

DIANE DUANE
YOUNG WIZARDS
VOLUME FOUR



A WIZARD
ABROAD

NEW MILLENNIUM EDITION

Young Wizards
New Millennium Edition
Book 4:

A Wizard Abroad

Diane Duane

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Copyright page

A Wizard Abroad

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Dedication

For A.M.

Admonition to the Reader

Geography in Ireland is an equivocal thing, and perhaps meant to be so. The more solid the borderline, the more dangerous the land's own response to it; the vaguer the boundary, the kindlier. This is best seen in the behavior of the borders between what we consider our own reality, and the other less familiar realities that shoulder up against it. Such boundaries are never very solid in Ireland and never more dangerous than when one tries to define them, to cross over. Twilight is always safer there than full day, or full night.

This being the case, I have taken considerable liberties with locations and “established” boundaries including those between counties and towns. County Wicklow is real enough, but there are a lot of things in the Wicklow in this book that are not presently located in the “real” county—and my version of Bray is not meant to represent the real one. The description of the townlands around Ballyvolan Farm and the neighborhood of Kilquade is more or less real, though the two are actually some miles apart. And Sugarloaf Mountain looks like parts of its description...occasionally.

More specifically, though, Castle Matrix exists: possibly more concretely than anything else in the book. But it has been moved from its actual present location. Or perhaps one can more rightly say that Matrix has stayed where it is, where it always is, but Ireland has shifted around it. Stranger things have happened. In any case, let the inquisitive reader beware...and leave the maps at home.

Rubrics

I am the Point of a Weapon (that poureth forth combat),
I am the God who fashioneth Fire for a head.
Who is the troop, who is the God who fashioneth edges?

(Lebor Gabála Érenn, tr. Macalister)

Three signs of the Return:
the stranger in the door;
the friendless wizard;
the unmitigated Sun.

Three signs of the Monomachy:
a smith without a forge;
a saint without a cell;
a day without a night.

(Book of Night with Moon, triads 113, 598)

Time Fix

Mid-July - early August, 2009

1: *Éire* / Ireland

The first hint Nita had of what was about to happen came when she got back home after a long afternoon's wizardry with Kit. They'd been working for three days to attempt to resolve a territorial dispute between two groves of trees... which is a whole lot tougher than it sounds. It's not easy to argue with a tree, let alone a crowd of them. No amount of hugging will get a tree to stop strangling another one with its roots, especially when it feels its innate right to expand its territory is being disrespected. But the two groups were now well along toward what appeared to be a negotiated settlement, and Nita was bushed.

She wandered into the kitchen to find her mother cooking. Nita's Mom cooked a lot as a hobby, but she also cooked as therapy, and Nita immediately started worrying when she noticed that while she was out her mother had embarked on some extremely complicated project that seemingly required three soufflé dishes and the use of every appliance in the kitchen at once, and had spilled out onto the dining room table as well. She decided to get out fast, before she was asked to wash something. "Hi, Mom," she said, edging hurriedly toward the door into the rest of the house.

"What's the rush?" said her mother. "Don't you want to see what I'm doing?"

"Um," said Nita, as she wanted no such thing but was unwilling to say so. "What are you doing?"

"I've been thinking," said her mother.

Oh God, Nita thought, and started to get seriously worried. Her mother was at her most dangerous when she *announced* that she was thinking; over the course of the last year, such sudden fits of thought had rarely meant anything but trouble for Nita. "About what?"

"Sit down, honey. Don't look as if you're going to go flying out the door any minute. I need to talk to you."

Oh no. Here comes something I know I'm not going to hear! But there was really no escape. With a sigh Nita went into the dining room, sat down and started playing with one of the wooden spoons which, among many other utensils, was littering the table.

"Honey," her mother said, "this wizardry—"

"It's going pretty well with the trees, Mom," Nita said, desperate to guide her mother onto some more positive subject. Her present tone didn't sound positive at all.

"No, I don't mean that, honey. Talking to trees—that's all right, that doesn't bother me." Nita rolled her eyes while her mom was still around the corner in the kitchen. *Boy, does she not know what constitutes tough wizardry yet...!* "But the kind of things you've been doing lately, you and Kit..."

~~Oh no, here we go: the shoe drops on last month's work, finally.~~ "Mom, we haven't gotten in trouble, not really." After all, Tom said no one was going to hold the Caribbean thing against us. Or the Arctic one. And the Vesta business, Carl said nobody could possibly have anticipated— "As new wizards go we've been doing pretty well. This early in our practice—"

"That being code for 'When you're as young as you two are,'" her mother said. She did something noisy with the blender for a moment and then said, "Which is the part that really bothers me. Hon, don't you think it would be a good idea if you just let all this—have a rest? You've been at it like ma the two of you. Even over last Christmas, you seemed to be running around all the time. And then the spring, and your finals, you didn't do as well as you thought you were going to. And you came home from that thing with *chilblains*." Nita covered her eyes for a moment. *It was a hundred and fifty below on Vesta, what's a chilblain or so among friends?* "Don't you think it's time you took a break, just for a month or so?"

Nita looked up at her mother without understanding at all. "How do you mean 'a break?'"

Her mother got busy with the food processor again, changing the plastic blade for the steel one. "Well, your dad and I have been talking. You and Kit have been seeing so much of each other in connection with the wizard business. At first we didn't want to say anything. Plainly the two of you have fun together, you're a lot happier than you used to be... But still." She paused as if hunting for words. "We're thinking that it might be a good idea if you two sort of... didn't see each other for a little while."

Nita's eyes went wide. "*Mom!*"

"No, hear me out. I understand you're good friends, I know there's nothing... physical going on between you! So put that out of your mind. We're very glad each of you has such a good friend. That's not a concern. What *is* a concern is that you two are spending a whole lot of time on this magic stuff, at the expense of everything else...."

'This magic stuff... !!' Nita thought. *Does she even hear herself?* This was a theme that Nita hoped she'd heard the last of months ago: that wizardry was some kind of fad or hobby, something you'd eventually get over, like enjoying online gaming or reading comics.

Nita opened her mouth, but her mom was still talking. "...that's all you do! You go out in the morning, you come back wiped out, you barely have the energy to speak to us sometimes... What about your childhood?"

"My *childhood*? What about it?" Nita said, now becoming actively annoyed. Up until last year, her experience of her childhood was that it swung unpredictably but too routinely between painful and boring. Only recently had it improved. And while wizardry might occasionally be painful, at least it wasn't ever dull. "Mom—you don't understand. This isn't something you can just turn off. You take the Wizard's Oath for *life*."

"I know," Nita's mother said. "That's what worries me. You're a little young to be making up your mind about what you want to do with the rest of your life."

~~At that Nita's eyes went wide, and she burst out laughing. "Wait, sorry, are you amnesic? You're the one who's been sitting through all the sessions with the guidance counselor at school! I'm not even fifteen yet, and already the word 'college' falls out of everybody's mouth about once every five minutes!"~~

"Now, Nita, that's not the same. You have to think seriously about that stage of education now. It's not the same as—"

"It is the same as! They want me to make career decisions, now, about what I'm going to do for, I don't know, ten years or if I'm really lucky 'in this job market'—" — it was so hard not to make fun of her guidance counselor's favorite phrase, and in his Boston accent— "wow, maybe even *twenty* years, after I get out of college! I'm not even sure what I want to do yet. Except be a wizard! But the one thing I *do* want, and *know* I want, you *don't* want me making decisions about? Not getting it, Mom!"

"Oh, honey!" her mom said in some distress, and dropped a spoon on the kitchen counter, and came into the dining room, wiping the spoon off on a paper towel. , "Why do you have to make this harder than it— Never mind. Look." Her mom took a breath. "Your Dad and I think it'd be a good idea if you went to visit your Aunt Annie in Ireland for a month or so. Until school starts again."

The breath went right out of Nita in shock. The Labor Day weekend was six weeks away: school started right after. *Six weeks—wait, what about my summer vacation—what about—?! "Ireland!!"*

"Well, yes. She's been inviting us over there for a while now. We can't go with you, of course—we've had our vacation for this year, and Dad has to be at work of course, he can't afford the overtime for staff to keep the shop open while he's away. But you could certainly go. School doesn't start until September ninth. That would give you a good month and a half."

There will be nothing good about it!! Nita thought. The best part of the summer, the best weather, the leisure time she'd been looking forward to putting to use either working or just hanging around with Kit... "Mom," Nita said, changing tack, "how're you going to afford this?"

Her mother gave her a look that was a bit too acute: the expression of someone who knew an attempted end-run when one presented itself. "Honey, you leave that to your dad and me to handle. Right now we're more concerned with doing the right thing for you. And for Kit."

"Oh, you've been talking to his folks about this too, have you?"

"No, hon, actually we haven't. I think they're going to have to sort things out with Kit their own way. I wouldn't presume to dictate to them. But we want you to go to Ireland for six weeks or so and take a breather. And see something different, something in the real world."

Oh jeez, Nita thought, they think this is the real world. Or all of it that really matters, anyway. This is going incredibly wrong... "Mom," Nita said, trying hard to calm herself down, "there's something here I'm not sure you're getting. Wizards don't stop doing wizardry just because they're not at home. If the Powers that Be put me on call when I'm in Ireland, well, I go on call, and there's nothing that

can stop it. I've made my promises. If something like that happens, if I have to go on call, wouldn't you rather have me here, where you and Dad can keep an eye on me and know what's going on all the time?"

Nita's mother frowned at that, and then looked at Nita with an expression compounded of equal parts suspicion and amusement. "Oooh, sneaky," she said, vanishing briefly back into the kitchen and returning with a glass bowl in the crook of her arm, the bowl full of something fluffy and amber-colored, with a white fluffier layer on top. "Nope. Sorry. Your Aunt Annie will keep good close tabs on you—we've had a couple of talks with her about that—"

Nita's eyebrows went up: first in annoyance that it was going to be difficult to get away and do anything useful if there was need; then in alarm. "Oh, *Mom!* You didn't tell her that I'm—"

"No, we didn't tell her that you're a wizard!" Her mother rolled her eyes. "What are we supposed to do, honey? Say to your aunt, 'Listen, Anne, you have to understand that our daughter might vanish suddenly. No, I don't mean run away, just disappear into thin air. And if she goes to the Moon, tell her to dress warm.'" Nita's mother gave her a wry look and reached for the wooden spoon that Nita had been playing with. "No. We trust you to be discreet. You managed to hide it from us long enough, Heaven knows...you shouldn't have any trouble keeping things under cover with your aunt." She started folding the egg white on top of the mixture in the bowl down into the layer underneath it. "No, honey," she said. "Your dad's going to see about the plane tickets tomorrow. I think it's Saturday that you'll be leaving—"

"*Saturday!!*" Nita was going hot and cold with shock. It was way too soon, *impossible*, the idea of being shipped off against her will like some kind of air mail package was bad enough, but there was no way she was going to get anything done now, *none*—

"Yes, the fare's cheaper then. We have to get you out of here before it goes up again: we're in kind of a keyhole between the two summer rush periods for air fares to Europe. It's a little complicated..."

"I could just, you know, *go there*," Nita said desperately. "It would save you the money, at least."

"What, you mean just vanish and reappear, the way you do? No, I think we'll do this the old-fashioned way," Nita's mother said calmly. "Even *you* would have some logistical problems with arriving at the airport and getting off the plane without anyone noticing that you hadn't been there before."

Nita frowned and started working on that one. "If we—"

"No," Nita's mother said. "Forget it. We'll send enough pocket money for you to get along with; you'll have plenty of kids to socialize with—"

Socialize with, Nita thought, and groaned inwardly. *Like she's sending me off to some kind of dog park for teenagers. To get socialized with normal human beings. What have I done to deserve this?!*

"Come on, Neets, cheer up a little! It should be interesting, going to a foreign country for the first time."

~~I've been to foreign galaxies, Nita thought. This I'm not so sure about!~~ But she also had that sense that further argument wasn't going to help her. No matter: there were ways around this problem, if she just kept her mouth shut.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll go. ...But I won’t like it.”

Her mother gazed at her thoughtfully. “I thought you were the one who told me that wizardry was about doing what you had to, whether you liked it or not?”

“It’s true,” Nita said, and got up to go out.

“And Nita,” her mother said.

“What, Mom?”

“I want your promise that you will not be popping back here on the sly to visit Kit. That little ‘beam-me-up-Scotty’ spell that he’s so fond of. The one you two use when you want to save your train fare for junk food.”

Nita felt the blood drain away from her face. That was the one thing she had been counting on to make this whole thing tolerable. “*Mom!* But Mom, it’s easy, I can just—”

“No, you can’t ‘just.’ We want you to take a break from each other for a while. Now I want you to *promise* me.”

Nita let out a long breath. Her mother had her, and knew she did; for a wizard’s promise had to be kept. When you spend your life working with words that describe and explain, and even change, the way the Universe is, you can’t play around with those words, and you can’t lie... at least not without major and unpleasant consequences.

“...I promise,” Nita said, hating it. “But this is going to be miserable.”

“We’ll see about that,” Nita’s mother said. “You go ahead now, and do what you have to do.”

“*Crap,*” Kit said. “This is completely dire.”

They were sitting on the Moon, on a peak of the Carpathian Mountains, about thirty kilometers south of the crater Copernicus. The view of Earth from there this time of month was good; it was waxing toward the full, while a dazzling Sun hung quite low over the Moon’s horizon. Long, long shadows stretched across the breadth of the Carpathians, so that the illuminated crests of the jagged peaks stood up from great pools of darkness, like rough-hewn pyramids floating on nothing. It was cold there; the wizardly force-field that surrounded Kit and Nita snowed flakes of frozen oxygen gently onto the powdery white rock around them whenever they moved and changed the field’s inner volume. But cold as it was, at least it was private.

Which was good, as Nita's mood was raw and her nerves were frayed, and there were few people besides Kit who she trusted to see her this way. "We were just getting those trees locked down," Nita muttered. "I cannot *believe* this."

"Do they really think it's going to make a difference?" Kit said.

"Oh, I don't know. Who *knows* what they think, half the time? And the worst of it is, they won't let me come back. She made me *promise*. *Dammit!*" Nita picked up a small piece of pumice and chucked it away, watching as it sailed about a hundred yards away in the light gravity and bounced several feet high when it first hit ground again. It continued bouncing down the mountain, and she watched it, scowling. "And now the upcoming-projects schedule is shot too. The hurricane-steering thing—that waiting list was about a mile long and we finally got on it, and then *this* happens! Not to mention the Venus survey. And that custom worldgating workshop at the Crossings, that's shot too now. We'll lose our places and it'll be years before we can reapply. There won't be any time to do *anything* about the before I have to go."

Kit stretched and looked unhappy. "We can still Manual-chat. Or overhear each other thinking, when that works."

"Mmf," Nita said.

"Or I can just call you."

"Better not," Nita said. "Roaming charges."

"Not so sure about that," Kit said. "Did I tell you I was talking to Tom and Carl last week about ways to tweak your phone with wizardry so you get around long-distance problems? There are apps you can install that hook it into the manual..."

"Oh *really*," Nita said.

"But as for work here... I'll get the trees finished with pretty soon: you can coach me at a distance ___"

"It won't be the same! You know that." Nita had often enough tried explaining to her parents the "high" you got from working closely with another wizard: the feeling that magic made in your mind while working with another, the texture, was utterly unlike that of a wizardry worked alone—more dangerous, more difficult, ultimately more satisfying. But her folks didn't seem to get it. *Or maybe they are starting to get it... and it's starting to freak them out.*

Nita sighed. "There must be some way we can work around this. How're your folks handling things lately?"

At that Kit sighed too. "Variable. My Pop doesn't mind it so much. He says, 'Big deal, my son's a *brujo*.' Sometimes he's actually kind of proud about it. But my Mama..." He shook his head, sighed. "Half the time she's okay. Mostly after she's been talking to my Pop. But other times... She doesn't

really want to say it, but I think she may have the idea that somehow we're meddling with Dark Forces."

"Oh no..."

"Oh yeah. An idea which Helena put into her head." Kit rolled his eyes. "Thank you so much, idiot big sister! I caught her looking at some kind of website about *exorcisms* the other day."

"Cute," Nita muttered.

Kit shook his head. "When are they making you leave?"

"Saturday." Nita rested her chin on one hand, picked up another rock and chucked it away. "All of sudden there's all this junk I have to pack, and all these things we have to do. Go to the bank and get Euros. Get me a debit card. Buy new clothes. Wash the old ones." She rolled her eyes and fell silent. Nita hated that kind of rushed busy-ness, and she was up to her neck in it now.

"How's Dairine holding up?"

Nita laughed. "Hardly heartbroken. Anyway, she's so busy doing big-scale long-range wizardry that half the time I only see her at meals. Don't get me started about breakfast." She snorted. "There she sits shoving cornflakes into her face while she builds these weird half-Speech-half-machine-language wizardries with Spot the magic computer. Or else she sits there having these bizarre voicelink conversations with wizards halfway across the Galaxy through Spot's manual functions. It's like watching intergalactic Skype." Nita fell into an imitation of Dairine's higher-pitched voice, made even more squeaky by annoyance. "'No, I will *not* move your planet! What do you want to move it for? It's fine right where it is!'"

Kit merely rolled his eyes and produced an expression of general disgust, with which Nita empathized completely. Dairine had come into wizardry at a younger age than most, and at a much higher power level; and she was also (by several months) a newer wizard than the two of them were. As a result she was presently more powerful than Nita and Kit put together, which annoyed Nita incredibly... not that there was a thing she could do about it. All she and Kit had on Dairine right now was experience, and the useful advantage of being two brains against one. Or at least it was useful *sometimes*. "At least she's not on your case as much as she used to be, it sounds like," Kit said.

Nita sighed. "Yeah. We don't fight nearly as much as we used to. In fact, it's been real quiet, that way. Not sure it's normal."

"Oh, right," Kit said, and laughed, "the way *we're* normal? Is it just me, or are we starting to sound like our folks?"

Nita had to laugh too. "You may have something there."

But then the amusement went out of her, because all the comfortable familiarity between them was about to be seriously interfered with.. "Kit, this really, really *sucks*. Who'm I going to have to talk to in Ireland?" She kicked one of the moon rocks in front of her and watched it bounce lazily downslope

“I miss you already and I haven’t even left!”

“Hey, c’mon,” he said, and nudged her shoulder with his. “You’ll get through it.” And he gave her a slightly evil grin. “Who knows, maybe you’ll meet some guy over there—”

“Don’t joke,” Nita said, irritable. “I don’t care about meeting ‘some guy over there.’ Don’t even know if they speak the same language.”

“Your aunt does.”

“My aunt’s American,” Nita said.

“Oh, come on, it’s not like they don’t speak English over there,” Kit said. “Otherwise why would all these big companies have factories and stuff all over the country? It can’t all be just Irish-speakers.” He looked at Nita with a concerned expression. “Come on, Neets. Life’s handing you lemons, so set up a lemonade stand. You can see a new place, you can probably meet some of their wizards. They’ll be in the manual directory... Give it a chance!” He picked up a rock too, turning it over in his hands. “Where *are* you going to be, exactly? Dublin? Or somewhere else?”

“That’s all there is,” Nita said grimly. “Dublin, and everywhere else. Which is filled with potato fields and cow pastures as far as the eye can see.”

“Saw that in the manual, did you?” Kit said. Nita rolled her eyes at him. “You haven’t done any research at *all*, have you.”

Nita snorted, for Kit could be incredibly pedantic; sometimes it came off as funny, but this was not one of those times. “No. I just really haven’t felt like it, okay? Because I’m seriously pissed off about this whole thing.”

“I was looking at the Ireland chapter in the History of Wizardry section of the manual a couple of months ago,” Kit said. “There’s a lot of interesting junk going on over there...”

“Kit, I don’t care *what* kind of junk is going on over there! I go on over *here*. *This* is where I do my work. I’m half of a team. What use am I without the rest?” Nita kicked another moon rock, watched it bounce away.

“Oh, I don’t know. You might be good for something. Scrubbing floors...doing the dishes...”

She turned to glare at him, though at the same time Nita felt guilty about it: he really was trying to cheer her up. “Not just trash talk, but *sexist* trash talk?” She laughed at him, though the laugh was kind of edgy. “You’re a dead wizard walking.”

“Had to get your attention somehow. Getting you mad is always good for stopping the self-pity...”

Which was why it really was going to be a pain in the butt to be away from him for a month and a half. Nita ran her hands through her hair in resigned annoyance. “Look, fine, you’ve made your point. I’ll do some research. But right now, what’re we going to do about the trees? We’ve got to get this

cleared up before I go. No point in wasting all this work.”

Kit leaned back. “I think we can get them to do another session tomorrow. The part of the negotiation about the roots was doing pretty well. I guess if we can get Aras to loosen up a little about the seedling acorns, Uriv might concede a couple of points regarding the percentage of sunlight.”

“Yeah...” Nita said. “And if they don’t see the sense of this pretty quick, we can always threaten to uproot the whole lot of them and plant them about three miles apart. They’ve been having too much fun fighting. Time it stopped.” The smile she turned on him was grim. “You be the good cop... I’ll be the bad cop.”

Kit sighed and looked at Nita with a grin that was a bit sad around the edges. “The missing-you-already thing?” he said. “Got that too.”

Looking at him, Nita saw it was true. The bad mood started falling off her, because if there was anything she hated more than being miserable, it was seeing Kit that way. “It’s only six weeks,” she said.

“Yeah, well... I’d say that six weeks won’t be a problem and we’ll do it standing on our heads,” Kit said. “Except wizards don’t lie, and a lie *that* big could be seen from space. And you wouldn’t believe it anyway.”

Nita’s smile was admiring if not happy. “Nope,” she said. “But I’d give you extra credit for trying.” She sighed, stood up. “Never mind. We’re running out of air. Let’s just get down there and get on with it. The sooner we start, the sooner it’ll be September.”

Saturday came.

Kit went with Nita and her parents on the late-afternoon ride to Kennedy Airport. It was a grim, silent sort of ride, broken only by the kind of strained, fake-cheerful conversation people make when they desperately need to say something, anything, to keep the silence from getting too thick. At least it seemed silent to the parents, which was an illusion Nita didn’t mind perpetuating in her present mood. They got cranky enough about her and Kit constantly texting each other under the table at dinnertime or while doing homework. If they found out that the two of them could pass *thoughts* back and forth as well, God only knew how hard they would have freaked.

Telepathy wasn’t all that simple a matter, and the two of them had gone off it somewhat since they got started—partly because mindtouch often got itself tangled up with a lot of other information you didn’t need or want the other person to have. Talking often turned out to be safer. But at this point, habits or not, they were going to have to get a lot better at the mindtouch for quick communications until the digital end of their wizardry got a little better sorted out.

The car could have a breakdown... Kit said silently.

Nita sighed. *No.*

~~*I'm not kidding. It wants to do that already. It can feel how everybody is! It hates this. And there's this one valve that's kinda loose..*~~

No! If I miss the flight they'll just reschedule me, and it'll cost more. Let's not make this worse than it is.

Not sure that's possible...

She sighed again, because today it was Kit who was more depressed about what was happening—possibly because he'd been hoping Nita's folks would have a last-minute change of heart. She'd tried telling him this wasn't on the cards, but then it was one of Kit's specialties to always be holding the door open, mentally, for something better to happen. *It's going to be okay, she said, as soon as we get through all this. Honest.*

You're really believing that at the moment, he said.

Don't have much choice, Nita said, as the car took the exit off the Southern State Parkway for Kennedy. As soon as they've dumped me and I'm on the plane, I want to talk to you about that smartphone app, I don't know if I've got it configured right.

Okay—

And then within minutes they were caught up in the inevitable steps of the dance: the airport traffic, the airport parking, the airport shuttle bus, the crowded terminal, the check-in lines, the baggage check-in—Nita's wheeled suitcase wasn't too huge and she could handle it herself without too much trouble, though she was privately determined to make it weightless if she had to carry it anywhere alone. And then, of course, after the passport check at the counter, came the passport and boarding-pass check conducted by the unescorted-minor representative from the airline, who talked over Nita's head to her parents while regarding Nita herself as if she was a cross between a piece of annoying baggage and some kind of small wild animal that might bite her or poop on her without warning. And then came the embarrassing giant nametag / ticket / passport pouch they hung around Nita's neck as if she was a clueless six-year-old—

Nita concentrated quite hard on staying calm and well-behaved all through this, despite thinking of how many times she and Kit had waltzed on their own through the Crossings Intercontinual Worldgating Facility, many *many* lightyears away, by merely holding up their manuals and saying "We're on errantry and we greet you, which way's the 600 cluster?"—that being the group of worldgate hexes that connected through to Grand Central and Earth's great legacy gates. *This, though... this is making me want to kill people.*

Not good, Kit said while looking in a different direction for a moment. Killing people speeds up entropy a whole lot.

Thanks loads for the reminder...

And then there was nothing for Nita to do except go through security, as the flight was in an hour

and the unaccompanied-minor lady was looking more impatient every second. Nita looked at her mom and dad, who were just now, very late in the process, acquiring a sudden stricken look that said *My God we're sending our baby away!* Nita sighed: she'd finally gotten herself settled into a sort of chronic annoyance with them that was almost good-humored, and now she was being forced into being sorry for them. It felt somehow unfair.

All she could do was go to them, and hug them. Her mom was sniffing and trying to hold it in. Her dad was smiling, and it was so, so fake. Nonetheless she held it together as best she could, for their sake. "Have a good time now," her father said.

She sighed and said, "I'll try, daddy. Mommy..." Nita was surprised at herself; she didn't usually call her mother "Mommy." They hugged again, hard.

"You be good, now," her Mom said. "Don't—" She trailed off. The "don't" was a huge one, and Nita could hear in it all the things parents always say: *don't get in trouble, don't forget to wash—but* most specifically, *Don't get into anything dangerous, like the last time! Or the time before that. Or the time before that—*

"I'll try, Mom," she said. It was all she could guarantee.

Then she looked at Kit. "*Dai,*" he said.

"*Dai stihó,*" she replied. It was the greeting and farewell of one wizard to another in the wizardly Speech: it meant as much "Bye for forever" as "Bye for now," since in a wizard's case there was no telling which option might apply. For Nita, at the moment, it felt rather more like the first. Kit had gradually assumed something of the holding-it-together expression that her Dad was wearing, and somehow she found it even harder to deal with on Kit. *Hug?*

Yeah.

So they did. And then the unaccompanied-minor lady cleared her throat and looked at her watch again, and there was nothing further to be done: it was time. Nita pulled herself together, grabbed her little carry-on bag with its backpack straps, waved at everyone a little weakly, and allowed herself to be shepherded along through the fast-access security gate for airline personnel, and into the line for the X-ray machines and the metal detectors. Just while she stood in the gateway she had time for one last look back. Her Mom and Dad and Kit were smiling and waving. For the moment Nita took the expressions at face value, and smiled and waved back. Then the unattended-minor lady nudged her through to the other side of the frosted-glass security-area door, and they were left behind.

After that came the rest of the security checks, and Nita spent the next fifteen or twenty minutes rolling her eyes as she found herself lined up behind people who apparently weren't clear that you should take metal things off before you went into a metal detector. When her turn came she passed through without incident, and the X-ray people weren't even slightly interested in her hand luggage. After that came a long slog down to her gate, during which Nita tried politely enough to make some conversation with her bodyguard. But shortly she gave this up as wasted effort, realizing that

compared to this woman, the trees had been absolutely garrulous, even *before* she started talking to them in the Speech.

And then at last came the gate, where a huge crowd of people was milling aimlessly around. As Nita glanced out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the waiting jet—it was a big green and white 737—Ms. I-Can't-Wait-To-Dump-You went straight to the podium through the crowd of people trying to get onto the plane first, plainly intent on making sure that Nita was on the plane before any of them. *The last place I want to be...* she thought.

Heard that, said the voice in her head.

I'm only about half a mile from you, Nita said silently, as her minder gestured her over to the jetway gate and tapped a combination into the its keypad. *Let's see how we do over three thousand.*

One way or another, we'll manage.

Give me a few, Nita said as she headed down the broad empty jetway with her impatient guardian by her side.

One thing at a time. I think I'm about to be duct-taped into my seat. Nita was watching the unaccompanied-minor lady confer in relieved haste with the flight attendant in the turquoise-green uniform who met them at the door. “This is Joanie Callanin—”

“*Juanita Callahan,*” Nita said.

The flight attendant gave Nita's giant ugly hang-around-the-neck label a single glance and smiled a smile that said I know who you are, ignore her. “Have a nice flight,” said the unaccompanied-minor lady, and took herself away more or less as if she thought Nita had the plague.

“Come on,” said the flight attendant, “we'll get you settled. First time?”

“Yes,” Nita said, and happily headed to the right and down the aisle after the attendant. Shortly thereafter she was in the seat that had been booked for her—a window seat—watching the beginnings of sunset settle in over the runways of Kennedy Airport.

You're not going to believe this, Kit said to her about ten minutes later, *but the trees want a consul*

Nita started laughing softly to herself, and then reached down for something in her lap: a book she'd been planning to pretend to read if something like this happened. *So, so typical,* she said silently, opening the book at random.

I'm heading straight back there: beaming out. Your mom and dad are on their way home in the car.

Okay, Nita said. *Let me know how it goes.* And she leaned back in the seat, running one hand down the window of the plane as people started slowly to get on, the people with children first.

You'd like the plane, she added. Her sensitivity was running high—perhaps because of her own

nervousness and distress at leaving—but the plane was alive in the way that mechanical things usually seemed to her as a result of working with Kit. That had been his strength from the start, and probably would be for a while—the ability to feel what a rock was saying, reading the secret thoughts of an elevator or an icebox, the odd thing-thoughts that run in the currents of energy which occur naturally or are built into physical objects, manmade or not. She could hear the plane straining against the chocks behind its many wheels, its engines hungry to eat cold, cold air at 30 below and push it out behind. There was a sense of purpose about it, of restraint, and of eagerness to get out of there, to be gone.

She was starting feeling more that way herself every moment. *Let's get this show on the road*, she thought, and glanced down at the seeming book in her hand. It was just a small beat-up volume in a buckram library binding, with the apparent title, SO YOU WANT TO BE A WIZARD?, the supposed author's name, Hearn, and the Dewey Decimal number all written on the spine in white ink.

Nita shook her head and smiled at the book, a little conspiratorially, for it was a lot more than that. Was it only two years, no, two and a half now, that she had found it in the local library? Or it had found her; she still wasn't too sure, remembering the way something had seemed to grab her hand as she ran it along the shelf where the book had been sitting. Whether it was alive was a subject on which the manual itself threw no light. Certainly it changed, adding new spells and other information as needed, updating news of what other wizards in the world were doing: missions attempted, spells developed. Using the manual, Nita had found Kit in the middle of a wizardry of his own, and helped him with it, the two of them passing through their wizardly Ordeal together and starting their partnership. They'd gotten into deep trouble together, several times: but together, they'd always gotten out again.

Nita sighed and started paging through the manual, very much missing the “together” part of the arrangement. She'd been resisting doing the Ireland research that Kit had mentioned until this point, hoping against hope that there would be a stay of execution. *But that, as I told him, wasn't going to happen*. So now she sat there, and looked down at the manual. It had fallen open (*surprise, surprise*, Nita thought) at the Wizard's Oath.

In Life's name, and for Life's sake, I assert that I will employ the Art which is Its gift in Life's service alone, rejecting all other usages. I will guard growth and ease pain. I will fight to preserve what grows and lives well in its own way; nor will I change any creature unless its growth and life, or that of the system of which it is part, are threatened, or threaten another. To these ends, in the practice of my Art, I will ever put aside fear for courage, and death for life, when it is right to do so—looking always toward the Heart of Time, where all our sundered times are one, and all our myriad worlds lie whole, in the One from Whom they proceeded...

She paged on deeper into the manual and started reading. All around Nita, seats filled (not in her row, to her delight) and bags were shoved up into overhead compartments. Up in the front, doors closed and people made announcements, and a safety film displayed on the seatback screens: and Nita kept on reading. Presently the whole plane wobbled as the little tug in front of it pushed it away from the gate. Nita peered out the window, watching the terminal swivel away behind her, hearing the engines rev up and the plane go over to interior power. The air conditioning seemed to get stronger, and Nita felt around beside her for the sweater her Mom had insisted she bring.

Stay warm, Kit said in her head.

I will. And let me know about the trees.

Later. Gonna be a long session, I think. But they're ready to get serious now.

Finally.

Someone may have repeated part of a conversation to them, Kit said. The uprooting part. Still, this'll take a while.

Nita snickered and once more pretended to be doing so because of something she was reading. *So call me later.*

Yeah. What time?

This thing won't be down until early tomorrow morning Irish time.

If I'm reading it right through you, Kit said, it doesn't particularly want to come down at all.

Nita laughed again. *Yeah. So maybe around ten Dublin time?*

You got it. Have a good flight!

For what it's worth, Nita said.

The plane began to trundle purposefully out toward the runway. The wait for a takeoff slot wasn't long: air traffic control gave them clearance right away, and Nita, eavesdropping along the plane's nerves, heard the pilot acknowledging it. A minute later the plane screamed delight, flung itself down the active runway at ever-increasing speed, and and leaped into the air over Jamaica Bay, climbing hard. Nita had to smile a little in spite of everything, wondering how much the pilots really thought they had to do with the process of flight. The plane had its own ideas.

New York slid away behind them in the sunset light, replaced by a swift twilight falling over the open sea.

Seven hours later, they landed in Dublin.

Nita had thought she would be completely unable to sleep, but when they turned out most of the lights in the plane after the meal service, she leaned her head against the window to see if she could relax enough to watch the movie a little.

Later she had faint memories of things going on in the cabin, around her, but the next thing she really registered was the sun was coming in the window; and there was land below. Nita looked down into the early morning—a little after six AM local time—and saw the ragged black coastline and the

curling water, white where it smashed into the rocks, the Atlantic throwing itself in fury against this first eastern barrier to its will. And then green—everywhere green, divided by little lines of hedge; a hundred shades of green, emerald, viridian, khaki, the pale green that has no right to be anywhere outside of spring—hedgerows winding between, white dots of sheep, tiny cars crawling along little roads: but always the green. The plane turned and she saw the beginning sprawl of houses, and Shannon underneath them—a little city, barely the size of her own.

The 737 passed over Shannon and kept streaking across central Ireland, already talking to the air traffic control systems in Dublin and feeling in advance how the morning tarmac would rumble under its wheels. The flight attendants came around with tea and croissants and scones, and Nita had hers and gazed out the window at the landscape under the morning light, all dappled with more of the many-shaded fields and streaked with bright rivers winding amongst the hills, these blazing like fire when the sun caught them. Her ears had started popping an hour or so ago as the plane began its descent. Now Nita was swallowing almost every minute or so to clear them as she found herself and the plane sinking gently toward a great green range of mountains, and three mountains notable even among the others.

Nita's mother had told her about these three, and had shown her pictures. One of them wasn't a mountain, but a promontory: Bray Head, sticking out into the sea like a fist laid on a table with the knuckles sticking up. Then, a mile further inland, and westward, Little Sugarloaf, a hill half again as high as Bray Head. And then westward another mile, and higher than both the others, Great Sugarloaf, Slieve O Cualann as the Irish had it: *the* mountain of Wicklow, its name said. It was certainly one of the most noticeable—a grey stony cone, pointed, its slopes green with heather—no tree grew there. She didn't have much more time to spend looking at the mountains, though: the flight attendants were coming around to collect the breakfast refuse, and by the time Nita was getting herself tidied up and belted in again, the plane had passed over the eastern coastline and was heading out to sea before swinging around and back inland for its final approach for Dublin Airport.

As Nita looked seaward, wondering if it was possible to see England or Wales from here, the Sun caught her full in the eyes. Nita shivered, a feeling that had nothing to do with the warmth of the sudden light. That was warm enough, but the feeling was cold. Something about to happen, something about the lances of light, the fire—

Nita shook her head: the feeling was gone. *I may have slept, but not real well*, she thought. *I'm probably pretty susceptible to weird ideas at this point.* But when wizards have weird ideas, they do well to pay attention to them. She forced herself to relive the feeling: to think again of the cold, and the fire, the sun like a spear—

Nothing came of it. She shrugged, and watched the water beneath them as the plane started its wide swing back toward the land.

It took them about fifteen minutes to come about and head back inland, over beaches and then more fields and finally a landscape that started looking very industrial, full of huge oil tanks and factories: and then came the airport's huge parking lots, and finally the runway, where the 737 put its wheels down with a roar of reverse thrust and a sigh as another journey ended (for the plane) too soon. After that came another ten minutes of taxiing to one of several long glassy terminal buildings with the word DUBLIN perched on its roof. A few moments later the jetway was being trundled up, and some

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