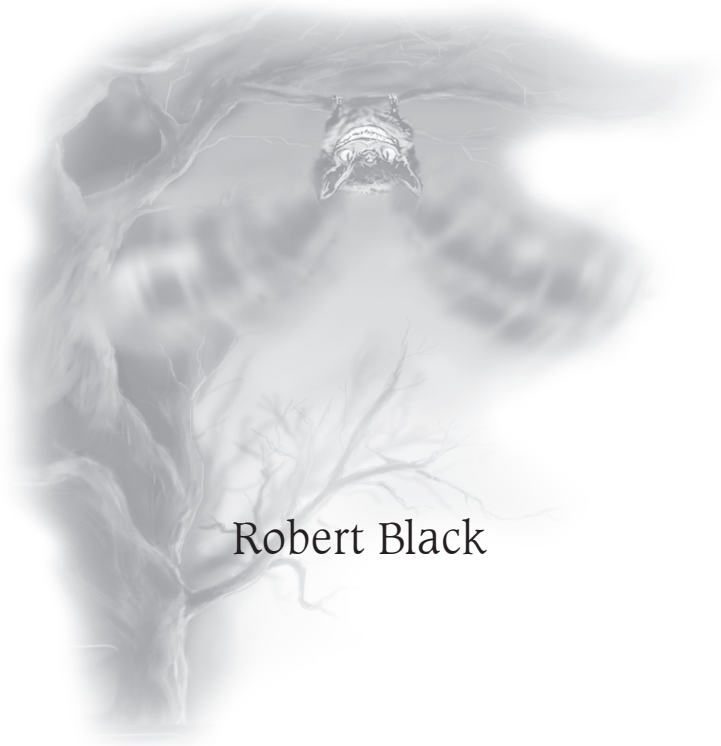


# Night of the Eerie Equations



Robert Black

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Also by Robert Black,  
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*Liberty Girl*

*Unswept Graves*

*Night of the Paranormal Patterns*

*Night of the Frightening Fractions*

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# Chapter One

The last bell rang at the end of a long school day. Lennie Miller sprang from her seat and hurried to her locker, eager to pack up her things and head for the school bus. It was already getting dark outside, between the short November day and the cold, gray rainclouds that hung over the little town of Bailey, Indiana. On a day like this, she was eager to get back to her warm, dry home.

She was finishing at her locker, just zipping up her backpack, when someone walked up to her—a thin girl about her own height, with wavy black hair and a pale complexion. Lennie felt like she had seen the girl before, but couldn't remember where.

The other girl smiled shyly. “Hi,” the girl said. “I’m Tanya. You’re...Lennie, right?”

“That’s right,” said Lennie. Her full name, Leonarda daVinci Miller, was much too embarrassing to use, so she went by Lennie with just about everyone, especially people she hadn’t met before.

“I...I wanted to ask if you could help me with something,” said Tanya. “You’re really good at math, aren’t you?”

Lennie blinked, surprised by the question. In the months since her family moved to Bailey, she’d been asked for help with math a lot—but rarely by anyone completely...human. She stared more intently, looking for any sign that the girl was more than she appeared.

Tanya rocked back under Lennie's gaze. "I hope you don't mind my asking," she said quickly. "It's just...I'm in Mr. Brannan's algebra class, and I've seen you there before, talking to him about math."

*So that's where she knows me,* thought Lennie. "You know I'm a seventh grader, right?" she asked. "You're a year ahead of me. And in algebra."

"I know, but I'm not very good at it," Tanya admitted. She held up her textbook. "The last chapter really confused me, and when you talk to Mr. Brannan, you sound like you understand him. He always gives us weird problems, like the ones you were doing."

Lennie groaned. "Do I have to help you right now? I don't want to miss the bus."

The other girl looked down, her eyes darting back and forth as she thought. "Could I email you something?" she asked, looking back up pleadingly. "You could check it out tonight and get back to me."

Lennie fidgeted uncomfortably. "Okay, but no promises," she relented. They exchanged email addresses, and then Tanya went on her way, casting one last hopeful look in Lennie's direction. Lennie wondered what she had done to make people think she was so good in math. Well, what she had done to make *normal* people think she was good in math. She already knew why not-so-normal beings thought that way.

She closed her locker and headed down the hallway. Just as she neared the exit, something that looked like a miniature orange pterodactyl zoomed through the door and over her head. She ducked and jumped out of the way—and only then realized no one else had seen the creature. Feeling self-conscious, she straightened up and tried to look as if

nothing had happened, hoping that the kids nearby were too preoccupied to notice.

“Aw, would you look at that? You know they’ll expect us to catch it!”

Lennie’s eyes darted over to the wall, where she found four tiny men, all with dark faces and long black hair, and all wearing traditional Native American clothes. They were *payiihsa*, small sprite-like beings who had once been magical helpers for the Algonquian tribes—but who also liked to play tricks on people. At the moment, they were standing on each other’s shoulders, with the top one reaching for the fire alarm on the wall. Not a good sign.

“Hey!” she cried out. “What are you guys doing?” She knew the little men were invisible to everyone around her, just like the pterodactyl, but this was no time to worry about looking weird in front of her classmates.

The little men turned their heads and looked up at her, all while somehow managing to keep from falling down in a heap. “Oh, hiya Pattern Finder!” said the one on top. “We didn’t see you there!”

“Yeah, I guessed that,” said Lennie. “You’re not about to pull the fire alarm, are you?”

“Who, us?” said the *payiihsa* on the bottom. “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong!”

“Yeah,” said the next one up. “We’re trying to fix this thing!”

Lennie looked at them skeptically. “Really?”

“Really!” cried the third one from the bottom. “There’s a loose wire inside.”

“That’s right,” the one below him agreed. “If we don’t fix it, there could be a short circuit or something!”

The *payiihsa* on top waved his hand, and a small screwdriver magically appeared in it. “Good thing we’re around, isn’t it?”

“Good thing I can ask the janitor to double check it,” said Lennie, narrowing her eyes at them. The little men held her gaze for a moment, but then their shoulders sagged in unison, and they all dropped to the floor.

“We’ve got to do something about our reputation,” muttered the one who had been on the bottom.

“Yeah, it was easier to play tricks when people trusted us more,” added the one who had been second from the bottom.

“You’d probably do some good if you caught that orange flying thing,” Lennie suggested. She glared at them in a way that told them she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“What are you looking at?”

Lennie jumped at the unexpected voice. A boy had stopped and was looking at her—a tall, husky boy whose size clashed with his voice’s reedy, high-pitched tone.

“Wha...what?” Lennie stammered. “Oh, nothing. I was...uh...just wondering how often they check these fire alarms. You never know when there might be a loose wire.”

The boy snorted at her disdainfully and continued on his way. Lennie fumed to herself for a moment, but then turned back to the *payiihsa*, only to see them scurrying down the hallway in the same direction the orange creature had flown.

*I guess they got to play a trick after all.* She shook her head slightly, marveling at the way such strange things had come to feel normal to her. They had become just another part of her life, ever since she discovered that Bailey sat on the edge of a Mystical Realm, right next door but a magical dimension away. Ghosts, zombies, and other strange

creatures could cross over into the non-magical world, but only a few people with special abilities could see them or hear them. Lennie hadn't discovered her gift until her family moved to town. And soon after that, the mystical beings told her she had an even more extraordinary fate. She was destined to be a Pattern Finder, someone the Mystical Realm turned to for help with their math problems. And they needed *a lot* of help with their math problems.

But at least they didn't need help with any math problems at the moment. Chasing a flying orange creature wasn't part of her job, and she had a bus to catch. There was still plenty of time for her to make it.

“Hey, there! Are you Lennie Miller?”

Lennie was just outside the door when she heard someone else calling her name, a boy's voice that cracked into a high tone every few syllables. She looked up and saw a boy she didn't recognize. He was a bit taller than she was; he had light, strawberry-tinted hair and a pale, almost washed-out face dotted by faded freckles. His appearance made Lennie fret briefly about her own fiery red hair and more prominent freckles, as if she needed a way to turn the brightness down on herself.

“You *are* Lennie, aren't you?” said the boy. “I'm Tim. Timothy North. Someone told me you're the person to see for maths help.”

There was something odd about the way the boy spoke. His vowels came out wrong, and he was stressing the letter R too much. And who on earth said “maths?” But those thoughts only crossed her mind briefly. She was too irritated to pay much attention to them.

“You're not in the same class as Tanya, are you?” she asked. “Because I already told her—”

“No, sorry,” Tim replied. “I don’t even know someone called Tanya.”

A group of kids came out of the school and pushed past them, heading for the buses. Lennie watched them and felt her time running out. “Well, can I just give you my email address, and you can send me your problem? I really need to go.”

The boy shook his head. “No, I’m afraid I don’t use email,” he replied.

“What?” Lennie cried in disbelief. “Who doesn’t use email?”

The boy grinned at her, his eyes suddenly turning mischievous. “Maybe someone who doesn’t like talking to drummies,” he told her.

Lennie’s eyes widened as she realized what was happening. Not only had Tim suddenly developed a British accent, he had used the word “drummie.” That kind of slang only meant one thing.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Lennie cried. But she was too late. Tim raised his hand and snapped his fingers, and they were promptly engulfed by a cloud of smoke. When it cleared, she was standing on some kind of athletic field, under a sky that had a greenish tint to it. At the edge of the field was a path leading to a building that looked like a fantasy world castle. They were in the Mystical Realm—on the grounds, she guessed, of Backrazor Academy, a school for young wizards.

“Surprise!” cried Tim. “Sorry about tricking you, but we didn’t think you’d come here otherwise.”

“We?” said Lennie. “I should have guessed...”



Before she could finish her thought, there were two more large puffs of smoke, heralding the appearance of two more young wizards—a boy with large round glasses and a mop of straight dark hair, and a girl with a pale complexion and long, wavy rust-colored hair. Their names were Martin and Pauline, and they had asked Lennie for help before.

“Spot on!” cried Martin. “It’s us!”

“We thought you should come over to our side this time,” said Pauline. “Do you like it?”

“Not when I’m trying to get home,” said Lennie. “Couldn’t you have just called me or something?”

Pauline shook her head. “We don’t have telephones!” she replied, as if the idea was repulsive to her.

“They’re not even allowed in the school,” Martin added. “Why do you keep expecting us to act like drummies?”

*Yes, how silly of me,* Lennie thought. “Drummie” was the word they used for anything in the non-magical world they didn’t like. Which was just about everything.

“Look, you’re here now,” said Tim. “That means you have to help us, doesn’t it?”

Lennie scowled at the boy. “It’s not like I’m a genie or something,” she said crossly. “You don’t get three wishes just because you caught me.”

“Actually, genies are a lot more complicated than that,” said Martin.

“Not really my point,” Lennie replied through clenched teeth.

“You’ll have to forgive Tim,” said Pauline. She had softened her tone and even flashed Lennie a smile. “He

doesn't know you like we do. He doesn't understand how things work."

Lennie sighed, not at all impressed with Pauline's attempt to seem friendly. "I'd guess 'how things work' is that you won't send me home until I agree to help you. Right?"

Pauline's gaze instantly went cold again. Behind her, Martin looked down at the ground. "Well...pretty much, yeah," he muttered.

"We don't have time to mess about," said Tim. "We've got to turn in our contest entry tomorrow!"

"Contest?" said Lennie. Now they were getting somewhere. "What kind of contest?"

"Our divining teacher is having a contest," Pauline explained. "He put some magical objects into a dimensionally transcendental shopping bag."

"A reusable one, of course," Martin added.

Pauline shot him an impatient look. "Yes, a reusable one," she continued. "We have to figure out how many objects there are without opening the bag or even touching it. Only by magic."

"And that involves math because...?" Lennie ventured.

"Because we can only figure out parts of the answer," said Martin. "We need you to put them together."

"Okay, okay," said Lennie, sighing again. She opened her backpack and took out a notepad, a pencil, and her reading glasses—the tools of her Pattern Finder trade. "So how much did you find out?"

"Our teacher told us there were three kinds of magical objects," said Tim. "Malaprops, platinum pinches, and duct tape."

Lennie raised an eyebrow. “Duct tape?” she said. “What’s so magical about that?”

“Not the drummie kind,” said Pauline. “You use magical duct tape to spy on people.”

“Right,” said Martin. “Put some on a ventilation duct, and it’ll record whatever people are saying in all the rooms the duct runs to!”

“Great,” Lennie remarked sarcastically. “Do I want to know what the other things are?”

“Malaprops look like things you’d use for a practical joke,” said Tim. “You know, rubber chickens or whoopie cushions or wing-sprouting pie plates. But they’re really magic wands in disguise!”

“And a platinum pinch is part of a magical game we play,” said Martin. “When you’re trying to score a goal, your teammates have to watch out for you, or the platinum pinch will come along and pinch you on the bum.”

*Okay, I’m officially glad I stuck with soccer,* Lennie thought. “So what do you know about these things?” she asked.

“I found out how much everything costs,” said Pauline. “Platinum pinches cost four yellers each, rolls of duct tape cost two each, and malaprops cost six each. The total cost of everything in the bag is one hundred yellers.”

Lennie nodded as she wrote down all the numbers. She already knew that a “yeller” was what the mystical beings called their money. She hadn’t asked why.

“I found out how much everything weighs,” said Martin. “Platinum pinches weigh three pounds each, rolls of duct tape weigh three-quarters of a pound, and malaprops weigh

one and one-quarter pounds. The total weight of everything in the bag is thirty pounds.”

“And I found out the total magical strength,” said Tim.

“How do you measure that?” asked Lennie.

“In bolts, of course!” Tim replied impatiently. “Bolts, lamps, and gloams. Everyone knows that.”

“Sure, whatever,” said Lennie. “So how many of them did you get?”

“The strength of a platinum pinch is two bolts,” said Tim. “A roll of duct tape is four bolts, and a malaprop is two bolts. The total strength of everything in the bag is sixty-two bolts.”

Lennie finished writing and then looked up to find all three wizards staring at her. “You want it right now?” she asked them. Nodding at Tim, she asked Martin and Pauline, “Didn’t you tell him it doesn’t work that way?”

“Oh yes, the Pattern Finder needs time to practice her craft,” Pauline said with a huff.

“What’s wrong with that?” said Lennie. “You said you aren’t turning in your answer until tomorrow.”

The wizards looked at each other. “I guess she’s got a point,” Tim admitted.

“Yeah, I do,” said Lennie. “And here’s another hint—I’ll find the answer a lot quicker at home. Do you think you can send me back now?”

“Yes, I suppose we can,” said Martin, sounding more than a little grumpy. “But we’ll be looking in on you!”

“Just meet me outside my school before class starts tomorrow,” Lennie assured them. “I’ll have the answer ready.”

Tim nodded and then snapped his fingers again. Just as before, a large cloud of smoke erupted from nowhere and surrounded her. When it cleared, she was back in Bailey.

More specifically, she was back in front of Bailey Community Middle School. Just as the last bus was driving away, and a few raindrops were starting to fall.

*Oh, that's just great*, she thought as she ducked into the building's entrance. When it came to wizards, three weren't any better than two.



## Chapter Two

A cold drizzle fell all the way home to the Miller family's small farm—soon to become an artists' retreat—on the outskirts of Bailey. As her mother pulled up to the house, Lennie noticed that her father's car was already there. He had gone to visit a client that morning, but apparently he had been able to get away early. That made her feel a bit more relaxed. Dinners alone with her mother could be a lot of pressure.

Her father was still unpacking his laptop bag from the trip when she went inside. She greeted him with a hug, and then sat down at the table as he pulled out something wrapped in a bag from a college bookstore.

"I'm glad you're home," her father said. "I've got something that might interest you. I found it when I stopped by the campus after my meeting."

"What is it?" Lennie wondered as she took the package. It was flat and rectangular, about the same size as the pads of paper she always carried. For a moment, she had a hopeful thought that it might be her own tablet, but that hope faded quickly. It was just paper—three pads of light green tinted sheets.

"You're underwhelmed," her father noted on seeing her reaction. He reached into the bag again. "That's okay. I got you something fun, too. But those might come in handy."

"What are they for?" Lennie asked. As she took a closer look, she could see that the pages were blank on one side

apart from a thin line around the edges, and had a grid for graphing on the other side.

“It’s called engineering paper,” her father explained. “We used it when I was in school, and some of my clients still use it now. You’ve really gotten into studying math since we moved here, so I thought I’d encourage you a little.”

“Oh, you noticed that?” said Lennie. Her stomach fluttered, but she tried not to let it show. Her parents didn’t know she’d been doing so much math only because of all the magical creatures asking for help. There was no way she could explain it to them.

“We’re always looking for ways to bring out your talents, dear,” said Lennie’s mother. “You shouldn’t try to hide the things that make you special.”

*Some things make me a little too special.* If creatures from the Mystical Realm recognized her math skills, that was one thing, but now normal people were noticing, too. Even her parents. It was a nightmare coming true. At this rate, she would be known as “the math girl” twenty-four hours a day.

After dinner, she went to her room, planning to work on the wizards’ problem, but she was too bothered to do anything with it. Instead, she went to her computer and logged into her favorite online game, determined to show herself there was still more to her life than math. But she had only been playing a few minutes when a message popped up from an old friend back in Philadelphia, a girl named Reshma. Lennie knew her from several soccer camps. She switched over to video chat, and before long, she was getting caught up on all the latest gossip.

“So, what are all those farm boys like?” Reshma asked after a while. “Any cute ones?”

Lennie rolled her eyes at the screen. “Puh-leeze,” she replied. “We just had a dance for Halloween, but everyone was wearing costumes.” *Besides, my life’s complicated enough without adding boys to it.* Then she grinned and asked, “How about you? Meet anyone interesting?”

“I wish,” said Reshma. “I’ve got this one little creep who keeps borrowing my history notes, just because he can’t think of another way to talk to me.”

Lennie laughed. “Are you sure that’s what he’s doing?” she asked. “Maybe he really wants help with history.”

“If he does, then he shouldn’t be asking me,” said Reshma. “I’m no history genius.”

“You sound like me,” said Lennie, “only I’ve got people thinking I’m a math genius.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” said Lennie. “You should see this problem someone gave me today. I can’t figure it out.”

Reshma frowned. “What kind of a problem is it?” she asked. “You want to show me?”

Lennie frowned back. “When did *you* become a math genius?”

Reshma laughed. “I’m not. But I am two grades ahead of you. Maybe it’s something I’ve seen and you haven’t.”

Lennie considered the idea and shrugged. “It’s worth a try,” she admitted. She picked up her new pad of engineering paper and held it toward the screen. “I’m supposed to find three different things, and I know three different ways they combine. I got as far as writing them out as equations.”



$$4 \times P + 2 \times D + 6 \times M = 100$$

$$3 \times P + \frac{3}{4} \times D + 1 - \frac{1}{14} \times M = 30$$

$$2 \times P + 4 \times D + 2 \times M = 62$$

“I’ve done problems like this where I was finding *two* things,” she continued. “But not three!”

Reshma stared at the page. “Don’t you ever just use X, Y, and Z for your variables?” she asked.

Lennie set the pad down and glared. “Don’t you start! I get enough of that from my friend out here.”

Reshma laughed again. “Sorry,” she replied in a tone that implied she wasn’t sorry at all. “Here, I’ll make it up to you. I’ve done this kind of problem before.”

“Oh, good,” said Lennie. “How does it work?”

“It’s kind of like a puzzle,” said Reshma. “You have to figure it out one piece at a time.”

“But where do you start?” Lennie asked. She held the pad up to the screen again.

Reshma thought for a moment. “Well, I’d start by multiplying everything in the third equation by negative two,” she proposed. “Remember that you have to do the same thing to both sides of the equal sign.”

“I know that!” Lennie insisted. She put the pad down and rewrote the third equation as Reshma suggested.

$$-4 \times P - 8 \times D - 4 \times M = -124$$

“Okay, now what?”

“Now you can take everything on the left side and add it to everything on the left side of the first equation,” said

Reshma. “And add everything on the right side to everything on the right side of the first equation.”

“You can do that?”

“You can if you do the same thing to both sides,” Reshma explained. “And the equals sign means that what’s on the left is the same thing as what’s on the right.”

Lennie thought over Reshma’s reply and shrugged. “Yeah, I guess it does,” she agreed. She went back to the pad and added the equations together.

$$(4xP) + (2xD) + (6xM) - (4xP) - (8xD) - (4xM) = 100 - 124$$
$$(-6xD) + (2xM) = -24$$

“Hey!” Lennie exclaimed. “The Platinum Pinches disappeared!”

“The *what?*” said Reshma.

“Er, never mind,” Lennie said quickly. “I just mean you got rid of the P variable.”

“Exactly!” said Reshma. “And next, you take two different equations and figure out how to get rid of the P in those, too.”

Lennie stared at her pad. *She’s saying I need to combine the middle equation with one of the other two*, she thought. *How can I do that and get rid of the P?* After a moment, she looked up. “What if I multiply the middle equation by two and the bottom one by negative three?” Before Reshma could say anything, she started putting her idea to the test. This time, she arranged the variables like they were columns in a regular addition or subtraction problem, to see if that made sense.

$$\begin{array}{r}
 6xP + 3/2xD + 2 - 1/2xM = 60 \\
 -6xP - 12xD - 6xM = -186 \\
 \hline
 -10 - 1/2xD - 3 - 1/2xM = -126
 \end{array}$$

“Good!” Reshma exclaimed when Lennie showed her the pad. “So now you have two equations with two variables. Think you can handle that?”

“Definitely!” said Lennie. She looked down at her pad to go on, but stopped when she heard Reshma laughing.

“Hey, I didn’t mean right now!” said Reshma. “Maybe you really *have* turned into a math genius!”

Lennie felt her face flush and her ears start to turn red, and she quickly looked away from the screen. “I have not!” she insisted. She knew Reshma was only teasing, but for some reason she felt angry and embarrassed.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone around here,” said Reshma. She winked at Lennie.

Lennie tried to calm herself down, still not understanding why she had reacted so strongly. “Yeah, you’d better not,” she said, trying to sound like she was teasing as well. “Or I’ll have to come back and...uh, simplify your fractions...or something?”

Reshma burst out laughing, and within seconds Lennie found herself joining in, grateful that the tension she felt had been broken. Math problems were interfering with her life enough already.

But just moments later, in mid-conversation, the video went dead. Lennie tried to reconnect, but then her entire screen went blank. She grabbed her mouse and tried moving it around, but her computer wouldn’t respond. Just as she

was about to reboot the machine, a familiar voice emerged from the speakers.

“Are you quite through with all that prattling? Because you still have a job to finish.”

Lennie growled at the sound of Pauline’s voice. “What part of ‘meet me before school tomorrow’ did you not understand?”

Her computer screen flickered back to life, revealing cartoon versions of the three wizards’ faces, set against an amorphous multicolored background. The cartoon version of Martin’s face looked directly at her. “What are you shouting at us for?” he asked. “It’s your fault for having a drummie life that’s too boring to spy on.”

“What gave you the idea that it’s all right to spy on me?” said Lennie. It wasn’t the first time they had done it, but she thought her reaction the last time had taught them not to do it again. Obviously, she had thought wrong.

“Look, let’s all just keep calm,” said Tim. “What’s done is done, and we all know what has to happen next.” The cartoon face looked at Lennie threateningly. “You’re not going to get your computer back until you solve our problem, so you might as well just finish it up.”

Lennie felt like stomping out of the room, but if she did, the wizards would probably just follow her and do something else to get her attention—maybe even something that would draw her parents’ attention as well. Besides, it was *her* room. If she wanted it back, she would have to give them what they wanted.

Sighing loudly, just in case any of them cared about how annoyed she was, she turned back to the problem. Now that she had only two variables and two equations to worry about, she could solve it with one of the methods she normally

used. But just as she was thinking about making a graph on the back side of the engineering paper, another idea came to her. *What if I can add the two equations together, like I did before? Would that work?* Curious to find out, she looked down at the equations again.

$$\begin{array}{r} -6 \times D + 2 \times M = -24 \\ -10\text{-}1/2 \times D - 3\text{-}1/2 \times M = -126 \end{array}$$

*The malaprops are positive in the first equation and negative in the second one,* Lennie thought. *If I could get rid of them, I'd only have duct tape left.* After staring at the page for a moment, she realized that she could multiply the first equation by three-and-a-half and the second equation by two. With a little help from her phone's calculator, she found the first answer.

$$\begin{array}{r} -21 \times D + 7 \times M = -84 \\ -21 \times D - 7 \times M = -252 \\ \hline -42 \times D \qquad \qquad \qquad = -336 \\ \qquad \qquad \qquad D = 8 \end{array}$$

“There are eight rolls of duct tape!” she declared triumphantly. She looked up and saw the three cartoon faces staring at her, looking unimpressed—if that was possible for a cartoon face. “Well, don’t everyone applaud at once,” she told them acerbically.

“You’ve still got two more numbers,” Martin reminded her.

Lennie rolled her eyes. “How could I forget?” Fortunately, finding the other two numbers simply meant going back to the equations she had found before.

$$\begin{aligned}
 -6 \times D + 2 \times M &= -24 \\
 -6 \times 8 + 2 \times M &= -24 \\
 -48 + 48 + 2 \times M &= -24 + 48 \\
 2 \times M &= 24 \\
 M &= 12
 \end{aligned}$$

“There are twelve malaprops,” she told them next.

“Those will come in handy,” Tim remarked, but Lennie didn’t say anything in reply. Now that she had two numbers, she just wanted to find the third number and get the problem over with.

$$\begin{aligned}
 2 \times P + 4 \times D + 2 \times M &= 62 \\
 2 \times P + 4 \times 8 + 2 \times 12 &= 62 \\
 2 \times P + 32 + 24 &= 62 \\
 2 \times P &= 6 \\
 P &= 3
 \end{aligned}$$

“Well, do you have it?” Pauline asked.

“Hang on, I’ve got to check it,” Lennie said. She went back to the other two original equations and tried out the values she had found.

$$\begin{aligned}
 4 \times P + 2 \times D + 6 \times M \\
 &= (4 \times 3) + (2 \times 8) + (6 \times 12) \\
 &= 12 + 16 + 72 \\
 &= 100
 \end{aligned}$$
  

$$\begin{aligned}
 3 \times P + 3/4 \times D + 1-1/4 \times M \\
 &= (3 \times 3) + (3/4 \times 8) + (1-1/4 \times 12) \\
 &= 9 + 6 + 15 \\
 &= 30
 \end{aligned}$$

“Okay, I’ve got it!” she announced. “Eight rolls of duct tape, twelve malaprops, and three platinum pinches.”

“Are you sure?” Tim asked tentatively.

Lennie held her pad up to the screen. “I’m sure.”

“That’s it, then!” Tim cried out. His cartoon face bounced around the screen until Pauline’s face moved over to block him.

“Don’t do that!” Pauline snapped at him. “She’ll start thinking we should be grateful!”

Lennie bristled at the remark. “You should be grateful that I put up with you guys,” she told them. A thought flashed into her mind, cutting through her irritation. “How do you even know I’m giving you the right answer?”

The three cartoon faces looked at her in surprise. “What do you mean by that?” asked Martin.

Lennie held up the pad again and shrugged. “How do you know I didn’t just write a bunch of gibberish and make up a wrong answer to tell you?” she asked. She tried to give them a wicked smile, for added effect.

Tim looked alarmed. “She wouldn’t do that, would she?” he asked the others.

“She’s the Pattern Finder,” Martin insisted. “Pattern Finders don’t do that!”

“But she lives like a drummie,” Pauline pointed out. “There’s no telling what else she might do!”

“So how do we know if she told us the truth?” Tim asked.

“I—I don’t know!” cried Martin.

Lennie stared intently at the screen. Threatening a bunch of cartoon faces wasn’t easy, but she was trying her best.

“Gee, maybe you should check the answer for yourselves,” she told them. “You can do that, can’t you?”

The three wizard faces looked at each other. “I...I suppose we could try,” said Tim.

“Why should we?” cried Pauline. “If we could do that, we wouldn’t have come here in the first place!”

“Yeah, but at least now we have answers we can test,” said Martin.

Pauline’s cartoon face turned red, and cartoon steam came out of its ears. “That will take us all night!” she snarled.

“Maybe, but I want to win tomorrow!” said Tim. Martin’s face bounced up and down in agreement.

Finally, Pauline relented. “Fine!” she cried as a little cartoon mushroom cloud appeared over her head. She looked at Lennie and added, “But if we find out you’ve tricked us, you’ll never hear the end of it!”

Before Lennie could say anything more, the faces vanished and her computer screen returned to normal. She sank into her chair with relief. *I’ll never stop hearing from you anyway*, she thought. *But at least I made you do something for a change.*