with functions to my personal specifications.”

“What else can you do?” Boatright leaned across the desk as if he wanted to grab the Leibniz back; Mikh held it firmly out of his reach. “Can you make things appear?”

Mikh shook his head. All his efforts to invoke the Monster Movement Transform Function had resulted in the obscure message “PARITY ERROR.”

“Can you make anything you want to disappear? This desk? No, don’t, it cost a bundle. Um, ah—the paper clips?”

Again Mikh shook his head. “Only printed matter,” he said with regret. “I apologize for the loss of your books; I’ll personally replace them as soon as possible.” Boatright chuckled and rubbed his hands together. “All in good time, my dear boy, all in good time. You’re hired, of course, and I shall want you to show me exactly how to repeat that little trick—or no, it wouldn’t do for me to be seen using mechanical aids. Some people might think it a Satanic contraption. You know, the secular humanist liberal commies call us book-burners,” he confided in Mikh, “just because we want to keep smut out of our homes and Satanism out of the schoolbooks. But it’s actually quite hard to burn a book.” A shadow crossed his brow. “Incredibly hard. But with this—it’s a miracle. And the state textbook hearings happening right in town this week, too! Oh, this’ll show the Gainers a thing or two about who really does the Lord’s work and has the Lord’s ear. A genuine, public, certified miracle in front of witnesses. I can hardly wait!”