

Fun With Hieroglyphics

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After thirty minutes of staring at a blank screen, I was finally inspired by the distinctive death-rattle sound of Norah's old Chevy coughing itself to a halt at the curb outside - not to words, but at least to action. I grabbed the mouse and clicked on the spreadsheet window I'd left minimized in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen. The resulting display of Dennis's and my finances was not a cheerful sight, but it was better than letting Norah look at the opening pages of my new book.

All 0,000 words and 0 K of it.

"Riva?" Norah called through the screen door as she came in with someone trailing her. "Is Jason ready yet? Oh, this is my friend Stephanie. She's a tech writer at Xycorp, that's why she looks like a grownup."

"How many times do I have to tell you, I'm *not* a `tech writer'? My title is manager of hard-copy composition and distribution resources," Stephanie corrected Norah. A faint line showed between her two perfectly arched, perfectly shaped brows. Her mouth was painted a clear, bright red mouth-shape and her eyes were outlined with curving, dark brown eye-shapes that matched her hair. At least, I assumed it was hair. It didn't stick to her forehead or creep across her cheeks or cling to the back of her neck the way everybody else's hair did in Austin's spring humidity and heat.

"Whatever," Norah agreed cheerfully. She sank down in a wicker chair that creaked under her plump form. "How's the book coming, Riva?" She turned to Stephanie. "Riva's another writer, did I tell you? But she never comes to Austin Writers League meetings—that's where I met Steph," she interpolated in my direction before looking back at Stephanie. "Her Salla and my Jason are working on some kind of truly dumb school project together."

"Theoretically," I agreed, happy to drop the subject of my nonexistent second book. "They *said* they needed to do some research at the library. I dropped them off about an hour ago. They were going to take the bus home. But if I know them, they haven't started their research yet; they're still kvetching about the dumb project. Sorry, Norah. I'll bring Jason home when they show up."

"Well, it *is* dumb," Norah said. "Develop a 3-D diorama in an empty oatmeal box, illustrating the building of the Pyramids."

"It does seem more like third-grade work than eighth-grade," I agreed. "But they've also got the option of

staging a one-act play dramatizing some incident of Egyptian history."

Norah groaned. "Twenty-two eighth-grade girls playing twenty-two versions of Cleopatra and the asp."

"Never happen," I said. "With Gene Kruzak teaching the Ancient History module, they'll never even have *heard* of Cleopatra. They probably think she's a charm you find at the bottom of the oatmeal box."

"Your Salla knows about Cleopatra," Norah said. "I'll bet."

"Salla's too strong a feminist to play that part. If they do a play, she'll probably rewrite Egyptian history to have Cleopatra recruiting an army and conquering Rome."

If I hadn't said that, would it have saved us all from what happened? The Paper-Pushers don't believe in the power of words, for all they use so many of them. My people know better. Words—especially mathemagical equantations—call spirits out of the air. And other things.

However, at the time I didn't feel any *frisson* of warning. The cold chills were caused by Norah's renewing her inquiries about how the book was coming. She'd been too good a friend, for too long, for me to actually lie to her. I did sort of wish the intimidatingly competent Stephanie hadn't been there too, though, listening to my confession of failure with those perfectly shaped brows rising in perfect half-moon crescents above her eyes.

"Everything else I've written . . ." I concluded, then glanced at Stephanie. "Er, Stephanie, you don't read science fiction, do you?"

Stephanie gave me a patronizing smile. "In my position, I'm afraid it's all I can do to keep up with the current psychological and technical literature."

"Right. Well. *You* know, Norah, I'm not so good at making up plots. That first book was just about stuff that happened right here in Austin. And the stories I've been selling to anthologies are all based on things that happened . . . in my homeland," I said, bearing Stephanie's presence in mind. "Now my editor says she wants the new book to be set in this uni . . . I mean, country, not in Da . . . my homeland. And I haven't *done* anything to write about here, at least not since . . . that stuff in the first book." Stephanie didn't seem offended by all the elisions; in fact, she didn't even seem to be listening. She was tapping one foot and staring off as if she could see right through the wall to the pile of laundry in our bedroom. Still, there was no point in bringing up my—unusual—background with somebody who didn't already know about it.

"You know what, Riva," Stephanie said suddenly. So much for my theory that she'd spaced out ten minutes ago. "I've met a lot of women like you, and I think I can help you."

"You can?" Somehow Stephanie didn't seem like a good source for sword-and-sorcery adventure plots, but who knows? Maybe she too had a Past.

"Sure. You're one of the standard types," Stephanie said. "I bet you quit your job to raise the kid, right?"

"Well . . . Not exactly. I tried working part-time for a few years . . ."

"And it didn't work out! Exactly! It's just too hard for women to divide their attention between the career and the home."

Actually, what I'd found was that after I hit thirty-five, working as a swordswoman-for-hire was too hard, period, but Stephanie was not interruptible.

"Now your daughter is old enough that she really doesn't need you, except to drive her places, and you're at loose ends. The home-based businesses you may have tried didn't work out," Stephanie went on.

I couldn't contradict her about Salla, anyway. Since she turned thirteen Salla hardly said anything to me except, "Oh, Moom!", "Will you drive me to the mall now?" and "How much longer are you gonna tie up the computer, I want to get on my chat room."

"What you need, Riva," Stephanie announced confidently, "is someone to help you reenter the professional world, get you started back in a career-track job. And I can do that for you."

"Um . . ." I didn't want to insult Stephanie, but she *really* didn't look like somebody who would have any contacts at all with my old employers—people like Zolkir the Terrible and Rodograunizzo the Revolting. Even if I'd wanted to get back into that business.

"Stephanie came to the Writers League tonight because she was recruiting tech writers for Xycorp," Norah put in.

"And *you*," Stephanie announced, looking straight at me, "are just the kind of person I'm looking for! Women who've been shunted out of the mainstream of professional work by our society's sexist attitude towards child-rearing, looking for a way back in . . . "

"Umm . . . I don't have much of a resume," I pointed out.

Stephanie waved her hand airily. "I can take care of all that. You *have* writing experience. And Norah's told me about your past life."

I glared at Norah.

"Any woman with the guts to do what you've already done - to leave your child's father and your homeland, to immigrate to the United States and start a new life from scratch - well, it's clear to me that you have what it takes to make it in the trenches of office politics."

And it was becoming clear to me that Norah hadn't told Stephanie *all* about my past life.

She leaned forward and took my hands. This close, the fervor in her eyes was almost hypnotic. "I need you, Riva. Xycorp needs you. This *society* needs you and women like you."

"Writers?"

"Strong women. Women who can roll with the punches and come up fighting."

Hmm. Maybe being a technical writer wouldn't be so boring after all. At least it seemed to call for skills I really had.

"Of course," Stephanie said, "you'll have to dress professionally at work."

I looked down at my jeans and T-shirt, visualized my old working outfit in its box under the bed. Somehow I had a feeling that a bronze chain mail corselet and thigh guards were not quite what Stephanie had in mind.

"What's wrong with these clothes?"

Stephanie and Norah looked at each other and there was one of Those Silences. You know the kind I mean: the kind where you realize that you've just revealed your total ignorance of the game and total unworthiness to play.

"I'm sure," Stephanie said finally, sounding considerably less sure than she had up to now, "that we can find something for you."

* * *

"Finding something" turned out to be somewhat more work than I had envisioned. Take shopping malls, for instance. I used to sneer at the ladies who got their exercise by walking up and down the length of an air-conditioned mall because they couldn't stand to work up an honest sweat. After Stephanie and I had been through Barton Springs Mall three times in one afternoon I had more respect for them. If nothing else, their feet were considerably tougher than mine, which ached from instep to heel, with separate factions of rebellious nerves lodged in each toe. As a member in good standing of the Bronze Bra Guild, with forty individual kills and several successful campaigns to my credit, I had too much pride to complain. I did reflect, however, that the Guild's training, which relied heavily on forced marches through the desert, running up mountains, and combat sparring, could reasonably be augmented by a few more endurance tests. In short, I had never trained for so many hours of walking on concrete floors. Of course, on Dazau we hadn't *had* concrete

By the time Stephanie pronounced herself satisfied with a gray suit that simultaneously concealed my chest and hobbled my knees, together with a set of undergarments that had been constructed by someone with bridge building and other major engineering feats on his mind, I was too tired to care about the funny-looking shoes that made me look as if I were walking on tiptoe. I couldn't tell if they fit anyway; my feet were going to hurt no matter *what* I wore. Ice packs seemed like a good choice.

All this may explain why for once I didn't mind when Salla staged her usual homecoming routine. This consisted of yelling, "I'M HOME!", slamming the front door, grabbing a handful of cookies and a Coke from the kitchen, and shutting herself in the cubbyhole we called a "study," where she could simultaneously watch TV, log on to a chat room with her friends, and talk on the phone. This was known as "doing homework." Some days I regretted the passing of the time when she'd wanted to tell me every detail of her day. Today, though, I was perfectly content to lie on the bed listening to my feet throbbing.

The longer Salla spent on the phone, the louder her voice got. That would have been okay with me, too, except that the walls of our house were made from something with all the sound-baffling qualities of a damp cardboard box. Thin cardboard. So I had the dubious pleasure of listening to one side of a conversation that seemed to consist entirely of, "No way!", "He *did*?" and "No *fucking* way, dude!"

"Salla," I called, "are you aware that I can hear every word you're saying?"

"That's okay, Mom," she yelled back, "I only reveal my innermost thoughts on the chat room. Right now I'm online with a nice old man in Copenhagen who likes little girls."

Well. I had to move sometime, if only to go to the bathroom. I hobbled to the study and looked over Salla's shoulder. The chat-room log showed nothing but the usual string of banalities:

SoMch2dI4: blah

FadeSoSlow: oaky

SoMch2dI4: blah

SoMch2dI4: Do u know Y jess is so mad at mark?

FadeSoSlow: no

SoMch2dI4: i c

FadeSoSlow:so are you gonna do the fucking assignment?

SoMch2dI4: Yeah

SoMch2dI4: if I don't my parents will KILL me

SoMch2dI4: they are like totally paranoid about school

"You got that right, anyway," I told the back of her head, "but what happened to the dirty old man from Copenhagen? You enticed me in here under false pretenses."

Salla giggled. "Come on, Mom. You know I wouldn't be dumb enough to chat with anyone like that." She paused and pretended to think for a moment. "Unless, of course, he had *candy* . . ."

"So what's the `fucking assignment'? And why aren't you doing it now?"

"Just a *minute*, Mom!" Salla typed, "got2go, my mom is hassling me," and logged off.

"It's that dumb thing for the ancient Egypt study unit, okay? You know, we gotta do a diorama in an oatmeal box, act in a dumb play, or . . . hell, where's the damn assignment sheet?" She rooted around in her backpack, tossing several empty juice boxes and a collection of ponytail holders onto the floor, and finally pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper. "Or find some other original and creative way of dramatizing ancient Egyptian life and making it real to your fellow students," she read with a sarcastic twist of her lip.

I hadn't seen this piece of paper before, and the decorative markings around the edges made the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I took it from her. "*Where did you get this?*"

Salla sighed again, more elaborately. "From Mr. Kruzak, where else?"

"But these *symbols* . . ." An old phrase from my apprenticeship to the wizard Mikhalleviko came to my mind. "Sacred carvings."

"Mom. They're just old Egyptian writing. Hieroglyphs. Nothing to get bent out of shape about. I got a cheat sheet off the Net that says what they stand for and how to pronounce them. See, this one means `star' or the sound `sba,' and this one means . . ." Salla's eyes drifted to the top of her cheat sheet and she looked confused. "And it says right at the top of the page that the word `hieroglyph,' literally means `sacred carvings.' How'd you know that?"

"I've . . . seen them before. Some of them, anyway. On Dazau they're . . . a wizard told me once that they were extremely potent magical symbols from the Old Tongue, only most of them had been lost and nobody knew exactly how to pronounce the ones that are left, so it was dangerous trying to invoke them; you never knew quite what you were going to get." Some of the results Mikhalleviko had gotten while experimenting with Sacred Carvings Magic were enough to wake me up screaming in the middle of the night fifteen years later.

"Way cool," Salla said. "Too bad Dazau magic doesn't work here."

"Thank goodness." I took a deep breath, tried to calm my fluttering nerves, and remembered just how much my feet hurt. "So what are you going to do for your project?"

Salla's three-cornered grin should have warned me, but I was thinking about those peculiar shoes and wondering whether I'd actually be able to stand up on them. "Something original and creative, of course. That's ten points extra."

"Like what?"

"When I figure it out, I'll tell you." Salla sat back in her chair and stared at me with that opaque look she'd developed around her thirteenth birthday. It meant, "Go away, don't bother me, information will be dispensed on a strict need-to-know basis."

So I did. I needed to rest up before tomorrow, anyway. Stephanie had scheduled me a six-hour appointment at Hair Apparent. I had no idea how anybody could spend six whole hours cutting hair, but I figured I was about to find out. What I didn't realize was that I shouldn't have been worried about the remodeling of Riva - I should have been thinking about Salla home alone with the computer for several hours. We'd had Call Trans-Forwarding and a link to Furo Fykrou via Virtual Service Provider for years, ever since I'd been a commuter mom with an address on the Planet of the Paper-Pushers and a day job as swordswoman for Duke Zolkir; and I *knew* Salla had figured out how to access all that stuff.

I also knew, or thought I knew, that Salla was too smart to get herself in trouble messing with Dazau magic, after her last experience. You'd think having to be rescued from involuntary apprenticeship to Furo Fykrou would make her at least a little wary of doing deals with a wizard. But no . . . she was thirteen now, and all those exploding hormones were short-circuiting her brain function. At least, that was my friend Norah's way of explaining what happened to teenagers.

I didn't actually see this chat room log until it was all over, but you probably need to know about it now:

SoMch2dI4: helo? FF r u there?

FF2dazau1: is this riva?

SoMch2dI4: no its salla don't logoff I wanta maka deal

JosieLou2: hi this is jess

JosieLou2: what r u wearing 2 the dance fri?

SoMch2dI4: the grey skirt the long one and a cami top

FF2dazau1: u wanna deal or talk to yr little friend? Ima busy wizard.

JosieLou2: way cool ima get a new dress

SoMch2dI4: ever hear of sacred carvings?

JosieLou2: isnt that the new rap group

SoMch2dI4: I wuz talkin 2 FF, jess

SoMch2dI4: allo?

FF2dazau1: so what about SC?

SoMch2dI4: nuthin much, only I got a complete set here. With pronunciation guide!

FF2dazau1: ok, scan them in and ill see if theres anything I cn use

SoMch2dI4: you gotta be kidding I want payment up front

FF2dazau1: how do I know you really got them?

SoMch2dI4: u trms enuf power to invok 1 carving, maybe 2.

SoMch2dI4: if it works you know I got the good stuff

SoMch2dI4: if it doesn't work no loss

FF2dazau1: xcept u wastin my time

SoMch2dI4: wheres yr spirit of adventure?

That happened Tuesday, while I was being chopped, tinted, lacquered, sprayed and waxed in Hair Apparent.

"Waxed?"

"Relax, Riva," Stephanie told me, "she's not going to take your eyebrows off, just shape them."

I've been wounded in battle; I wasn't going to fuss over a little thing like having tiny hairs pulled out of my face. Although I will say this for battle as opposed to eyebrow waxing, at least you're allowed to defend yourself. However, when Stephanie started making noises about my bikini line, I pointed out quickly that when I wore the suit she'd picked out, plus panty hose and all the other junk designed to mold me into an acceptable shape, nobody was going to have any opportunity to inspect *that* hair.

These Paper-Pushers people have no sense of decency. There are limits to everything.

When the hairdresser got through with me, I stared into the mirror she held up and wondered where Riva Konneva had gotten to. Instead of a proud member of the Bronze Bra Guild, long hair falling loose and unconstrained (as a challenge to the enemy: you're never going to get close enough to me to grab my hair

or anything else, so don't even think about it!) I saw a sleek, smooth woman who looked like a dark-skinned copy of Stephanie: close-cropped shining helmet of hair that clearly wouldn't dare lift a strand in any breeze, perfectly arched lines of brows, and a lost look in the dark eyes under the freshly waxed brows.

"Great!" I said, too heartily, to conceal my confusion, and reached for my purse. "Gosh, that was quick, too; I thought you said this would take all day, Steph, and it's only been three hours." Three interminable hours. Three hours that would have been more pleasantly spent staked out on an anthill. But who's complaining. After all, Stephanie was doing me a *favor*; showing me how to present myself in the World of the Paper-Pushers, a skill I'd never quite mastered on my own. If I wanted to work here instead of on Dazau—

"Where do you think you're going?" Stephanie and the hairdresser said simultaneously as I reached for a hip pocket I no longer had. Oops. No jeans. Pencil-slim gray skirt that not only hobbled my knees, but wouldn't hang right if you dared put anything in the token pockets. Where was that purse?

"Well, I thought—"

"Sit," Stephanie said, sounding as if she were talking to a recalcitrant dog. "*Sit*. The cosmetologist is going to show you how to do your face."

I sat.

Did you realize some people can spend *two hours* putting on eye makeup alone?

"I won't have time to do this every day and work too," I pointed out to Stephanie. "Oh, you won't need to," she assured me. "You'll learn how to do the makeup real fast, and then all you'll have to do is get up a couple of hours early to wash and blow-dry your hair."

I took a deep breath and thought about those pre-dawn training runs - up Black Saddle Peak and down again - when I was an apprentice in the BBG. I hadn't given up then, even though the downhill jog had been really punishing for a nursing mother who hadn't been issued her bronze bra yet. I certainly wasn't going to wimp out just because Paper-Pushers' apprenticeship rituals were harder than I'd expected.

I will admit, though, that for the second day in a row I reached home and collapsed without much energy for bugging Salla about her homework. Dennis was working late that night, meeting with a series of parents who couldn't understand why their darlings were flunking Algebra II. If Salla wanted to spend the

evening in a chat room, munching on pizza, that was fine with me.

"As long as you give me a piece of the pizza," I stipulated. "From the side *without* anchovies."

She forked over the pizza and assured me that her Egyptian Studies project was practically done, and I left it at that. I was in bed before Dennis got home, with the alarm set for five so I could get up and do the required maintenance on my Paper-Pushers' costume, so I didn't get the benefit of his comments on my new look. And Salla, of course, hadn't noticed. When she's doing her chat room / telephone / television multicomunications thing, I could strip stark naked and paint myself with green stripes and she wouldn't notice.

From comments I'd heard from other people who had real Paper-Pushers' jobs, I kind of expected the first few days to consist of thinking up lies to put on interminable forms and waiting for somebody to tell me what to do. Stephanie had other plans.

"Drop those in your cubicle, you can fill them out at home in your spare time," she snapped when I found my way to the Composition and Distribution Center clutching my inch-thick stack of green, white, yellow and pink forms.

I looked out over a maze of chin-high cardboard partitions. It looked like a large-scale version of something Salla had built for torturing white mice in a Science Fair project last year. The inmates of the cubicles looked kind of like the mice after Salla got through changing the maze structure on them for the fortieth time. Dazed. Uncomprehending. Quiet. And with a little light of madness in the eyes . . .

"This one's yours." Stephanie indicated a closet-sized space near her own desk, took the papers from my hands and dropped them on a desk that was already covered with manuals and diskettes. "And that's your first project. I'll bring you up to speed after the meeting."

"Um, don't I have to have an interview? I mean, I haven't actually been *hired* yet." I didn't think. The people in Personnel had been rather like Stephanie: so brisk and efficient that they didn't have time to tell you what was going on.

"A formality," Stephanie assured me. "We're des—I mean, we're in an aggressively up-hiring mode at the moment. Come on, you're late. The monthly Vision Statement Meeting is about to start and I want you to sit in, get you up to speed on Xycorp's philosophy. Don't worry, you won't have to say anything, just listen."

That *sounded* easy enough. I made a mental note of another Paper-Pushers' translation. Did "Aggressively up-hiring mode" translate to "Desperate, as in you can hold us up for an extra sack of gold zolkys," or just "Desperate, as in we don't really care what you know as long as you have a measurable pulse?" Probably the latter, I concluded as I followed Stephanie down long tunnels glowing with the eerie blue-tinged lights that Paper-Pushers favored for indoor spaces. That might be something to worry about. Back home, the second version of "desperate" amounted to sending untrained recruits out as sword-fodder while saving the skilled fighters for the second wave of the attack. What exactly did it mean here? Maybe I'd find out in the meeting.

Ha.

Within half an hour I was completely lost and unable to translate anything anybody said. It was a hallucinatory experience. The conference room *looked* real enough, with an expensive oval mahogany table, padded swivel chairs, and a computer console built into each place at the table. The *people* looked reasonably real and competent—for Paper-Pushers, anyway; Duke Zolkir could have taken out the entire roomful with no help from his Guild swordswomen, but Paper-Pushers didn't go in for that kind of battle. They fought with words instead—and the words that eddied and swirled around that table like happysmoke were so slippery I couldn't begin to get a grasp on them.

At the beginning I figured out a few things. "Vision Statement" didn't mean that they cared whether I or anybody else could see farther than six inches without glasses; it meant that they had to come up with some words describing what they were trying to do at this branch of the company. That sounded good to me; I could have used some explanation. "Write software to do stuff, write manuals describing how to use it to do stuff, sell it to people who want to do stuff," was all I'd gotten out of Stephanie's description of Xycorp.

But the words! "Leverage" was a favorite. I thought this had something to do with getting a stick under something you wanted to move and applying force to the other end of the stick. But these people planned to "leverage" information, services, resources, catalysts, solutions . . . Somebody wanted to make sure that the planning process proceeded proactively; me, I wanted him to say those four words twenty-five times quickly without stuttering. Somebody else insisted that the vision statement must include the words "high payoff," "low risk," and "return on investment." A third somebody insisted that the core paradigm was a matter of principle-centered market-driven infrastructures.

Oh, well, Stephanie *had* introduced me as a new hire who was just there to listen and get up to speed. After half an hour I figured I'd done enough of the listening part. People were starting to shout at each other; I sat back and fingered the computer console. Maybe I could do the "get up to speed" part now, find out through the computer just what this company actually did.

Wrong again. I didn't have the passwords to access any company files. Salla wouldn't have let a little thing like that stop her, but I didn't know how to circumvent the password system. Besides, it might be a

bad idea to hack into the company's system while sitting in my very first official business meeting. But I needed to do *something* to take my mind off the spiky shoes, the engineer-constructed underwear, and the suspicion that my oily skin was slowly infiltrating the perfect mask of makeup Stephanie had instructed me to apply. Ah, an Internet connection! Never mind the company passwords; I gave it the key words for my home system and quietly logged on while two guys in suits yelled at each other about "innovative paradigms," and "mission-critical services." Perhaps I could look up Xycorp on the Net and at least find out what their software was supposed to do.

As soon as the screen flashed on my personal home page I was poised to hit the "Search" button. But my hands froze over the keyboard as a scrolling banner unrolled in the "Local News" section of the screen, where I normally kept track of weather and school holidays and good movies coming up.

"Terror at Colton Middle School," the banner announced in flashing red and yellow letters that made my stomach turn over. I skimmed the few words below. There wasn't much. A report of armed men disrupting an eighth-grade Social Studies class, police being called to the scene, need to proceed slowly for fear of creating a hostage situation, the lack of any statement from the teacher, Eugene Kruzak . . .

Gene Kruzak.

Eighth-grade social studies.

Salla's class.

And Salla had been planning to do something "creative and original," with Sacred Carvings

I switched into Instant Messenger and activated the trans-world chat mode, holding my breath until the purple screen with the scrolled edges came up. So my passwords worked fine on this system. So far, so good. Now if only Furo Fykrou was on line . . . I sent an emergency alert to ff2dazau1@zolkir.org and prayed that the beeping would annoy him enough to get an immediate answer.

Some jerk at the head of the table was yammering about the need for a value-added encirclement strategy.

"Too complicated," somebody else said.

"Well, why don't we just ask the tech writers—I mean, the Composition and Distribution Department—about that?"

I had a feeling that everybody was staring at me. Why not Stephanie? Where *was* Stephanie? She must have taken a bathroom break. I tried to remember the last words. Encirclement strategy.

"Well, uh . . . I always thought it was desirable to locate the enemy before attempting to surround them," I said, almost at random.

The guy at the head of the table stared and then laughed loudly. After a moment, everybody else did so too.

"Ah! You've been reading Sun Tzu, haven't you? *The Art of War*?"

That last phrase, at least, I recognized.

"I . . . have studied the art of war, yes, sir," I said.

"See?" he lectured the others. "I *told* everybody you need to read that book. It's a classic. See, even the *tech writers* can quote it! By God, it's time we brought some fresh blood into this place! If anybody here could read anything but memos . . . "

I tuned him out as the screen cleared to a normal . . . well, more or less normal . . . chat mode.

FF2dazau1: ok salla you satisfied with yr results?

RivaK: This is Riva, not Salla, and I am NOT happy, Furo! You've been sneaking around behind my back getting Salla in trouble again, haven't you?

FF2dazau1: hey it was her idea

RivaK: Any more following Salla's ideas without checking with me and I'll get Dennis to turn you into a sand-lizard. He can do it, you know. He's a professional. They know more mathemagics on Paper-Pushers than you've ever . . .

FF2dazau1: ok,ok,ok, keep cool. How was I to know the Sacred Carving she picked out to test was the dragon's tooth?

RivaK: You know Salla, don't you? Now you're going to fix it. And fast!

I instructed him to invoke some 4-d equantations that would get me over to Colton Middle School a little bit faster than fast - like about half an hour ago, before the cops showed up and this whole mess got on the Internet. And on the way, I wanted a stop at home, to change into my *real* working outfit. I couldn't do any good in a gray hobble-skirt and bound feet.

FF2dazau1: that's heavy magic you know. Gonna cost.

RivaK: Wrong. Your payment is I *don't* have Dennis turn you into a sand-lizard, and maybe in five or six years I forgive you.

FF2dazau1: Works for me.

Wizards are arrogant, tough, mean-minded bastards, but they're no match for an infuriated mother. Especially one with a paid-up membership in the Bronze Bra Guild and a husband who just happens to be a mathemagical genius.

"Sorry to leave you, guys," I said as I stood up, "but there's an emergency over at my kid's school. I gotta run."

I had instructed Furo Fykrou to activate the transfer from the women's room around the corner from the conference chamber. Didn't want to make these people nervous by having them see me vanish into thin air.

Stephanie was just leaving the women's room as I got there. She smiled weakly and said something about coffee and long meetings; I nodded and pushed through the door without really listening. Oh, hell, there was some girl playing with her eye makeup in front of the mirror. And no way to tell FF to delay the . . .

I think she screamed as I was leaving, but I'm not sure. I hope they don't insist on her taking a drug test or anything.

I'd asked for just enough time at the house to make a quick change from suit and pantyhose into something I could really work in. With my arms and legs free and mail protecting vital parts, with my sword Sasulau hanging in her scabbard by my side, I found I could already think better. While I was changing, some other things had occurred to me that might come in handy. I grabbed my cell phone, a roll of aluminum foil, the last two clean white sheets in the laundry hamper, and a can of shoe polish. No time for more—the air was quivering around me already in preparation for the second transfer. I bundled everything into a pillowcase just before my stomach turned inside out and upside down.

I *hate* time-transfers.

There was no time to throw up as the dingy brown halls of Colton Middle School came into focus around me, though. I tossed the pillowcase full of gear behind me with my left hand while my right drew Sasulau. She came out singing blood and death; I came up crouching, weight balanced, ready to spin, turn, thrust wherever was necessary—

—and found my path to the enemy blocked by kids and teachers. Encirclement strategy, my left boob! I couldn't even get *at* the tall, mean-looking, half-naked men who were jabbering in the doorway to a classroom. There were teachers diving for cover, wannabe gangsta students trying to act tough, and some idiot drowning out all our words with panicky calls for help on the loudspeaker.

"Move it," I suggested to the kid in front of me, the one who was turning pale green under his dreads and threads while his buddies urged him on.

He didn't seem to hear me, so I repeated the suggestion with a gentle hint from Sasulau. Didn't even tear his jeans, but he gasped, did a leap like a hooked fish, and subsided gently onto the floor. I stepped over him and encouraged a couple of other people to move aside. At least these kids didn't faint—good, the floor wouldn't be *too* littered when I got to where I really needed to move.

The warriors were bunched up in the doorway. Bad planning; only one of them was free to move against

me. That one gave me a nasty grin and lowered a javelin about three times the length of Sasulau, wagging the pointed head suggestively between my stomach and groin.

While he was enjoying himself and waiting for me to shriek and faint, I went under the javelin and planted Sasulau in his thigh. She slid in nice and clean between the overlapping metal scales of his half-armor, protested with a high whine when I drew her out before she could go all the way through. I didn't want to kill the guy, just get his attention.

I had to break two of their javelins, flip a bowman over my shoulder and slightly wound a couple of swordsmen before they figured out that they were no longer dealing with Paper-Pushovers, but it was no big deal; the idiots kept trying to defend the doorway one at a time. No training in palace fighting, clearly.

"Throw down your weapons and get over in that corner!" I snapped as soon as they began looking appropriately worried. I wasn't sure the Sacred Carvings had given them modern-day language comprehension, but my gestures made it clear enough.

Most of the Social Studies class had gone under their desks, fortunately, so they weren't in the way. I didn't see Gene Kruzak anywhere, but Salla popped out from cover behind the computer table as soon as she heard my voice.

"Okay, what are they, and how can I talk to them?" I demanded. I hoped I would get some points with her for not rushing across the room and hugging her like a little kid. I wanted to. I wanted to drag her out of there and to hell with the rest of the school. But she'd stirred up some adult-sized trouble here; she had better help me clean it up like an adult. *Later* I'd hold on to her for, oh, seven or eight hours, or days, or whatever it took to get my heart rate down to normal.

"I—I think they're Nubian mercenaries," Salla stammered. "Or maybe Libyan. Later than Sixth Dynasty, because the costumes and weapons indicate—"

She was starting to get into Lecture Mom mode already; I cut her off with a chopping motion of Sasulau. "Never mind the ancient history; what do they *speak*? I need to make a deal with these guys."

Fortunately, it turned out that the Sacred Carvings magic worked just like modern mathemagical transfer equations, implanting an ability to use and understand the dominant language of the culture you were landed in. Less fortunately, it seemed that the magic had picked up the dominant language as being that of Colton Middle School: teen-speak. I had to get Salla and the kid with dreadlocks to translate for me. Fortunately the deal I had to offer wasn't complicated: passage to a nice, big, rich planet with a climate

very much like their home, with plenty of work for good mercenaries.

"Not," I added, "that you people seem all that skilled to me, but I expect you'll shape up pretty fast." Those that lived. These guys had probably been tough once upon a time, but it appeared—luckily for me—that Salla had called up some kind of elite palace guard detail that hadn't had to do any real fighting for some years. We don't waste a lot of time on ceremonial processions or palace guard detail on Dazau. They'd probably enjoy the chance to get some real work for a change, once they adjusted.

All I had to do then was activate Call Trans-Forwarding on my cell phone and alert Furo Fykrou to pick up his new employees.

"But what am I going to *do* with a mercenary army?" he whined. "I'm a wizard of peace, not a duke."

"Rent them out to Zolkir," I suggested. "Take a percentage of the rental and give them the rest as salary."

"Umm." He sounded happier already. "Four parts for me, one for them. Or do you think that's too generous? Maybe five for me . . ."

While he was happy, I persuaded him to activate the transfer, and just in time too; there were sirens wailing in the distance.

I heaved a sigh of relief as the dark, scarred men quivered, became columns of darkness, disappeared. I didn't have a clue how to reverse Sacred Carvings magic so as to send them home again, and neither did anybody on Dazau—Sacred Carvings had been a lost art for so long - but I was pretty sure they'd be happy serving Duke Zolkir. And Furo Fykrou probably wouldn't cheat them any worse than their previous employers had.

There was just a little cleanup work to be done, quickly, before the cops arrived. I tore up the sheets, tossed one strip to Jason and Salla and had them mop up the blood on the floor, while I collected the wannabe eighth-grade gangstas and used the rest of the sheets, the aluminum foil, and the boot polish on them. Since their leader was still pale and shaky from his faint, and I hadn't had time to clean the blood off Sasulau yet, they were cooperative. Quite.

The hardest part was persuading Gene Kruzak to come out from under his desk at the front of the classroom. But when he finally emerged, he blinked at the line of eighth-grade boys in torn-sheet loincloths and aluminum-foil armor, with their hair matted into shape with shoe polish, and agreed that yes, Salla had come up with a striking demonstration of Seventh Dynasty mercenary soldiers, and yes, it

was a pity that some people who didn't understand how he liked to dramatize history for the kids had misunderstood and panicked, and no, of course he hadn't been worried for a moment.

I gather that this story did *not* amuse the cops when they finally got there, expecting full-scale gang warfare in the halls. I wouldn't know firsthand; Salla had insisted that I hide in the bathroom before anybody else saw me, pointing out that a six-foot warrior woman in bronze chain mail would probably make the police seriously nervous. "I could say I dressed up to help out with your project?" I suggested.

"Please, Mom," Salla said. Her lower lip was quivering. "I can deal with it from here. And if anybody else sees you, I'll just *die*!"

That should have warned me, but it didn't. I paced up and down in the eighth-grade girls' bathroom and listened while Salla and Gene Kruzak convinced everybody that the whole kerfuffle had been a false alarm. The police were relatively easy to convince; they were happy not to have to deal with a gang war, and even happier not to have any bodies to take away, so they didn't give the principal too much of a hard time about stupid hysterical phone calls to 911.

Everybody, in fact, was happy . . . Except Salla, as I discovered when she came in to release me. "Honestly, mo-ther!" she started on me before the swinging door had closed. "How could you *embarrass* me like that?"

"Huh?"

"*Look* at you!" She was close to tears. "Coming to school in that ridiculous outfit. It's indecent. Your *boobs* are showing through the chain mail. And all my *friends* saw you!"

"You'd rather all your friends got chopped up by Nubian mercenaries?" I asked in what I thought was a neutral tone.

"Oh, don't patronize me," Salla wailed, "you just don't *understand*! Haven't you got any decent clothes with you? In the car?"

Car.

I hadn't thought about how we were going to get home.

"Uh, actually, I guess I'll have to ride the bus with you," I told her.

"In *that* outfit? You can't! I'll walk home! I'm never going to be able to show my face in this school again, and it's ALL YOUR FAULT"

Let's skip the rest of the scene, okay? Anybody who's raised a teenage daughter knows how it went, and the rest of you, believe me, will be happier not knowing the gory details. Suffice it to say that I waited in the bathroom, semi-decently concealed in a stall, until Dennis dismissed his own classes and was free to drive us both home.

Where I discovered, on checking my email, that Salla wasn't the only one who was less than thrilled with my recent actions.

Oh, Furo Fykrou was happy enough. He'd already been able to rent my little gift out to Count Bukklivannizi for a border war, in return for so many zolkys that he'd actually, in a moment of unwizardly generosity, credited my account with ten percent of the rental as a sort of finder's fee.

But Stephanie was another matter. Her email reiterated, several times over, that she was disappointed in me. Very, very disappointed. After all her efforts to help me reenter the career track, how could I blow it all by acting so unprofessionally as to take off from work just for some little problem my kid was having at school? Needless to say, Xycorp was not going to hire me now. They had concluded I wouldn't be a good fit with the corporate culture.

I wrote back that I thought Xycorp was quite right, and in any case I wouldn't be looking for work in the near future, because I'd had an idea for another story.