

DON SAKERS_____.

The Finagle Fiasco

Yes, I remember the Murphy episode. Of course, I was not Grand Master of Euler at the time—I was only Assistant Christensen Professor of Topology. Still, I don't suppose anyone will ever forget that time, when the Math Institute here on Euler was all that stood between the galaxy and total domination by a sadistic megalomaniac.

What's that? Oh, yes, I know the Psychology Institute has done penance for allowing Khar-Davii to take over. And I understand that they say it can never happen again. Well, I wonder—psychology is not of course an exact discipline, like math.

Eh? Yes, the Murphy episode. As I recall, it was shortly after the spring term had begun. I had trouble with some of my displays; the Twenty-Dimension Simulator had developed a singularity, and simply would not accept fields with more than eighty operations. Maintenance told me that the entire system would have to be shut down for reprogramming, and I went to the Grand Master for approval. She was conversing on the hyperwave; I waited until she was done. In due time she opened the privacy hood and smiled at me. "Ah, Professor Yagwn. How are you?"

"Fine, Madam. And yourself?"

She sighed. "I could be better, Yagwn. You've heard of this Khar-Davii, who calls himself the Conqueror? Well, it appears that he has taken over the Galactic Council and killed the Co-ordinator. He has proclaimed himself Monarch of Humanity, and the inhabited worlds are falling all over their own feet to surrender to him."

I recalled hearing something about the matter on the news. "Are his weapons that formidable?"

"Apparently so. Euler is the only planet that has not yielded. I was just talking with the outlying Galactic Traffic station—Khar-Davii's fleet is even now heading toward this world." She glanced at a data screen on her desk. "Ah, excuse me. The fleet has arrived. We are surrounded."

I had no opportunity to voice an opinion. There was a bright flash of light, and suddenly the image of a corpulent human man appeared in the center of the Grand Master's office. Behind him were banks of machinery tended by warriors in full battle dress.

"I am Khar-Davii, the Conqueror. Your miserable planet has refused to accept my rule. You will surrender to me now or I will destroy your world."

I suppressed a grin; the Grand Master did not bother to hide her amusement. "I hardly think it is a miserable world. I rather like it. Conqueror, your plan of conquest would interfere with our spring term, and I'm sure that the commotion would upset many of our scholars."

Khar-Davii narrowed his brows. "As I was told—you are totally out of touch with the real universe. Mathematicians and philosophers—not a practical being in the bunch."

The Grand Master lost her smile. One thing that always bothered her was the accusation that Euler was out of touch with reality. To her, math was the highest form of reality. She stood and faced Khar-Davii.

"My dear Conqueror, I will not allow you to bother Euler. If you wish to attack, then do so—but let me show you something of our defenses first." She touched a button, and a screen behind her showed the image of a great cannon.

I drew in my breath sharply at the sight.

"And what is that machine, Grand Master?" Khar-Davii asked with a smile. "Will it shoot strings of numbers at us?"

The Grand Master answered with another smile. "No doubt, Conqueror, a man with your military background has heard of the Murphy laws? That which can go wrong, *will* go wrong. Here we have them formulated as a theorem, and implemented as a weapon."

"And this is your defense?"

She spread her hands and regarded him as though he were a simpleton—which seemed readily apparent. "Long ago we investigated the Murphy laws completely. This machine amplifies their

effects. If you attack us, your guns will fail to fire, your ships will suffer instrument breakdowns, your most trusted officers will trip and accidentally sound recall orders. You could never beat us.”

Khar-Davii dissolved in a fit of laughter. “My fleet has been listening to this conversation—now they know what ‘terrible weapon’ Euler will use against them.” He stopped chuckling. “Grand Master, prepare for your death. Fleet—Attack!”

The attack did not last long.

Since I had a little time to spare, I watched it on the viewscreens from the Grand Master’s office. After twenty minutes or so, only the Conqueror’s flagship was left in fighting condition. It was not too long afterward that Khar-Davii’s image reappeared in the office. The Conqueror was harried and bedraggled, and there was fear in his eyes.

“Can I help you, Conqueror?” the Grand Master asked.

“Enough. Enough. Turn off that machine. We will sue for peace. I will not attack your planet any more.”

“Fine.” She pressed another button. “Your treaty has been logged. We have other weapons that we can use against you, should you try to break your word. I will thank you now to take the remnants of your fleet away without bothering us . . . we have important work to do.”

“You will not try to prevent me from ruling the Galaxy? Your Murphy Machine is a more formidable weapon than any I possess.”

She smiled. “Poor, poor Conqueror. You should have taken more mathematics classes. Deductive reasoning would have helped you. The Murphy Machine worked perfectly—as soon as it was turned on, things started to go wrong. The first problem that developed was the failure of the machine itself.”

“Failure. . . ?”

“Yes.” She laughed. “It was the superstition of your crews that defeated you, Khar-Davii. They believed that they could not win, and so they did not.”

Khar-Davii snarled, and his image vanished. Viewscreens showed his ships limping away from Euler.

“We shall have no more trouble from him. The memory of his defeat and his fear of a recurrence will prevent him from returning. He will attempt to rule the galaxy and will forget about Euler.” She shook her head. “What can I do for you, Yagwn?”

"I need permission to shut down the Twenty-Dimension Simulator for reprogramming."

"Very well, I will make the necessary notifications."

"Thank you." I turned to go, then paused at the door. "About the Murphy Machine, Grand Master. Do you think it was kind to lie to him so?"

"Kinder than letting him know what a terrible power he is really up against. He thinks the machine unworkable." She shrugged.

"Let *him* figure out why his empire dissolves so quickly."

Dismissing me, she bent her head back to her work.