

*A Wizard Alone*  
*The Young Wizards Series - Book 06*

**DIANE DUANE**

Magic Carpet Books

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*For all the friends from Payne Whitney*

***Contents***

Consultations

Investigations

Pursuits

Conversations

Quandaries

Elucidations

Complications

Entrapments

Reconstructions

Liberations

*Life*

more than just being alive

(and worth the pain)

but hurts:

fix it

grows:

keep it growing

wants to stop:

remind

check I don't hurt

be sure!

*One's* watching:

get it right!

later it all works out,

honest

meantime,

make it work

*now*

(because now

is all you ever get:

now *is*)

—The Wizard’s Oath,

excerpt from a private recension

Footsteps in the snow

suggest where you have been,

point where you were going:

but where they suddenly vanish,

never dismiss the possibility

of flight\_\_\_

—*Book of Night with Moon*, xi, v.

## ***Consultations***

In a living room of a suburban house on Long Island, a wizard sat with a TV remote control in his hand, and an annoyed expression on his face. “Come on,” he said to the remote. “Don’t give me grief.”

The TV showed him a blue screen and nothing more.

Kit Rodriguez sighed. “All right,” he said, “we’re on the record now. You made me do this.” He reached for his wizard’s manual on the sofa next to him, paged through it to its hardware section—which had been getting thicker by the minute this afternoon—found one page in particular, and keyed into the remote a series of characters that the designers of both the remote and the TV would have found unusual.

The screen stayed mostly blue, but the nature of the white characters on it changed. Until now they had been words in the Roman alphabet. Now they changed to characters in a graceful and curly cursive, the written form of the wizardly Speech. At the top of the screen they showed the local time and the date expressed as a Julian day, that being the Earth-based system most closely akin to what the manual’s managers used to express time. In the middle of the blue screen appeared a single word:

*WON’T.*

Kit let out a long breath of exasperation. “Oh, come on,” he said in the Speech. “Why not?”

The screen remained blue, staring at him mulishly. Kit wondered what he’d done to deserve this. “It can’t be that bad,” he said. “You two even have the same version number.”

*VERSIONS AREN’T EVERYTHING!*

Kit rubbed his eyes.

“I thought a six-year-old child was supposed to be able to program one of these things,” said a voice from the next room.

“I sure feel like a six-year-old at the moment,” Kit muttered. “It would work out about the same.”

Kit's father wandered in and stood there staring at the TV. Not being a wizard himself, he couldn't see the Speech written there, and wouldn't have been able to make sense of it if he had, but he could see the blue screen well enough. "So what's the problem?"

"It looks like they hate each other," Kit said.

His father made a rueful face. "Software issues," he said. He was a pressman for one of the bigger news-papers on the Island, and in the process of the company converting from hot lead to electronic and laser printing, he had learned more than most people cared to know about the problems of converting from truly hard "hardware" to the computer kind.

"Nope," Kit said. "I wish it were that simple."

"What is it, then?"

Kit shook his head. Once upon a time, not so long ago, getting mechanical things to see things his way had been Kit's daily stock-in-trade. Now everything seemed to be getting more complex by the day. "Issues they've got, all right," he said. "I'm not sure they make sense to me yet."

His father squeezed his shoulder. "Give it time, son," he said. "You're a *brujo*; nothing can withstand your power."

"Nothing that's not made of silicon, anyway," Kit said.

His father rolled his eyes. "Tell me all about it," he said, and went away.

Kit sat there staring at the blue screen, trying to sort through the different strategies he'd tried so far, determining which ones hadn't worked, which ones had worked a little bit, and which ones had seemed to be working just fine until without warning they crashed and burned. The manual for the new remote said that the new DVD player was supposed to look for channels on the TV once they were plugged into each other, but the remote and the DVD player didn't even want to acknowledge each other's existence so far, let alone exchange information. Neither the DVD's manual nor the remote's was any help. The two pieces of equipment both came from the same company, they were both made in the same year and, as far as Kit could tell, in the same place. But when he listened to them with a wizard's ear, he heard them singing two different songs—in ferocious rivalry—and making rude noises at each other during the pauses, when they thought no one was listening.

"Come on, you guys," he said in the Speech. "All I'm asking for here is a little cooperation—"

"No surrender!" shouted the remote.

"Death before dishonor!" shouted the DVD player.

Kit covered his eyes and let out a long, frustrated breath.

From the kitchen came a sudden silence, something that was as arresting to Kit as a sudden noise, and that made him look up in alarm. His mother had been cooking. Indeed, she was making her *arroz con polio*, a dinner that visiting heads of state would consider themselves lucky to eat. When without warning it got quiet in the kitchen in the middle of that process, Kit reacted as he would have if he'd heard someone say, "Oops!" during the countdown toward a space shuttle launch: with held breath and intense attention.

"Honey?" Kit's mom said.

“What, Mama?”

“The dog says he wants to know what’s the meaning of life.”

Kit rubbed his forehead, finding himself tempted to hide his eyes. “Give him a dog biscuit and tell him it’s an allegory,” Kit said.

“What, *life*?”

“No, the biscuit!”

“Oh, good. You had me worried there for a moment.”

Kit’s mother’s sense of humor tended toward the dry, and the dryness sounded like it was set at about medium at the moment, which was just as well. His mother was still in the process of getting used to his wizardry. Kit went back to trying to talk sense into the remote and the DVD player. The DVD player blued the TV’s screen out again, pointedly turning its attention elsewhere.

“Come on, just give each other a chance.”

“Talk to *that* thing? You must have a chip loose.”

“Like I would listen!”

“Hah! You’re a tool, nothing but a tool! I entertain!”

“Oh yeah? Let’s see how well you entertain when I turn you off like a light!”

Kit rolled his eyes. “Listen to me, you two! You can’t get hung up on the active-role-passive-role thing. They’re both just fine, and there’s more to life—”

“Like what?!”

Kit’s mama came drifting in and looked over Kit’s shoulder as he continued to speak passionately to the remote and the DVD player about the importance of cooperation and teamwork, the need not to feel diminished by acting, however briefly, as part of a whole. But the remote refused to do anything further, and the screen stayed blue. Kit started to think he must be turning that color in the face.

“It sounds like escargot,” his mother said, leaning her short, round self over him to look at the TV.

“What?”

“Sorry. Esperanto. I don’t know why the word for snails always comes out first.”

Kit looked at his mother with some interest. “You can hear it?” he said. It was moderately unusual for nonwizards to hear the Speech at all. When they did, they tended to hear it as the language they spoke themselves—but because the Speech contained and informed all languages, being the seed from which they grew, this was to be expected.

“I hear it a little,” his mother said. “Like someone talking in the next room. Which it was...”

“I wonder if the wizardry comes from your side of the family,” Kit said.

His mother’s broad and pretty face suddenly acquired a nervous quality. “Uh-oh, the chicken broth,” she said, and took herself back to the kitchen.

“What about Ponch?” Kit said.

“He ate the dog biscuit,” his mother said after a moment.

“And he didn’t ask you any more philosophical stuff?”

“He went out. I think he had a date with a biological function.”

Kit smirked, though he turned his face so she wouldn’t see it if she came back in. His mother’s work as a nurse expressed itself at home in two ways: either detailed and concrete descriptions of things you’d never thought about before and (afterward) desperately never wanted to think about again, or shy evasions regarding very basic physical operations that you’d think wouldn’t upset a six-year-old. Ponch’s business seemed mostly to elicit the second response in Kit’s mama, an effect that usually made Kit laugh.

At the moment he just felt too tired. Kit paused in his cheerleading and went rummaging through the paperwork on the floor for the DVD’s and remote’s manuals. *We’re in trouble when even a remote control has its own manual*, he thought. But if a wizard with a bent toward mechanical things couldn’t get this kind of very basic problem sorted out, then there really *would* be trouble.

He spent a few moments with the manuals, ignoring the catcalls and jeers that the recalcitrant pieces of equipment were trading. Then abruptly Kit realized, listening, that the DVD *did* have a slightly different accent than the remote and the TV. *Now, I wonder*, he thought, and went carefully through the DVD’s manual to see whether the manufacturer actually had made all the main parts itself.

The manual said nothing about this, being written in a broken English that assumed the system was, indeed, being assembled by the proverbial six-year-old. Resigned, Kit picked up the remote again, which immediately began shouting abuse at him. At first he was relieved that this was inaudible to everybody else, but the DVD chose that moment to take control of the entertainment system’s speakers and start shouting back.

“Oooh, what a nasty mouth,” said his sister Carmela as she walked through the living room, wearing her usual uniform of floppy jeans and huge floppy T-shirt, and holding a wireless phone in her hand. She had been studying Japanese for some months, mostly via watching anime, and had now graduated to an actual language course—though what she chiefly seemed interested in were what their father wryly called “the scurrilities.” “*Bakka aho kikai, bakka-bakka!*”

Kit was inclined to agree. He spent an annoying couple of moments searching for the volume control on the DVD—the remote was too busy doing its own shouting to be of any use. Finally he got the DVD to shut up, then once again punched a series of characters into the remote to get a look at the details on the DVD’s core processor.

“Aha,” Kit said to himself. The processor wasn’t made by the company that owned the brand. He had a look at the same information for the remote. It also used the same processor, but it had been resold to the brand-name company by still another company.

“Now look at that!” Kit said. “You have the same processors. You aren’t really from different companies at all. You’re long-lost brothers. Isn’t that nice? And look at you, fighting over nothing! She’s right, you *are* idiots. Now I want you guys to handshake and make up.”

There was first a shocked silence, then some muttering and grumbling about unbearable insults and who owed whom an apology. “You both do,” Kit said. “You were very disrespectful to each other. Now get on with it, and then settle down to work. You’ll have a great time. The new cable package has all these

great channels.”

Reluctantly, they did it. About ten minutes later the DVD began sorting through and classifying the channels it found on the TV. “Thank you, guys,” Kit said, taking a few moments to tidy up the paperwork scattered all over the floor, while thinking longingly of the oncoming generation of wireless electronics that would all communicate seamlessly and effortlessly with one another. “See, that wasn’t so bad. But someday all this will be so much simpler,” Kit said, patting the top of the DVD player.

“No, it won’t,” the remote control said darkly.

Kit rolled his eyes and decided to let the distant unborn future of electronics fend for itself. “*You* just behave,” he said to the remote, “or you’re gonna wind up in the Cuisinart.”

He walked out of the living room, ignoring the indignant shrieks of wounded ego from the remote. This had been only the latest episode in a series of almost constant excitements lately, which had begun when his dad broke down after years of resistance and decided to get a full-size entertainment center. It was going to be wonderful when everything was installed and everything worked. But in the meantime, Kit had become resigned to having a lot of learning experiences.

From the back door at the far side of the kitchen came a scratching noise: his dog letting the world know he wanted to come back in. The scratching stopped as the door opened. Kit turned to his pop, who had just come into the dining room again, and handed him the remote. “I think it’s fixed now,” he said. “Just do this from now on: Instead of using this button to bring the system up, the one the manual tells you to, press this, and then this.” He showed his pop how to do it.

“Okay. But why?”

“They may not remember the little talking-to I just gave them—it depends on how the system resets when you turn it off. This should remind them...I hardwired it in.”

“What was the problem?”

“Something cultural.”

“Between the remote and the DVD player?! But they’re both Japanese.”

“Looks like it’s more complicated than that.” There seemed to be no point in suggesting to his pop that the universal remote and the DVD were both unsatisfied with their active or passive modes. Apparently doing what you had been built to do was a prospect no more popular among machines than it was among living things. Everything had its own ideas about what it really should be doing in the world, and the more memory you installed in the hardware, the more ideas it seemed to get.

Kit realized how thirsty all this talking to machinery had made him. He went to the fridge and rummaged around to see if there was some of his mom’s iced tea in there. There wasn’t, only a can of the lemon soft drink that Nita particularly liked and that his mom kept for her.

The sight of it made Kit briefly uncomfortable. But neither wizardry nor friendship was exclusively about comfort. He took the lemon fizz out, popped the can’s top, and took a long swig. *Neets?* he said silently.

*Yeah*, she said in his mind.

There wasn’t much enthusiasm there, but there hadn’t been much enthusiasm in her about anything for some weeks. At least it wasn’t as bad for her now as it had been right after her mother’s funeral. But clearly Kit wondered whether the bitter pain she’d been in then was, in its way, healthier than her current

gray, dull tone of mind, like an overcast that showed no signs of lifting. Then he immediately felt guilty for even being tempted to play psychiatrist. She had a right to grieve at whatever speed was right for her.

*Busy today?*

*Not really.*

Kit waited. Normally Nita would now come forth with at least some explanation of what “not really” involved. But she wasn’t anything like normal right now, and no explanation came—just that sense of weariness, the same tired *why-bother* feeling that kept rearing up at the back of Kit’s mind. Whether he was catching it directly from her via their private channels of communication, or whether it was something of his own, he wasn’t sure. It wasn’t as if *he* didn’t miss Nita’s mother, too.

*I finished fixing the TV*, Kit said, determined to keep the conversation going, no matter how uncomfortable it made him. Someone around here had to try to keep at least the appearance of normalcy going. *Now I’m bored again... and I want to stay that way for a while. Wanna go to the moon?*

There was a pause. *No*, Nita said. *Thanks. I just don’t feel up to it today.* And there it was, the sudden hot feeling of eyes filling with tears, without warning; and Nita frowning, clenching her eyes shut, rather helplessly, unable to stop it, determined to stop it. *You go ahead. Thanks, though.*

She turned away in thought, breaking off the silent communication between them. Kit found that he, too, was scowling against the pain, and he let out a long breath of aggravation at his own helplessness. *Why is it so embarrassing to be sad?* he thought, annoyed. *And not just for me.* Nita’s overwhelming pain embarrassed her as badly as it did him, so Kit had to be careful not to “notice” it. Yet there wasn’t anything he seemed able to do for her at the moment. He felt like an idiot—unable to think of anything useful to say, and just as idiotic when he was tempted to keep saying the same things over and over: “It’ll pass,” “You’ll come out of it eventually.” They all sounded heartless and stupid. *And besides, how quick would I come out of it if it were my mama who died?*

Kit let out a long breath. There was nothing to do but keep letting Nita know that he was there, one day at a time. So he’d taken care of today’s responsibility.

The phone rang, mercifully relieving Kit of his guilt for thinking that doing the right thing for his best friend was some kind of awful burden.

“*Igotitgotitgotit!*” Carmela shrieked from upstairs. “*Hola Miguelque—*” A pause. “Oh. Sorry. *Kit!*.”

“What?”

“*Tomds Eljefe.*”

“Oh.” Kit went to the extension phone in the kitchen. His mother, deep in the business of deboning a chicken, glanced at him as he passed and said nothing, but her smile had a little edge of ruefulness about it. She was still getting her head around the concept that a man she routinely saw at hospital fund-raisers, a successful writer for commercial television and a pillar of the community, was also one of two Senior wizards for the New York metropolitan area. Ponch, Kit’s big black Labrador-cum-Border-collie-cum-whatever, was now lying on the floor with his head down on his paws, carefully watching every move Kit’s mother made that had anything to do with the chicken. As Kit stepped over him, the dog spared him no more than an upward glance, then turned his attention straight back to the food.

Kit smiled slightly and picked up the phone. His sister was saying, “And so then I told him— Oh, *finally.*”

Kit, don't hog the line; I'm expecting a call. Why can't you two just do the magic telepathy thing like you do with Nita? It'd be cheaper!"

"*Vamos*," Kit said, trying not to sound too severe.

"Bye, sweetie," Tom Swale said on the other end.

"Bye-bye, Mr. Tom," Carmela said, and hung up the upstairs phone.

Kit grinned. "Magic telepathy," he said. "Like she cares that much about the phone bill."

Tom laughed. "Explaining the differences of communications between you and me and you and Nita might make more trouble than it's worth," he said. "Better let her get away with it just this once. Am I interrupting anything?"

"I just finished dealing with a hardware conflict," Kit said, "but it's handled now, I think. What's up?"

"I wouldn't mind a consultation, if you have the time."

*He wants a consultation from me? That's a new one.* "Sure," Kit said. "No problem. I'll be right over."

"Thanks."

Kit hung up, and saw the look his mother was giving him. "When's it going to be ready, Mama?" he said. "I won't be late. Not too late, anyway."

"About six. It doesn't matter if you're a little late... It'll keep." She gave him a warning look. "You're not going anywhere sudden, are you?" This had become her code phrase for Kit leaving on wizardly business.

"Nope," Kit said. "Tom just needs some advice, it looks like."

His father wandered back into the kitchen. "The TV working okay now?" Kit said.

"Working?" his pop said. "Well, yeah. But possibly not the way the manufacturer intended."

Kit looked at his pop, uncomprehending. His father went back into the living room. Kit followed.

Where the TV normally would have shown a channel number, the screen was now displaying the number 0000566478. The picture seemed to be of a piece of furniture that looked rather like a set of chrome parallel bars. From the bars hung a creature with quite a few tentacles and many stalky eyes, which were *not* in the usual places. The creature was talking fast and loud in a voice like a fire engine's siren, while waving around a large, shiny object that might have been an eggbeater, except that, in Kit's experience, eggbeaters didn't usually have pulse lasers built into them. Characters flashed on the screen, both in the Speech and in other languages. Kit stood and looked at this with complete astonishment. His father, next to him, was doing the same.

"You didn't hack into that new pay-per-view system, did you?" his father said. "I don't want the cops in here."

"No way," Kit said, picking up the remote and looking at it accusingly. The remote sat there in his hand as undemonstratively as any genuinely inanimate object might... except that Kit was less certain than ever that there really *were* any such things as inanimate objects.

He shook the remote to see if anything rattled. Nothing did. "I told you to behave," he said in the Speech.

"But not like *what*" the remote said in a sanctimonious tone.

His father was still watching the creature on the parallel bars, which pointed the laser eggbeater at what looked like a nearby abstract sculpture. This vanished in a flare of actinic green light, leaving Kit uneasily wondering what kind of sculpture screamed. "Nice special effects," Kit's father said, though he sounded a little dubious. "Almost too realistic."

"It's not special effects, Pop," Kit said. "It's some other planet's cable." He hit the reveal control on the remote, but nothing was revealed except, at the bottom of the screen, many more strings of characters flashing on and off in various colors. "Shopping channel, looks like." Kit handed the remote back to his father.

"This is a *shopping* channel?" his pop said.

Kit headed for the coat hooks by the kitchen door and pulled his parka off one of them. "Popi, I've got to get to Tom's. I'll be back pretty soon. It's all right to look at it, but if any phone numbers that you can read appear—do me a big favor, okay? *Don't order anything!*"

Kit opened the back door. Ponch threw one last longing look at what Kit's mama was doing with the chicken, then threw himself past Kit, hitting the screen door with a *bang!* and flying out into the driveway.

Kit followed him. At the driveway's end, he paused, looking up briefly. It was almost dark already; the bare branches of the maples were showing black against an indigo sky. January was too new for any lengthening of days to be perceptible yet, and the shortness of the daylight hours was depressing. But at least the holidays were over. Kit could hardly remember a year when he'd been less interested in them. For his own family's sake, he'd done his best to act as if he was, but his heart hadn't been in the celebrations, or the presents. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about the one present Nita most desperately wanted, one that not even the Powers That Be could give her.

Kit sighed and looked down the street. Ponch was down there near curbside in the rapidly falling dark, saluting one of the neighbor's trees. "Back this way, please?" he said, and waited until Ponch was finished and came galloping back up the street toward him.

Kit made his way into the backyard again, with Ponch bouncing along beside him, wagging his tail. "Where did the 'meaning of life' thing come from all of a sudden?" Kit said.

*I heard you ask about it,* Ponch said.

The question had, indeed, come up once or twice recently in the course of business, around the time Ponch started talking regularly. "So?" Kit said, as they made their way past the beat-up birdbath into the tangle of sassafras at the back of the yard, where they were out of sight of the houses on either side. "Come to any conclusions?"

*Just that your mama's easy to shake down for dog biscuits.*

Kit grinned. "You didn't need to start talking to her to find that out," he said. He reached into his pocket, felt around for the "zipper" in it that facilitated access to the alternate space where he kept some of his spells ready, and pulled one out—a long chain of strung-together words in the Speech that glowed a very faint blue in the swiftly falling darkness. "I'd keep it in the family, though," Kit said to Ponch. "Don't start asking strangers complicated philosophical questions... It'll confuse them."

*It may be too late*, Ponch said.

Kit wondered what that was supposed to mean, then shrugged. He dropped the spell-chain to the ground around them in a circle. The transit wizardry knotted itself together at the ends in the figure-eight wizard's knot, and from it a brief shimmering curtain of light went up and blanked the night away as displaced air went *thump!* and Kit's ears popped. A moment later he and Ponch were standing together in Tom's backyard, behind the high privet hedge blocking the view from Tom's neighbors' houses. Across the patio, lights were on in the house, and banging noises were coming from the kitchen.

Kit and Ponch made their way past the stucco koi pond toward the sliding porch doors, Ponch shaking his head emphatically. "Are your ears bothering you?" Kit said, as the sound of barking came from further inside the house.

*Only lately*, Ponch said.

"Sorry. I'll have a look at the spell later." Kit pushed the patio door to one side and went into Tom's dining room. That space flowed into the living room area, where Tom's desk sat in a corner, past the sofas and the entertainment center. But at the moment all the action was in the kitchen, off to the left, where big, dark-haired Carl, his fellow Advisory wizard, was doing something to the strip lighting that ran below the upper kitchen cupboards. Tom was leaning against the refrigerator, holding a cup of coffee, with the expression of a man who wants nothing to do with whatever's happening.

"Hi, Kit," he said, as Ponch ran through the kitchen and out the other side, heading toward the bedrooms, where the sheepdogs Annie and Monty were barking at something. "Coke?"

"Yeah, thanks." Kit sat down at the table and watched Carl, who was bent over sideways under the upper cupboards and making faces.

"I told him to call an expert," Tom said as he fished a can of Coke out of the refrigerator and sat down with Kit at the dining room table, where a number of volumes of the Senior version of the wizard's manual were piled up.

"We're expert enough to change the laws of physics temporarily," Carl muttered. "How hard can wiring be?"

With a *dunk!* all the lights in the house went out.

Carl moaned. Kit could just see Tom make a flicking motion with one finger at the circuit-breaker box near the kitchen door, and the lights came back on again. "You should stick to physics," Tom said.

"Just one more time," Carl said, and went down the stairs to the basement.

"This will be the sixth 'one more time' in the past two hours," Tom said. "I'm hoping he'll see sense before he blows up the transformer at the end of the street. Or maybe the local power station."

"I *heard* that!" said the voice from the basement.

Kit snickered, but not too loudly.

"Anyway," Tom said, "thanks for coming over. Briefly, one of our wizards is missing, and I'd like you to look into it."

This was a new one on Kit. "Missing? Anybody I know?"

“Hard for me to tell. Here’s the listing.” Tom pulled down the topmost manual and opened it; the pages riffled themselves to a spot he had bookmarked. It was a page in the master wizards’ address listing for the New

York area, and one block of information glowed a soft rose. Kit leaned over to look at it. In the Speech, it said:

McALLISTER, Darryl

18355 Hempstead Turnpike

Baldwin, NY 11568

(516)555-7384

power rating: 5.6 +/- .3

status: on Ordeal

initiation: 4777598.3

completion:

duration to present date: 90.3

resolution: nil

Kit stared at the duration figure for a moment: There was something wrong with it. “That doesn’t look right,” he said at last. “Did a decimal point get misplaced or something? That looks like months.”

“It *is* months,” Tom said. “Just a whisker over three, which is why it came up for attention today. The manual normally flags such extended Ordeals to be audited by a Senior.”

“I thought nobody was allowed to interfere with a wizard’s Ordeal,” Kit said. “It’s what determines whether you ought to be a wizard in the first place. Whether you can run into the Lone Power and survive...”

“Normally that’s true,” Tom said. “But Ordeals aren’t always so clear-cut; they do sometimes go wrong. A resolution can get delayed somehow, or there can be local interference that keeps the resolution from happening. An area’s Seniors are allowed a certain amount of information about Ordeals among probationary wizards who’d be in their catchment area if things went right, especially if something goes wrong in a specific sort of way—a stuck Ordeal, or a contaminated one. We have some latitude to step in and try to kick that Ordeal back into operation again. While interfering as little as possible.”

Kit nodded, glancing to one side as Carl came up from the basement with a very large roll of duct tape. “Ah,” Tom said. “The substance that binds the universe together.”

“We’ll see,” Carl said, and bent himself over sideways again.

“It’s a brute force solution,” Tom said. “Inelegant. The phone’s right there!”

Carl ignored him and started doing something with the duct tape.

“So now we come to this kid,” Tom said, indicating the highlighted listing again.

*Clunk!* went the circuit breaker, and the house went dark again; only the text on the page in front of them continued to glow, while in the back bedroom the dogs paused, then went on barking. Tom gestured once more at the breaker box, and the lights came on. “It’s not like he’s been physically absent from the area for all this time, as far as I can tell,” Tom said. “If he were, certainly there would have been something about it in the news, and there’s been nothing. But at the same time, this is not a normal duration for a human Ordeal. We need to find out what’s going on, but quietly. Do you or Nita know him well enough to look in on him and see what’s happening? Or do you know anyone who does?”

Kit shook his head. “I can check with Neets, but she’s sure never mentioned him to me,” Kit said. “Why bring me in on this, though? You’re a Senior; you’d probably be able to tell a lot better than I can what’s going on with him.”

“Well,” Tom said, “let’s put it this way. How come you chose to do a direct transit here rather than just walk over and knock on the front door?”

Kit was briefly surprised that Tom would bother asking so obvious a question. “It’s not exactly like you’ve got any kids of your own,” he said. “And if the neighbors keep seeing kids wandering in and out of here every five minutes—”

“Say no more,” Tom said. “We’re on the same wavelength. It’s just another facet of the way wizards have to behave in our culture. Attracting attention to yourself is usually unwise. In this particular situation, if people start noticing *you* in the neighborhood around the object of our mutual interest, they won’t think too much about it—it’s not far enough from your own stamping grounds to provoke suspicion. Whereas if Carl or I went to investigate personally, notice might be taken. This kind of initial fact-finding is better suited to a wizard of your age.”

“Besides,” Carl said, peering up at the bottom of the cupboard, “lately you’ve been evincing a certain talent for finding things.”

“Well, Ponch has,” Kit said.

“I’m not sure he’d be producing these results without you as part of the team,” Carl said, as he applied duct tape liberally to the cupboard’s underside. “Let’s not get overly tangled up in details at the moment.”

“From a man in your position, that has a hollow ring,” Tom said.

“Sure, go ahead, mock me in my torment.”

“Anyway, are you willing?” Tom said. “To go over there during the next couple of days? See what the kid’s doing, physically, talk to him if you can, try to get a sense of what his state of mind is.”

“Sure,” Kit said. “Am I allowed to tell him I’m a wizard, if he asks?”

“I’ll leave that up to you,” Tom said. “Normally I would suggest that you try to avoid it if possible. You don’t want to take the chance of altering his perception of his Ordeal, maybe even making him think you’re supposed to be involved in it somehow. But if you can come by any sense of why his Ordeal’s taking him so long, I’d be glad to hear it.”

Carl straightened up. “Okay,” he said. The strip lights under the cupboards were now actually on. He looked at the light they cast on the counter with some satisfaction. “At least now I’m going to be able to see what I’m cooking without getting blinded.” He went over to the wall, turned the dimmer switch.

*Clunk!*

“I could stop by the supermarket on the way home and get you some candles,” Kit said as he got up. “Fire still works.”

“Very funny,” Carl said. “I hope that someday, when duct tape is sticking to *your* gray hairs—”

“Kit,” Tom said, “ignore the whimpering from the sidelines for the moment... Be careful not to get sucked in. This youngster may seem very, very stuck when you meet him, and you’ve got to resist the temptation to give him help he doesn’t need. You could end up endangering yourself, not to mention altering the focus of his Ordeal... which could make him fail it. Or worse.”

“I’ll watch out.”

“Okay. Go see what you can find out. You may want to leave your manual on record when you’re talking to him; it may pick up some nuance that you miss at first.” He paused. “Listen to that,” he said.

Kit listened, puzzled. “I don’t hear anything.”

“What the master of sarcasm over there means is that the dogs have stopped barking,” Carl said. “They’ve been having some kind of metaphysical discussion for days now. And they’re loud about it.”

“Have they been asking you about the meaning of life?” Kit said.

Both Tom and Carl gave Kit a look. “Uh, yes,” Tom said.

Kit covered his face. “It’s my fault,” he said. “A new kind of blackmail, and I know where they got it. They probably want dog biscuits.”

“New tactic,” Tom said wearily, getting up. “Old problem. I’ll bear it in mind.”

Ponch came lollaping back into the dining room. Kit got up, too. “I’ll get in touch as soon as I find anything out,” Kit said, opening the patio door to let Ponch out.

“Thanks, fella,” Tom said. “*Dai stiho.*”

“Yeah, you go well, too. Well enough not to electrocute somebody, anyway!”

They headed back the way they’d come, Kit pausing briefly in Tom’s backyard with the spell-chain in his hands to adjust the variable that determined how much and how fast the air displaced around their transiting mass when they “came out of nowhere.” Ponch was bouncing up and down around him, making it difficult for Kit to remember where in the structure of the spell the variable actually was. “Would you sit *down?*” he said under his breath to Ponch, while passing the softly glowing chain of words through his hands until the little barbed bit sticking out from the variable scratched his skin. Kit held the word up in front of his eyes, squinting at it like someone threading a needle, and managed to catch the delicate outward-hooked tail of the spell character between finger and thumb.

*Chicken!* Ponch was shouting in his head. *Hurry up! It’s chicken!*

“And philosophy goes right out the window, huh?” Kit said as he twiddled the mass-displacement variable; it shaded down from a bright blue to a darker one. “You’re a bad influence on those guys, you know that?”

*Me? Never. Chicken!*

“Right,” Kit said, folding the variable’s tail back in and shaking the spell through a quick sine wave to unkink it. It fell smoothly to the ground and knotted itself. “Now sit down or you’re gonna wind up in two different places, and not in one piece!”

Ponch sat down but still managed to bounce a little.

The spell flared up, its blue a little darker this time. A second later they were standing in Kit’s backyard again, without the ear-popping effect this time, and the light faded out of the spell.

“Better?” Kit said, winding the spell-chain up and sticking it back in his “pocket.”

*It’s fine. I’m hungry!* Ponch shouted, and ran for the house.

Kit breathed out, feeling hungry, too, and tired. This, at least, had nothing to do with the emotional climate. No wizardry is without its price, and this was the normal reaction to a transit wizardry: a small but significant deduction from Kit’s personal energy supply. It was one of the reasons why, as they got older, a lot of wizards spent as much time as they could making sure they were in decent physical shape.

Kit went after Ponch and was surprised not to see his mama and pop eating in the kitchen, as they usually did. He wandered into the living room and found them there on the sofa. Kit’s pop was finishing the last of what must have been a second helping of *arroz con polio*, watching the TV screen, while Kit’s mama sat next to him, cross-legged, punching the scan button on the remote and looking at the TV with an expression of extreme bemusement.

His father looked up. “Five billion channels and nothing on,” he said in a kind of horrified astonishment.

“The story of modern life,” Kit said, resigned, and headed to the kitchen to get himself a plate. “Just be-cause a species is more scientifically advanced than us doesn’t mean its TV is any better, believe me.”

His father absorbed this assessment with a thoughtful look. “Maybe that should make me feel better. I’ll let you know. What did Tom have to say?”

“It’s complicated,” Kit said. “A missing persons case.”

“And are *you* likely to go missing?” his pop said.

“Not right away,” Kit said. “I have to do some detective work here first.”

“Oh, my god,” Kit’s mama said, “what are they *doing*”

Anything that could so seriously gross out Kit’s mama, the nurse, was worth a look. Kit grabbed a plate and ducked back into the living room, looked at the writhing, thrashing, stridently colored image for a moment, then took the remote away from his mama and punched it for subtitles. “Oh, that’s what I thought,” he said, after spending about ten seconds reading them. “It’s a soap.”

“Not of any brand I recognize,” his mother said. She looked scandalized.

“It’s real basic, Mama,” Kit said. “Boy meets girl meets thing meets other thing. Boy loses girl loses other thing finds thing. Boy loses thing gets girl loses thing. Happily ever after...” He tossed the remote back to his mother.

She fielded it badly as she studied the screen for any signs of boys or girls, and looked like she was having trouble finding any, though there were plenty of “things.” “‘Basic,’ you said?”

“Old, old story, Mama. You should see some of these guys’ literature. Shakespeare would have loved

it.” Kit considered that briefly: His lit class had been doing the late Shakespeare comedies, and suddenly a whole set of opportunities opened out before him. “Just imagine *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with ten or twelve extra genders...”

His mother raised her eyebrows, gave up on the soap, and started changing channels again. “Doesn’t this thing have an online channel guide?” she said.

“I’ll have a look at it later and let you know,” Kit said.

He saw the look she threw at his pop. “Are there cooking channels?”

“Oh, yeah.” Then Kit paused, having a horrible thought. “On second thought, it might be smarter to avoid those. Some of them feature humans... and not as the cooks.”

The look on his mother’s face made Kit wish he’d kept quiet. She began changing channels with unusual speed. Kit raised his eyebrows and went back into the kitchen with the plate.

He was spooning out rice when his dad came back in and began rooting around in the silverware drawer in an aimless way that didn’t fool Kit for a moment. “Son,” he said, very quietly, “is there *really* a cooking channel, uh, ‘about’ us?”

“Pop, there’s lots of them.”

His father looked shocked. “But how is something like that *permitted*\*.”

Kit shrugged. “You go where you shouldn’t go,” Kit said, and couldn’t help grinning, “you find out stuff you shouldn’t find out. Like how you taste in a sweet-and-sour sauce with galingale. The universe is full of little surprises.”

“I always have the feeling that there’s a lot about this wizardry you’re not telling me,” his father said. “Sometimes it worries me. Then come times like this when I’m horribly glad about my ignorance. Just don’t go places where you shouldn’t go, okay?”

“I try to avoid it,” Kit said. “Is it okay with you if I go to Baldwin in the next couple of days, though?”

His pop looked surprised. “Baldwin? No problem with that.”

“Thanks.”

Kit brought his plate into the living room, where he sat down on the floor and watched his mother change channels one more time. “Well, *that’s* pretty,” she said, sounding relieved.

Kit glanced up at the screen, chewing. “Uh, Mama,” he said, “I’m probably too young to be watching anything that explicit.”

Her eyes widened. “But, honey, it’s just a big cloud of gas, or smoke, or...” She stopped, her eyes widening even more, then changed the channel six times in a row without stopping.

Kit grinned and turned his attention back to the chicken.

## ***Investigations***

Circuses—even just the thought of them—had always scared Nita when she was little. Later on, she had felt that the fear was ridiculous. Circuses were supposed to be so much fun for small children—all the sparkle, glitter, and noise, the processions of elephants parading along trunk-by-tail, the blare of brass

music, the daring acrobats and tumblers, the goofy clowns.

Yet it hadn't worked that way for Nita the first time she actually went to one. Where the other kids in the audience had laughed and clapped, she sat amid all the raucous noise feeling terribly unnerved. It wasn't so much being afraid that an acrobat would fall, that a lion would eat the lion tamer... nothing so concrete or obvious. But the darkness, the gradually strengthening smells of sawdust, animal sweat, greasepaint, and canvas, the spotlighting that left too many other things purposely obscure while half-seen forms moved in those shadows, themselves concealed by the light—all these slowly combined to suggest that something unexpected, something unavoidable, was going to happen. And that looming unknown frightened Nita badly. At intermission she'd begged her parents to take her home. Dairine had cried at the thought of leaving, and so their mom had stayed with Dari while her father drove Nita back to the house.

That her dad had never pressed her for details about this was still one of the things Nita thought about when counting up the reasons she loved him. But even his silent support couldn't do anything about the nightmares that followed, nightmares full of leering clown faces and the musky smell of big cats. Finally the nightmares faded away and left Nita wondering what in the world had been the matter with her. Yet she never went to another circus. And even now, sometimes the mere sight of a spotlight aimed at an empty floor, with darkness lying silent beyond it, was enough to induce in her a feeling of tremendous foreboding that would darken her soul for hours.

Sometimes she tried to work out in more detail why she'd been so scared. She kept coming back to the clowns. To Nita, there was a fake quality about them, nothing genuinely humorous. It was strange to think that someone seriously thought that makeup could make you funny. But there was no question in Nita's mind that makeup *could* make you scary. The stylized clown face, too generic, too cartoony: That really bothered her. The baggy, motley costume, disguising the real body shape so that it could have been a bare steel skeleton underneath instead of flesh and bone. The slapstick jokes, endlessly repeated, which were supposed to be amusing *because* of the repetition—all these left Nita cold. There was something mechanical about clowns, something automatic, a kind of robot humor; and it gave her the creeps.

It was doing so again, right now, because here in the darkness, followed around by one of those sinister spotlights, was a typical clown act—the clown riding around and around in circles on a ridiculously small bicycle, in ever decreasing circles. There was nothing funny about it to Nita. It was pitiful. Around and around and around, in jerky, wobbling movements, around and around went the clown. It had a painted black tear running down its face. The red-painted mouth was turned down. But the face under the white greasepaint mask was as immobile as a marble statue's, expressionless, plastered in place. Only the eyes were alive. They shouted, *I can't get off! I can't get off!* And, just this once, the clown didn't think it was funny, either.

The drumroll went on and on, as if for a hanging rather than a circus stunt. The chain of the bicycle rattled relentlessly in the silence inside the light. Beyond the light, in the darkness, the heartless crowd laughed and clapped and cheered. And through the sound of their applause, low, but building, came the growl of the tiger, pacing behind the bars, waiting its turn.

The drumroll never stopped. The clown rode in tighter and tighter circles, faster and faster. The wheels of the bike began to scream. The crowd shouted for more. "Stop it," Nita yelled. "Stop it! Can't you see it's killing him?"

"As often as possible," growled the tiger. "And never often enough."

The crowd roared louder. "Stop it!" Nita shouted back, but now they were drowning her out, too. "Stop

it!”

“STOP!”

She was sitting up in the dark, alone. It took her a ragged three or four breaths to realize she was in her own room, in bed, and that her own shout had awakened her.

Nita sat still for a few moments, praying that she wouldn't hear anyone coming to find out if she was okay. She wasn't, but she still hoped no one would respond. There wasn't anyone in the house who'd been sleeping well for a while now.

She stayed still for a long time. Mercifully, no one showed up, and Nita began to relax, realizing that she might have expected this outcome if she'd really thought about it. Dairine, when she slept these days, slept hard, in utter exhaustion. Their dad lately had been doing much the same, a change from the previous month, when he had hardly slept at all. It didn't take a wizard to figure out that he'd been *afraid* to fall asleep, because of who he would, again and again, *not* find beside him when he woke up. Finally his body had overruled that kind of behavior and now was trying to sleep too much, to not wake up at all, if possible. The reasons were the same, and just thinking of them made Nita want to cry all over again.

She lay back against the pillows and let her breath out at the thought of the dream. *It's just me*, she thought. She hated to describe it any further, for the next line of explanation would have been, *Since Mom*— And she refused to blame her mother for it; her mom now had nothing further to do with pain. It was Nita's own pain that made her nights so awful. The shrink at school, the counselor at the hospital, both told her the same thing: “Grief takes time. The pain discharges in a lot of different ways, in old repeated patterns, weird symbolic images, mental unrest. Try to stop it, and it just takes longer. Let it take its own time; let it go at its own speed.”

*Like I have a choice*, Nita thought bitterly. She could have used wizardry to combat the sleep disturbances, but the manual had told her plainly that this would be counterproductive. Easing others' pain is one thing; willfully trying to avoid experiencing one's own is another, and has its own price, too high for the intelligent wizard to pay. It was smarter to let the hurt discharge naturally, without interfering.

But these commonsense counsels were still no comfort in the middle of the night, when she was alone in the dark. All Nita could do was wipe her face repeatedly, dry her eyes on the pillow, and hope to fall asleep eventually. Lacking that, she'd lie there and wait for dawn.

Nita lay there, almost seeing the eyes hidden in the exaggerated colors and shadows of the painted face, and squeezed her own eyes shut. *It's just my pain in*

*disguise*, she thought. *Pain expressed as a symbol, one step away from the reality.*

*I wish this were over with. I wish life were normal again...* But she knew that the old kind of normal was never going to come back. Somehow she was just going to have to make a new one.

Nita turned over to try to go back to sleep, but it took a long while: From the shadows of dream, those eyes kept watching her...

The next day was Tuesday. Kit went through his early classes more or less mechanically. The problem of Tom's “lost wizard” was on his mind. Tracking him down and identifying him wouldn't be a

problem—the manual would be able to localize him and point him out when Kit was close enough. *But what then?* he thought as the bell rang for fourth period. He picked up his backpack and walked out of his math class on his way to history. *Do I just walk up to him, say, “Hi, there. I’m on errantry and I greet you. What’s the problem?” Is it better to just take a good look at him from a distance, maybe?*

“Hey, KF, don’t say hi or anything!”

Kit glanced around and found Raoul Eschemeling walking along next to him. Or rather, he glanced over and then up, because Raoul went up a good ways. He was a skinny, pale blond guy, tall enough to be a basketball player—the kind of person for whom the word *gangly* originally could have been coined. Friendly and gregarious, Raoul was constantly inventing bizarre nicknames for the other kids in the advanced history class, a motley crew of crazies of various ages, all fast-tracked together into a single advanced unit. “KF” was short for “kit fox,” and this nickname had stuck longer than any of the others Raoul had hung on Kit at one point or another.

“Hey, Pirate,” Kit said. “Sorry, I was daydreaming.”

“Saw that. You almost walked into a locker there. You ready for Machiavelli’s quiz?”

“Oh, god, no,” Kit said as they turned the corner and headed down the corridor toward their classroom. “Machiavelli” was Mr. Mack, their history teacher, and, in his case at least, the nickname was justifiable: He had a twisty, calculating mind that made learning history from him a pleasure. “I forgot. Well, I did the reading. Maybe I’ll survive.”

Raoul looked at him closely. “You got stuff on your mind?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“She doing okay? I haven’t seen her around a lot lately.”

“Huh? Oh, Nita.” They went into the classroom together and took seats near the back wall. There was no assigned seating in Mack’s class, which meant there was always a rush for the rearmost seats, everybody’s desperate attempt to be somewhere that would make Machiavelli less likely to call on them... not that sitting in the back ever seemed to work. “She’s okay, pretty much.” Kit paused, watching the room fill up hurriedly—no surprise since Mack made the lives of latecomers a question-filled hell. “I mean, as okay as she can be under the circumstances.”

Raoul looked at Kit with interest. “So if you weren’t going all vague about her just now, then what’s on your mind?”

“Oh, just home stuff...”

The bell rang. *Saved!* Kit thought. With the bell came Machiavelli, moving fast, as always, five feet tall and balding, in a blue suit and wearing a red tie ornamented with the images of many tiny yellow rubber duckies. The suit never changed, but the tie changed every day, and in the few seconds of fascination it produced, Mr. Mack would always pick the unfortunate student who looked most off guard and start peppering him or her with questions. “Rodriguez,” he said, and Kit’s heart sank. “You ready for our little quiz today?”

Wizards do not lie; too much depends on the words they use seriously for them to play fast and loose with the less serious ones. “I don’t know, Mr. M., but I think I’m about to find out.”

Machiavelli grinned at him. Kit restrained the urge to groan out loud, and once again wished it wasn’t

unethical for a wizard to use his powers to read the closed textbook in his backpack. All he could do now was pray for the bloodshed to be over with quickly.

Forty-five minutes later, Kit and the rest of the class walked out, mostly looking like they had been run over repeatedly by the same steamroller. "Remind me never to go to sub-Saharan Africa in the eighteen hundreds," Raoul muttered. "After today, just seeing it would make me come down with post-traumatic stress disorder."

Kit theoretically *could* have gone to that time and place if he wanted to and was willing to pay the price, but right now he felt about the same as Raoul did. "Still, it could have been worse. At least we passed."

"Yeah. Not sure I have any appetite left for lunch... I guess we can go look, though."

Kit grinned, privately thinking that it would take a nuclear war to ruin Raoul's appetite. "Let me know how it was. I have to go home for lunch."

"God, I wish I lived as close to school as you do," Raoul said. "When I think of all the cafeteria food I wouldn't have to eat...!"

"Go on, Pirate," Kit said. "Suffer a little. I'll see you later."

He made his way back to his locker, chucked his backpack into it, locked it up again, and headed out the school's back door, jogging across the parking lot, through the gate, and around the corner onto Conlon Road.

Ponch was bouncing around in the backyard, jumping almost to the top of the chain-link fence, as Kit came down the driveway. "Okay, okay, give me a minute," Kit said. He pulled the screen door open and poked the lock with one finger. "Hey, Chubbo..."

The lock obligingly threw its bolt back for him. Kit patted the lock, opened the door, loped into the kitchen, very hastily threw together a ham sandwich on rye with some mustard, and ate it. For his mother, who was still asleep because she had been working night shifts at the hospital over the past week, he left a note scribbled on the pad on the refrigerator: "I had lunch. See you later." He thought of adding the code phrase "Out on business now" to let his mama know that there was wizardly work afoot, but then he changed his mind. He'd have no more than his lunch period minus the time to eat the sandwich before he would have to be back at school again, anyway.

Kit cleaned up the crumbs from his sandwich and went out, pulling the door softly closed behind him so as not to wake his mama. "See you, big guy," Kit said to the lock. "Keep her safe."

*I'm on it!*

He went around the back, opened the gate softly, and closed it again, grabbing Ponch by the collar and roughing him up a little by way of saying hello. "And you weren't even barking," Kit said. "Good for you."

*She's asleep, Ponch said. I don't want her to yell at me.*

"Neither do I Good for you for thinking of it."

*Are we going out?!* Ponch began chasing his tail in delight.

"Just for a quick look at our guy. I want to see if he's okay before I come barging in on him. We're going to have to be stealthy, though."