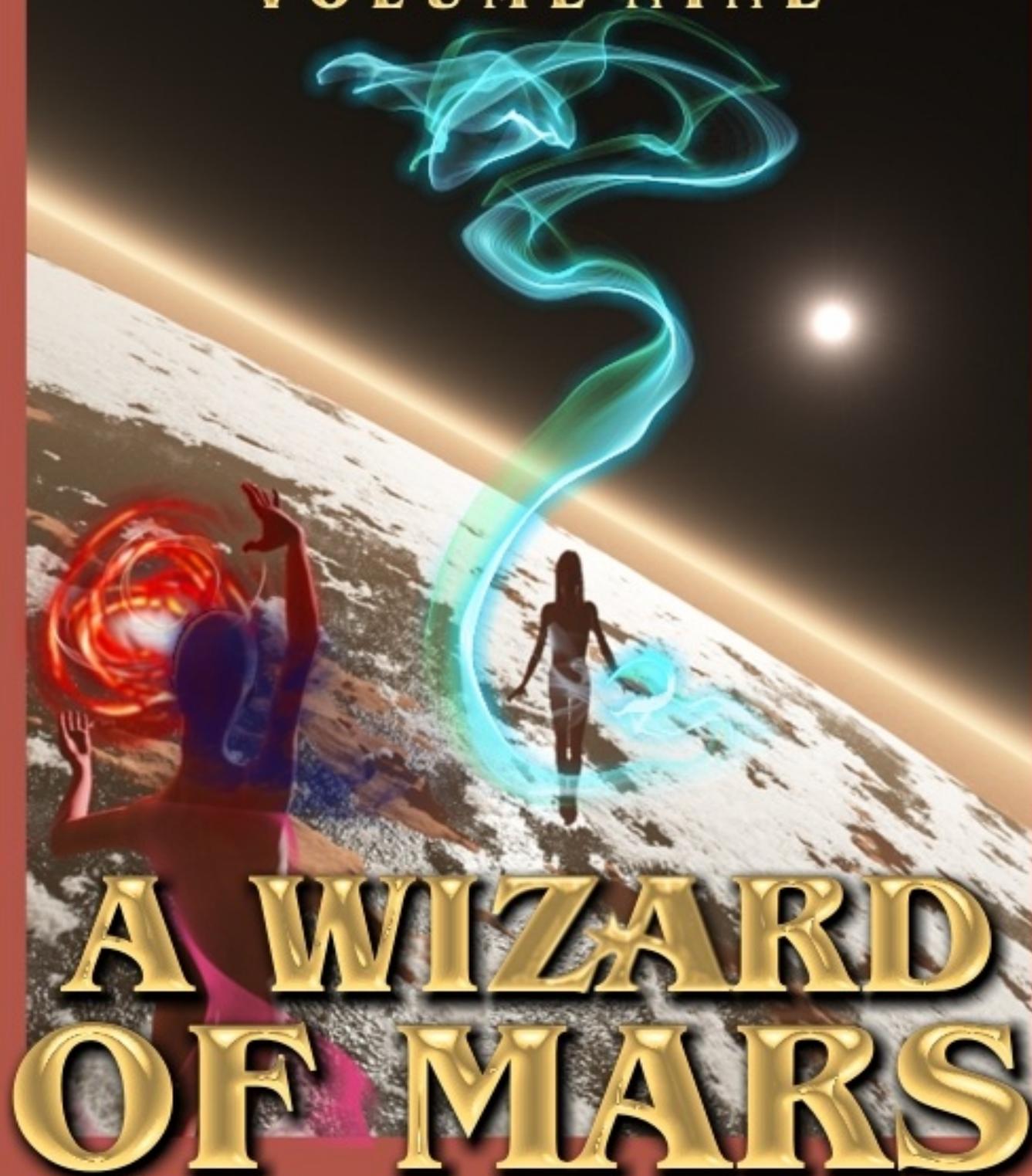


DIANE DUANE
YOUNG WIZARDS
VOLUME NINE



**A WIZARD
OF MARS**

NEW MILLENNIUM EDITION

Young Wizards
New Millennium Editions

Book 9:

A Wizard of Mars

Diane Duane

Errantry Press

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County Wicklow

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Copyright page

A Wizard of Mars

New Millennium Edition

Errantry Press

County Wicklow, Ireland

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Donald Maass Literary Agency

Suite 801, 121 West 27th Street

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Dedication

For Kim and Ben and Greg
and Jules and ERB,
and, most affectionately, for Ray and Robert:
...because (one way or another)
we *are* all Martians:

— and for Peter Murray,
much-missed moderator of
the [Young Wizards Discussion Forums](#),
something he'd really have liked:
that pesky timeline, sorted at last

Rubrics

...Mars, why art thou bent
On kindling thus the Scorpion, his tail
Portending evil and his claws aflame?...
Why planets leave their paths and through the void
Thus journey on obscure? 'Tis war that comes,
Fierce rabid war: the sword shall bear the rule...
(*Pharsalia*, Marcus Annaeus Lucanus: Book 1)

The one departed | is the one who returns
From the straitened circle | and the shortened night,
When the blue star rises | and the water burns:
Then the word long-lost | comes again to light
To be spoke by the watcher | who silent yearns
For the lost one found. Yet to wreak aright,
She must slay her rival | and the First World spurn
Lest the one departed | no more return.
(*The Red Rede*, 1-8)

Truth is always late, always last to arrive, limping along with Time.
(*The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, Baltasar Gracián, §146)

Time fix

Late June, 2010

1: Terra Cognita

The problem, Kit thought, scowling at the paper, isn't the basic shape, so much. It's what to do with the legs...

He briefly glanced up from the pencil sketch he'd been doing in the margin of his notebook and looked wearily up at Mr. Machiavelli, his history teacher, as if he'd actually been paying attention to anything the Mack was saying. It was hard enough to care, this time of year. *One more week till school's out. One more week!*— and especially late on a Friday afternoon, when the air-conditioning was broken.

Again! Kit thought. He was sweltering, along with everyone else in the place. Only little, balding Mr. Mack, strolling back and forth in front of the blackboard and holding forth on Asian politics of the 50s, seemed untouched by the heat and humidity. He paused to write the word “Pyongyang” on the board, pausing in the middle of the process to stare at the word as if not sure of the spelling.

Oh, come on, Mack, give us a break: who cares about this stuff right now?! But the Mack, as the who class knew too well by now, was unstoppable; the heat slowed him down no more than cold or rain or dark of night probably would have. People names and place names and endless dates just kept on rolling out of him, and now he turned to the blackboard and started writing again...

Kit let out a sigh and glanced at the air vents at the back of the room. Cold air should have been coming out of them, but right now they were emitting nothing but an occasional faint clunking noise as somewhere in the system a feeder vent kept trying and failing to open. The school system was having budget troubles, which meant that some equipment that needed to be completely replaced wasn't even getting maintenance. But knowing this didn't make the heat any easier to bear.

People in the back of the room were fanning themselves with paperwork and notebooks. Kids sitting by the open windows were leaning toward them, courting any passing breath of air, and (when Mr. Machiavelli wasn't looking) panting obviously, as if that would help. Without stopping what he was saying, Mr. Mack had paused to flip open a book on his desk and peer down at it: he shoved a bookmark into it and turned back to the blackboard, starting to write something else. *How can this not be bothering him when he's got a whole suit on?* Kit thought. *Doesn't he have sweat glands??*

The cooling system clunked several times more, to no effect. Kit made a face, glanced at the clock. It seemed hopelessly stuck at twenty past two, and the class wasn't going to let out until quarter of three...which from where Kit was sitting felt like at least a year away. *I can't stand it anymore. And anyway, none of them'll notice—*

Very quietly Kit reached down into the book bag beside his desk and pulled out his wizard's manual. At the moment, the manual looked like his history textbook— which was perfectly normal, since earlier this year Kit had stuck a chameleon spell on the manual's exterior, causing it to imitate the proper textbook for whatever class he happened to be in.

Kit turned idly through the manual's pages to the one that held the spell he'd first crafted to do repair.

on the school's cooling system, back when it broke down during the unseasonal heat wave back in April. He'd had to use the spell several times since, and he'd had to rework it every time, because engineers from other schools kept coming over to work on the system— and every time they did, they disrupted whatever quick fix Kit had managed to implement the last time he'd done the fix-it spell. *Gotta get in here sometime during vacation and do a real fix on the whole system*, Kit thought. *Otherwise things'll get even worse when the cold weather comes around...*

The words of the spell, in the long, curved strokes and curlicue hooks-and-crooks of the wizardly Speech, laid themselves out before him on the manual page. Hovering above them, faint and hardly to be seen, was the shadow of the camouflage page that any casual, nonwizardly observer would see if he or she looked at the book.

There was of course no question of saying the spell out loud in a situation like this. *Gonna be kind of a strain doing it on the quiet*, Kit thought. *But this heat's just too much. And what's it like on the other side of the building, where the Sun's hitting? The kids over there must be dying. Let's just call this my good deed for the day.*

He closed his eyes for a moment, working to make the requisite “quiet zone” inside his mind, and then he opened his eyes again and started silently reading the words of the wizardry in the Speech. Slowly the wizardry started to work: a silence started to fall around Kit as the universe seemed to lean in around him, listening to the spell.

In the growing silence, Kit watched the room around him seem to fade, while the normally invisible layout of the cooling system now started to become visible, glowing like a wireframe diagram stretching out and away from the history classroom. Kit didn't need to go hunting through the system to find the source of the problem. He knew where it was, and anyway, the locator functions of the spell would have shown him the duct near the heart of the building, just this side of the heat pump in the school's engineering center.

Kit peered at the duct in his mind, concentrating on the source of the problem— a vent shutter that looked something like a small, boxy Venetian blind.

“Okay,” he said silently in the Speech. “What is it *this* time?”

The guy came again, said the vent shutter buried deep in the duct, *and he tightened those bolts up too much...*

“Said” was of course not the best way to put it— inanimate objects don't communicate the way organic ones do— but to a wizard like Kit, who was good at communicating with such objects, the way the information passed was enough like talking and listening to think of it that way.

The wizardry showed Kit the bolts that the vent shutter meant: a series of them, up and down each side of it, fixing its shutter hinges to the inside of the duct. “Got it,” Kit said silently. “Okay, here we go —”

He turned his attention to the bolts. “Come on, guys, lighten up. You don't need all that tension. Just let yourselves unwind...”

Half of wizardry was persuading people, creatures, or objects to do what you wanted them to. The rest of it was knowing what words in the Speech would get the intention across... and by now, Kit knew the words entirely too well. Slowly, the wizardry showed him the bolts loosening up one by one. “Not too

much,” he said in his mind. “We don’t want the shutter to fall out. Yeah, that’s it... just like that.”

The last bolt rotated a quarter turn. “That’s the ticket,” Kit said in his mind. “That should do it. Thanks, guys.”

With one finger Kit traced a series of curves on the desk, the “unknotting” routine to undo the Wizard’s Knot that fastened most spells closed and started them working. The wizardry obediently unraveled: the glowing wireframe of the duct structure faded out as the classroom faded in around Kit again. And from far away in the building, echoing down the air vents that led into the room, Kit heard something go *clunk*, just once—the vent’s shutters, locking into the correct position. After a few moments, a breath of cooler air started sighing out of the vent.

Kit let out a breath of his own. It was tough to conceal the effects of doing a spell, even a minor one like this. He felt as if he’d just run up a few flights of stairs, and it was now taking some effort to keep his breathing regular. For the moment, all Kit could do was shut his manual and pick up his pencil, his hand shaking with a fine muscle tremor born of the brief exertion. But the air was cooling already. *Worth it*, Kit thought, *even for just twenty minutes...* He glanced again at the sketches in his notebook’s margin, the topmost of which showed a single slender tower rising from a forest of small ones, all surrounded by a barren, otherworldly landscape. The tower in particular was fuzzy around the edges, with erasures and redrawing: rendering architecture wasn’t Kit’s strong suit. But the figures he’d drawn farther down the page were better, especially the—

“Not too bad,” said a voice over his shoulder. “Better put some more clothes on her, though, or you’ll lose your PG-13 rating.”

Kit froze as the laughter of his classmates spread around the room.

Mr. Mack’s hand came down and picked up the notebook. “Actually, as regards the draftsmanship, not bad at all,” his history teacher said. “I’d rate her babe quotient at, oh, an eight or so. Make it eight-point-five for her, uh, attributes.” More snickering went around the class. Kit’s face went hot. “But as for the content...” Mr. Mack gave Kit a disapproving glance. “Not sure what it has to do with the aftermath of the Korean War...”

“Uh. Nothing,” Kit said.

“Nice to see that you realize that, Mr. Rodriguez,” Mr. Mack said, wandering back up to his desk and dropping the notebook on it. “So maybe you’ll exculpate yourself by filling us in on the continuing significance of the thirty-eighth parallel...”

Kit swallowed hard. This kind of thing was so much easier to do on paper: the shufflings and mutterings and under-the-breath comments of his classmates routinely filled him with more dread than being locked in a closet with the Lone Power. “It’s the border between North and South Korea,” he said. “Both sides have it heavily fortified. It’s also one of the few land borders you can see from space, because there’s normal city light on the southern side of the line, and it’s almost pitch-black on the north...”

Slowly his throat got less dry. Kit went on for a minute or two more about famines and political tensions, trying to remember some of the really good stuff that would have been just a couple of pages back in the notebook right in front of him if he hadn’t been drawing in it. Finally Mr. Mack held up a hand.

“Enough,” he said. “Ms. Simmons, maybe you’d pick up where the artistic Mr. Rodriguez left off. What effect is the UN’s food-aid effort likely to have on the North in view of the present political situation?”

“Uh—”

Kit had little amusement to spare for poor Delinda Simmons’s ensuing struggle to find an answer. Between doing the spell, trying to hide it, and then having to try to recall notes he’d taken two weeks before, he was now stressed to breathlessness. He concentrated on acting like he was paying attention while being grateful Mr. Mack had let him off the hook so soon— he’d seen some of his classmates go through scenes of torment that had lasted a lot longer.

At last Mr. Machiavelli held up a hand, with just a glance at the clock. Kit glanced at it, too. Somehow it was still only two thirty. *Boy, you don’t need wizardry to get time to run slow, sometimes ...* “All right,” Mr. Machiavelli said. “Were this an ordinary day, you’d all have to sit here and suffer through me doing a recap of what the work required for next Friday was going to be. But, lucky you, for you there is no next Friday! Where you’ll all be by then, since classes end on Tuesday, I neither know nor care. Me, I’ll be up on the North Fork, wearing a really beat-up straw hat and helping an old friend prune her grapevines— not that any of *you* will care. What you *will* care about, of course, are your final grades.”

A great stillness settled over the classroom, broken only by the sighing of cool air from the vent. Mr. Mack turned toward his desk, flipped his briefcase up onto it, and opened it. “These exams,” he said, “as you know, are sixty percent of your final grade. As usual, there’ll probably be questions and comments from some of your parents.” Mr. Mack drew himself up as tall as was possible for him: maybe five feet two. “But you, and they, should know by now that there aren’t going to be any changes. Whatever you’ve got, you’ve brought on yourselves. So, those of you who have recourse to inhalers, get them out now...”

He brought out a pile of papers stapled together in six-sheet bundles, and started to work his way up and down the aisles, starting from the leftmost row. Kit sat there with his palms sweating, grateful that at least Mr. Mack wasn’t one of those sadists who called you up to the desk in front of everybody to get the bad news.

In the first row, subdued mutters of “Yes!” or “Oh, no...” were already going up. A couple of seats behind Kit and to the left, his buddy Raoul Eschemeling got his paper and looked at the back page, where Mr. Mack usually wrote the grade. Then he raised his eyebrows at Kit, grinned at him, at the same time making an “OK, not bad ...!” gesture with one hand.

Kit swallowed as Mr. Mack came to his row, gave Gracie Mackintosh her paper, gave Tim Walencza in front of Kit, his... and then glanced down at Kit, shook his head slightly, and walked on by. “I’ll see you after class,” Mr. Mack said.

The sweat all over Kit went cold in a flash. Some kids in the class broke out in either a low moan of “Uh-oh...” or some really nasty laughs that were badly smothered, on purpose. Kit went hot again at the laughter. There were some junior boys and a senior in here who resented being tracked into this class with the smart younger kids; these guys were constantly ragging Kit about his grades being too good.

As if something like that’s possible where my folks are concerned! Kit thought. But nonetheless, he

could just hear them: *He's a geek, just a nerd, it comes naturally, he can't help it.* Or else: *teacher's pet, little brownnoser, who knows what he's doing to Mack to get grades like this...* They were just the normal jeers that Kit had long ago learned to expect, and it didn't take mind reading or any other kind of wizardry to hear them going through those kids' brains right now.

Kit could do nothing now but sit there as students all around him got their papers while his own desk remained terrifyingly empty. *Oh, no. Oh, no. What's going on? What have I done now?* And the tragedy was that he had no idea. He racked his brain for anything that made any kind of sense, as the last papers in the right-hand row went out.

Mr. Mack made his way back to his desk. "Not a brilliant result, all told," Mr. Mack said as he closed his briefcase and put it aside. "Workmanlike, in many cases. Dull, in a lot of others. You people need to get it through your heads that spitting a teacher's exact words back at him in an essay, or adding material that's plainly been plagiarized from encyclopedias and online sources, won't cut it... with me or the much tougher teachers to follow, who'll get *really* offended at you insulting their intelligence with such lackluster output. None of your result exactly shone, and none of your results were utter disasters. With a very few exceptions."

The silence was nearly as profound as the one that had leaned in around Kit earlier, but this one was far more unnerving. Kit felt eyes all around the room resting on him in scared or amused conjecture.

He glanced over his shoulder. Raoul hunched his tall, blond, gangly self down against his desk and rolled his eyes at the others' reaction. The look he threw Kit was sympathetic. Raoul, too, had had a grade slump earlier in the year, and his own dad and mom had taken turns tearing strips off him about it ever since, invoking not getting into college and "a ruined résumé" and other dire threats if he didn't shape up. Ever since, he and Kit had been studying together, and they'd both thought they had the course material down pat. *Well, one of us did, anyway...*

Mr. Mack glanced at the clock. It suddenly said two forty-three, and now Kit found himself wishing desperately that time would slow down again. "Well," Mr. Mack said, "I'm sure you're all thinking we've all seen enough of each other for one year. For the moment, I'm inclined to agree with you. So all of you just get yourselves the heck out of here!"

This invitation was immediately followed by a muted cheer and the concerted shriek of chairs being pushed back as the bell went. Everybody who hadn't already leapt to his feet did so now and plunged toward the door: the classroom emptied as if it had been turned upside down and shaken. Kit stood there and watched everyone go... then finished stuffing his manual and other books into his book bag and went up to Mr. Mack's desk.

"Well," Mr. Mack said, glancing up from Kit's notebook. "Any thoughts?"

This gambit was one of the Mack's favorite ways to get a student to say something dumb, allowing him scope to verbally torture the unfortunate victim for many minutes thereafter. Kit was determined not to let this happen. "Okay, I shouldn't have been drawing," he said. "I should have been paying attention."

Mr. Mack put his eyebrows up as if resigned at so quick a surrender. Kit had seen this maneuver, too, and what came of it: he refused to rise to the bait. For a few moments there was silence as each of them concentrated on outwaiting the other.

Then Mr. Mack glanced at the notebook. "It's a thoot, isn't it," he said.

Kit followed his glance, surprised. "Uh, yeah."

"Not a lot of people still read those books," Mr. Mack said. "Burroughs's style has to seem antiquate these days. But you can't fault his imagination." He looked down at Kit's sketch of what had to be a very large creature, to gauge by the scale of the humanoid being standing next to it. "What made him decide to put so many legs on these things, I can't imagine. I could never assemble a clear picture of thoot in my head no matter how I tried."

"If you sort of divide the legs into two sets—" Kit said.

"Six and two, huh?" Mr. Mack said, studying the drawing. "With the six in the back grouped for better traction? You may have a point." Mr. Mack glanced up at him again. "But it's possibly still an effort that might better have been saved for your art class."

"Uh, yeah."

He glanced across the page. "And that would be the calot, I guess. Another nice solution for the multiple legs. Nice tusks, too. You wouldn't want to get on the bad side of that thing. And as for her..." Mr. Mack said, glancing down at the sketch again with a critical eye. "Well, you've put more clothes on her than Burroughs did. This rendition owes more to Victoria's Secret than the description in the original... so let's let the inappropriateness issue ride for the moment."

Kit blushed fiercely. "Now about your test," Mr. Mack said. "You and Mr. Eschemeling have been working together. Pretty hard, I believe. So I was curious about... let's call it a discrepancy in your performance on the final."

What have I done to deserve this? Kit thought in despair. I worked so hard! I really studied for this, I should have been all right, I should at least have passed—

"Especially since there's nothing wrong with your ability to discuss the material, even in front of your admittedly unsympathetic classmates," Mr. Mack said. "That was a nice touch, by the way—that bit about being able to see the border from space. Saw that picture myself, some months back. It brings you up short."

Kit didn't feel inclined to mention that he hadn't seen the image as a picture: the difference was clearly visible from the surface of the Moon when the weather on Earth was right. "The light on one side, and the darkness on the other..." Mr. Mack said. "A striking image. Too bad things aren't usually quite so simple, especially over there. Anyway, no question that your work's improved the last couple of months. You've been trying a whole lot harder than you were before."

And this was true... which was why Kit couldn't understand why he was standing here alone without a test paper in his hand. *Mama's going to go so ballistic with me, we'll be able to use her to launch satellites! I can't believe I—*

"The problem might lie in the way your concentration comes and goes without warning, kind of like I did just then," Mr. Mack said. "But we'll chalk that up to end-of-term antsy, huh?" Then he grinned—an expression that Kit had rarely seen on Mr. Mack's face before. Kit didn't know if this was cause for alarm, but he was alarmed enough already. "Now, then—"

Mr. Mack popped his briefcase open and pulled out one last test paper. Kit instantly recognized his own handwriting on it.

“I thought I’d spare you the embarrassment of dealing with this in front of the class...” Mr. Mack said softly. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that some of our older participants have issues.”

If Kit thought he’d been sweating before, he now found that his pores had been holding out on him. Mr. Mack looked at him with a thoughtful expression.

“And so,” he said, “because for all I know you may see some of them socially, I didn’t really want to give them a chance to make your life uncomfortable all summer because of—” and he held up the test paper— “this.”

Kit gulped and reached for the paper, shaking slightly. At the bottom of the front page, circled, was a number: 99%.

Kit’s eyes went wide. “Ninety-nine?” he said. “*Ninety-nine!*”

“Best mark in the class,” Mr. Mack said. “Congratulations.”

Then it hit Kit. “Ninety-nine??” he said, flipping the pages to look at them one after another. “*Why not a hundred!?*”

Mr. Mack looked at his watch. “Possibly one of the shortest bursts of gratitude on record,” he said. “Kit, I had no choice. You misspelled ‘Pyongyang.’”

Kit was so torn between relief and completely unreasonable disappointment that all he could do was say “Oh.”

“One ‘o,’ one ‘a,’” Mr. Mack said. “I checked. Sorry about that. But your essay was terrific. Best I’ve seen in a long while. You’re showing at least a few of the warning signs of falling in love with history.”

Kit said nothing, partly from embarrassment at being praised, and partly because he suspected Mr. Mack was right, and he didn’t know what to make of that.

“So you can tell your mother, who I know was giving you grief,” Mr. Mack said, “that whatever else you’ve done in your other subjects this spring, you’ve passed history with flying colors, and I’m really pleased with you. She should be, too. Tell her to get in touch if she wants any more details.”

“She will,” Kit said.

Mr. Mack smiled slightly. “So did mine,” he said. “Mothers. What can you do?... Go on, get out of here. And enjoy your summer.”

Kit stuffed the paper hurriedly into his book bag and shouldered it. Mr. Mack closed his briefcase with the air of a man shutting a whole year into it, and good riddance. Then he glanced up. “Unless there was something else? Of course there was.”

Kit gave up any hope of ever being able to put anything over this particular teacher. “Yeah. Uh— *How do you not sweat like that?*”

Mr. Mack looked briefly surprised, and then laughed out loud. “The phrasing’s unusual,” Mr. Mack

said. “I take it you mean, how do I not sweat? And the answer is, I *don't* not sweat.”

Kit raised his eyebrows.

“But I *do* waterproof the insides of my clothes,” Mr. Mack said.

Kit stared at him. Mr. Mack laughed again, then, the sound of a sneaky magician giving away the secret to a really good trick. “It’s a Marine thing,” Mr. Mack said. “We used to do it on parade. We spray our shirts with that anti-stain waterproofing stuff you use on upholstery. It’s good for giving other people the impression that you’re not quite human.”

His voice as he said this was so dry that Kit burst out laughing. But a moment later he stopped. “You were in the Marines?” Kit said, suddenly seeing Mr. Mack with entirely new eyes. This little guy, just barely taller than Kit’s mama, with his bald head and his red tie with little blue galloping ponies on it and a different tie every day—“*Korea?*”

Mr. Mack shook his head. “Oh, no,” he said. “A lot of other places. But Korea was well before my time.”

Kit looked at him; this time it was his turn to look thoughtful. “The way you talked about it, though. The dark, the light—”

Mr. Mack shook his head. “If a historian needs anything,” he said, “it’s an imagination. The dates, the place names, the battles... they’re not what’s most important. What matters is thinking yourself into those people’s heads. Imagine how the world looked to them— their sky, their sea. Their tools. Their houses. Their troubles. That’s how what they did starts to make sense. Along with what we do in the same situations...”

He paused, looking surprised at himself. “Sorry. It’s a passion,” Mr. Mack said. “But I can recognize the signs in someone else. Watch out: it’ll eat you alive. Other lives, other minds ...there’s no getting enough of them.” He gave Kit a cockeyed look. “Why are you still here? Go away before I give you a quiz.”

Kit grinned and left with as much dignity as he could manage. The dignity broke down about three yards down the hall, as he caught sight of Raoul, trying to look like he was leaning casually against a locker, waiting for Kit. Kit didn’t know whether to try to look cool or to scream out loud. Screaming won. He pulled the paper out again, waved it in Raoul’s face.

Raoul snatched it out of Kit’s hand. “Do you believe this, Pirate?” Kit yelled. “*Do you believe this?!*”

They started jumping up and down together like the acrobatically insane. “Ninety-nine! Ninety-nine!” Raoul promptly turned it into something like a sports chant. “*Nine-ty-nine! Nine-ty-nine!*”

People wandering down the hall that crossed this one stared at them, vaguely interested by the action of the certifiably mad— meaning anyone who would still willingly be in the building after the end of the last period. “But what did *you* get?” Kit said as they headed toward the doors at the end of the hall.

“Eighty,” Raoul said.

Kit suddenly felt bizarrely disappointed. “How’d *that* happen?”

“I messed up the essay,” Raoul said. “But I did okay on everything else. It’s not a bad grade. My

mom'll get off my case now."

"Mine, too," Kit said, "I hope. But wow, what a relief. I thought I was dead!"

"I thought you were dead!" Raoul laughed that crazed laugh of his as they went down the hall to the paired doors that led to the parking lot. They each hit one door and burst out into the hot, humid summer air, laughing.

"This day could not *possibly* get any better," Kit said.

"Oh, come on," Raoul said, "stretch your brains. Anything could happen..."

They saw Raoul's mom's slightly beat-up red station wagon come swinging in through the parking lot gates. "So listen," Raoul said, "my dad says we're having a big barbecue next week, for his birthday. Next Thursday. You and your folks and your sister, you're all invited. Can you make it?"

"I'll find out."

"Okay," Raoul said, as his own mom pulled up. "Text me later!"

Kit nodded, waving at Raoul's little blond mom as he got into the car. The first thing Raoul did was fish around in his pack and show his mom the test paper: she grinned, and Raoul flashed a grin of his own at Kit as his mom drove away.

Kit let out a long breath as he glanced down at his own paper one more time, then put it away. His nerves were finally settling down, which was a good thing, as he was also still tired from doing that spell. He wasn't so tired, though, that he wasn't going to immediately call the wizard with whom he worked most closely and do a little gloating.

He pulled his wizard's manual out of his back-pack, flipping it open to the rearmost pages, the messaging area. Some pages were covered with stored messages, all seemingly printed in the graceful, curvilinear characters of the wizardly Speech; but any one Kit touched with a finger would seem to rise up out of the page, the writing increasing in size for easier reading. He flipped through the back pages until he found one that was blank, ready to take a message—and then stopped. In the middle of a page that had been blank earlier in the afternoon was a single line of text, and it was glowing fierce blue and pulsing alternately brighter and fainter—the sign of a message that had just come in and hadn't yet been read.

Kit peered at it. There was nothing there but a time stamp— JD 2455367.11685— and these words:

We've found the bottle. Meeting this afternoon. M.

The breath went right out of Kit.

Holy cow ...Raoul was right!!

"Yes!" Kit shouted. He slapped the manual shut, shoved it back in the book bag, and jumped up and punched the air some more. And then, because right in front of the school would have been a bad place to do a teleport, he ran off across the parking lot, grinning, to find a more private spot.

2: Gili Motang

Nita Callahan sat on the flat, warm stones at the edge of the koi pond, her eyes closed, looking for something.

After a moment, she saw it. *Shadow*, she thought. *A shadow across the Sun. Just for a few seconds. But when?*

She waited: and then she knew.

“Now,” she said, and opened her eyes.

The water rippled at her in the summer breeze, the surface of it dazzling in the bright and uninterrupted sunlight. Nita winced.

“Oh, come on,” she said under her breath. “Come *on!*” She looked up at the sky overhead. It remained stubbornly clear.

“That won’t help,” said a small voice from the water.

She frowned and refused to answer. Above and beyond the trees that surrounded Tom Swale’s yard, very slowly, a single little puffy cloud could be seen cruising toward the low, late-afternoon Sun. It seemed to be in no hurry. If clouds had feet, it would have been dragging them.

Nita scowled harder. *Hurry up!* she thought in the Speech. *Come on, get a move on!*

But merely thinking something in the Speech doesn’t turn the idea into a spell... especially since wizardry is mostly about persuading creatures and things to do what you want, not ordering them around.

The cloud actually seemed to slow up. Then, finally, almost reluctantly, it started to pass in front of the sun.

Nita grinned. “*Awright!*” she said, looking down into the fishpond. “That’s the best one yet! I only missed it by half a minute.”

One of the koi, the one with the silver-coin scales, looked up out of the pond at her. “Fifty seconds,” Doitsu said.

“Or about fifty-five seconds too long,” said another voice, a human one, from behind her. “Doesn’t count. Try it again.”

Nita let out an annoyed breath and turned. “You guys are just being mean!”

“An oracular who predicts the future a minute late is possibly even less effective than one who gets it wrong all the time,” Tom Swale said, straightening up with a groan from the flower bed where he’d been working. “And will probably get a lot more frustrated.”

“Hey, thanks loads,” Nita said, and slumped against the fishpond’s rockwork.

“You’d hardly expect me to start lying to you at this late date,” Tom said, amused.

Nita gave him an annoyed look. “Let’s see *you* do any better!”

“Me? Why should I?” Tom frowned down at the next flower bed. “This is *your* gift we’re trying to sharpen up.”

“And, anyway, it’s too hot!”

“True,” Tom said, “but nothing to do with the business at hand. Come on, give it another try.”

Nita wiped her forehead; she was sweating. “It’s no use. I need a break.”

Another koi, a marmalade-colored one, put its head up out of the water. “You need to concentrate harder,” said Akagane. “You can’t be in that moment unless you’re in *this* one.”

“Blank your mind out first,” said Doitsu.

A third head came up, splotched in red and black on silver-white. “Pay more attention to the news,” said Showa.

Nita rolled her eyes. “None of you are helping!”

“It’s not help you need,” Tom said. “It’s practice. You think anybody learns to see futurity overnight?”

“Forget the future!” Nita said. “I can barely see the present!” She leaned back against the rocks behind the koi pond, rubbing her eyes: beams from the low sun piercing through the trees were glancing off the pond’s surface, and the glitter of them made her eyes water.

“The news’ll help with that, too,” Tom said. He was sweating; even in a T-shirt, the humidity that day was enough to make anybody miserable.

“And it’s not *the* future,” said Showa, backfinning toward where the rocks overhanging the pond made a small waterfall. “A future.”

Nita sighed. “But how can you tell you’ve got the right one?”

“You can’t,” said Akagane as she rose to the surface in Showa’s wake. “At least, you can’t tell for sure, or very clearly.”

“You can get a feeling,” said Doitsu, just hanging there in the water and fanning his fins. “Or a hunch.”

“But what if you’re wrong?”

Doitsu made a kind of shrug with his fins. “You try again. Assuming you haven’t blown up the world or something in the meantime...” And he submerged.

The other two koi sank down into the water as well. Nita sighed and leaned back, watching Tom as he walked over to another of the plant beds, squatted down beside it, and then let out a long, annoyed breath. He reached down in among some of the plants, pushed broad green leaves aside, and sighed.

“Guys,” Tom said in the Speech, “how many times do we have to have this conversation?” He picked

something up, looked at it. It was a slug. He shook his head and tossed it off to one side, into another leafy bed. “Those are *your* strawberries—” *fling*—“over *there!* These are *my* strawberries—” *fling*—“over *here!*”

Nita gave him a crooked smile. “That can’t be real good for them.”

“Slugs are resilient,” Tom said.

Nita watched another one fly through the air. “Yeah. I see how they bounce...”

“Do I hear a criticism coming?”

Nita restrained herself, but wasn’t quite ready to stop teasing Tom yet. “Isn’t it weird that a Senior Wizard can talk the sky into hitting things with lightning but can’t talk a bunch of slugs out of eating his strawberries?”

Tom sighed. “Lightning’s a lot easier to talk to than slugs,” he said. “Not that you’re so much talking to the slug as to its DNA... which has been the way it is for about a hundred million years. Strawberries are a relatively recent development, to a slug. But then, so are human beings.” He grinned. “Anyway, I live in hope that they’ll get it eventually. But enough of you being on my case. C just you. Kit’s running late. Where’s he gotten to?”

Nita rolled her eyes. “That’d be the question, the last couple weeks.”

Tom glanced up. “He’s missing Ponch, huh?”

Nita shrugged, not sure how to describe what was going on. Kit’s dog had been getting increasingly strange for a long time, but in the complex and disruptive events of the last month he had gone way beyond strange, right out of life and into something far greater. Kit wasn’t exactly sad about what had happened, but he was definitely sad at not having his dog around anymore. “It’s complicated,” Nita said. “I don’t think it’s just about Ponch. But he’s been away from home a lot.”

Tom straightened up again and gave Nita a look that was slightly concerned. “A lot of that going around right now...”

Nita sighed. “Tell me about it. But his sister Helena’s coming home from college in a couple of weeks. *That* has to be on his mind. And then there’s Carmela. He’s having trouble dealing with her lately.”

Tom pulled off his gardening gloves and tossed them up into the air: they vanished. “Yeah, well,” he said. “First time off the planet, and what does she do but stride out into the universe like she owns the place and blow up the Lone Power? For what that’s ever worth in the long term. Still, I could see where it might make Kit feel a little surplus.” Tom strolled back to her, his hands in his pockets. “Does Carmela seem any different?”

“No. Or yes,” Nita said. “But that might just be because of her PSAT scores.”

Tom put his eyebrows up. “Worse than expected?”

“Better,” Nita said. “It’s screwed up her college plans. She thought she was going to take it easy and go to the community college in Garden City. Now all of a sudden her pop and mama and her guidance counselor are giving her all this stuff about CalTech and Harvard.”

Tom gave Nita a wry look. “Interesting problem. But otherwise it sounds like you’re telling me that, though her PSATs might be an issue, shooting up a major interstellar transport center and being dragged halfway across the known Universe hasn’t particularly cramped her style.”

“No. And that’s what has me worried. Tom, tell me she’s not turning into a wizard!”

He laughed one big laugh. “Would it break your heart if she was?”

“Mine? Not really. *Kit’s*? That’s another story.”

“Not that I could do anything one way or the other,” Tom said. “If the Powers offered her the Oath and she accepted it. It’d be out of our hands. But wouldn’t you think it’s kind of late for her to become a wizard? You know how it goes. Onset in humans is usually between twelve and fourteen...”

“Except for people like Dairine,” Nita muttered.

“Yes, well,” Tom said, straightening up with a groan and massaging the small of his back, “your sister’s the exception to most of the rules I know. How’s *she* coping, by the way?”

Nita shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s hard to work out what’s going on with her sometimes. All she’ll say is that she’s looking for Roshoun.”

Tom nodded, heading for the French doors at the back of the house. Nita got up from the edge of the pond and followed him in. “What’s your take on that?” Tom said.

Nita shook her head as she stepped into the relative cool of the living room. *That he vanished in a cloud of moondust while he was doing a wizardry that had one end stuck in the core of the Sun, and he’s probably dead, and my sister’s in denial?* she thought, but refused to say out loud.

On the kitchen table, Tom’s version of the wizard’s manual was stacked up several volumes high. “What’s it say about him in *there*?” Nita said.

Tom put up his eyebrows. “You haven’t looked in your own manual?” he said.

“Well...”

“Scared to?”

Nita gave him a look. She had of course been scared to. Finding out the truth would have forced her into a position where she would have had to start working out what to do about Dairine.

Tom shook his head. “You know,” he said, going over to the sink to wash his hands, “if I looked in there for an answer, and then told you what I was shown, it might not be data that from your point of view would necessarily be definitive. Or even useful. Has that occurred to you?”

“No,” Nita said.

“Well, when you do get around to looking, tell me what you see.”

Nita rolled her eyes, as she’d been hoping to get Tom to do the scary thing for her: she’d had more than enough of being scared in the last month or so. *Great. Now I get to go back to being just too chicken to look...*

“And by the way,” Tom said, turning off the faucet and reaching for a dish towel hanging over the door of the cupboard under the sink, “you’re blinking.”

“Huh?” Nita said, and then glanced to her right. “Oh, yeah, right.”

There in midair beside her, a little pinpoint of blue light like a star was flashing on and off. “I really should hook up a sound to this,” Nita said, reaching out to the little light and pulling it straight down in the air. “I did this wizardry the other morning real early, and I didn’t want to wake anybody up while I was testing it.”

A vertical slit of darkness opened in the air, exposing the inside of the otherspace pocket in which Nita kept her wizard’s manual and various other useful objects while she was out and about. She reached into the darkness, felt around for a moment, and then came out with her manual.

Nita started paging through it while Tom opened the fridge and rummaged around. “Message?” he said, coming out with a couple of cans of cola.

“Yeah. Uh, got any fizzy water in there?”

“Sure. Thought you were the big cola fan, though...”

“I’m off the sugar for a while.”

“Don’t tell me,” Tom said, coming out with a bottle of mineral water, “that you’re starting to worry about your weight! *Completely* inappropriate for you at your age—”

“Huh? Oh, no, no, it’s just that I keep getting these... Never mind.” Nita trailed off, partly on purpose as she flipped the manual open to the back pages where the messaging wizardries and messages were stored. No way she was going to get into acne-and body-image issues right now with a wizard of a completely different sex, seniority, and order of importance.

On the rearmost page of the manual, one block of text was alternately glowing dark and fading. Nita peered at it. Then she snickered. “Kit’s getting ready to go to Mars,” she said, putting down the manual for a moment and opening the mineral water to take a swig. “What a surprise!”

Tom chuckled as he popped open his can of cola. “Kind of the flavor of the month with him, isn’t it?”

“More like the flavor of the year.” Nita read down the message and tapped the reference link at the bottom of it: another message, the one that had caused Kit to send her the first, appeared in the first one’s place. “He’s got Mars posters up in his room, and little Mars crawlers on his desk, and half the Mars books in the school library *aren’t* there: they’re stacked up on his bed...”

She grinned. “Hey, this is great. Mamvish got in just now! We’ve been talking to her a lot by manual this last year, but we’ve never seen her in person. Kit’s gonna be buzzed to meet her finally.”

Nita shut her manual and put it away in the otherspace pocket again, “zipping up” the little blue light to close it again. She pinched the light; it went out. “Which is probably why he ran straight over to Gili Motang without waiting for me.”

Tom smiled at Nita’s annoyed expression. “Well, maybe it’s understandable,” he said. “Mamvish is heavily in demand all over this side of the galaxy: normally we don’t get to see so senior a wizard out this way unless it’s something to do with worldgates. If the Powers’ own Species Archivist has come

out to our neighborhood in person to check up on something, that's definitely a hot topic. So if Kit wants to go do the fanboy thing, well, so will half the other wizards on the planet." Tom paused. "And now that I think of it..." He got up and went back to the fridge.

Puzzled, Nita watched Tom open it again and start rooting around. "I guess there really *are* no accidents," he said, coming out with a very large plastic bag full of tomatoes. Tom shut the fridge and handed the bag to Nita.

She looked at the bag, and then at Tom again. Tom grinned at her. "When you catch up with Kit," he said, "make sure you take that with you. It's been so hot so early this year, the backyard's getting overrun with these." He sighed. "And in another week it'll be the zucchini. I've really got to check in with the global warming intervention group..."

"*Tomatoes??*" Nita said. "What kind of spell uses tomatoes?"

"And tell Mamvish we send our best," Tom said. "I'd love to go see her myself, but I have to get back to work. Carl and I and all the other Seniors are still hip-deep in the on-planet cleanup from last month's business."

"I feel for you," Nita said, not entirely sincerely. "Tom, there are a ton of these! My arms are breaking!"

Tom just laughed. "So levitate them."

The spell to make them float would have cost as much energy as just carrying them, or more. Nita just gave Tom an annoyed look, boosted the overstuffed bag up from the bottom, and shifted it to her other arm. Tom picked up his cola again and went over to the table, gesturing at the stack of manuals. Several of them picked themselves up off one in the middle of the stack: Tom pulled it out, and the others settled back onto the stack once more.

"Obviously our manuals will update with a précis of what you all decide to do about whatever she's here for," Tom said, sitting down. "Especially since Mamvish won't have come all this way just for fun. But do me a favor and drop me a note to fill in any details you think we should know about."

"Okay," Nita said, and shifted the bag to the other arm again. Tom was already paging through his own manual, wearing a distracted look... which frankly didn't surprise Nita, considering what all the wizards on the planet had been through of late. *So why hang around and pester him? Let's go find out what the tomatoes are good for.*

She hefted the bag again to resettle it over her hip, then wandered out of the house and over to the fishpond again, peering in. One of the koi came drifting up to the surface: it was Doitsu. "Hey," Nita said. "I forgot to ask you:

"Wha'd you think of the mealworms?"

Did they satisfy

That deep-down desire for 'yum'?"

Doitsu gave her a look and just hung there in the water, fanning his fins and saying nothing.

"Okay," Nita said. "See if I go out of my way to bring *you* stuff from the bait shop again."

Doitsu eyed Nita from under the water. "The mealworms were lovely," he said. "But your scansion's

execrable. ‘Wha’d?’”

Nita rolled her eyes. “I’m just getting the hang of this! Cut me some slack.”

“When you can construct a haiku without apostrophes, sure,” Doitsu said. “And not a moment sooner. If you’re going to be an oracular, you’ve got standards to maintain. So get out there and make me *not* want to spit in your eye.” And he vanished down into the water again.

Nita shifted the bag of tomatoes to the other arm. “I’m getting trash-talked by *fish*,” she said under her breath. “Something’s wrong with this picture.” She sighed and took the flagstone path around the side of the house, heading for home.

It wasn’t too long a walk, which was a good thing: though she kept shifting the tomato bag from hand to hand, both her arms were still killing her by the time she got close to her house. As Nita came down the sidewalk in the early sunset light, she looked at her front yard— all covered with ground ivy, and with the single big maple tree standing up out of the middle of it, shading everything— and thought, *Why does it look so little these days? And the house, too.* It was a standard enough bungalow for this neighborhood— white-shingled, black-roofed, two stories, with the attic partly converted— but lately it had seemed much smaller than it had this time last year. As Nita walked up the driveway, the memory of the Crossings Intercontinual Worldgating Facility came back to her unbidden: that vast main concourse illuminated with its strange sourceless night lighting, its tremendously high roof-sky seemingly absent and the whole concourse open to the huge, pulsating, many-colored stars of its home planet’s neighborhood. *After you’d been there as much as I have this last month, anything’d look small,* Nita thought. *That place has got to be the size of New Jersey. Well, Rhode Island, anyway...*

She went up the stairs to the back door, expecting to have to let herself in: but the inside door was open. Nita opened the screen door, braced it behind her so it wouldn’t slam, and dumped the bagged tomatoes on the drainer by the sink as she went through the kitchen. “Daddy?”

“He had to go back to the shop for something,” came a voice from inside, and Nita grinned, because it wasn’t her sister’s voice coming from the living room, but someone else’s entirely. “He’ll be back in an hour, he said.”

Nita went through the dining room into the living room. There Kit’s older sister Carmela was sitting on the floor amid a heap of cushions and a scatter of TV remotes. Nita looked at the remotes in bemusement, as she couldn’t remember their TV having quite *that* many. There was the VCR remote, sure, and the one for the TV, and the—

“*Ohaiyo gozaimas!*” the TV yelled at her as she entered.

Nita stopped still. *Oh no...* she thought. “Mela,” she said, “you didn’t—”

“I brought our remote over,” Carmela said, and stretched her fluffy-sweatered self out among the cushions, toying with her single long dark braid. “Dairine said it might be smart to train your TV to get the alien cable channels, the way Kit did with ours. This is bargain-shopping season, after all! And we don’t want to freak out the visitors at home...”

Nita perched briefly on the arm of her dad’s easy chair behind Carmela and looked at the TV. It wasn’t nearly as fancy or new a model as Kit’s new entertainment-center TV was, but all the same it was showing a channel-listing page as sleek and modern as anything Kit’s set could boast. And as Carmela punched the “scroll” button, the online guide shifted through page after page after page of channels

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