



DIANE DUANE

*So You
Want to Be
a Wizard*



Magic Carpet Books
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Summary: Thirteen-year-old Nita, tormented by a gang of bullies because she won't fight back, finds the help she needs in a library book on wizardry which guides her into another dimension.

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P R S Q

For Sam's friend

Acknowledgment

David Gerrold is responsible for the creation of several images found in this book, upon which the writer has elaborated slightly. He's also responsible for beating the writer with a club until the words came out right—a matter of several years' nonstop exertion. It would take several more years to fully acknowledge his contributions to both the writer and the written; but brevity is probably best. O friend, big brother, thanks and love, again and always.

By necessity every book must have at least one flaw; a misprint, a missing page, or an imperfection....the Rabbis ... point out that even in the holiest of books, the scroll resting inside the Ark, the Name of Names is inscribed in code so that no one might say it out loud, and chance alone can pronounce properly the Word that once divided the waters from the waters and the day from the night.... As it is, some books, nearly perfect, are known to become transparent when opened under the influence of the proper constellation, when the full Moon rests in place. Then it is not uncommon for a man to become lost in a single letter, or to hear a voice rise up from the silent page; and then only one imperfect letter, one missing page, can bring him back to the land where a book, once opened, may still be closed, can permit him to pull up the covers around his head and smile once before he falls asleep.

—*Midrashim*, by Howard Schwartz

I have been a word in a book.

—"The Song of Taliesin"
in *The Black Book of Caermarthyr*

Prologue

PART OF THE PROBLEM, Nita thought as she tore desperately down Rose Avenue, *is that I can't keep my mouth shut.*

She had been running for five minutes now, hopping fences, sliding sideways through hedges, but she was losing her wind. Some ways behind her she could hear Joanne and Glenda and the rest of the crowd pounding along in pursuit, threatening to replace her latest, now-fading black eye. Well, Joanne *would* come up to her with that new bike, all chrome and silver and gearshift levers and speedometer/odometer and toe clips and water bottle, and ask what she thought of it. So Nita had *to* tell her. Actually, she had told Joanne what she thought of *her*. The bike was all right. In fact, it had been almost exactly the one that Nita had wanted so much for her last birthday—the birthday when she got nothing but clothes.

Life can be really rotten sometimes, Nita thought. She wasn't really so irritated about that at the moment, however. Running away from a beating was taking up most of her attention.

"Callahan," came a yell from behind her, "I'm gonna pound you up and mail you home in bottles!"

I wonder how many bottles it'll take, Nita thought, without much humor. She couldn't afford to laugh. With their bikes, they'd catch up to her pretty quickly. And then...

She tried not to think of the scene there would be later at home—her father raising hands and eyes to the ceiling, wondering loudly enough for the whole house to hear, "Why didn't you hit the back?"; her sister making belligerent noises over her new battle scars; her mother shaking her head and looking away silently, because she understood. It was her sad look that would hurt Nita more than the bruises and scrapes and swollen face would. Her mom would shake her head, and clean the hurts up and sigh....

Crud! Nita thought. The breath was coming hard to her now. She was going to have to try to hide to wait them out. But where? Most of the people around here didn't want kids running through the yards. There was Old Crazy Swale's house with its big landscaped yard, but the rumors among the neighborhood kids said that weird things happened in there. Nita herself had noticed that the guy didn't go to work like normal people. *Better to get beat up again than go in there. But where can I hide?*

She kept on running down Rose Avenue, and the answer presented itself to her: a little brown brick building with windows warmly alight—refuge, safety, sanctuary. The library. *It's open, it's open. I forgot it was open late on Saturday! Oh, thank Heaven!* The sight of it gave Nita a new burst of energy. She cut across its tidy lawn, loped up the walk, took the five stairs to the porch in two jumps, bumped open the front door, and closed it behind her, a little too loudly.

The library had been a private home once, and it hadn't lost the look of one despite the crowding of all its rooms with bookshelves. The walls were paneled in mahogany and oak, and the place smelled warm and brown and booky. At the thump of the door Mrs. Lesser, the weekend librarian, glanced up from her desk, about to say something sharp. Then she saw who was standing there and how hard she was breathing. Mrs. Lesser frowned at Nita and then grinned. She didn't miss much.

"There's no one downstairs," she said, nodding at the door that led to the children's library in the single big basement room. "Keep quiet and I'll get rid of them."

"Thanks," Nita said, and went thumping down the cement stairs. As she reached the bottom, she heard the bump and squeak of the front door opening again.

Nita paused to try to hear voices and found that she couldn't. Doubting that her pursuers could hear her either, she walked on into the children's library, smiling slightly at the books and the bright posters.

She still loved the place. She loved any library, big or little; there was something about all that knowledge, all those facts waiting patiently to be found that never failed to give her a shiver. When friends couldn't be found, the books were always waiting with something new to tell. Life that was getting too much the same could be shaken up in a few minutes by the picture in a book of some ancient temple newly discovered deep in a rain forest, a fuzzy photo of Uranus with its up-and-down rings, or a prisms picture taken through the faceted eye of a bee.

And though she would rather have died than admit it—no respectable thirteen-year-old ever stepped foot down there—she still loved the children's library too. Nita had gone through every book in the place when she was younger, reading everything in sight—fiction and nonfiction alike, fairy tales, science books, horse stories, dog stories, music books, art books, even the encyclopedias.

Bookworm, she heard the old jeering voices go in her head, *four eyes, smart-ass, hide-in-the-house-and-read. Walking encyclopedia. Think you're so hot.* "No," she remembered herself answering once, "I just like to find things out!" And she sighed, feeling rueful. *That time she had found out about being punched in the stomach.*

She strolled between shelves, looking at titles, smiling as she met old friends—books she had read three times or five times or a dozen. Just a title, or an author's name, would be enough to summon up happy images. Strange creatures like phoenixes and psammeads, moving under smoky London daylight of a hundred years before, in company with groups of bemused children; starships and new worlds and the limitless vistas of interstellar night, outer space challenged but never conquered; princesses in silver and golden dresses, princes and heroes carrying swords like sharpened lines of light, monsters rising out of weedy tarns, wild creatures that talked and tricked one another....

I used to think the world would be like that when I got older. Wonderful all the time, exciting and happy. Instead of the way it is....

Something stopped Nita's hand as it ran along the bookshelf. She looked and found that one of the books, a little library-bound volume in shiny red buckram, had a loose thread at the top of its spine, one which her finger had caught. She pulled the finger free, glanced at the title. It was one of those *So You Want to Be a ...* books, a series on careers. *So You Want to Be a Pilot* there had been, and *So You Want to Be a Scientist ... a Nurse ... a Writer...*

But this one said, *So You Want to Be a Wizard.*

A what?

Nita pulled the book off the shelf, surprised not so much by the title as by the fact that she had never seen it before. She thought she knew the whole stock of the children's library. Yet this wasn't a new book. It had plainly been there for some time—the pages had that yellow look about their edges, the color of aging, and the top of the book was dusty, *SO YOU WANT TO BE A WIZARD. HEARNSEN*, the spine said: that was the author's name. Phoenix Press, the publisher. And then in white ink in Mrs. Lesser's tidy handwriting, *793.4: the Dewey decimal number.*

This has to be a joke, Nita said to herself. But the book looked exactly like all the others in the series. She opened it carefully, so as not to crack the binding, and turned the first few pages to the table of contents. Normally Nita was a fast reader and would quickly have finished a page with only a few lines on it; but what she found on that contents page slowed her down a great deal. "Preliminary Determinations: A Question of Aptitude." "Wizardly Preoccupations and Predilections." "Basic Equipment and Milieus." "Introduction to Spells, Bindings, and *Geasa*." "Familiars and Helpmeet." "Advice to the Initiate." "Psychotropic Spelling."

Psychowhat? Nita turned to the page on which that chapter began, looking at the boldface paragraph beneath its title.

WARNING

Spells of power sufficient to make temporary changes in the human mind are always subject to sudden and unpredictable backlash on the user. The practitioner is cautioned to make sure that his/her motives are benevolent before attempting spelling aimed at...

I don't believe this, Nita thought. She shut the book and stood there holding it in her hand, confused, amazed, suspicious—and delighted. If it was a joke, it was a great one. If it wasn't...

No, don't be silly.

But if it isn't...

People were clumping around upstairs, but Nita hardly heard them. She sat down at one of the low tables and started reading the book in earnest.

The first couple of pages were a foreword.

Wizardry is one of the most ancient and misunderstood of arts. Its public image for centuries has been one of a mysterious pursuit, practiced in occult surroundings, and usually used at the peril of one's soul. The modern wizard, who works with tools more advanced than bat's blood and beings more complex than medieval demons, knows how far from the truth that image is. Wizardry, though exciting and interesting, is not a glamorous business, especially these days, when a wizard must work quietly so as not to attract undue attention.

For those willing to assume the Art's responsibilities and do the work, though, wizardry has many rewards. The sight of a formerly twisted growing thing now growing straight, of a snarled motivation untangled, the satisfaction of hearing what a plant is thinking or a dog is saying, of talking to a stone or a star, is thought by most to be well worth the labor.

Not everyone is suited to be a wizard. Those without enough of the necessary personality traits will never see this manual for what it is. That you have found it at all says a great deal for your potential.

The reader is invited to examine the next few chapters and determine his/her wizardly potential in detail—to become familiar with the scope of the Art—and finally to decide whether to become a wizard.

Good luck!

It's a joke, Nita thought. Really. And to her own amazement, she wouldn't believe herself—she was too fascinated. She turned to the next chapter.

PRELIMINARY DETERMINATIONS

An aptitude for wizardry requires more than just the desire to practice the art. There are certain inborn tendencies, and some acquired ones, that enable a person to become a wizard. This chapter will list some of the better documented of wizardly characteristics. Please bear in mind that it is not necessary to possess all the qualities listed, or even most of them. Some of the greatest wizards have been lacking in the qualities possessed by almost all others and have still achieved startling

Slowly at first, then more eagerly, Nita began working her way through the assessment chapter, pausing only to get a pencil and scrap paper from the checkout desk, so that she could make notes on her aptitude. She was brought up short by the footnote to one page:

**Where ratings are not assigned, as in rural areas, the area of greatest population density will usually produce the most wizards, due to the thinning of worldwalls with increased population concentration....*

Nita stopped reading, amazed. "Thinning of worldwalls"—were they saying that there are other worlds, other dimensions, and that things could get through? Things, or people?

She sat there and wondered. All the old fairy tales about people falling down wells into magic countries, or slipping backward in time, or forward into it—did this mean that such things could actually happen? If you could actually go into other worlds, other places, and come back again....

Aww—who would believe anybody who came back and told a story like that? Even if they took pictures?

But who cares! she answered herself fiercely. *If only it could be true....*

She turned her attention back to the book and went on reading, though skeptically—the whole thing still felt like a game, but abruptly it stopped being a game, with one paragraph:

Wizards love words. Most of them read a great deal, and indeed one strong sign of a potential wizard is the inability to get to sleep without reading something first. But their love for and fluency with words is what makes wizards a force to be reckoned with. Their ability to convince a piece of the world—a tree, say, or a stone—that it's not what it thinks it is, that it's something else, is the very heart of wizardry. Words skillfully used, the persuasive voice, the persuading mind, are the wizard's most basic tools. With them a wizard can stop a tidal wave, talk a tree out of growing, or into it—freeze fire, burn rain—even slow down the death of the Universe.

That last, of course, is the reason there are wizards. See the next chapter.

Nita stopped short. The universe was running down; all the energy in it was slowly being used up. She knew that from studying astronomy. The process was called *entropy*. But she'd never heard anyone talk about slowing it down before.

She shook her head in amazement and went on to the "correlation" section at the end of the chapter, where all the factors involved in the makeup of a potential wizard were listed. Nita found that she had a lot of them—enough to be a wizard, if she wanted to.

With rising excitement she turned to the next chapter. "Theory and Implications of Wizardry" the heading said. "*History, Philosophy, and the Wizards' Oath.*"

Fifty or sixty eons ago, when life brought itself about, it also brought about to accompany it many Powers and Potentialities to manage the business of creation. One of the greatest of these Powers held aloof for a long time, watching its companions work, not wishing to enter into Creation until it could contribute something unlike anything the other Powers had made, something completely new and original. Finally the Lone Power found what it was looking for. Others had invented planets, light, gravity, space. The Lone Power invented death, and bound it irrevocably into the worlds. Shortly thereafter the other Powers joined forces and cast the Lone One out.

Many versions of this story are related among the many worlds, assigning blame or praise to one party or another. However, none of the stories change the fact that entropy and its symptom, death, are here now. To attempt to halt or remove them is as futile as attempting to ignore them.

Therefore there are wizards—to handle them.

A wizard's business is to conserve energy—to keep it from being wasted. On the simplest level, this includes such unmagical-looking actions as paying one's bills on time, turning off the lights when you go out, and supporting the people around you in getting their lives to work. It also includes a great deal more.

Because wizardly people tend to be good with language, they can also become skillful with the Speech, the magical tongue in which objects and living creatures can be described with more accuracy than in any human language. And what can be so accurately described can also be preserved—freed to become yet greater. A wizard can cause an inanimate object or animate creature to grow, or stop growing—to be what it is, or something else. A wizard, using the Speech, can cause death to slow down, or go somewhere else and come back later—just as the Lone Power caused it to come about in the first place. Creation, preservation, destruction, transformation—all are a matter of causing the fabric of being to do what you want it to. And the Speech is the key.

Nita stopped to think this over for a moment. It sounds like, if you know what something is, truly know, you don't have any trouble working with it. Like my telescope—if it acts up, I know every piece of it, and it only takes a second to get it working again. To have that kind of control over—over everything—live things, the world, even... She took a deep breath and looked back at the book, beginning to get an idea of what kind of power was implied there.

The power conferred by use of the Speech has, of course, one insurmountable limitation: the existence of death itself. As one renowned Senior Wizard has remarked, "Entropy has us outnumbered." No matter how much preserving we do, the Universe will eventually die. But it will last longer because of our efforts—and since no one knows for sure whether another Universe will be born from the ashes of this one, the effort seems worthwhile.

No one should take the Wizards' Oath who is not committed to making wizardry a lifelong pursuit. The energy invested in a beginning wizard is too precious to be thrown away. Yet there are no penalties for withdrawal from the Art, except the knowledge that the Universe will die a little faster because of energy lost. On the other hand, there are no prizes for the service of Life—except life itself. The wizard gets the delight of working in a specialized area—magic—and gets a good look at the foundations of the Universe, the way things really work. It should be stated here that there are people who consider the latter more of a curse than a blessing. Such wizards usually lose, their art. Magic does not live in the unwilling soul.

Should you decide to go ahead and take the Oath, be warned that an ordeal of sorts will follow, a test of aptitude. If you pass, wizardry will ensue....

Yeah ? Nita thought. And what if you don't pass?

"Nita?" Mrs. Lesser's voice came floating down the stairs, and a moment later she herself appeared, a large brunette lady with kind eyes and a look of eternal concern. "You still alive?"—

"I was reading."

"So what else is new? They're gone."

"Thanks, Mrs. L."

"What was all that about, anyway?"

"Oh ... Joanne was looking to pick a fight again."

Mrs. Lesser raised an eyebrow at Nita, and Nita smiled back at her shamefacedly. She *didn't mind* much.

"Well, I might have helped her a little."

"I guess it's hard," Mrs. Lesser said. "I doubt *I* could be nice all the time, myself, if I had that load on my back. That the only one you want today, or should I just have the nonfiction section boxed and sent over to your house?"

"No, this is enough," Nita said. "If my father sees too many books he'll just make me bring them back."

Mrs. Lesser sighed. "Reading one book is like eating one potato chip," she said. "So you'll bring it back Monday. There's more where that came from. I'll check it out for you."

Nita felt in her pockets hurriedly. "Oh, crud. Mrs. L., I don't have my card."

"So you'll bring it back Monday," she said, handing her back the book as they reached the landing, "and I'll stamp it then. I trust you."

"Thanks," Nita said.

"Don't mention it. Be careful going home," Mrs. Lesser said, "and have a nice read."

"I will."

Nita went out and stood on the doorstep, looking around in the deepening gloom. Dinnertime was getting close, and the wind was getting cold, with a smell of rain to it. The book in her hand seemed to prickle a little, as if it were impatient to be read.

She started jogging toward home, taking a circuitous route—up Washington from Rose Avenue, then through town along Nassau Road and down East Clinton, a path meant to confound pursuit. She didn't expect that they would be waiting for her only a block away from her house, where there were no alternate routes to take. And when they were through with her, the six of them, one of Nita's eyes was blackened and the knee Joanne had so carefully stomped on felt swollen with liquid fire.

Nita just lay there for a long while, on the spot where they left her, behind the O'Donnells' hedge, the O'Donnells were out of town. There she lay, and cried, as she would not in front of Joanne and the rest, as she would not until she was safely in bed and out of her family's earshot. Whether she provoked these situations or not, they kept happening, and there was nothing she could do about them. Joanne and her hangers-on had found out that Nita didn't like to fight, wouldn't try until her rage broke loose—and then it was too late, she was too hurt to fight well. All her self-defense lessons went out of her head with the pain. And they knew it, and at least once a week found a way to sucker her into a fight—or, if that failed, they would simply ambush her. All right, she had purposely baited Joanne today, but there'd been a fight coming anyway, and *she* had chosen to start it rather than wait, getting angrier and angrier, while they baited *her*. But this would keep happening, again and again, and there was nothing she could do about it. *Oh, I wish we could move. I wish Dad would say something to Joanne's father—no, that would just make it worse. If only something could just happen to make it stop!*

Underneath her, where it had fallen, the book dug into Nita's sore ribs. The memory of what she had been reading flooded back through her pain and was followed by a wash of wild surmise. *If there are spells to keep things from dying, then I bet there are spells to keep people from hurting you....*

Then Nita scowled at herself in contempt for actually believing for a moment what could possibly be more than an elaborate joke. She put aside thoughts of the book and slowly got up brushing herself off and discovering some new bruises. She also discovered something else. Her favorite pen was gone. Her space pen, a present from her Uncle Joel, the pen that could write on butter or glass or upside down, her pen with which she had never failed a test, even in math. She patted herself all over, checked the ground, searched in pockets where she knew the pen couldn't be. No use, it was gone. Or taken, rather—for it had been securely clipped to her front jacket pocket when Joann and her group jumped her; It must have fallen out, and one of them picked it up.

"Aaaaaagh!" Nita moaned, feeling bitter enough to start crying again. But she was all cried out and she ached too much, and it was a waste. She stepped around the hedge and limped the little distance home.

Her house was pretty much like any other on the block, a white frame, house with fake shutters but where other houses had their lawns, Nita's had a beautifully landscaped garden. Ivy carpeted the ground, and the flowerbeds against the house had something blooming in every season except the dead of winter. Nita trudged up the driveway without bothering to smell any of the spring flowers, went up the stairs to the back door, pushed it open, and walked into the kitchen as nonchalantly as she could.

Her mother was elsewhere, but the delicious smells of her cooking filled the place; veal cutlets tonight. Nita peered into the oven, saw potatoes baking, lifted a pot lid and found corn on the cob cooking on the steamer.

Her father looked up from the newspaper he was reading at the dining-room table. He was a big, blunt, good-looking man, with startling silver hair and large capable hands—"an artist's hands!" He would chuckle as he pieced together a flower arrangement. He owned the smaller of the town's two flower shops, and he loved his work dearly. He had done all the landscaping around the house in his spare time, and around several neighbors' houses too, refusing to take anything in return but the satisfaction of being up to his elbows in a flowerbed. Whatever he touched grew. "I have a special understanding with the plants," he would say, and it certainly seemed that way. It was people he sometimes had trouble understanding, and particularly his eldest daughter.

"My Lord, Nita!" her father exclaimed, putting the paper down flat on the table. His voice was shocked. "What happened?"

As if you don't know! Nita thought. She could clearly see the expressions going across her father's face. *MiGod, they said, she's done it again! Why doesn't she fight back? What's wrong with her?* He would get around to asking that question at one point or another, and Nita would try to explain it again, and as usual her father would try to understand and would fail. Nita turned away and opened the refrigerator door, peering at nothing in particular, so that her father wouldn't see the grimace of impatience and irritation on her face. She was tired of the whole ritual, but she had to put up with it. It was as inevitable as being beaten up.

"I was in a fight," she said, the second verse of the ritual, the second line of the scene. Tiredly she closed the refrigerator door, put the book down on the counter beside the stove, and peeled off her jacket, examining it for rips and ground-in dirt and blood.

"So how many of them did you take out?" her father said, turning his eyes back to the newspaper. His face still showed exasperation and puzzlement, and Nita sighed. *He looks about as tired of this as I am. But really, he knows the answers.* "I'm not sure," Nita said. "There were six of them."

"Six!" Nita's mother came around the corner from the living room and into the bright kitchen—danced in, actually. Just watching her made Nita smile sometimes, and it did now, though changing expressions hurt. She had been a dancer before she married Dad, and the grace with which she moved made her every action around the house seem polished, endlessly rehearsed, lovely to look at. She glided with the laundry, floated while she cooked. "Loading the odds a bit, weren't they?"

"Yeah." Nita was hurting almost too much to feel like responding to the gentle humor. Her mother caught the pain in her voice and stopped to touch Nita's face as she passed, assessing the damage and conveying how she felt about it in one brief gesture, without saying anything that anyone else but the two of them might hear.

"No sitting up for you tonight, kidlet," her mother said. "Bed, and ice on that, before you swell up like a balloon."

"What started it?" her dad asked from the dining room.

"Joanne Virella," Nita said. "She has a new bike, and I didn't get as excited about it as she thought I should."

Nita's father looked up from the paper again, and this time there was discomfort in his face, and regret. "Nita," he said, "I couldn't afford it this month, really. I thought I was going to be able to earlier, but I couldn't. I *wish* I could have. Next time for sure."

Nita nodded. "It's okay," she said, even though it wasn't really. She'd *wanted* that bike, wanted so badly—but Joanne's father owned the big five-and-dime on Nassau Road and *could* afford three hundred-dollar bikes for his children at the drop of a birthday. Nita's father's business was a lot smaller and was prone to what he called (in front of most people) "cash-flow problems" or (in front of his family) "being broke most of the time."

But what does Joanne care about cash flow, or any of the rest of it? I wanted that bike!

"Here, dreamer," her mother said, tapping her on the shoulder and breaking her thought. She handed Nita an icepack and turned back toward the stove. "Go lie down or you'll swell worse. I'll bring you something in a while."

"Shouldn't she stay sitting up?" Nita's father said. "Seems as if the fluid would drain better something."

"You didn't get beat up enough when you were younger, Harry," her mother said. "If she doesn't lie down, she'll blow up like a basketball. Scoot, Nita."

She scooted, around the corner into the dining room, around the second corner into the living room, and straight into her little sister, bumping loose one of the textbooks she was carrying and scattering half her armload of pink plastic curlers. Nita bent to help pick things up again. Her sister bent down beside her, didn't take long to figure out what had happened.

"Virella again, huh?" she asked. Dairine was eleven years old, redheaded like her mother, gray-eyed like Nita, and precocious; she was taking tenth-grade English courses and breezing through them, and Nita was teaching her some algebra on the side. Dairine had her father's square-boned build and her mother's grace, and a perpetual, cocky grin. She was a great sister, as far as Nita was concerned, even if she was a little too smart for her own good.

"Yeah," Nita said. "Look out, kid, I've gotta go lie down."

"Don't call me kid. You want me to beat up Virella for you?"

"Be my guest," Nita said. She went on through the house, back to her room. Bumping the door open, she fumbled for the light switch and flipped it on. The familiar maps and pictures looked down at her—the *National Geographic* map of the Moon and some enlarged *Voyager* photos of Jupiter and Saturn and their moons.

Nita eased herself down onto the bottom bunk bed, groaning softly—the deep bruises were beginning to bother her now. *Lord*, she thought, *what did I say? If Dari does beat Joanne up, I'll never hear the end of it.* Dairine had once been small and fragile and subject to being beaten up—mostly because she had never learned to curb her mouth either—and Nita's parents had sent her to jujitsu lessons at the same time they sent Nita. On Dari, though, the lessons took. One or two overconfident kids had gone after her, about a month and a half into her lessons, and had been thoroughly and painfully surprised. She was protective enough to take Joanne on and, horrors, throw her clear over the

horizon. It would be all over school; Nita Callahan's little sister beat up the girl who beat *Nita* up.

Oh no! Nita thought.

Her door opened slightly, and Dari stuck her head in. "Of course," she said, "if you'd rather do yourself, I'll let her off this time."

"Yeah," Nita said, "thanks."

Dairine made a face. "Here," she said, and pitched Nita's jacket in at her, and then right after the book. Nita managed to field it while holding the icepack in place with her left hand. "You left it in the kitchen," Dairine said. "Gonna be a magician, huh? Make yourself vanish when they chase you?"

"Sure. Go curl your hair, runt."

Nita sat back against the headboard of the bed, staring at the book. *Why not? Who knows what kinds of spells you could do? Maybe I could turn Joanne into a turkey. As if she isn't one already. Or maybe there's a spell for getting lost pens back.*

Though the book made it sound awfully serious, as if the wizardry were for big things. Maybe it's not right to do spells for little stuff like this—and anyway, you can't do the spells until you've taken the Oath, and once you've taken it, that's supposed to be forever.

Oh, come on, it's a joke! What harm can there be in saying the words if it's a joke? And if it's not then...

Then I'll be a wizard.

Her father knocked on her door, then walked in with a plate loaded with dinner and a glass of cola. Nita grinned up at him, not too widely, for it hurt. "Thanks, Dad."

"Here," he said after Nita took the plate and the glass, and handed her a couple of aspirin. "Your mother, says to take these."

"Thanks." Nita took them with the Coke, while her father sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Nita," he said, "is there something going on that I should know about?"

"Huh?"

"It's been once a week now, sometimes twice, for quite a while. Do you want me to speak to Jo Virella and ask him to have a word with Joanne?"

"Uh, no, sir."

Nita's father stared at his hands for a moment. "What should we do, then? I really can't afford to start you in karate lessons again—"

"Jujitsu."

"Whatever. Nita, what *is* it? Why does this keep happening? *Why don't you hit them back?*"

"I *used* to! Do you think it made a difference? Joanne would just get more kids to help." Her father stared at her, and Nita flushed hot at the stern look on his face. "I'm sorry, Daddy, I didn't mean to yell at you. But fighting back just gets them madder, it doesn't help."

"It might help keep you from getting mangled every week, if you'd just keep trying!" her father said angrily. "I hate to admit it, but I'd love to see you wipe the ground up with that loudmouth rich kid."

So would I, Nita thought. *That's the problem.* She swallowed, feeling guilty over how much she wanted to get back at Joanne somehow. "Dad, Joanne and her bunch just don't like me. I don't do the things they do, or play the games they play, or like the things they like—and I don't *want* to. So they don't like me. That's all."

Her father looked at her and shook his head sadly. "I just don't want to see you hurt. Kidling, I don't know ... if you could just be a little more like them, if you could try to..." He trailed off, running one hand through his silver hair. "What am I saying?" he muttered. "Look. If there's anything I can do to help, will you tell me?"

"Yessir."

"Okay. If you feel better tomorrow, would you rake up the backyard a little? I want to go over the lawn around the rowan tree with the aerator, maybe put down some seed."

"Sure. I'll be okay, Dad. They didn't break anything."

"My girl." He got up. "Don't read so much it hurts your eyes, now."

"I won't," Nita said. Her father strode out the door, forgetting to close it behind himself as usual.

She ate her supper slowly, for it hurt to chew, and she tried to think about something besides Joanne or that book.

The Moon was at first quarter tonight; it would be a good night to take the telescope out and have a look at the shadows in the craters. Or there was that fuzzy little comet, maybe it had more tails than it did last week.

It was completely useless. The book lay there on her bed and stared at her, daring her to do something childlike, something silly, something absolutely ridiculous.

Nita put aside her empty plate, picked up the book, and stared back at it.

"All right," she said under her breath. "All right."

She opened the book at random. And on the page to which she opened, there was the Oath.

It was not decorated in any way. It stood there, a plain block of type all by itself in the middle of the page, looking serious and important. Nita read the Oath to herself first, to make sure of the words. Then, quickly, before she could start to feel silly, she read it out loud.

"In Life's name, and for Life's sake," she read, "I say that I will use the Art for nothing but the service of that Life. I will guard growth and ease pain. I will fight to preserve what grows and lives well in its own way; and I will change no object or creature unless its growth and life, or that of the system of which it is part, are threatened. To these ends, in the practice of my Art, I will put aside fear for courage, and death for life, when it is right to do so—till Universe's end."

The words seemed to echo slightly, as if the room were larger than it really was. Nita sat very still, wondering what the ordeal would be like, wondering what would happen now. Only the wind spoke softly in the leaves of the trees outside the bedroom window; nothing else seemed to stir anywhere. Nita sat there, and slowly the tension began to drain out of her as she realized that she hadn't been hit by lightning, nor had anything strange at all happened to her. *Now she felt silly—and tired too, she discovered.* The effects of her beating were catching up with her. Warily, Nita shoved the book under her pillow, then lay back against the headboard and closed her hurting eyes. So much for the joke. She would have a nap, and then later she'd get up and take the telescope out back. *But right now ... right now....*

After a while, night was not night anymore; that was what brought Nita to the window, much later. She leaned on the sill and gazed out in calm wonder at her backyard, which didn't look quite the same as usual. A blaze of undying morning lay over everything, bushes and trees cast light instead of shadow, and she could see the wind. Standing in the ivy under her window, she turned her eyes up at the silver-glowing sky to get used to the brilliance. *How about that,* she said. *The backyard's here, too.* Next to her, the lesser brilliance that gazed up at that same sky shrugged slightly. *Of course,* it said. *This is Timeheart, after all.* Yes, Nita said anxiously as they passed across the yard and out into the bright shadow of the steel and crystal towers, *but did I do right?* Her companion shrugged again. *Find out,* it said, and glanced up again. Nita wasn't sure she wanted to follow the glance. Once she had looked up and seen—*I dreamed you were gone,* she said suddenly. *The magic stayed, but you were away.* She hurt inside, enough to cry, but her companion flickered with laughter. *No one ever goes away forever,* it said. *Especially not here.* Nita looked up, then, into the bright morning and the brighter shadows. The day went on and on and would not end, the sky blazed now like molten silver..

The Sun on her face woke Nita up as usual. Someone, her mother probably, had come in late last night to cover her up and take the dishes away. She turned over slowly, stiff but not in too much pain, and felt the hardness under her pillow. Nita sat up and pulled the book out, felt around for her glasses. The book fell open in her hand at the listing for the wizards in the New York metropolitan area, which Nita had glanced at the afternoon before. Now she looked down the first column of names, and her breath caught.

CALLAHAN, Juanita L.,
243 E. Clinton Ave.,
Hempstead, NY 11575
(516) 555-6786. (novice, pre-rating)

Her mouth fell open. She shut it.
I'm going to be a wizard! she thought.
Nita got up and got dressed in a hurry.

Preliminary Exercises

SHE DID HER CHORES that morning and got out of the house with the book as fast as she could, heading for one of her secret places in the woods. *If weird things start happening*, she thought, *no one will see them there. Oh, I'm going to get that pen back! And then...*

Behind the high school around the corner from Nita's house was a large tract of undeveloped woodland, the usual Long Island combination of scrub oak, white pine, and sassafras. Nita detoured around the school, pausing to scramble over a couple of chain-link fences. There was a path on the other side; after a few minutes she turned off it to pick her way carefully through low underbrush and among fallen logs and tree stumps. Then there was a solid wall of clumped sassafras and twining wild blackberry bushes. It looked totally impassable, and the blackberries threatened Nita with their thorns, but she turned sideways and pushed through the wall of greenery undaunted.

She emerged into a glade walled all around with blackberry and gooseberry and pine, sheltered by the overhanging branches of several trees. One, a large crabapple, stood near the edge of the glade and there was a flattish half-buried boulder at the base of its trunk. Here she could be sure no one was watching.

Nita sat down on the rock with a sigh, put her back up against the tree, and spent a few moments getting comfortable—then opened the book and started to read.

She found herself not just reading, after a while, but studying—cramming the facts into her head with that particular mental *stomp* she used when she knew she was going to have to know something by heart. The things the book was telling her now were not vague and abstract, as the initial discussion of theory had been, but straightforward as the repair manual for a new car, and nearly as complete. There were tables and lists of needed resources for working spells. There were formulas and equations and rules. There was a syllabary and pronunciation guide for the 418 symbols used in the wizard's Speech to describe relationships and effects that other human languages had no specific words for.

The information went on and on—the book was printed small, and there seemed no end to the things Nita was going to have to know about. She read about the hierarchy of practicing wizards—the book listed only those practicing in the U.S. and Canada, though wizards were working everywhere in the world—and she scanned down the listing for the New York area, noticing the presence of Advisor wizards, Area Supervisors, Senior wizards. She read through a list of the "otherworlds" closest to her own, alternate earths where the capital of the United States was named Huictilopochtli or Lafayette City or Hrafnkell or New Washington, and where the people still called themselves Americans, though they didn't match Nita's ideas about the term.

She learned the Horseman's Word, which gets the attention of any member of the genus *Equus*, even the zebras; and the two forms of the Mason's Word, which give stone the appearance of life for short periods. One chapter told her about the magical creatures living in cities, whose presence even the nonwizardly people suspect sometimes—creatures like the steam-breathing fireworms, packrats, little lizards that creep through cracks in building walls to steal treasures and trash for their lairs, hoards under the streets. Nita thought about all the steam she had seen coming up from manhole covers in Manhattan and smiled, for now she knew what was causing it.

She read on, finding out how to bridle the Nightmare and learning what questions to ask the Transcendent Pig, should she meet him. She read about the Trees' Battle—who fought in it, who won it, and why. She read about the forty basic classes of spells and their subclasses. She read about Timeheart, the unreal and eternal realm where the places and things people remember affectionately are preserved as they remember them, forever.

In the middle of the description of things preserved in their fullest beauty forever, and still growing, Nita found herself feeling a faint tingle of unease. She was also getting tired. She dropped

the book in her lap with an annoyed sigh, for there was just too much to absorb at one sitting, and she had no clear idea of where to begin. "Crud," she said under her breath. "I thought I'd be able to make Joanne vanish by tomorrow morning."

Nita picked the manual up again and leafed through it to the section labeled "Preliminary Exercises."

The first one was set in a small block of type in the middle of an otherwise empty page.

To change something, you must first describe it. To describe something, you must first see it. Hold still in one place for as long as it takes to see something.

Nita felt puzzled and slightly annoyed. This didn't sound much like magic. But obediently she put the book down, settled herself more comfortably against the tree, folded her arms, and sighed. *It's almost too warm to think about anything serious.... What should I look at? That rock over there. Naah, it's kind of a dull-looking rock. That weed ... look how its leaves go up around the stem in a spiral. ...* Nita leaned her head back, stared up through the crabtree's branches. *That rotten Joanne. Where would she have hidden that pen? I wonder. Maybe if I could sneak into her house somehow, maybe there's a spell for that.... Have to do it after dark, I guess. Maybe I could do it tonight.... Wish it didn't take so long to get dark this time of year.* Nita looked at the sky where it showed between the leaves, a hot blue mosaic of light with here and there the fire-flicker of sun showing through, shifting with the shift of leaves in the wind. There are kinds of patterns—the wind never goes through the same way twice, and there are patterns in the branches but they're never quite the same either. And look at the changes in the brightness. The sky is the same but the leaves cover sometimes more and sometimes less ... the patterns ... the patterns, they ... they...

(They won't let you have a moment's rest,) the crabapple tree said irritably. Nita jumped, scraping her back against the trunk as she sat up straight. She had heard the tree quite plainly in some way that had nothing to do with spoken words. It was light patterns she had heard, and wind movements, leafrustle, fireflicker.

(Finally paid attention, did you?) said the tree. (As if one of them isn't enough, messing up someone's fallen-leaf pattern that's been in progress for fifteen years, drawing circles all over the ground and messing up the matrices. Well? What's *your* excuse?)

Nita sat there with her mouth open, looking up at the words the tree was making with cranky light and shadow. *It works. It works!* "Uh," she said, not knowing whether the tree could understand her, "I didn't draw any circles on your leaves—"

(No, but that other one did,) the tree said. (Made circles and stars and diagrams all over Telerilarch's collage, doing some kind of power spell. You people don't have the proper respect for artwork. Okay, so we're amateurs,) it added, a touch of belligerence creeping into its voice. (So none of us have been here more than thirty years. Well, our work is still valid, and—)

"Uh, listen, do you mean that there's a, uh, a wizard out here somewhere doing magic?"

(What else?) the tree snapped. (And let me tell you, if you people don't—)

"Where? Where is she?"

(He,) the tree said. (In the middle of all those made-stone roads. I remember when those roads went in, and they took a pattern Kimber had been working on for eighty years and scraped it bare and poured that black rock over it. One of the most complex, most—)

He? Nita thought, and her heart sank slightly. She had trouble talking to boys. "You mean across the freeway, in the middle of the interchange? That green place?"

(Didn't you hear me? Are you deaf? Silly question. That other one *must* be deaf not to have heard Teleri yelling at him. And now I suppose *you'll* start scratching up the ground and invoking power and ruining *my* collage. Well, let me tell you—)

"I, uh—listen, I'll talk to you later," Nita said hurriedly. She got to her feet, brushed herself off, and started away through the woods at a trot. ~~Another wizard? And my God, the trees~~—Their laughter at her amazement was all around her as she ran, the merriment of everything from foot-high weeds to hundred-foot oaks, rustling in the wind—grave chuckling of maples and alders, titters from groves of sapling sassafras, silly giggling in the raspberry bushes, a huge belly laugh from the oldest hollow at the tree before the freeway interchange. *How could I never have heard them before!*

Nita stopped at the freeway's edge and made sure that there were no cars coming before she tried to cross. The interchange was a cloverleaf, and the circle formed by one of the off-ramps held a stand of the original pre-freeway trees within it, in a kind of sunken bowl. Nita dashed across the concrete and stood a moment, breathless, at the edge of the downslope, before starting down it slantwise.

This was another of her secret places, a spot shaded and peaceful in summer and winter because of the pine trees that roofed in the hollow. But there was nothing peaceful about it today. Something was in the air, and the trees, irritated, were muttering among themselves. Even on a foot-thick cushion of pine needles, Nita's feet seemed to be making too much noise. She tried to walk softly and wished the trees wouldn't stare at her so.

Where the slope bottomed out she stopped, looking around her nervously, and that was when she saw him. The boy was holding a stick in one hand and staring intently at the ground underneath a huge larch on one side of the grove. He was shorter than she was, and looked younger, and he also looked familiar somehow. *Now who is that?* she thought, feeling more nervous still. No one had ever been there, one of her secret places when *she* came there.

But the boy just kept frowning at the ground, as if it were a test paper and he was trying to scrounge the right answer out of it. A very ordinary-looking kid, with straight black hair and a Hispanic look to his face, wearing a beat-up green windbreaker and jeans and sneakers, holding a willow wand of a type that Nita's book recommended for certain types of spelling.

He let out what looked like a breath of irritation and put his hands on his hips. "*Cojones,*" he muttered, shaking his head—and halfway through the shake, he caught sight of Nita.

He looked surprised and embarrassed for a moment, then his face steadied down to a simply worried look. There he stood regarding Nita, and she realized with a shock that he wasn't going to yell at her, or chase her, or call her names, or run away himself. He was going to let her explain herself. Nita was amazed. It didn't seem quite normal.

"Hi," she said.

The boy looked at her uncertainly, as if trying to place her. "Hi."

Nita wasn't sure quite where to begin. But the marks on the ground, and the willow wand, seemed to confirm that a power spell was in progress. "Uh," she said, "I, uh, I don't see the oak leaves. Or the string."

The boy's dark eyes widened. "So *that's* how you got through!"

"Through what?"

"I put a binding spell around the edges of this place," he said. "I've tried this spell once or twice before, but people kept showing up just as I was getting busy, and I couldn't finish."

Nita suddenly recognized him. "You're the one they were calling crazy last week."

The boy's eyes narrowed again. He looked annoyed. "Uh, yeah. A couple of the eighth graders found me last Monday. They were shooting up the woods with BB guns, and there I was working. And they couldn't figure out what I was doing, so at lunch the next day they said—"

"I know what they said." It had been a badly rhymed song about the kid who played by himself in the woods, because no one else would play with him. She remembered feeling vaguely sorry for the kid, whoever he was; boys could be as bad as girls sometimes.

"I thought I blew the binding, too," he said. "You surprised me."

"Maybe you can't bind another wizard out," Nita said. *That was it*, she thought. *If he's not one—*
"Uhh ... I guess not." He paused. "I'm Kit," he said then. "Christopher, really, but I have
Christopher."

"Nita," she said. "It's short for Juanita. I hate that, too. Listen—the trees are mad at you."

Kit stared at her. "The *trees*?"

"Uh, mostly this one." She looked up into the branches of the larch, which were trembling with
more force than the wind could lend them. "See, the trees do—I don't know, it's artwork, sort of, with
their fallen leaves—and you started doing your power schematic all over their work, and, uh—"

"Trees?" Kit said. "Rocks I knew about, I talked to a rock last week—or it talked to me, actually
—though it wasn't talking, really..." He looked up at the tree. "Well, hey, I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't
know. I'll try to put things back the way I found them. But I might as well not have bothered with the
spell," he said, looking again at Nita. "It got caught. It's not working. You know anything about this?"

He gestured at the diagram he had drawn on the cleared ground, and Nita went to crouch down to look
at it. The pattern was one she had seen in her book, a basic design of interlocking circles and wavy
parallelograms. There were symbols drawn inside the angles and outside the curves, some of them
letters or words in the Roman alphabet, some of them the graceful characters of the wizardly Speech
"I just got my book yesterday," she said. "I doubt I'll be much help. What were you trying to get? The
power part of it I can see."

She glanced up and found Kit looking with somber interest at her black eye. "I'm getting tired
being beat up just because I have a Spanish accent," he said. "I was going to attract enough power
me so that the big kids would just leave me alone and not start anything. An 'aura,' the book called
it. But the spell got stuck a couple of steps in, and when I checked the book it said that I was missing a
element." He looked questioningly at Nita. "Maybe you're it?"

"Uhh—" She shook her head. "I don't know. I was looking for a spell for something different.
Someone beat me up and stole my best pen. It was a space pen, the kind the astronauts have, and
it writes on anything, and I always took all my tests with it and I always pass when I use it, and I want
it *back*" She stopped, then added, "And I guess I wouldn't mind if they didn't beat me up anymore
either."

"We could make a finding spell and tie it into this one," Kit said.

"Yeah? Well, we better put these needles back first."

"Yeah."

Kit stuck the willow wand in his back pocket as he and Nita worked to push the larch's needles
back over the cleared ground. "Where'd you get your book?" Nita said.

"In the city, about a month ago. My mother and father went out antique hunting. There's this old
part of Second Avenue where all the little shops are—and one place had this box of secondhand books
and I stopped to look at them because I always look at old books—and this one caught my eye. My
hand, actually. I was going after a Tom Swift book underneath it and it pinched me...."

Nita chuckled. "Mine snagged me in the library," she said. "I don't know ... I didn't want Joann
—she's the one who beat me up—I didn't want her to get my pen, but I'm glad she didn't get *this*." She
pulled her copy of the book out of her jacket as Kit straightened up beside her. She looked over
at him. "Does it work?" she demanded. "Does it really *work*?"

Kit stood there for a moment, looking at the replaced needles. "I fixed my dog's nose," he said.
"A wasp stung him and I made it go down right away. And I talked to the rock." He looked up at Nita
again. "C'mon," he said. "There's a place in the middle where the ground is bare. Let's see what
happens."

Together they walked to the center of the hollow, where the pine trees made a circle open to the
sky and the ground was bare dirt. Kit pulled out his willow wand and began drawing the diagram

again. "This one I know by heart," he said. "I've started it so many times. Well, this time for sure." He got his book out of his back pocket and consulted it, beginning to write symbols into the diagram. "Would you look and see if there's anything else we need for a finding spell?"

"Sure." Nita found the necessary section in the index of her book and checked it. "Just an image of the thing to be found," she said. "I have to make it while you're spelling. Kit, do you know *why* the works? Leaves, pieces of string, designs on the ground. It doesn't make sense."

Kit kept drawing. "There's a chapter on advanced theory in there, but I couldn't get through it all the way. The magic is supposed to have something to do with interrupting space—"

"Huh?"

"Listen, that's all I could get out of it. There was this one phrase that kept turning up: 'temporospatial claudication.' I think that's how you say it. It's something like, space isn't really empty, it folds around objects—or words—and if you put the right things in the right place and do the right things with them, and say the right things in the Speech, magic happens. Where's the string?"

"This one with all the knots in it?" Nita reached down and picked it up.

"Must have fallen out of my pocket. Stand on this end, okay?" He dropped one end of the string into the middle of the diagram, and Nita stepped onto it. Kit walked around her and the diagram with it, using the end of the string to trace a circle. Just before he came to the place where he had started, he used the willow wand to make a sort of figure-eight mark—a "wizards' knot," the book had called it—and closed the circle with it. Kit tugged at the string as he stood up. Nita let it go, and Kit coiled it around and put it away.

"You've got to do this part yourself," Kit said. "I can't write your name for you—each person in the spelling does their own. There's a table in there with all the symbols in it."

Nita scuffed some pages aside and found it, a long list of English letters and numbers, and various symbols in the Speech. She got down to look at Kit's name, so that she could see how to write her own, and group by group began to puzzle the symbols out. "Your birthday's August twenty-fifth?"

"Uh-huh."

Nita looked at the symbol for the year. "They skipped you a couple grades, huh?"

"Yeah. It's rotten," Kit said, sounding entirely too cheerful as he said it. Nita knew that tone of voice—it was the one in which she usually answered Joanne, while trying to hide her own fear of what was sure to happen next. "It wouldn't be so bad if they were my age," Kit went on, looking over Nita's shoulder and speaking absently. "But they keep saying things like 'If you're so smart, 'ow come you talk so fonny?'" His imitation of their imitation of his accent was precise and bitter. "They make me sick. Trouble is, they outweigh me."

Nita nodded and started to draw her name on the ground, using the substitutions and symbols that had appeared in her manual. Some of them were simple and brief; some of them were almost more complex than she believed possible, crazy amalgams of curls and twists and angles like those a mad insane stenographer might produce. She did her best to reproduce them, and tied all the symbols together, fastening them into a circle with the same wizards' knot that Kit had used on the outer circle and on his own name.

"Done?" Kit asked. He was standing up again, tracing the outer circle around one more time.

"Yup."

"Okay." He finished the tracing with another repetition of the wizards' knot and straightened up. Then he put his hand out as if to feel something in the air. "Good," he said. "Here, come check this."

"Check what?" Nita got up and went over to Kit. She put out her hand as he had, and found that something was resisting the movement of her hand through the air—something that gave slightly under increased pressure, like a mattress being pushed down and then springing back again. Nita felt momentarily nervous. "Can air get through this?"

"I think so. I didn't have any trouble the last couple of times I did it. It's only supposed to seal off unfriendly influences."

Nita stood there with her hand resting against nothing, and the nothing supported her weight. The last of her doubts about the existence of magic went away. She might have imagined the contents of the book, or been purposely misreading. She might have dozed off and dreamed the talking tree. But *this* was daylight, the waking world, and she was leaning one-handed on empty air!

"Those guys who came across you when you had this up," she said, "what did they think?"

"Oh, it worked on them, too. They didn't even understand why they couldn't get at me—their thought it was their idea to yell at me from a distance. They thought they were missing me with their BB guns on purpose, too, to scare me. It's true, what the book said. There are people who couldn't see magic if it bit them." He glanced around the finished circle. "There are other spells like this that don't need drawings after you do them the first time, and when you need them, they're there really fast—like if someone's about to try beating you up. People just kind of skid away from you."

"I bet," Nita said, with relish. Thoughts of what else she might be able to do to Joanne flickered through her head, but she pushed them aside for the moment. "What next?"

"Next," Kit said, going to the middle of the circle and sitting down carefully so as not to smudge any of the marks he'd made, "we read it. Or I read most of it, and you read your name. Though first you have to check my figuring."

"How come?" Nita joined him, avoiding the lines and angles.

"Two-person spell—both people always check each other's work. But your name, you check again after I do."

Kit was already squinting at Nita's squiggles, so she pulled out her book again, and began looking at the symbols Kit had drawn in the dirt. There were clearly two sides to the diagram, and the book said they both had to balance like a chemical equation. Most of the symbols had numerical values attached, for ease in balancing, and Nita started doing addition in her head, making sure both sides matched. Eventually she was satisfied. She looked again at her name, seeing nothing wrong. "Is it okay?"

"Yeah." Kit leaned back a little. "You have to be careful with names, it says. They're a way of saying what you *are*— and if you write something in a spell that's *not* what you are, well..."

"You, mean... *you* change ... because the spell says you're something else than what you are? You *become* that?"

Kit shrugged, but he looked uneasy. "A spell is saying that you want something to happen," he said. "If you say your name wrong—"

Nita shuddered. "And now?"

"Now we start. You do your name when I come to it. Then, the goal part down there—since it's a joint goal, we say it together. Think you can do it okay if I go slow?"

"Yeah."

Kit took a deep breath with his eyes closed, then opened his eyes and began to read.

Nita had never heard a voice speaking a spell aloud before, and the effect was strange. Ever so slightly, ever so slowly, things began to change around her. The tree-sheltered quiet grew quieter. The cool light that filtered through the canopy of branches grew expectant, fringed with secrecy the way things seen through the edge of a lens are fringed with rainbows. Nita began to feel as if she was caught in the moment between a very vivid dream and the awakening from it. There was that feeling of living in a body—of being aware of familiar surroundings and the realities of the daylight world waiting to be resumed—yet at the same time seeing those surroundings differently, colored with another sort of light, another kind of time. On one level Nita heard Kit reciting a string of polysyllables that should have been meaningless to her—words for symbols, pieces of words, babbling

Yet she could also hear Kit talking, saying casually, and, it seemed, in English, "We need to know something, and we suggest this particular method of finding the information..." And the words didn't break the expectancy, the listening silence. For once, for the first time, the dream was *real* while Nita was awake. Power stirred in the air around her and waited for her to shape it.

Magic.

She sat and listened to Kit. With each passing second she could catch more clearly the clear, metallic taste of the equation as it began to form itself, flickering chill and bright in her mind. Kit's speech was giving it life, and with quiet, flowing efficiency it was going about its purpose. It was invoking the attention of what Nita might have called physical laws, except that there was nothing physical about them—they had to do with flows of a kind of power as different from ordinary energy as energy was from matter. The equation stretched and coiled and caught those powers within itself. The words wove it. Nita and Kit were caught in it, too. To Nita it seemed as if, without moving, she held out her hands, and they were taken—by Kit, and by the spell itself, and by the ponderous power caught across from her in the dance. There was a pause: Kit looked across the diagrams at her.

Nita scowled at the symbols beside her and began to read them, slowly and with some hesitation—naming herself one concept or one symbol at a time, binding herself into the spell. At first she was scared, for she could feel the strangeness folding in close around her. But then she realized that nothing awful was happening, and as her name became part of the spell, *that* was what was sliding down around her, protecting her. She finished, and she was out of breath, and excited, and she had never been happier in her life.

Kit's voice came in again then, picking up the weave, rejoining the dance. So it went for a while—the strange words and the half-seen, half-felt movements and images falling into a rhythm of light and sound and texture, a song, a poem, a spell. It began to come whole all around them, and all around the tingling air stayed still to better hold the words, and the trees bent close to listen.

Kit came to the set of symbols that stood for his name and who he was, and read them slowly and carefully. Nita felt the spell settle down around him, too. He finished it and glanced up at Nita, and together they began the goal section of the spell. Nita did her best to make a clear image of the pen she spoke—the silver case, gone a little scratched and grubby now, her initials incised up on the top. She hardly had time to wonder at the harmony their paired voices made before things began to change again. The shadows of the trees around them seemed to grow darker; the aura of expectancy grew sharp enough to taste. The silence became total, and their voices fell into it as into a great depth.

The formula for their goal, though longer than either of their names had been, seemed to take less time to say—and even stranger, it began to sound like much more than just finding a pen and being left alone. It began to taste of starfire and night and motion, huge and controlled, utterly strange. Saying the formula left Kit and Nita breathless and drained, as if something powerful had briefly been living and speaking through them and had worn them down. They finished the formula together, and gulped for air, and looked at each other in half-frightened expectation, wondering what would happen next.

The completed spell took effect. Nita had thought that she would gradually begin to see something, the way things had changed gradually in the grove. The spell, though, had its own idea. Quick as a gasp it slammed them both out of one moment and into another, a shocking, wrenching transition like dreaming that you've fallen out of bed, *wham!* Instinctively they both hung on to the spell as if onto a railing, clutching it until their surroundings steadied down. The darkness had been replaced by a lowering, sullen-feeling gloom. They looked down as if from a high balcony onto a shadowed island prisoned between chill rivers and studded with sharp spikes of iron and cold stone.

(Manhattan?) Kit asked anxiously, without words. Nita felt frozen in place like a statue and couldn't turn to answer him—the spell was holding her immobile.

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