

BY THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF "SO YOU WANT TO BE A WIZARD"

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Interim ERRANTRY

THREE TALES OF THE YOUNG WIZARDS

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Interim Errantry

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***Errantry Press
County Wicklow
Republic of Ireland***

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Published by Errantry Press, an imprint of EbooksDirect.co, Co. Wicklow, Ireland: a division of the [Owl Springs Partnership](#)

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Not On My Patch, *How Lovely Are Thy Branches*, and *Lifeboats* are all canonical works in the Young Wizards universe and conform to the timeline established in [the Young Wizards New Millennium Editions](#).

Content advisory: *How Lovely Are Thy Branches* contains an incident featuring drunkenness and strong language. *Lifeboats* contains several brief scenes in which non-explicit age-appropriate discussions of human sexuality appear. Parental discretion may be advisable where younger readers are involved.

Type set in *Palatino Linotype*

Cover created by the author using *Terragen 3.0* and *DAZ 3D*

Ebook version history:

v1.00 (18 October 2015): EbooksDirect.co release

v1.01 (19 October 2015): Amazon.com version: formatting adjustments and front matter edits

Time fix

All three of these works fall between Young Wizards book 9, [*A Wizard of Mars*](#), and the forthcoming book 10, [*Games Wizards Play*](#).*

*Not On My Patch*** takes place on October 31, 2010.

*How Lovely Are Thy Branches*** takes place between November and late December of 2010.

Lifeboats begins on February 2nd, 2011, and takes place between JD 2455595.5118 and J 2455602.2003 respectively... depending on where you're standing.

*Available 2/2/2016 from Amazon.com and at major chains and independent booksellers

**Available in ebook format at EbooksDirect.co and soon at Amazon.com

Nita Callahan was standing by the dining room table, scowling at it and having second thoughts about the items laid out ready on it for her...especially the big sharp knife.

I don't know, she thought. *I really don't know if I want to do this. But now that it's here, I guess I have to.*

I guess—

She picked up the knife, toyed with it for a moment, warily tested its edge with her thumb... then looked for about the twentieth time at the thing she was preparing to stab.

The doorbell rang.

"Pff," she said, rolling her eyes, for this had been happening all afternoon: every time she worked her courage up to do the deed, she got interrupted. *Except maybe I think I want to be interrupted when this is involved...*

"You want to get that one, honey?" her dad said from somewhere toward the back of the house.

"Yeah, no problem." Nita headed for the front door, picked up a couple of trick-or-treat bags from the little table her dad had put by the doorway, and opened the door.

There was a tallish young guy standing there in a long plum-colored eighteenth-century frock coat that had with lace spilling out of the sleeves and collar. He was also wearing a tricorne hat jammed down onto a long dreadlocked wig, tight breeches and thigh boots, and carrying a silver plastic cutlass which he waved at her jauntily. "ARR," he said.

Nita looked Kit up and down, and finally had to laugh. "The mustache," she said. "It's crooked..."

Kit's eyes widened and he reached up to push the stuck-on mustache back into place. "This thing's stability," he said, "leaves a lot to be desired."

"So do a spell and stick it on that way."

Kit laughed. "Waste a wizardry on this? Pass," he said as he headed past Nita into the living room. "I've got spirit gum. Somewhere here..." He stuffed the plastic cutlass through his belt and started going through the frock coat's pockets.

Nita's big silver-haired dad came out of his bedroom at the back, just finishing the act of pulling on a pulling a sweatshirt decorated with flapping bats. As his head popped out of the neck of it, he ruffled his hair back into place and looked Kit up and down. "Cristoforo Rodriguez the Scourge of Tortuga, huh?"

"Hey, Mr. C. Yeah, more or less."

"Looks good," said Nita's dad. "So how soon can we have this stuff off the table, honey? There are some other things I need to be doing here while I get ready for the slaving hordes."

Nita sighed. "I'm working on it," she said, and followed him into the dining room.

"That is one beat up pumpkin," Kit said, looking at what sat on the table where the newspapers were thickest.

"Yeah," Nita's dad said as he went on into the kitchen. "I went over to that pick-your-own place between here and Uniondale: you know the one. I shouldn't have left it so late, I guess—they'd been cleaned out of the biggest ones. All the pumpkins that were left were either on the small side, or lopsided or dented one way or another. Still," he said, giving it a glance from the kitchen door, "this one has character."

Nita was inclined to agree with him. The pumpkin was about a foot and a half across, and had probably been growing somewhere exposed, to judge by the dried-out veining all over the top of it. She ran a hand over the top of it, as she'd already done a bunch of times this afternoon, feeling the

crinkly texture and reflecting that it was definitely more interesting than the smooth picture-perfect pumpkins she'd seen a few days ago in the grocery store but had gotten distracted and forgotten to pick up. *More avoidance...* she thought.

She sighed. "I guess I should get on with this," she said, and picked up the knife.

The doorbell rang.

"Aaaagh!" Nita said. "This is *never* going to get done! And everybody's showing up so early. I thought we were finished with the little kids now..." She went off into the living room, picked up the same pair of candy bags she'd picked up before, and opened the door.

Nita found herself staring at a tall gangly black-haired guy wearing a shaggy Alley-Oop style caveman skin over a green-and-white-striped soccer jersey that said SPORTS WORLD in big letters, and in smaller ones, around a little badge on the breast, BRAY WANDERERS F.C. The guy had more splotchy piebald skins bound around his legs and over his Doc Martens, and he was balancing a truly huge caveman club over one shoulder. "Hey, be happy," he said, "it's Samhain!"

She laughed at the sight of him. Ronan had purposely grimed himself up and punked his hair out into weird Celto-Goth points with some kind of hair wax that appeared to have the holding power of dried concrete, and he was carrying a rough burlap sack with a very dysfunctional one-eyed Jack-o-Lantern face painted on it. "Come on in," Nita said. "But why so formal? Thought you were going to just appear out of nothing in the back yard, like normal people."

"Because I prefer to yank your chain," Ronan said as he came in, "as is traditional. And speaking of which... get a load of *you*. That's a new look..."

Nita grinned, though she found herself blushing at the same time. "Not so new," she said, brushing at the skirt—if that was the word for it—of her costume. "It was big on Mars, once upon a time." ... "*big's*" *the right word to describe something there's so little of!* In its Martian incarnation the costume, heavy on gems and gleaming metal and filmy translucent drapery, could still have been described as fairly minimal—and more so depending on which Mars you were talking about. The wizardly jury was still out on exactly how Edgar Rice Burroughs had come so close to describing what the real First Race of Mars considered decent daywear. Nita had been less concerned about that issue than about how to adjust the design so that she wouldn't get arrested for indecent exposure or scandalize her Dad. She'd opaqued the long sheer skirt down and added an underskirt, as well as short filmy sleeves and a fair amount of coverage to the bodice, and then had sent the whole designs off to one of the retailers at the Crossings who owed both her and Carmela some large favors. The overall result was satisfying, even though she was still going to want a jacket if the temperature dropped too low.

"I got kind of used to it while I was working up there," Nita said. She didn't mention what she thought Ronan might be perfectly able to guess: that Kit had liked it on her, and had been too shy to say as much. "So if anybody asks, I'm an alien princess or something."

"But as I understand it, you kind of were," Ronan said, and smiled. It was a less jokey or edgy smile than she usually saw from him, and Nita blushed again. *What is the matter with me stop it stop it stop it!* she thought, but as usual the blush was ignoring her and would plainly be taking its own sweet time about burning out. *Nothing to do but carry on...*

"It got better," Nita said, and grinned at him. "Anyway, why're we standing here? Come on in..."

He followed her into the living room, where Kit had come out to see who was there. "Hey, look, it's the Dread Pirate Rodriguez," he said as the two of them clasped hands overarm. Then Ronan started snickering. "Jeez Louise, Kit! Worst... mustache... *ever!* Why didn't you just give it up and grow one?"

"Don't think he hasn't been trying," said a voice from the bathroom at the back of the house.

Kit turned a weary glance on Nita. "Is it all right if I destroy your sister a little?"

“Knock yourself out,” Nita said. “But even the Lone One’s had a run at that and didn’t get far...”

Kit sighed and leaned over the living room candy table, picking up one of the newly filled orange and black paper trick-or-treat packages and peering into it. “Problem is that if you use wizardry to get your beard growing, you’re stuck with it.”

“And you don’t want to start shaving yet. Fair play to you there,” Ronan said, rubbing his own face which was adorned under the makeup-grime with what looked like about three days’ worth of stubble. “Believe me, I don’t mind having a little holiday from the face scraping every now and then...”

“How *did* you get here, though?” Nita said, taking the bag away from Kit and putting it back on the candy table. “I thought you’ve still got trouble with doing single teleports out of Ireland, because of all the old spell residue built up in the ground. Did you hitch over with somebody who had an authorized transit?”

“Nope. No problems at all with single transits today,” Ronan said. “Because in the enlightened land in which I dwell, Halloween is an official government holiday... and this being the case, the local senior wizards always open some ‘safe transport’ spots so people celebrating The Day That’s In It can spelljump in and out of the place without too much trouble.” He glanced around. “But speaking of my usual ride, where’s wee Darryl? Thought he’d be here.”

“He had a change of plans,” Kit said. “Decided to stay over in Baldwin this year. It’s not that long really since he finished up his Ordeal, and his folks are still a little freaked out by it all. He doesn’t want to push them too hard on the letting-him-be-out-by-himself issue, so he’s letting them ride here on him at Halloween this time.”

“Pity,” Ronan said. “And he didn’t want to do one of his be-two-places-at-once tricks?”

Kit shook his head. “Tom and Carl told him to cut back on the colocation stuff for a while till his power levels settle down. I think they’re afraid he’ll strain something.”

“Or find out something about himself he shouldn’t know?” Ronan said. “Oh well. Too bad: always like having his smiling face around. So what’s on the agenda?” He looked over the table and picked up the trick-or-treat bag Kit had just put down. “We doing the same drill he coached me on? Go door to door, say the magic words, get people to give us sweets for nothing?”

“That’s it,” Nita said, deftly reaching in as he was starting to open the bag, taking it away from him, and putting it back on the table. “And then over to Tom and Carl’s to see what their ‘haunted house’ looks like: it’s their turn to do one for the town this year. We’re just finishing up some last details here.”

“Meaning stuff that should have been done two or three nights ago,” Kit said.

Nita sighed: Kit had been teasing her about this for a couple of days. “Come on, it’s all in the dining room...” Nita said, and led the way through.

The dining room table was covered with newspapers, and the newspapers were covered with the remains of prep for the night’s trick or treaters. There were about sixty or seventy more of the little paper bags decorated in orange and black, all now stuffed with candy and twisted closed: and there, still untouched, was the pumpkin.

Ronan looked it over. “Not as big as some I’ve seen around here,” he said, sitting down at the table and picking up one of the bags. “Some of your neighbors’ ones are the size of beach balls.”

Nita considered taking this bag too away from Ronan, and then shrugged. “Yeah, well,” she said, and leaned on the table, gazing at the pumpkin. “We’re kind of working our way back in gradually.”

“Back in?” Ronan said, opening the bag and peering into it curiously.

“Yeah. The way school around here used to be, when you were twelve or so everybody started thinking that that was too old to be trick or treating any more, so I stopped. And then the year after that, Kit and I had our Ordeal, and I got distracted. Halloween didn’t seem like such a big deal all of sudden, and except for Dairine, the family kind of went off it for a while. And then after Mom...”

Nita sighed and shrugged. “That year no one felt much like it anyway. But this year, Dad was saying, ‘Why don’t we revive the tradition. Mom always liked it...’ And it seemed like a good idea. Dairine even got into it.”

“Goodness,” Ronan said. “Will she be honoring us with her presence eventually, do you think?”

“Don’t get snotty, Nolan!” said the voice from the back bathroom. “Unlike some people, who just throw themselves together with hair product and any old spare cowhide they have lying around, *I* like to make sure I look right before I go out.”

Nita snickered very softly, but then turned her attention back to the pumpkin. *Better get on with this...* she thought. She picked up the knife, and then hesitated yet again.

“What’s with you?” Ronan said as he emptied the trick-or-treat bag out on the table and began going through the contents. “You look like the reluctant axe murderer.”

Nita groaned under her breath and sat down in the chair at the end of the table. “I just don’t know if this is ... strictly ethical.”

Kit pulled out a chair too and fiddled with his frock coat for a moment so that he could avoid sitting on it and messing it up. “You know,” he said, “you could always ask the *pumpkin* how it feels.”

She had in fact been avoiding this, nervous about what answer she might get. *But there’s no avoiding it, I guess; pretty soon we’re going to have to get moving...* Nita put out a hand and ran it once more over the scratchy veiny skin around the pumpkin’s stem. “Excuse me,” she said in the Speech, “but... exactly how *are* you about this?”

There was a brief pause while the pumpkin got its vegetable consciousness wrapped around the idea that someone was speaking to it, let alone someone who would be able to understand the response. *This what?* the pumpkin said.

Nita hesitated. “I’m about to stick a knife in you,” Nita she said after a moment, “cut off your top, and scoop out your insides with a spoon.”

There was another pause. *Your point being?* said the pumpkin.

Nita blinked, as she was generally used to more energetic responses from plant life. *But then, those are mostly still growing in the ground...* “Well, isn’t there some chance this might hurt you?”

Haven’t felt a thing since I got pulled off the vine, said the pumpkin. *Just been taking it easy since then.* It paused, for a bit longer this time. *Besides,* it said after a few moments more, *it’s autumn, isn’t it? I’m supposed to die now. It’s all about the seeds, after all. I rot... but the seeds don’t. Some of them will come up. Then I’ll wake up in one of them, maybe more.*

“So you really don’t mind if I cut off your top and pull your insides out and carve a face in you,” Nita said, still just slightly incredulous.

Well, what’s it all for?

“Celebrating the time of year,” Nita said. “The autumn. The year’s end... and the new beginning, I guess.”

Ronan nodded. “That’s what it meant when we invented it,” he said.

If a pumpkin could have shrugged, this one would have. *Then do it. I don’t mind being part of a celebration, and maybe it’ll be fun to have a face.*

The permission could hardly have been more clear-cut. Nita got up, picked up the knife again, and said, “Okay, here we go...”

She braced herself and made the first cut, half expecting to hear a scream: but there wasn’t any response at all. “Are you okay?” she said.

Sure. When are you going to start?

Considering that she was standing there with the cut-off top of the pumpkin in her hand, this was reassuring. “Uh, okay,” Nita said, and got to work in earnest, scooping out the seeds and the webby bits in the middle.

Within a few minutes she had all the pulp out and had begun cutting the face. Kit and Ronan immediately started offering helpful design tips and critiquing her cutting technique, so that Nita lost any further concern about the pumpkin's feelings in a vague fog of annoyance at the kibitzing. "And how many of these have *you* done, oh great design expert?" Nita said to Ronan when she couldn't bear it any more.

"Pumpkins? Not a single one, I'm glad to say."

Kit glanced at him, confused. "Wait, I thought you guys *invented* Halloween."

"Course we did. The pumpkins to carve, and the candy, though, that's new. We didn't get candy when I was little. Just nuts and apples."

Nita and Kit looked at him, incredulous. "And that was all?" Kit said. "That wouldn't get your house a whole lot of business in this neck of the woods. Might even get you egged..."

"Different times," Ronan said. "Different traditions. Back then people just gave the kids what we grew at home: stuff from outside was too expensive. But nowadays you lot have ruined us. We're coming down with pumpkins and plastic Jack O'Lanterns and crappy superhero costumes." Then he snickered a little. "You know what we used before pumpkins?"

"What?"

"Turnips." Ronan started laughing.

"Turnips," Nita said in wonder. "But wasn't the whole carving thing originally about putting something freaky enough in front of your house that it would scare the demons away?"

Ronan was still laughing, but he managed to stop himself after a few moments, wiping his eyes. "Yeah. And you do have to ask yourself what poor weedy wimp of a demon would be scared of a carved-up turnip..."

"Not that I'm sure why demons would be scared of pumpkins either," Kit said.

Ronan shook his head, but he grinned a little. "Some traditions don't make sense," he said. "No point in paying attention to them if they don't work for you. Like the apples and nuts. Lots of lovely fiber, no question. Good for little growing kids. But I think I prefer these wee marshmallowy things." He reached into yet another of the bags he'd been plundering and produced a screamingly yellow cellophane-wrapped chick, eyeing its packaging. "Peeps? Poops?"

"Poops!" Kit snorted with laughter and mimed falling over sideways out of the chair.

"Must be *some* planet where they poop this color," Ronan said, examining the marshmallow chick with a critical eye. "Wouldja ever look at that shade. Think of the godawful crap they must put in these things to make that happen..."

He popped the chick into his mouth and chewed with a meditative expression. "Revolting," Ronan said after a moment. "Got any more?"

"They come in orange too," Kit said, digging around in yet another of the bags and coming up with an orange marshmallow pumpkin, which he unwrapped and tossed to Ronan.

"Will you two *cut that out*?" Nita said as she finished with the pumpkin's second eye. "It took me hours to get those right!"

Ronan ingested the Peep-pumpkin and started going through the contents of another of the dumped out bags. "And look at these," he said, picking out a piece of candy corn that had somehow wiggled its way into the marshmallow pumpkin packet. "Look at this thing, it's just so much sugar and dye. All the chemicals in these, you'll stunt your growth for sure! Here, I'll eat them for you."

Nita sighed in resignation. "These peanut things are good," she said, picking up one candy that Kit had spilled out of another of the bags.

Ronan stared at the pale-orange object. "That's never a peanut."

"It's just supposed to sort of look like one. It's marshmallow too."

"Who're you kidding?" Ronan said. "This thing's *hard*. A Styrofoam peanut, *that* it might be."

“Different kind of marshmallow...”

Ronan bit into it anyway, and then gave Nita the kind of look reserved for some unfortunate whose senses were malfunctioning. “And why’s it taste like bananas? You people are unwell.” But nonetheless he started rooting around in the candy on the table for another.

In the back of the house, the bathroom door opened. A few seconds later Dairine came into the dining room, and Ronan and Kit turned to look at her. “Whoa!” Kit said, and Ronan simply burst out laughing: for Dairine was turned out in the long brown overrobe and crosswrapped beige *gi*-like undertunic of a young Jedi. Every detail had been handled—the breeches, the boots, and even the narrow apprentice braid hanging down on one side, with her red hair otherwise tied into a short ponytail behind. Behind her came Spot, who for the occasion had applied a virtual-shapechange field to himself and now looked like the kind of little low-running droid that when it sees you coming, hurriedly does a K-turn and runs away squeaking in fear.

Nita knew Dairine had been working on getting her costume right for days, and therefore she wasn’t above teasing her a little. “Still looks like a bathrobe,” she said.

Dairine turned a faintly scornful look on Nita. “People who carry these are *not* wearing bathrobes,” she said, twitching aside the overrobe to reveal, hanging from the bathrobe’s inner belt, a foot-long cylindrical object. This she unhitched, flipped in the air, and caught while hitting its actuator stud. The lightsaber’s actinic blade instantly sprang out and sang softly in the air.

Ronan nodded, impressed. “Now *that’s* a nice wizardry,” Kit said.

Dairine gave Kit the same look. “You kidding? Who needs wizardry for this? I bought it from one of Carmela’s weapons suppliers. Light-based weapons are real popular with species that have tight-channel plasma technologies. And once you’ve got one, modding a new hilt onto the thing’s no big deal.” She flicked her wrist from side to side, and the blade sizzled and hummed in the air: she looked at it with an expression of satisfaction tinged with annoyance. “Though you won’t believe the crap I went through to get it to make that noise. Any decent lightsword’s completely silent. What kind of idiot builds weapons that let the bad guys hear you coming?”

Nita sucked in a breath and was glad that there were none of the more rabid sort of Star Wars fans around to take issue with such heresy. “Oookay,” she said. “Just don’t let anybody else play with the thing...”

“Oh come on,” Dairine said, collapsing the blade and hanging the lightsaber hilt at her belt again. “It’s DNA-locked—all the basic models come with that now.” She glanced at the table and the neat rows of candy bags, now not quite so neat. “This is getting kind of messed up...”

“Yes it is,” Nita said, glaring at Ronan and Kit. “You guys are going to get plenty of stuff once we’re out! Will you *lay off this?*”

Kit and Ronan both smiled angelically at her, but showed no signs of stopping. *Got to get them out of here before they eat it all...* Nita thought. “Okay,” she said, “we’re done here.” She wrapped up the seeds and pulp from the pumpkin in the top few layers of newspaper on which she’d been working, took them into the kitchen and put them in the bag with the composting waste.

“So where are you going to put it?” Kit said. “Front step?”

“Probably...” Nita said. But as she came back into the dining room, she looked at the pumpkin and realized that it was looking back at her: and despite the carven smile, it looked a little sad.

“...No,” she said. “I’m taking him with. Dad can’t keep an eye on the front door every minute, and I don’t want him getting smashed while we’re out.”

Kit looked at her quizzically. “You’re going to carry a *real* pumpkin around with us?”

Nita studied the pumpkin briefly. “It’s not like he’s overripe. Or *too* heavy. I can get some rope, pierce through the sides and make a handle. I’ll take a separate bag for the candy.”

“*He?*” Dairine said, bemused.

Ronan shook his head in genial disbelief. "I've seen a lot of wizards do a lot of weird things," he said, "but I've never seen one bond with a vegetable before."

"Life's full of these little surprises," Nita said. She fitted the pumpkin's top back in place, saw to her satisfaction that it fitted snugly. Then on an afterthought she removed it again, shook her charm bracelet around on her wrist, and pinched one charm, a tiny lightbulb, that had a ready-to-activate spell attached to it. When she pulled her finger and thumb away from the charm again, they had a little spark of bright white light between them. Nita reached inside the pumpkin and snugged the little particle of wizard-light down into the place where she'd most deeply dug away the pumpkin's flesh at the bottom, then put the stem-lid back on. The wizard-light shone very satisfactorily through the pumpkin's new eyes and mouth, even in daylight. "Anybody sees that," Nita said, "they'll think it's a LED. Give me a couple of minutes to deal with the handle and we can go."

It took less than that, as it turned out: some of the heavy braided raffia-twine that her dad used in his florist's business proved to be perfect for this job. When it was done Nita tested the handle, found it entirely secure, and then equipped herself with one of several Halloween-themed paper shopping bags. She handed one each to the others. "You ready?"

"All set," Ronan said.

"Daddy, we're going...!" Nita said.

"So I see," he said, looking in again from the kitchen. "And you've got your phones with you if there are any problems..."

"Don't think there's likely to be much in the way of problems," Nita said.

Her dad watched them head for the front door with a slightly thoughtful expression. Nita blushed one more time, for though her dad knew that there'd recently been some kind of status change in her relationship with Kit, she hadn't yet been successful in explaining it to him, because she hadn't yet finished figuring it out herself. "Don't be too late," her dad said: and Nita knew this was code for *Don't do anything I wouldn't want you to*.

"I won't," she said: and very much hoped, as the front door shut behind them, that this was going to turn out to be true.

The weather at least was cooperating with the local trick-or-treaters. After a few days of rain and wind earlier in the week, conditions had abruptly settled the day before into a lovely still crispness exactly right for the end of October. The trees were on the turn and glowing in the last rays of late-afternoon sun; and things had fortunately had time to dry out, so that the yellow and orange maple and oak leaves you scuffed through rustled satisfyingly instead of just lying there wet and sodden on the sidewalk.

Nita sighed as the four of them walked down the street and stopped at the first few of their neighbors' houses. She loved this time of year, both for the changeableness of it and the slight sense of sadness that seemed to hover over it, the world saying *Oh well...* as it reluctantly gave up the midyear warmth and paused for a few long cool breaths before turning inevitably toward the winter. The particular blue the sky went, the growing quiet even on windy days when the leaves came off the trees: they all mattered a lot to her.

That changeableness seemed to have come over Halloween itself, in a way. It was a little weird to see so many older kids dressed up and taking part in the last-day-of-October ritual. But over the last few years it seemed that a lot of junior high-age, even senior high-age kids, had been getting into it. Partly it was being pitched among the kids as a way to have fun after dark with the excuse of taking care of the littler participants... though pretty much everyone involved understood that this was actually a good way to get out from under the ever-watchful parental eyes for a while. Nita knew very well that a lot of kids from school, though they'd gotten themselves costumed and acquired all the re

of the necessary props, were actually up in town snogging in the darkness behind the shopping center or meeting in various vacant lots to get drunk. *Their problem*, Nita thought. She had other priorities tonight.

After the first few houses, where everyone collected the usual little bags or miniature candy bars, they came to the McLoughlins' house up the street. There were no lights in the windows, no light on over the front steps. "Nobody home," Ronan said.

"No," Nita said, "they're never 'home'. They don't do Halloween."

"Seems like other people have opinions about that," Ronan said as they walked past the house. He was noting the enthusiastic TP-ing of the big sycamore tree in the McLoughlins' front yard.

"Yeah," Nita said. "And it's gonna make a big mess all over their lawn. I think I might stop by real early tomorrow morning and see if I can get all that to sort of melt away..."

"What, just vanish it?" Ronan said.

"Nothing so obvious. The paper's made to biodegrade pretty quickly, so it's just a matter of convincing it to do it all in a couple of hours instead of a couple of weeks..."

They stopped at another house and collected a couple of taffy apples and a caramel pop each, then headed off again, idly discussing the best ways to use wizardry to disguise the artificially accelerated breakdown of toilet tissue. As they got down toward the end of the street where Nita's road crossed another one and more trick-or-treaters were visible, she caught Kit giving some of the kids down the road a dissatisfied look. "What?" she said.

"I'm starting to feel like a walking wardrobe malfunction."

"Why?" Nita said. "You look great. You heard the people at the last house, they thought you were something out of the movies! And anyway, we haven't seen that many other pirates."

Kit snickered. "It's not that," he said. "I mean, look at them..." He gestured down the cross street at some of the other trick-or-treaters making the rounds, among whom there were a lot of long overrobes, pointy hats, souped-up broomsticks, and a positive superfluity of wands. "Half the planet's running around dressed as wizards."

Ronan grinned one of those lazy superior grins he specialized in. "One day of the year, sure we can cut them some slack," he said. "Since we dress as wizards the other three hundred and sixty-four..."

As they continued to work the street, the four of them amused themselves for a while by counting the wizard costumes. But there were also a fair number of the usual glow-in-the-dark skeletons and bedsheet ghosts, not to mention Supermen and Batmen and winged fairies of various types, often shepherded by watchful parents or older brothers and sisters. And there were also other forms of supervision, both more annoying and less green.

Cars were very slowly driving up and down the street in the slowly growing dusk, stopping, pausing, driving on again. "What are they doing?" Ronan muttered.

"Curb-crawling," Kit said, his disdain only thinly veiled. They paused on the sidewalk to watch as yet another overprotective parent in an SUV pulled up into the vacant street space between a couple of the neighbors' driveways, let a batch of costumed kids out, waited until they'd rung the nearest houses' doorbells and collected the expected booty, and then—once they'd all piled back into the station wagon again—drove them a few doors further down to repeat the process.

"What the feck happens when these kids grow up?" Ronan said under his breath, disbelieving. "Will they be able to wipe themselves, you think?"

"No telling," Dairine muttered. "Never mind them. Here's the Kerricks' place, they love Halloween and they always give out a ton of stuff..."

They stopped there, had their costumes duly admired by the Kerricks, were given truly astonishing amounts of candy and fruit, and headed on down the street again. It was an old familiar route for Nita down East Clinton to the cross street, Park Avenue; work up and down Park for about a quarter mile i

each direction, then retrace your steps to East Clinton and hit all the houses up the length of it to Nassau Road. Then head for home, because by the time you got near there, you'd be having trouble carrying your candy bag, it'd be so heavy. If you got your second wind, you might then go out and do another run up some of the nearby side streets. *Might as well enjoy this first run, though, Nita thought. Because who knows if we'll feel like a second? Or for that matter, whether this might be the last time we do this. We may really be getting a little old for this kind of thing...*

She sighed. "How're you holding up?" she said to the pumpkin.

I'm all right. This is interesting. There's a lot to see...

"I can't just keep calling you 'hey you'," Nita said. "What should I call you?"

I don't know. I never gave it any thought before today...

"Well, you're a Jack-O-Lantern now... how would Jackie be?"

Behind her, Dairine snickered. "Sooooo predictable..."

Nita rolled her eyes and ignored her. The pumpkin said, *That's a nice name. Jackie...*

"Jackie it is," Nita said.

Kit had been listening to this, and he was smiling a little behind the crooked mustache: but the smile had a slightly concerned quality to it. *You know*, he said privately to Nita, *this could be a problem.*

What?

You've given it a nickname, he said. *Sometimes when we've done that in the past... it hasn't worked out all that well for whatever wore the nickname. Fred... Ed...*

Nita gave him a look, not entirely sure if he was teasing her. *You're having a sugar crash already*, she said. *Have one of those Snickers we just got and see if your mood improves.*

He started rooting around obligingly enough in his candy bag, and said nothing further. But there was something about the way Kit didn't immediately come back with an argument or a smart remark that unsettled Nita slightly. *Even if that's true*, she said after a moment, *I'm betting we could change the odds a little if we worked at it.*

"Here's one," Kit said, and came up with a Snickers. "Want half?"

Nita accepted it happily enough, but she found herself wondering briefly about the nickname issue: it wasn't something she'd ever considered before. *I need to think about this a little and see if he's got a point...* And a few seconds later she found herself looking through her own bag for another of those candy bars. They were kind of habit-forming.

They hit another fourteen or fifteen houses, and the bags began to fill, and the dusk settled over everything, the streetlights flickering on one by one. Jackie was taking it all in, though in most cases not having any real idea of what was going on. *What do you do with all this stuff?* he said.

"We eat it," Nita said.

Nutrients?

"Well, sort of," Nita said. She wasn't sure she was equipped at the moment to explain the concept of junk food to a pumpkin.

That's all right, then, Jackie said. *That's pretty much what we do, really. Acquire nutrients.* He sounded as if the prospect, or the memory, brought him a lot of pleasure.

Nita caught a quick faint glimpse of his memory. "Sun and water," she said. "You want all you can get of those..."

That's right. Sun and water: you soak 'em up, all you can. And nutrients: pull in everything you can. Time's short. All you get is one season in the sun. We're hungry all the time. So we soak it all up and get big. That makes the seeds inside happy. So when we finally fall off the vine and break down, there's plenty for the birds and animals to eat. And the more of me there is, the more of the seeds get away to grow.

“So that’s it for you?” Nita said. “Sprout fast. Get as big as you can. Die fat and juicy.”

You got it. That’s what it’s all about.

The generally rounded and enclosing imagery Nita kept getting from the pumpkin in these exchanges was making her start to wonder if “Jackie” actually ought to be short for “Jacqueline.” But there was always a danger in trying to introduce human gender ideas to a plant, so Nita kept her surmises on this count to herself. What was also intriguing her, though, was a slight unaccountable tang of sadness in Jackie’s thought. “What’s the matter?” Nita said, pausing at the foot of one house’s front walk as the others went up to ring the doorbell.

Well, you know, I didn’t get... all that big.

Nita grunted as she shifted Jackie over to her other arm. “Sorry, but I have to disagree. Even without your insides, you weigh a ton.”

You’re just saying that to make me feel good.

She burst out laughing, both at herself and at the wistful tone. But Jackie took no notice. *You get a little unhappy, it said, when almost everybody else gets picked and you don’t. If the sun hit one side of you more than the other while you were growing... if you came out lopsided, or squashed in... the people just walk past you and leave you there...*

Nita sighed, having too many memories as it was of those humiliating lineups before gym-class softball games, where each side fights to keep from having to choose you. These days she’d pretty much stopped caring about it. She’d gradually realized that the other kids’ opinions of her weren’t going to change no matter how well or badly she played, and she had a lot of better things to use wizardry for than becoming a heavy hitter. But the embarrassment and pain had been real enough until she found her way through them. “Look,” she said, “it really doesn’t matter. It’s what’s inside that counts, even if it sounds like a cliché to say it. I mean, clichés usually have some truth attached: that’s how they get to be clichés to begin with.”

I suppose you’re right...

The others came down the walk, and Kit handed Nita a toffee apple. “It’s good and dark now,” he said. “You think we should head for Tom and Carl’s?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Nita said.

It was a four or five blocks’ walk from the point they’d reached near Nassau Road. Above the dry rustling leaves on the trees, the stars were getting bright; Jupiter was well risen and showed coolly white in the northeastern sky. They turned the corner out of East Clinton onto Rose Avenue and headed down through the dark, seeing ahead of them the occasional glimmer of orange-shaded flashlights or glow-in-the-dark costumes or plastic-bladed lightsabers, the faint flicker of “ghosts” flapping by under the streetlights. “Remember,” Nita said, “the first time we looked Tom up in the manual? And we saw his address and said ‘Oh my god no, it’s that crazy guy, who knows what goes on in that place with the big hedge...’”

“We were so freaked,” Kit said, and laughed at the memory. But hard on the heels of the laughter came a long, high, spooky howl from down the road: a wolflike sound boosted by a very effective sound system.

“Imagine if we’d heard that...” Nita said, laughing too. “They’re rolling! Let’s see what kind of crowd they’ve got.”

They came to the yard with the tall hedges that had unnerved Nita so long ago. Now the hedge was festooned with fake cobwebs, and from inside it, little glinting eyes in batches of eight looked out creepily at passersby. A lot of costumed kids and escorting parents were heading in and out of the open gate that led through the single gap in the hedge. As the four wizards went through the gate and up the walk toward the front door of the house, Nita suddenly caught a glimpse of a couple of black

cats off to one side, one a little slimmer and more angular than the other, their eyes glinting respectively golden and brassy in the dimness. “Guys, look—!”

“I see them,” Ronan said, and headed across the grass to where the cats were watching the proceedings from near the shrubbery closest to the house. “Hey, Rhiow! What’s shakin’?”

The little black cat put her whiskers forward at them all. “Things around here, I’d say! But you haven’t met my partner, have you, cousins? Hwaith, this is Hrronan—Khit and Hnita—Dhairine—”

Introductions were made all around. “What brings you two out this way?” Kit said.

“Well, you know how people on this side of the Atlantic get about black cats this time of year,” Rhiow said, and sat down and yawned. “Either you have to stay sidled for a few days to keep from attracting attention to black cats in general and giving some ehhif bad ideas...”

“Or you have to stay in,” Hwaith said, stretching fore and aft and sitting down next to her. “So boring. So we got out of town. Urruah and the twins are handling the Grand Central gates for the evening...”

“And when Tom and Carl told us what they were up to this year, we said, ‘Sure, we’ll come by and add some atmosphere,’” Rhiow said. “Controlled circumstances, after all. We go where we’re needed...”

“You guys don’t fool me,” Kit said. “You just have fun being someplace where wizards are doing magic out in the open for one night in the year.”

“Well, who wouldn’t?” Hwaith said. “Bad enough that so much of this planet has to be *sevarfrith*. When one of the cultures has a night when you can come out and sing on the rooftops a little, interventionally speaking... who’d miss that?” He chuckled. “Anyway, they’ve really knocked themselves out—you ought to go take the tour.” He looked over his shoulder toward the front windows, which were all curtained with something that let an eerie blue light shine through.

“Will do,” Kit said as the two cats vanished back toward the house. The four wizards made their way back up to the walk again and headed for the door and the steps up to the porch.

“Do my ears deceive me?” said a voice from inside the door, which had what appeared to be some kind of alien skeleton nailed up spread-eagled on it. Out of the door came lurching someone in classic Frankenstein’s Monster makeup of the Boris Karloff vintage, every detail complete right down to the giant heavy shoes, the jacket with the too-short sleeves, and the bolts in the neck. But the face under the makeup was Tom Swale’s, and Nita couldn’t stop herself from laughing at the sight of one of the Advisory Wizards in something so different from his usual jeans and polos. “It is you guys! Didn’t know if we were going to see you tonight.”

“How could we miss this!” Kit said.

“Well, just glad you could take time out of your busy schedules,” said another voice from behind Tom: and there was the normally very buttoned-down Carl Romeo in a frayed and apparently bloodstained business suit that had seen far better days, and some of the most realistic ghoulish makeup that Nita had ever seen. Carl leaned out the door and peered at the sagging candy bags. “You folks have plainly been making out like bandits. Come on in, release your burdens for a while and have a look around.”

They all filed in, pausing at a table by the front door, where visitors were exchanging admission tickets and getting their hands stamped. Behind the table sat a gorgeously witchy-looking woman wearing a slinky glittering deep-purple dress with black lace applied over it in a spiderweb pattern and a matching long veil or mantilla in the same spiderweb lace.

“You haven’t met this lady,” Tom said. “This is a cousin of ours from out west. Helen Walks Softly: Kit Rodriguez, Nita Callahan. And from a little further out of town, Ronan Nolan...”

Hands were shaken and everyone quietly said *dai stihó*, for there were nonwizards wandering around the ground floor, looking at static displays of scary stuff. “Your eyes are really great,” Kit said.

in complete admiration. They were those of some big cat, a lion maybe, large and golden. “Contacts?”

Rhiow and Hwaith burst out laughing. “Not exactly,” Helen said. “We can discuss technique later —”

“What is with your earrings??” Nita said. She leaned close and peered at one of them, a fuzzy bobbly looking thing hanging from Helen’s earlobe.

The earring promptly opened two small eyes, flicked out two small ears, and unfolded two perfect delicate, fingery wings. Nita jumped in surprise, and then burst out laughing while the tiny bat gazed at her upside down.

“That’s just *sick*,” Ronan said in complete admiration. “Most people keep their bats inside their belfries...”

“We have these tiny little ones up in the mountains in California,” Helen said. “Makal, my people call them. We’ve got caves full of them on my tribal band’s lands: sometimes in the evenings they follow me around when I’m up there doing shaman work. And if they feel like hanging out with me afterwards...” She chuckled. “On a night like tonight, why would I argue?”

“Hey there cousin,” Nita said, tickling one of them behind the ear. It peeped at her and closed the wings up; a second later so did its counterpart hanging from Helen’s other ear.

“So step upstairs and have a look around,” Tom said. “We only get a chance to do this once every six years or so, and Carl’s really pulled out the stops this time. Leave your stuff behind the table: Helen’ll take care of it for you.” He eyed Nita’s pumpkin with interest. “Something new in the way of accessories? You can leave that too if you like...”

“No,” Nita said, “I’ll hang onto him.”

Tom and Carl both raised their eyebrows at the pronoun, but neither commented. “Right this way, then,” Carl said. “Try not to scream more loudly than our other guests...”

The next half hour or so was a tour de force of flapping giant bat-shapes, half-seen clammy things with too many eyes that leapt at you from closets or dropped on you from the ceilings, sudden vistas of bottomless pits where no such pits were possible, claws that grabbed, beastly teeth that snapped just in front of your nose out of the darkness, webs that brushed across your face, hissing black demon cats with glaring eyes and fur that stood on end and sizzled with sparks, tentacles that suckered onto you and creepily clung, and dreadful wet moldy smells that you didn’t want to know the source of. Nita screamed as often and loudly as any of the others—even Ronan got caught off balance this way several times—and knowing that clever wizardries were behind about half these effects, and friendly alien wizards were behind the other half, didn’t help at the time. It was all about staging, at which Tom’s script work made him expert. Your own too-suggestible mind, in tune with the archetypes associated with the horror genre and many old myths, did the rest. Nita finished the tour exhilarated but surprisingly wrung out; and while Ronan and Kit went through it again, and Dairine paused downstairs to have a drink of some ominously bubbling and smoking fruit punch, Nita took Jackie out into the relative peace and quiet of the back garden.

She sat down on the edge of the koi pond and got her breath back, listening to more screams floating down from the upstairs of the house, and to the sound of her pulse starting to slow down at last. After a little while a tall shape came out the back door and made its way over to her through the shadows. “So tell me,” Carl said, “how’s it look?”

“Really great,” Nita said. “I didn’t know you two were so into this.”

“Well, why not?” Carl said. “If you spend all the rest of the year fighting the serious Powers of Eeeeeevil, then sometimes you just want to spend a little time enjoying the harmless kind of spooky stuff. Keeping the old traditions alive... while making it plain that fewer and fewer of the old ploys the Lone Power used have so much fun scaring us with will work any more: not for anything serious. Sure, it comes up with new ones all the time...”

“But laughing at the old ones still gets under Its skin.”

“Way under,” Carl said, “since it really, *really* hates not being taken seriously...” He looked back at the house. “But who doesn’t like being safely scared, occasionally? Pleasantly scared, by something that can’t really hurt you?” He grinned as an eldritch howl came floating out one of the upstairs windows, accompanied by the shrieks and then the laughter of small children. “It starts getting you used to fear... so when you come up against something really scary, you can cope a little better.”

“Like being vaccinated,” Nita said. “The weakened bugs make you immune...”

“A useful metaphor,” Carl said, over more of the upstairs screaming. He grinned in the dark. “I should get back in there: some of those spells have to be reset after they fire a few times.” He patted Nita on the shoulder, vanished into the dark again.

Nita sat there for a few moments, listening to the noises from inside the house, and then glanced over at Jackie. “You’ve been quiet...” Nita said under her breath to the pumpkin.

It took a moment before the answer came back. *Something’s wrong*, the pumpkin said.

Nita started to get concerned. *Oh God, I did something wrong and the cutting’s affecting it now after all...!* “Are you all right? Do you want to go back home?”

Back home, it said, *yes. But not your place. My home. Where I grew. Something’s wrong...*

Her pulse had been starting to slow down, but now it started to pick up again, and she wasn’t even clear why. After a few minutes, when Kit wandered out into the garden looking for him, Nita’s pulse was beating even faster. “We have to go,” she said.

“Why? What’s the matter?”

“Jackie needs to go back to the pick-your-own place,” Nita said. “Something’s wrong there, he says.”

“Wrong?” Kit bent down and put a hand on the pumpkin. “What is it, guy?”

I don’t know. Just... something’s wrong. And getting wronger.

It was sounding more agitated by the second. Nita and Kit looked at each other. “Don’t ask me what’s going on,” Nita said. “Maybe a pumpkin can start getting sensitive to things if it spends all evening hanging out with wizards? But he was connected to that ground for a long time... he’s in a position to know if something’s wrong there. And considering the day he’s had, I think we should humor him a little, don’t you?”

“Can’t argue with you there. ”

“Where’s Ronan?” Nita said.

“Inside having some of that punch,” Kit said. He wiped his forehead, looking a little surprised at the sweat there. As if on cue, his mustache promptly fell off. Kit started fishing around in his pockets for the spirit gum again, and then muttered something rude under his breath and stuck it back on again, even though it would only go on crookedly now.

“Done with the punch,” said a voice out of the dark. “Dairine’s right behind me. I could smell you two worrying out here. What’s up?”

“Jackie wants to go back to where he was picked,” Kit said. “There’s some kind of trouble there.”

Nita had pulled her manual out of the little belt pouch where it hung on this costume, across from the chased sheath for her rowan wand. She paged through it hurriedly to the mapping section, tapped on it until it brought up an image of the little strip of suburban farmland that remained between her town and Uniondale. “I’ve got the coordinates,” she said.

Got them here too, said a calm voice in the back of her head.

Here’s another one who’s been quiet today, Nita said privately to the peridexis. *Taking a day off?*

Just staying in the background while you enjoyed yourself, the peridexis said. *But the enjoyment seems to have hit some kind of hitch --*

Because we may be back on duty again! Stay with me— “Dair, Bobo’ll feed Spot the targeting data

—”

“Got it,” Dairine said a second later. “Spot, do us a circle—” Almost instantly a large spell-transition circle with five personal transport subcircles appeared on the grass opposite the koi pond. “Check your ID data and jump in,” Dairine said, stepping into one of the circles herself. “Concealment field’s built in, don’t worry about being seen.”

Nita shoved her manual back into its pouch, grabbed Jackie’s handle, and carefully stepped into one of the vacant subcircles, checking to make sure that Spot was using the most recent version of her name. *Bobo, you’d better add something for Jackie here—*

Spot’s handled it: there’s extra language in the submodule attached to yours, see it there?

Great. Nita glanced up after a few seconds to see everyone else in place, and Dairine waiting for her. “I’m good,” she said. “Hit it—”

Things around them went black, and then bright again. Nita glanced around hurriedly, trying to get her bearings.

The harvest moon had risen some hours earlier, and now it stood high over a rather sad and lonely landscape. Long ridges where pumpkins had been planted and raised ran down the length of the field, and from the ridges straggled tired-looking pumpkin vines. Some of these were withered and dying: others were still alive, but had only small or misshapen pumpkins left attached to them. The field was surrounded by windbreak trees on all four sides, with here and there a break or a gate through which tractors could drive in, and off to one side, a long line of plain wooden tables where the people who came to pick the pumpkins could clean up what they picked before paying for them.

Everything looked monochrome in the moonlight, ever so faintly golden, and very still. There was no sound. Nothing moved. The pirate, the caveman, the Jedi and the alien princess stood looking around them, not speaking for the first few moments.

“Okay,” Nita said to Jackie at last. “We’re here. What’s the problem?”

Something bad is happening in the ground, Jackie said. It was happening before. But it’s much worse now. It’s trying to get out—

They all stood still in the silence, looking, listening—

And then a pale thin hand shot up out of the damp crumbly dirt and grabbed Dairine by the ankle.

She shrieked at the top of her lungs, jumped back about three feet, and then staggered and nearly fell down, for the hand hadn’t let go of her ankle, and the arm behind it was pulled further up out of the ground and kept hanging on. A second later the blue-white fire of her lightsaber broke loose, and Dairine sliced the arm off at the elbow. She then spent the next few seconds jumping up and down and trying to dislodge the hand, which still wouldn’t let go—

All around them in the field, other bumps and lumps started heaving themselves up out of the dirt—skinny fleshless hands scrabbling at it, knobbly shoulders and backs heaving up, whole lank tattered-clad human shapes struggling up on hands and knees, staggering erect; blind faces and empty eyes searching for signs of life in the field, targeting on it, lurching toward it. Nita knew immediately that these weren’t actual high-end zombies of the animated-full-corpse type. But they were more than undead enough to be going on with: staggering cobbled-together shapes meant to inflict terror, disgust and despair. They had a blunt, insufficiently-detailed look to them that in some ways was worse than genuine rotting human corpses would have been. And they were unquestionably the bearers of a message: *Take... Me... seriously!*

“Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks *cubed!*” Ronan said. “What on earth brought *this* shite on?”

“Our old buddy,” Kit said. “Taking advantage of the moment.” He scowled and pulled out his wand. “Too many people have the idea that the forces of evil are stronger tonight... so to some extent, they really are. Lean that much conviction up against reality, and it frays around the edges a little. Then

You Know Whose little friends that hang around the edges of existence to do Its dirty work jump right in and use the available energy to make mischief—”

“*You call this mischief??*” Dairine shouted. She’d finally stopped jumping around in sheer gross-out mode, and paused long enough to simply pull the gripping hand off her ankle by brute force. Then she sliced and diced it thoroughly where it lay on the ground, and having done that, spent a few moments jumping up and down on the pieces in infuriated disgust, yelling, “Eww, eww, eww!!”

Ronan burst out laughing as the tatty dark shapes came lurching and staggering closer and closer to the wizards in the darkness, bits and pieces occasionally falling off them as they came. The laughter had a slightly panicky edge to it, though, and after a moment Ronan got his control back as he reached inside his costume’s tunic. “Sorry, sorry,” he said as he pulled out something hard to see, “honestly. . . just keep expecting them to start dancing. Naturally you guys are carrying—”

Nita ripped her wand out of its sheath and shook all the safeties off the spells in her charm bracelet. Kit threw his plastic sword away and pulled his Edsel-antenna wand out too. “Time to make a stand,” Nita said. “We let It mess up Halloween, it’ll be coming after Hanukkah or Christmas next!” She whispered a word or two, and the rowan wand blazed with ready power. “*You hear me?*” Nita yelled, not just at the growing numbers of oncoming, shambling undead, but at the amused Power responsibility for them and doubtless watching this whole thing. “I am taking Halloween back, and *you are not getting away with this!* Not on my patch!”

“What *she* said,” Ronan said. And the unseen something in his hands abruptly expanded into what at first glance looked like another caveman club of some kind. It was definitely a club, though, broad and flat and kind of rounded at the business end, narrower down at the handle, and burning inside with a peculiar pale brown light.

“Ronan,” Kit said. “You finally got that thing built!”

“I surely did,” Ronan said. “Say hello to the Magic Hurley!” And from under his caveman skin he pulled a small round core of blinding yellow light that he tossed into the air. “Watch the *sliotar*, boys!” he yelled, and whacked the ball of light at better-than-fastball speed hard into the nearest zombie.

It exploded, arms and legs and pieces of other whatnot flying yards away. Ronan pulled out another of the *sliotar*-bombs, tossed it, hit it with unerring aim at the next nearest zombie. It blew up too.

Unfortunately Nita noticed that as soon as the pieces fell to the ground, the earth started humping and bumping up underneath them, and shortly each piece was a whole new zombie that headed right back toward the four wizards. “Guys,” she shouted, “this situation’s math is *not* working in our favor.”

“They need to be completely destroyed,” Kit yelled back as he targeted one and then another of the zombies with the laser-like output from his antenna wand. They went down, but also quickly got up again. “Vaporized! Or canceled out or something!”

“And how is this even *happening?*” Dairine yelled, slicing another zombie right in two, only to see the two halves each make another of themselves. “There aren’t any bodies buried here!”

“Not sure there need to be,” Ronan said, in one of those extremely rational tones of voice he acquired sometimes. He whacked another magic *sliotar* at a zombie and neatly took the head off, then scowled as its head grew another body and its body grew another head with unnerving speed. “Think about it. For more complicated reanimation spells, you can make do very nicely with human byproducts, human... waste. That winds up in all kinds of places, and even after you process it...”

Nita rolled her eyes as the white rowan-fire wrapped around a zombie and blasted it backwards, and it too got up again. “*Too much information, Ronan!*”

“No, seriously, think about it. Think about all the stuff that was you, once, or part of you, that gets thrown out or goes down the toilet and gets into the waste treatment system. I mean, besides the usual stuff. Hair. Dandruff. Tissues you’ve sneezed in. Nail clippings—”

“How many toenails does it take to make up a whole person??” Dairine hollered at him as she sliced her way out of a group of the zombies that was converging on her, and within a few breaths found herself dealing with an even bigger group. “Did I ever want to be *thinking* about this? *Will the inside of my head ever be clean again?* Somebody better get me some Clorox after we’re done here!”

“Consider it revenge for your bedspread,” Ronan said. “But I think whoever grew these had better look into their fertilizer’s supply chain. The raw materials aren’t the real problem, though—”

“It’s what’s animating these things!” Kit said. “And what *is* animating them? We can’t stop them we don’t know what’s making them go—”

Bobo, Nita said, *hurry up and get me a reading!* She gasped for breath as she shot down another zombie and it started putting itself together.

I’ve got one, the peridexis said, *and you won’t like it.*

I’m already well along the not-liking-it spectrum at the moment! What are they??

The animating entities are yangshi.

Dairine looked up in alarm as she caught Bobo’s data via Spot. “Oh, *crap!*”

“Wow, and to think I was just worried about them eating my *flesh*,” Kit said, the sarcasm not hiding his growing unease at all well.

Nita, for her part, gulped and kept fighting, but now she too was getting freaked. Thinking of *yangshi* as demons was almost giving them too much credit. But as the Lone Power’s minions went, they were nasty. *Yangshi* needed living creatures’ life force to survive, and they got it by prolonged physical contact, during which they sought to bite or wound the victim. If one of them had time to get so much as a tooth into you, that would be the end of it all. *Might be quick*, Nita thought, *or might take a long time.*

But let the wound be as little as a snakebite, or as big as a whole leg pulled off, it wouldn’t matter. Every sentient living thing came equipped with an invisible barrier layer that kept its soul bound inside its physical structure. The *yangshi*’s bite would open up a wound in the boundary layer that couldn’t be healed and would only tear wider with time. Inevitably the soul would leak out, and when the body no longer contained the threshold amount of soulstuff necessary to sustain the body/soul matrix, the spirit would go and the body would die.

“This is just to wear us out,” Kit yelled as he kept fighting. “They’re gonna dogpile us and put us out of the running for good if we don’t think of something real fast!”

“Right,” Dairine said, backing away in a hurry from the *yangshi* zombies that were trying to engage her. “Time to get radical.” She started pulling the top of her inner tunic askew.

Kit gave her an almost comical look as he kept fighting. “Not exactly the time for a striptease, Dair!”

“Not what I have in mind. Somebody mentioned vaporizing them?” Dairine got a grip on what suddenly gleamed bright at her neck in the moonlight: a pale golden torc with a big yellow cabochon stone set in it. She started talking very fast in the Speech, something Nita had trouble getting a handle on because of the speed and the complexity of the language, something very involved and full of fire imagery. Dairine shouted one last word, stood there with her fists clenched—

And nothing happened. Dairine cursed and looked desperate, for though the saying goes that “a spell always works,” nothing can make it work if it’s not plugged into a viable power source of the correct type. “No no no *no!*” she yelled. “*Spot?!*”

“What happened?” Kit said, shooting at another zombie and taking it down, but again not for long and the crowd of them was now pressing in closer—

“I was using the Sunstone on Wellakh this morning,” Dairine moaned, “and the damn thing’s still in phase with Thahit, it takes fourteen hours to get back in phase with Sol after I’ve been using it with its home star and I can’t pull power with it yet—”

Something else then, Nita thought. Vaporization—

And Kit's earlier suggestion came back to her. Or canceling them out. If their raw material is coming out of the soil— "You're a genius!" she yelled at Kit.

"I am?" he said, shooting again. "That's nice to know, so maybe you could let me know how before I become a *dead* genius??"

She'd been dancing around a lot as she fought, but now Nita made her way hurriedly back to where she'd put Jackie down, and stood next to him. "As soon as we see if this works!" she said. "Buy me a couple of minutes, okay? And then I'm going to need you guys to feed me power."

Kit nodded, got Ronan's and Dairine's attention, and they formed a loose triangle with Nita at the center. Much as she would rather not have done so, she closed her eyes so she could better see the spell she was going to be building in her head.

She was furious, but right now that was a useful dividend, and Nita knew how to make that work for her: she let the anger build. *It's not bad enough we have to deal with the Lone Power while we're on active errantry, but it comes after us when we're just having a little off time? This sucks. She scowled. This is not how I had my evening planned! A little candy, a little fun walking around and seeing everybody's costumes and enjoying being dressed up ourselves. And then a little private time with Kit out in the quiet and the dark, just a little time during which the two of them were for a change not saving the world... Or blowing up zombies!*

But instead, what do I get? I'm part of the evening's entertainment! Nita could just imagine the Lone Power sitting somewhere comfy, in a big black armchair or something, with its feet up, sipping nice hot pumpkin spice latte and watching all this unfold. And then probably recording it somehow and sticking it up on Evil-Minion YouTube to share with all its little followers. She scowled harder, opening her eyes. Yeah, well, I've got your pumpkin latte right here, nuisance boy!

She grinned. *Sun and water, Nita thought. But especially sun. Bobo, that complete dissociation matrix we were looking at a month or so ago? The one 'too unpredictable and violent for everyday use?'*

I do remember that coming up for study, yes...

Crack it out and restructure it for organic input.

Organic?

Get busy!

She picked Jackie up and looked him? her? whatever—in the eye. "How would you like to get out there," she said, "and have a chance to be the pumpkin you only ever dreamed of being before? The best one. The biggest one. With all the sun you can remember inside you at one time—"

The feeling of utter longing and desire almost swept her away. *If only!*

"Tonight's the night," Nita said. "All you have to do is remember that sun. All of it. It's all inside you... and it's what's inside that counts." She grinned a slightly evil grin. "Can you do that?"

Can I!!

"Then get busy and start doing it right now!" *Bobo?*

Intention feed's incoming, Bobo said. It's considerable.

It'd better be. Build the spell and give it to me compacted. I need a semiphysical conduit to plug it into Jackie here.

I have to warn you, the peridexis said, sounding concerned, if your adjunct's intention flags, the conduit might short out and the spell might fail—

Better hope it doesn't, then, Nita said, or Long Island's gonna be hip deep in zombies by morning. Ready?

Delivering now.

The spell flashed into life before her, hanging in the air in a set of nested circles about a foot wide

Okay, Nita said, *not quite what I had in mind for this*. She reached out to start redrafting the spell, pulling parts of the spell diagram into other configurations. *One big circle, three chord lines, a small external power-control circle at the tangent point. Three inclusions. Power envelope... radius of effect... expansion room for the intention statements...* Once again she found herself being glad she'd spent so much time on spell construction these last couple of months: it was getting a lot easier to build spells on the fly when the Manual didn't have exactly what you needed. *But that module, yeah, that'll work, plug that in here. And that one—*

Nita concentrated hard on ignoring the chaos going on around her and looked the spell over carefully, checking the language of it and the way it was arranged. Every spell was about persuasion: this one was about helping Jackie remember all that sun, and more than that, the urge toward life that she'd picked up from it, the desire to get it right and be all you could even if that was just being a pumpkin. *This is as good as it gets in the time we have*, she thought at last. *So let's see what kind of result this produces*. She signed the spell with her name in the Speech and tied it into closed-and-ready mode with the Wizard's Knot: the whole long Speech-statement, from invocation to incitation, would read itself and execute when Nita pronounced the trigger word. "Kit! Two seconds to check me on this?"

He knocked down one more zombie while looking the diagram over. "Looks good, better get on with it—!"

And he was right, because the zombies were pressing in closer and closer all the time. "So here we go," Nita said, plucking the bright-burning words and geometrical figures of the spell out of the air and crumpling them together into a little tight-packed ball. She got down beside Jackie, pulled his lid off, and popped the spell inside him, pushing it down against the orange flesh inside and feeling the spell's short-range power conduit sink in and hook up. The light of the spell shone out through his eyes. *How's that? You feel okay?*

Yes. And none of this would be working this way if you hadn't scooped out my insides, would it? the pumpkin said.

Nita nodded, feeling a sudden rush of a weird mixture of satisfaction and excitement: a sense of absolutely being part of a plan, not just making one—a sense of things falling right into place, and of being exactly in the right place at the right time. Nita had heard other wizards call this serendipitous effect "the Big Sync", and talk about how much fun it could be. Now she grinned, entirely seeing the point. "Okay," she said. "Kit? Ready when you three are!"

Kit caught Ronan's and Dairine's eyes and started speaking under his breath in the Speech. Nita could feel him laying out the intangible power conduits that would feed the spell power through her. *It'll only take them a few seconds to get hooked up—*

She turned her attention back to the tattered, rotted-looking shapes lurching toward them. "Willing followers of the Fallen," she said, pulling up one of the shortest of the formal demon-management notifications, "be warned by me! We are on the business of the Powers that Be, and by Their power vested in us, unless you disperse forthwith to your own places, we will utterly undo and abolish you!"

The zombies paused—

And kept coming.

"Last warning, you guys!" Nita said, holding Jackie up. "I've got a pumpkin, *and I'm not afraid to use it!*"

There was another slight pause—and then a sound that if possible made Nita angrier than before: zombie laughter, the animating *yangshi* demons making fun of her. They kept on coming.

That's it, Nita thought. *Let's rumble!* To Jackie she said silently, *Are you absolutely sure you're up for this?*

Up for this? I was grown for this!

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