

Tales from the Slushpile

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Halfway through the SalamanderCon panel On Thud and Blunder, the stuffy hotel air was likely to put me to sleep before my demo came up. Right now Brian Spooner was droning on about how the sociology of most sword-and-sorcery novels was completely off base, they didn't begin to understand how many peasants it took to support one fighting man (man, naturally; this was one of the Spooner-Upshaw Gang talking). He had all kinds of numbers charts to support his contention. He was also way off base, not having actually lived in a society where personal combat was a way of life. One thing he hadn't taken into account was how many swordspersons (to be non-sexist about it, Paper-Pushers style) it took to protect a string of farms in border territory. Another thing he didn't consider was the effect of motivation on productivity. Those tests about how long it took English students to build a replica of an early Norman castle were completely irrelevant. I've supervised quick fortifications out on the boundaries of Duke Zolkir's territory, and I can promise you those kids would've worked a lot faster given the encouragement of a swordswoman behind them and Baron Rodo's roughs just over the hill, raring to skewer them for brunch.

But I wasn't here to argue with Brian Spooner's book-based theories of how agrarian societies actually worked, or even to enjoy Susan Crescent's wickedly funny comments on writers who thought a horse was a kind of four-legged sports car requiring no daily maintenance. I was supposedly here to demonstrate my military expertise to D. McConnell. Who had still not put in an appearance.

"But now," the moderator interrupted Brian, as the audiences coughs and shuffles threatened to overwhelm his reedy voice, "before we run out of time, let's hear from our martial arts expert! Riva Konneva, author of several delightful stories in the Sword and Sorcery genre and a recent SFWA member, has kindly consented to give us a demonstration of just what's wrong with the fighting passages in some of the books we've been discussing."

Sigh. Even if D. McConnell wasn't here, I had a responsibility to do my part of the Thud and Blunder panel. I stood up and laid out some of my demo props on the table, around the stacks of books my fellow panelists had been tearing to shreds. The thirty-pound sword had been a real pain to put together, but I'd found an SCA blacksmith who reluctantly agreed to subvert his craft long enough to add an inconspicuous line of lead weighting along the blade of one of his failed swords. The morningstar had been easier; all that had cost me was a quick Call Trans-Forwarding to a wizard in my home reality of Dazau and an exorbitant Inter-Universities Express fee for sending some standard Bronze Bra Guild equipment to me here on the Planet of the Paper-Pushers. And Sasulau, my own personal sword, hadn't cost me anything at all... The barely perceptible humming as I drew her from the scabbard warned me that she would expect to taste blood before she was sheathed again. "Not this time, Sasulau," I muttered to

This was a peaceful talkfest of science fiction writers and fans, a place where the only bloodshed was psychic as writers' dearest creations were ripped apart by self-appointed editors and critics.

Like me.

"Could you talk into the mike, Riva?" the moderator asked. "We couldn't quite hear that."

I waved the mike away. The audience and other panelists hadn't been meant to hear my comment to Sasulau; and what I did want them to hear I could convey without the aid of one of those squawking Paper-Pushers toys. After whipping a troop of Bronze Bra recruits into shape, making my voice heard across this medium-sized hotel room full of fans was child's play.

"Let's start with weapons," I said. "Brian, have you noticed how many of these books have their barbarian hero wielding a twenty-kilo mace or a fifty-pound sword or something equally impressive?" I knew he hadn't, but I needed to get around the fact that I hadn't actually gone through the stack of assigned reading and made the notes I'd meant to make. I just couldn't get through all the pages of *Cant the Conqueror*, *Blunt the Barbarian*, *Warrior Priests of Guck*, the other colorful paperbacks we were supposed to be discussing. The only book I'd actually read was a slim volume published by some local house nobody here had ever heard of. Because the cover was plain yellow paper instead of a painting of somebody with thews like Vordokaunnevik the Great, I'd thought it wouldn't be as silly as the other books; and because it was only half an inch thick, I'd thought it would be easier to skim through.

Wrong on both counts. Dwight Muhlhauser's opus was so dumb I didn't really want to mention it; fun of it here; seemed unsporting, like spearing a sleeping wizard.

Brian didn't let me down, though. I knew I could count on a guy not to admit ignorance. "Yeah, sure," he said, nodding wisely. "That bothered me, too, but I thought I would let you speak to that point, Riva."

Susan Crescent, bless the lady, flipped through *Cant the Conqueror*. "You mean like this? With one slash of his mighty sword, weighing as much as a tub of butter, Cant hewed through his adversary's armor-plated shoulder and clove him to the waist."

"Exactly! A tub of butter—well, you know how small one of those one-pound blocks of butter you get at the supermarket is? You got to figure at least twenty of those to make a decent-sized tub," I said, "and then this is a preindustrial society, the tub is wood and adds another five pounds minimum. So old Cant is swinging around a twenty-five pound sword. I had this one made up for demo purposes. Who wants to heft it?"

I stepped down from the small dais on which the table sat and offered the sword to a volunteer in the front row of the audience who obligingly made my point by dropping it, staggering under the weight, and even tottering around the front of the room trying to swish

blade back and forth.

"If the weight's evenly distributed, as in this model," I said, taking it back, "the blade is too heavy for you to move it quickly; I could get under your guard and disembowel you with a ballpoint pen while you're fighting off incipient bursitis." I demonstrated on the guy who was tottering around with the sword and he obliged me by falling to the floor and writhing in a dramatic but unconvincing death throes. "If that thirty pounds is mostly in the hilt," I went on, returning the sword to the table, "the balance is so far off you won't get a single slash in. And in any case, carrying that weight at the end of your arm is going to exhaust you before the fight even started."

"Yeah, but don't you need something heavy to get through the armor?" somebody asked.

"Glad you asked that question." I picked up the borrowed morningstar and smiled, remembering how one just like this had smashed through the front rank of Rodo's Rowdies and spattered the second line with red and grey brain porridge, back in the Battle of Zolkir's Forest. Several people in the front row pushed their chairs back, away from me. I don't know why smiling makes Paper-Pushers so nervous.

I went into a demonstration of how the morningstar got its punching force not from an overweighted business end but from the velocity of the swing. This I could do on automatic given exactly the same talk to years of fresh-faced Bronze Bra Guild recruits doing Weapon Training 101. While I talked, I scanned the audience one last time and concluded that no, D.McConnell really hadn't showed up. So much for Norah's brilliant plan!

Better back up a little. I don't know if you noticed, but the moderator introduced me as "author of several stories," not as author of a wonderful, brilliant, funny, authentic book about a woman warrior's adventures on the Planet of the Piss-Pot Paper-Pushers. I'd finished that book last winter, shortly after the adventures it described, and had been trying without success to sell it ever since. A few short stories based on various little episodes from my Bronze Bra days had made it into the fantasy magazines, enough to earn my SFWA membership, but the book manuscript bounced back from major sf publishers so rapidly I was beginning to wonder if I'd accidentally printed it out on rubber. The last straw had been the prissy, self-righteous rejection letter I'd received from a new editor at Chimera. This D. McConnell had the gall to turn down my book because "it is well known to current feminist psychological theorists that women are naturally nonviolent and nurturing and hence could not have the true intuitive feeling for swordfighting and the joy in mindless violence displayed by this heroine. The story, however, is not entirely unappealing, and I would be willing to look at another book by Rita Konneva when she chooses to write about something she knows about from personal experience."

Believe me, this is not a letter to send to somebody who did twelve years' hard service with Duke Zolkir's Bronze Bra Guild. My first impulse was to fly to New York and demonstrate my expertise in swordfighting to D. McConnell in person, ending with a virtuoso demonstration

fybilka, or the art of executing an opponent by chopping inch-sized cubes of flesh off his back. My second was to send him a letter (preferably printed on asbestos paper) detailing my military experience and possibly challenging him to single combat.

Norah Tibbs, a single-mother friend of mine who writes science fiction when she's not cranking out romance novels to pay the mortgage, said she had a better idea.

"Editors who've been chopped into stew meat can't buy books," she pointed out, "and as for the resume, he wouldn't believe it. Remember, most people here don't know that Dazau is real. You're trying to sell the book as fantasy, not autobiography. What you need to do is demonstrate your skills to him-"

"That," I fumed, "is what I said first, only you told me I shouldn't prepare him for an entrance to the SalamanderCon Chili Cookoff."

"-in a non-destructive way," Norah went on firmly. "Look, this McConnell guy is new, nobody knows anything about him. He was probably brought in from one of the other branches after Singleday bought Chimera and Arbor bought Singleday. But he's coming to SalamanderCon, and they just sent out the preliminary schedule. You're on this panel." She pointed to a line that read, "On Thud and Blunder: Homage to Poul Anderson. Tibbs, Konrad, Crescent, Spooner."

"The italics mean I'm the moderator," she explained before I could ask, "which means I can do just about anything I want with the panel format. At least that's how I'm interpreting it. A"

"Who's Poul Anderson? I didn't know you people had the custom of homage, but I'm not about to put my hands between the hands of some baron I don't even know."

"It doesn't mean that kind of homage," Norah said. "Poul Anderson is a great science fiction writer-you really should read the literature in your own field, Riva-and he wrote an absolutely marvelous essay called, 'On Thud and Blunder,' about the stupid unrealistic things writers of sword-and-sorcery novels do. At least read the essay before SalamanderCon, okay? I'll lend you my copy."

"All right," I promised, "but I don't see..."

"Look at the schedule, stupid! Our panel's at one. McConnell's on the next panel in that same room, at two o'clock. And my friend Lee Justin just called from Oklahoma City, she's coming to SalamanderCon and she's having lunch with McConnell at noon that day. She's one of Chimera's biggest writers," Norah explained in a sort of footnote, "naturally the new editor wants to make her happy. He'll have an hour to kill between lunch and his panel, it'll be really easy for Lee to steer him into our panel to fill the time. And what will he see when he gets there?"

"A bunch of geeks sitting around a table talking about science fiction?" I suggested, just to show that I wasn't totally ignorant.

Norah gave me one of those you've-missed-the-point-again looks that make me feel a bit younger than my middle-school-age daughter Salla.

"He will see," she said, slowly and emphasizing every word, "Riva Konneva, in full battle gear, giving a stand-up demonstration of what's wrong with the fight scenes in most sword-and-sorcery novels, and how an experienced swordswoman would really do it. And you in your padded chain mail, with Sasulau singing through the air, can't convince him you know what you're doing, then I give up."

"Then can I chop him into little pieces?"

"Only," Norah said firmly, "if he doesn't agree that you're an expert and that Arbor SingledayChimera should buy your book."

Then she'd gone off on a tangent about how Lee had missed SalamanderCon last year because she was busy having a baby and how much she was looking forward to seeing little Miles, and we'd sort of quit discussing the great plan.

Which was fine with me, because it actually sounded like a pretty good idea. It had gone from sounding like a good idea right up to thirty seconds before one o'clock today, when Norah admitted that she was looking flustered because Lee and McConnell hadn't shown up yet.

"His plane's late," she whispered. "Look, I'll do what I can. I'll put you last on the speaker list, okay? Give him time to get here."

She'd done that. But now it was a quarter till two, and although the fans seemed to be enjoying my part of the talk, it wasn't doing me any good at all with an editor who didn't even have the decency to show up for his part in the plan.

The door opened, Norah gasped, and I swung round to look at her. The morningstar, at the apex of its swing when I turned, thudded down on the table and turned it into two splintered halves under the shreds of the white linen cloth, which sagged down like a hammock into which the pile of paperbacks gently thudded, one by one.

The audience applauded wildly. I didn't have the heart to tell them it wasn't part of the planned show.

"Lee's here," Norah whispered.

I looked back at the opening door. A tall, slim woman with long black braids was trying to sidle into the room, but she was hampered by a large baby in a sling. Behind her came a cooing

of men I didn't know. The tall lean one was wearing an Army fatigue jacket two sizes too big for his shoulders and covered with insignia that had a home-brewed look; the short square had acne, bulging tattooed arms, and a shiny bald head. They weren't exactly my idea of sophisticated representatives of the New York publishing industry, but I recognized Lee Ju from her book-jacket pictures and by squinting I could just make out the letters D-M-on the weirdo's name tag. Great! Norah's friend had produced McConnell just in time!

I decided to use my best prop after all. I'd gotten the idea from that Poul Anderson essay Norah insisted I read, and a perfect example had come up on page ten of Muhlhauser's *Spears of Thunfungoria*. My compunctions about using such an abysmally crummy book as panel-fodder vanished. So it was like spearing a sleeping wizard; so what? That's actually the best time to impale them, if you don't want to risk spending the rest of your life in the Reptiles and Amphibians section of Baron Rodograunnizo's private menagerie. And I didn't have much time left in which to make an impression on McConnell.

All the best advice to public speakers recommends that you fix your attention on one member of the audience to establish that sense of personal connection, and that's just what I did. My eyes never left McConnell as I stepped back behind the shattered table, dropped the morningstar, and pulled the ten-pound rib roast out of its supermarket bag.

"One of the books I read in preparation for this panel," I said, holding up *Spears of Thunfungoria*, "actually has the hero cutting off an enemy's head with a single stroke. This sounds good, but has anybody here actually tried it?"

"I bet you could do it with one of those Japanese samurai swords," somebody else opined, "you know, the ones that they make them with several thousand folds of steel..."

"The ones that they cost several hundred thousand bucks?" Susan Crescent interrupted. "Hey, I was in the Marines, buddy, and let me tell you, even the U.S. Army's defense budget doesn't provide the average grunt with that class of equipment."

"Susan's absolutely right," I said, "and certainly your average self-employed mercenary can't afford it, much less a..." I thumbed through *Spears of Thunfungoria* in search of the full description of the hero, "... a half-naked barbarian tribal warrior from the frigid north, mounted on a hirsute Arctic stallion, clad only in a kilt made from the hide of his first saber-toothed tiger kill and flaunting the crude weapons of his fatherland. That's on page eleven. I added, "and this head-lobbing occurs on page ten. He doesn't exactly have time to get high-technology weapons."

"And if he's riding a stallion in a kilt and no underwear, he's gotta have saddle sores like you wouldn't believe," Susan interjected.

McConnell shifted in his seat and crossed and uncrossed his legs. One foot beat out a nervous tattoo against the carpeted floor. His eyes twitched in their sockets, showing white

laced with red veins. All that espresso coffee they drink in New York must be pretty hard on the system.

"Now Sasulau, here, is worth a dozen of your average mercenary's swords," I said, whisking the blade back and forth so that everybody could admire Sasulau's finely honed edge and perfect balance. "Brian, if you'll just hold this rib roast up by the attached string, I'll show you what happens when you swing at a big piece of meat that's not supported by a chopping block."

"Hey," McConnell interrupted in a voice that wavered between squeaky and gravelly, "we're talking human beings here, lady. Gort killed people, not rib roasts. This book is about real fighting and real men, not about some kind of word game for Jews and queers." He leaned forward and emphasized his point with a stabbing finger while the musclebound hulk beside him nodded approval.

Somehow I'd expected a New York editor to have smoother manners and sound less like an escapee from an Aryan Power survivalist camp. But I was unwillingly impressed that he'd done so much reading in the field that he'd already worked his way down to Spears of Thunfungoria. On the other hand-depressing thought-maybe that was what he thought good sword and sorcery novels ought to be like.

Well, I'd just have to show him how wrong he was.

"Human beings," I said, smiling sweetly in his direction, "are just big pieces of meat unsupported by a chopping block, if you think about it from a swords-woman's point of view. Part of the art of swordfighting is to deal with what's actually in front of you, not what might be convenient for your purple prose. Brian?"

Looking just a tad green around the gills, Brian stuck both arms out and tried to hold the roast as far away from his body as possible, dangling at the end of the string I'd wrapped around it. He must not have much confidence in my aim. I'd better move fast; his arms were already trembling with the effort.

I backed up, swished Sasulau through the air a few times, put the full power of my right shoulder and a good full-body follow-through into my swing... and got Sasulau stuck in the middle of the rib roast. Brian staggered but managed to remain upright.

"That," I said, eyes on McConnell, "is what happens if you try the kind of slash-and-thud fighting described in Spears of Thunfungoria."

His mouth moved and his fingers twitched, but he didn't say anything this time. "And what would really happen next would not be that my enemy would topple over decapitated, but that Brian here would eviscerate me while my sword was stuck in this piece of meat."

Brian looked a bit doubtful about this plan, but I didn't give him time to voice any objections. "Now, Brian, just put the rib roast down on the table-no, not the broken one, the other one-and I'll show you how easily Sasulau can go through this with proper support, just in case any of you suspected I wasn't using a real sword for that demonstration."

All it took this time was a flick of the wrist; Sasulau was sharp and thirsty. She sliced through the meat and bones as if they were molded of lard, stopping a hairsbreadth short of the tabletop to protect her edge.

There was another round of applause from the audience, noticeably excluding McConnell. His hands were working as if he wanted to put them around my neck. So much for the plan. I was obviously too pissed off at being contradicted to be impressed by my experience. And there wasn't time to mend matters; a con gofer stuck his head through the door making cut-throat signs, and Norah announced that we were almost out of time, had to clear out for the next panel and Riva could take maybe one question before we left.

To my short-lived joy, McConnell was the first one with his hand up. "You might not realize this," he began with a nasty sneer, "but Gort is a member of a superior Aryan race that hasn't been weakened by mongelization and crossbreeding with Jews and Blacks and Spies. Naturally you don't understand the difference this makes, just like anybody else in the publishing industry, it's so full of Jews a decent white man doesn't stand a chance..."

Lee Justin moved as far away from him as the close-packed seating would allow. She put her baby's head and concentrated fiercely on counting his fingers, probably to keep herself from telling her new editor that he made her sick at her stomach. Having given up hope of making a favorable impression, I didn't feel any need for such restraint. But I was confused about why he was trashing his own industry.

"Surely, Mr. McConnell, as an editor yourself, you realize-"

"I am not an editor!" he interrupted me in turn. "Editors are blood-sucking ghouls who eat their young, haven't you figured that out yet?"

Actually I had begun to suspect something of the sort, but I hadn't expected to hear it from the guy I had been working so hard at impressing.

"But... aren't you the D. McConnell who's with ArborSingledayChimera?"

Beside him, Norah's friend Lee was shaking her head and making the same sort of cut-your-throat-and-shut-up gestures the timekeeper at the door had made. Susan Crescent grabbed her briefcase and said something about another appointment. Most of the audience was leaving too, and I couldn't blame them. This exchange could hardly be of gripping interest to anybody except me.

"I certainly am not," the guy I'd been thinking of as McConnell said. "And you know it. I was all a plot, wasn't it?"

"Well..." Okay, there had been a little scheming and plotting going on, but if he wasn't I McConnell, what did it have to do with him?

"A plot to humiliate me!" Little flecks of saliva sprayed from his narrow mouth.

"Huh?"

The bald man next to him, the one with the bulging steroid muscles, acne, and tattoos, said "This here is Dwight Muhlhauser, lady. He's the guy who wrote *Spears of Thunfungoria*. And wasn't real nice of you to make fun of his book when he was right here in the audience, was he now? Little darkie girlies oughta learn better manners than that." He leered in a way that made me want to swing the morningstar into his yellowing teeth. It made Brian Spooner decide that it was time to get to his next panel. Quite a number of people shared that opinion; there were only about six of us left in the room now, and one of those was a dark-haired girl who had just come in. She gave Lee a little wave and seated herself in the front row, probably waiting for the panel to start.

"Editors never really read manuscripts by an unknown," Muhlhauser announced. "It's impossible for a newcomer to get a fair chance. I know if anybody from a major publishing house would read *Spears of Thunfungoria* all the way through-if anybody would-they'd recognize my genius and I wouldn't be reduced to self-publishing."

That explained why I'd never heard of the publisher. "MiDPublications," was just a fancy name for "Vanity Press."

"I read it all the way through," I pointed out.

At that moment Brian finally made it out the door, hot on the heels of most of the panel audience. He let the door slam behind him when he left, which wasn't such a great idea. Dwight Muhlhauser looked around and realized that his audience had dwindled alarmingly. "Nobody else leave this room!" he shouted, and leapt to his feet.

Lee Justin leapt with him. They seemed to be tangled together in some way that involved Lee's baby sling. After a moment's confused wrestling, Dwight had the baby, Lee had the sling, and she was going for his eyes with all ten fingernails. His bald buddy grabbed her by the wrists long enough for Dwight to hit her on the chin, hard, with his free hand. She slumped down between the chairs where I couldn't see her. Norah started for her, but Dwight squeezed the baby so hard that little Miles let out a squawk of fright. "Nobody move or the kid gets it," he shouted.

We all stood absolutely still.

He jerked his head at me. "Okay. You, little lady, down among the audience. You too, far broad," he told Norah. "The guys are running this show now." We followed his directions, taking seats in the front row next to the newcomer. Norah looked furious. I tried to look cool. He'd made me leave Sasulau on the table, but I wasn't completely out of options yet.

Mihlhauser strutted to the stage, holding the baby under his arm like a football, and grabbed the plain-paper edition of *Spears of Thunfungoria*. "I'm gonna have a fair reading now," he said to us, "and nobody's gonna interrupt. Got that?"

"The next panel-" the girl beside me started to say.

"Skull, I want you to secure the exits," Mihlhauser snapped. "Now!" He lifted the book reverently in one hand and rather awkwardly opened it to the first page. I was grateful that the baby seemed too stunned to struggle; no telling what would happen if he gave Mihlhauser a problem. We had to get that kid out of his arms, but how?

Skull swaggered back from the barred doors and sat down beside the dark-haired girl, and she folded. She shrank a little from him, which brought our heads close enough together that we could, carefully, murmur to each other without attracting Mihlhauser's attention.

"Nebulous clouds of crepuscular twilight gleamed green in the thunderous sky as Gort the Barbarian wended his way down from the northern mountains," Mihlhauser began.

The girl beside me shuddered. "Does it all go on like that?"

"Nope," I said. "It gets worse."

Mihlhauser raised his voice a little. "In the decadent metropolis of Thunfungoria, the lasciviously apathetic minions of corruption's own queen, Agagaba the Diabolically Decadent hustled and bustled in the marketplace with odious greed. I hope you all appreciate that poor alliteration," he added, "hustled and bustled? Pretty good, huh? I've got a real way with words."

"Yeah, and Torquemada had a real way with suspected heretics," the girl beside me murmured. "He doesn't even know the difference between alliteration and rhyme!"

"'Terminate your nefarious transactions,' Gort bellowed baldly, 'for Gort the Grand and Illustrious has shown up out of the north to requite the misdoings perpetrated upon your inculpable prey!' He spurred his stallion over the prostrate bodies of the apprehensive priest-traders and with the tip of his sword sliced the shackles from an undraped slave girl whose bosom quivered with ecstasy at the scrutiny of this puissant hero. Both her bosoms were actually."

The girl beside me sighed. "Somebody has to stop this. Out of respect for the English language, if nothing else. Mr. Muhlhauser!" she called out.

Muhlhauser stopped in the middle of a leering description of the slave-girl's navel. "Do you have to warn you again? Want to see me play baby-toss with this kid and the costume lady's prop sword?"

Sasulau gave an ominous hum as he reached for her, and I shuddered. She was angry; she wanted blood. And she might take the baby as her sacrifice. I was never entirely sure about Sasulau's ethics.

"Mr. Muhlhauser," the girl went on calmly, "I'm an editor with Arbor Singleday Chimera and what I've heard of your work so far has made a very strong impression on me."

Muhlhauser absentmindedly rested the baby on his shoulder. Miles gurgled happily and drooled down the writer's shirt collar. "It has?"

"An unforgettable impression," she said with a barely concealed wince. "I might go so far as to say I've never before heard prose with the rhythms and cadences you bring to it."

Muhlhauser squinted down at her name tag. "Hey. You're shitting me. Chimera already turned this book down."

"That," the girl said, "was before Singleday bought Chimera and Arbor bought Singleday and they brought me in. If you'll send your manuscript back to us, Mr. Muhlhauser, marked Attn.: Dacia McConnell, I can promise you that your work will get the attention it deserves."

"Nauzu's Blood! You're D. McConnell?" I exclaimed. "Why weren't you here half an hour earlier?"

"My plane was late. Don't distract me. If that jerk hurts Miles, one of my best writers will be too upset to produce for months. We can't afford to lose Lee Justin." She turned back to the front of the room. "How about it, Mr. Muhlhauser? Or-" She snapped her fingers. "Say! I've got an even better idea! Why don't I just take that copy of your book now? I can read it tonight and we can talk contract terms tomorrow. I happen to know there's an opening on our spring list."

Muhlhauser teetered back and forth from the balls of his toes to his heels in an agonized semi-dance of decision. Miles seemed to enjoy the movement; he grabbed the collar he'd been dribbling on and began gumming it like a puppy going after a large soup bone.

"Naah," Muhlhauser decided finally. "Why tie myself down to one house? You can listen to the reading like everybody else, then you can join the bidding. Hey, Skull, you tell those geeks outside I want this room's mikes patched into the sound system for the whole hotel. Let's give everybody a fair chance!"

While Skull negotiated through the locked doors, Mihilhauser hefted the baby up higher on his shoulder, reopened the yellow paperback and resumed his reading. Dacia McConnell slumped down in her chair and sighed in frustration. On my other side, Norah alternated between rubbing her aching head, craning her neck to see if Lee had sat up yet, and staring hungrily at the baby in Mihilhauser's arms.

We were well into the first dumb fight scene, where Gort skewers a couple of city guards through the heart, when a glimmering of an idea came to me. "Mr. Mihilhauser, that's not such a great technique. You know, the heart is an awfully small target. Also you've got to get through the rib cage. Me, I prefer to take them in the abdomen. It's a nice big soft target, and any fighter knows how much a gut wound hurts, so even if you don't get them the first time they're running scared and they'll probably forget to protect their throats. Slash the throat and you've got them. Or if your employer wants them brought back alive, go after the legs and try to cripple them. That point was engraved on my memory; I'd once had a very embarrassing discussion with Duke Zolkir after a call Trans-Forwarded from the PTA had distracted me in the middle of a swordfight so that I forgot to keep any of the thieves I was after alive long enough to stand

Mihilhauser gave me a cold, reptilian glance. "Gort," he said, "is the worlds greatest swordsman. For him to pierce an opponent through the heart is child's play."

"Oh, yeah? You just don't know how hard it is. I bet you've never tried."

"I've done my research!" he snapped.

"And I've lived mine."

Dacia McConnell grabbed my leather wrist-guard. "Are you crazy? Don't make him mad or he might hurt the baby."

"Trust me," I whispered, "I know what I'm doing."

Mihilhauser had resumed reading, but I knew I'd get another chance to badger him in a minute. Dacia seemed smart and cool; she could help me here. "Look," I said, barely moving my lips, "this is what I'm trying to get him to do. And then this is what'll happen next..."

"How do you know?"

"Because," I said smugly, "those who can, do... and I can. Then when this happens, you'll be in a perfect place to..."

I barely had time to outline the plan to her before Mihilhauser had reached the next stupid fight scene.

"Uh, Mr. Muhlhauser? Excuse me, but it's not that easy to pierce chain mail. Sure, you can bruise your opponent pretty badly, especially if you keep hacking away at the same spot, but actually getting a blade through is another matter."

"Lady, will you stop interrupting? I've studied the matter in great detail, and..."

"Let's have a demonstration, then." I stood up, wriggling slightly so as to get maximum jostle from my chain-mail corselet and divided skirt. "I'm willing to come up on stage and let you stab and skewer me."

"Well..."

"You can even use that big heavy sword," I suggested, pointing at the specially weighted prop sword, "just like the one Gort would have had." I took two steps up to the dais on which the tables sat while I was talking. "And all I ask for to defend myself is this skinny little thing." As soon as my hand touched Sasulau, her joyous hum transmitted itself through my body. She knew, now, that she'd drink blood. And she was thirsty; it had been too long since she'd been drawn for anything but practice bouts.

"Or are you scared to fight a girrrl?" I added with a teasing pout and another strategic wriggle.

"What's in it for me?" Muhlhauser demanded. "You're not an editor; what can you do for me after I win?"

"If you win," I said, winking, "you can name your own reward, sweetie."

That decided him. He thrust baby Miles down from the dais for his buddy Skull to hold. He assumed a fighting pose, holding up the weighted prop sword in both hands. Even that way his muscles quivered with the strain. "Here I am, baby," he called, "come and get me!"

I sidled around him, trying to look scared. "No, that's not the way it works. Aren't you supposed to try and poke me?"

Skull guffawed. "Oh, he'll do that later, little lady!"

Muhlhauser raised the sword over his head, preparing for a downward swipe. I'd counted on that; there wasn't much else you could do with something that heavy. If this had been a real fight, I'd have had Sasulau in and out of his skinny gut before he knew what happened to him. But I really didn't want to disembowel somebody in the middle of SalamanderCon. It might make a bad impression on my editor. I sliced into one of his thighs instead.

It wasn't that much of a cut; the best I'd been hoping for was that blood loss would slow him down so that I'd be able to take him out without doing too much more damage. But he yowled

dropped the sword and clapped one hand to his bleeding leg.

"Tell your buddy to give the baby back," I said, "and we're even."

"That hurt!" Mihilhauser complained.

I guess he hadn't done all that much research.

"Well? It'll hurt more if I have to do it again, I promise you." I waggled Sasulau close enough for him to hear her thirsty song.

Mihilhauser's left eyelid developed a fast nervous tic. "Put that damn thing down and we got a deal."

I laid Sasulau back on the table-I wasn't going to sheathe her again until I'd cleaned her-reached out as if to shake hands on our "deal."

"Look out, Riva!" Norah cried as his hand came up again from his hip, holding something small and black. "He's cheating!"

My half-opened hand met his and opened a slash of red across the wrist where my secondary blade, razor-sharp and small enough to fit in the palm of one hand, just touched him. The black thing fell to the floor and exploded in a burst of sound that temporarily deafened me. I could see Norah's lips moving again; then something solid and heavy fell on my back.

Perfect.

A glance to my right showed me Dacia McConnell with Miles in her arms, backing slowly down the aisle away from the fight. Good girl.

I twisted slightly to one side, grabbed a massive wrist and used Skull's own weight and momentum to flip him around and over. A crunching sound as he hit the floor suggested that the move might have dislocated his shoulder. Certainly he didn't appear to be in any hurry to get up again. As for Mihilhauser, he was crouched under the shattered table, moaning and nursing himself. I gave him two superficial cuts and crying for someone to get the medics.

I wiped Sasulau's blade on the tablecloth and sheathed her just as Dacia reached and opened the double doors at the far end of the room.

We had a bit of confusion there, what with cops, EMT's, and con organizers all pouring in at once. With a couple of competent women directing things, though, it didn't take long to get priorities straight. A groggy Lee was reunited with Miles, the cops decided to accompany Mihilhauser and Skull to Seton Emergency, and the captive audience departed in all directions to unload the story of their ordeal on the nearest willing ear. It seemed the panel Dacia was

to've appeared on had been postponed "due to unavailability of meeting room," which I thought was an excellent example of the Paper-Pushers' art of telling the truth in a totally misleading way. So after Norah hugged me and dashed off to look after Lee and Miles, Dacia McConn and I were left grinning at each other in a messy but momentarily empty room.

"That was a good idea after all," Dacia allowed. "How did you know Skull would leap to help his buddy?"

"They always do," I said.

"How did you know Muhlhauser was going to cheat?"

"I didn't... but I always do. Fighting isn't a game; it's about winning. And sometimes," I added, thinking of a drooling baby, "it's really important to win."

"And you knew Skull would hand the baby to me?"

"I figured in the excitement of the moment, he'd naturally expect a woman to hold the baby and you were the closest one. After all," I quoted from her letter, "most people think women are... how did it go... 'naturally nonviolent and nurturing.' "

Dacia frowned slightly, as though she knew she'd heard those words before and couldn't think where. "Anyway," she said crisply, shaking off her momentary confusion, "I think we made a great team."

"I think so too," I agreed, "and I hope we can go on doing it."

"You want to go through something like this again?"

"No, I want to sell you a book. Remember the manuscript you rejected because you didn't believe women knew anything about fighting?"

Dacia's eyes traveled to my name tag. "Riva Konneva... Uh-oh."

"I think uh-oh," I agreed, letting one hand rest on Sasulau's hilt. "Do you believe I know something about fighting now?"

Dacia nodded slowly.

"And you did say you had an opening on your spring list."

"That was a bargaining point in a hostage situation," she protested.

"Well," I said, moving slightly so that I stood between her and the door, "I'd hate to think

that a writer's best chance of being published is to take hostages rather than to negotiate in a civilized manner."

"I'm sure we can work something out," Dacia said quickly.

The hotel staff showed up then to clean out the room for the banquet, so she was never in any danger, not really. But we did establish a mutually agreeable deal.

I had to use some stupid pen name because she thought "Riva Konneva" was too hard for most Americans to pronounce, but they bought the book and published it. It's out in the store right now, in fact.

You are going to buy a copy, aren't you? I'd hate to have to argue with you about it. Sure we can work something out.