

Against the stars a turtle passes, carrying four elephants on its shell.

Both turtle and elephants are bigger than people might expect, but out between the stars the difference between huge and tiny is, comparatively speaking, very small.

But this turtle and these elephants are, by turtle and elephant standards, big. They carry the Discworld, with its vast lands, cloudscapes, and oceans.

People don't *live* on the Disc any more than, in less hand-crafted parts of the multiverse, they live on balls. Oh, planets may be the place where their body eats its tea, but they *live* elsewhere, in worlds of their own which orbit very handily around the centre of their heads.

When gods get together they tell the story of one particular planet whose inhabitants watched, with mild interest, huge continent-wrecking slabs of ice slap into another world which was, in astronomical terms, right next door – *and then did nothing about it* because that sort of thing only happens in Outer Space. An *intelligent* species would at least have found someone to complain to. Anyway, no one seriously believes in that story, because a race quite

that stupid would never even have discovered blood.*

People believe in all sorts of other things, though. For example, there are some people who have a legend that the whole universe is carried in a leather bag by an old man.

They're right, too.

Other people say: hold on, if he's carrying the entire universe in a sack, right, that means he's carrying himself and the sack *inside* the sack, because the universe contains everything. Including him. And the sack, of course. Which contains him and the sack already. As it were.

To which the reply is: well?

All tribal myths are true, for a given value of 'true'.

It is a general test of the omnipotence of a god that they can see the fall of a tiny bird. But only one god makes notes, and a few adjustments, so that next time it can fall faster and further.

We may find out why.

We might find out why mankind is here, although that is more complicated and begs the question 'Where else should we be?' It would be terrible to think that some impatient deity might part the clouds and say, 'Damn, are you lot still here? I thought you discovered blood ten thousand years ago! I've got ten trillion tons of ice arriving on Monday!'

* Much easier to discover than fire, and only slightly harder to discover than water.

We may even find out why the duck-billed platypus.*

Snow, thick and wet, tumbled on to the lawns and roofs of Unseen University, the Discworld's premier college of magic.

It was sticky snow, which made the place look like some sort of expensive yet tasteless ornament, and it caked around the boots of McAbre, the Head Bledlow, as he trudged through the cold, wild night.

Two other bledlows† stepped out of the lee of a buttress and fell in behind him on a solemn march towards the main gates.

It was an old custom, centuries old, and in the summer a few tourists would hang around to watch it, but the Ceremony of the Keys went on every night in every season. Mere ice, wind and snow had never stopped it. Bledlows in times gone past had clambered over tentacled monstrosities to do the Ceremony; they'd waded through floodwater, flailed with their bowler hats at errant pigeons, harpies and dragons, and ignored mere faculty members who'd thrown open their bedroom windows and screamed imprecations on the lines of 'Stop that damn racket, will you? What's the *point?*' They'd never stopped, or even thought of stopping. You couldn't stop Tradition. You could only add to it.

The three men reached the shadows by the main

*Not why is it *anything*. Just why it is.

† A cross between a porter and a proctor. A bledlow is not chosen for his imagination, because he usually doesn't have any.

gate, almost blotted out in the whirling snow. The bledlow on duty was waiting for them.

‘Halt! Who Goes There?’ he shouted.

McAbre saluted. ‘The Archchancellor’s Keys!’

‘Pass, The Archchancellor’s Keys!’

The Head Bledlow took a step forward, extended both arms in front of him with his palms bent back towards him, and patted his chest at the place where some bledlow long buried had once had two breast pockets. Pat, pat. Then he extended his arms by his sides and stiffly patted the sides of his jacket. Pat, pat.

‘Damn! Could Have Sworn I Had Them A Moment Ago!’ he bellowed, enunciating each word with a sort of bulldog carefulness.

The gatekeeper saluted. McAbre saluted.

‘Have You Looked In All Your Pockets?’

McAbre saluted. The gatekeeper saluted. A small pyramid of snow was building up on his bowler hat.

‘I Think I Must Have Left Them On The Dresser. It’s Always The Same, Isn’t It?’

‘You Should Remember Where You Put Them Down!’

‘Hang On, Perhaps They’re In My Other Jacket!’

The young bledlow who was this week’s Keeper of the Other Jacket stepped forward. Each man saluted the other two. The youngest cleared his throat and managed to say:

‘No, I Looked In . . . There This . . . Morning!’

McAbre gave him a slight nod to acknowledge a difficult job done well, and patted his pockets again.

‘Hold On, Stone The Crows, They Were In This Pocket After All! What A Muggins I Am!’

‘Don’t Worry, I Do The Same Myself!’

‘Is My Face Red! Forget My Own Head Next!’

Somewhere in the darkness a window creaked up.

‘Er, excuse me, gentlemen—’

‘Here’s The Keys, Then!’ said McAbre, raising his voice.

‘Much Obligated!’

‘I wonder if you could—’ the querulous voice went on, apologizing for even thinking of complaining.

‘All Safe And Secure!’ shouted the gatekeeper, handing the keys back.

‘—perhaps keep it down a *little*—’

‘Gods Bless All Present!’ screamed McAbre, veins standing out on his thick crimson neck.

‘Careful Where You Put Them This Time. Ha! Ha! Ha!’

‘Ho! Ho! Ho!’ yelled McAbre, beside himself with fury. He saluted stiffly, went About Turn with an unnecessarily large amount of foot stamping and, the ancient exchange completed, marched back to the bledlows’ lodge muttering under his breath.

The window of the University’s little sanatorium shut again.

‘That man really makes me want to swear,’ said the Bursar. He fumbled in his pocket and produced his little green box of dried frog pills, spilling a few as he fumbled with the lid. ‘I’ve sent him no end of memos. He says it’s traditional but, I don’t know, he’s so . . .

boisterous about it . . .’ He blew his nose. ‘How’s he doing?’

‘Not good,’ said the Dean.

The Librarian was very, very ill.

Snow plastered itself against the closed window.

There was a heap of blankets in front of the roaring fire. Occasionally it shuddered a bit. The wizards watched it with concern.

The Lecturer in Recent Runes was feverishly turning over the pages of a book.

‘I mean, how do we know if it’s old age or not?’ he said. ‘What’s old age for an orang-utan? *And* he’s a wizard. *And* he spends all his time in the Library. All that magic radiation the whole time. Somehow the flu is attacking his morphic field, but it could be caused by *anything*.’

The Librarian sneezed.

And changed shape.

The wizards looked sadly at what appeared very much like a comfortable armchair which someone had, for some reason, upholstered in red fur.

‘What can we do for him?’ said Ponder Stibbons, the Faculty’s youngest member.

‘He might feel happier with some cushions,’ said Ridcully.

‘Slightly bad taste, Archchancellor, I feel.’

‘What? Everyone likes some comfy cushions when they’re feeling a little under the weather, don’t they?’ said the man to whom sickness was a mystery.

‘He was a table this morning. Mahogany, I believe. He seems to be able to retain his colour, at least.’

The Lecturer in Recent Runes closed the book with a sigh. 'He's certainly lost control of his morphic function,' he said. 'It's not surprising, I suppose. Once it's been changed, it'll change again much more easily, I'm afraid. A well known fact.'

He looked at the Archchancellor's frozen grin and sighed. Mustrum Ridcully was notorious for not trying to understand things if there was anyone around to do it for him.

'It's quite hard to change the shape of a living thing but once it's been done it's a lot easier to do it next time,' he translated.

'Say again?'

'He was a human before he was an ape, Archchancellor. Remember?'

'Oh. Yes,' said Ridcully. 'Funny, really, the way you get used to things. Apes and humans are related, accordin' to young Ponder here.'

The other wizards looked blank. Ponder screwed up his face.

'He's been showing me some of the invisible writings,' said Ridcully. 'Fascinatin' stuff.'

The other wizards scowled at Ponder Stibbons, as you would at a man who'd been caught smoking in a firework factory. So *now* they knew who to blame. As usual . . .

'Is that entirely *wise*, sir?' said the Dean.

'Well, I do happen to be the Archchancellor in these parts, Dean,' said Ridcully calmly.

'A blindly obvious fact, Archchancellor,' said the Dean. You could have cut cheese with his tone.

‘Must take an interest. Morale, you know,’ said Ridcully. ‘My door is always open. I see myself as a member of the team.’ Ponder winced again.

‘I don’t think I’m related to any apes,’ said the Senior Wrangler thoughtfully. ‘I mean, I’d know, wouldn’t I? I’d get invited to their weddings and so on. My parents would have said something like, “Don’t worry about Uncle Charlie, he’s *supposed* to smell like that,” wouldn’t they? And there’d be portraits in—’

The chair sneezed. There was an unpleasant moment of morphic uncertainty, and then the Librarian was sprawling in his old shape again. The wizards watched him carefully to see what’d happen next.

It *was* hard to remember the time when the Librarian had been a human being. Certainly no one could remember what he’d looked like, or even what his name had been.

A magical explosion, always a possibility in somewhere like the Library where so many unstable books of magic are pressed dangerously together, had introduced him to unexpected apehood years before. Since then he’d never looked back, and often hadn’t looked down either. His big hairy shape, swinging by one arm from a top shelf while he rearranged books with his feet, had become a popular one among the whole University body; his devotion to duty had been an example to everyone.

Archchancellor Ridcully, into whose head that last sentence had treacherously arranged itself, realized that he was unconsciously drafting an obituary.

‘Anyone called in a doctor?’ he said.

‘We got Doughnut Jimmy* here this afternoon,’ said the Dean. ‘He tried to take his temperature but I’m afraid the Librarian bit him.’

‘He bit him? With a thermometer in his mouth?’

‘Ah. Not exactly. There, in fact, you have rather discovered the reason for his biting.’

There was a moment of solemn silence. The Senior Wrangler picked up a limp black-leather paw and patted it vaguely.

‘Does that book say if monkeys have pulses?’ he said. ‘Is his nose supposed to be cold, or what?’

There was a little sound, such as might be made by half a dozen people all sharply drawing in their breath at once. The other wizards began to edge away from their Senior Wrangler.

There was, for a few seconds, no other sound but the crackling of the fire and the howl of the wind outside.

The wizards shuffled back.

The Senior Wrangler, in the astonished tones of someone still possessing all known limbs, very slowly took off his pointy hat. This was something a wizard would normally do only in the most sombre of circumstances.

‘Well, that’s it, then,’ he said. ‘Poor chap’s on his way home. Back to the big desert in the sky.’

* Ankh-Morpork’s leading vet, generally called in by people faced with ailments too serious to be trusted to the general medical profession. Doughnut’s one blind spot was his tendency to assume that every patient was, to a greater or lesser extent, a racehorse.

‘Er, rainforest, possibly,’ said Ponder Stibbons.

‘Maybe Mrs Whitlow could make him some hot nourishing soup?’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

Archchancellor Ridcully thought about the house-keeper’s hot nourishing soup. ‘Kill or cure, I suppose,’ he murmured. He patted the Librarian carefully. ‘Buck up, old chap,’ he said. ‘Soon have you back on your feet and continuing to make a valued contribution.’

‘Knuckles,’ said the Dean helpfully.

‘Say again?’

‘Knuckles, rather than feet.’

‘Castors,’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

‘Bad taste, that man,’ said the Archchancellor.

They wandered out of the room. From the corridor came their retreating voices:

‘Looked very pale around the antimacassar, I thought.’

‘Surely there’s some sort of a cure?’

‘The old place won’t be the same without him.’

‘Definitely one of a kind.’

When they’d gone the Librarian reached up cautiously, pulled a piece of blanket over his head, cuddled his hot-water bottle and sneezed.

Now there were *two* hot-water bottles, one of them a lot bigger than the other and with a teddy bear cover in red fur.

* * *

Light travels slowly on the Disc and is slightly heavy, with a tendency to pile up against high mountain ranges. Research wizards have speculated that there is

another, much speedier type of light which allows the slower light to be seen, but since this moves too fast to see they have been unable to find a use for it.

This *does* mean that, despite the Disc being flat, everywhere does not experience the same time at, for want of a better term, the same time. When it was so late at night in Ankh-Morpork that it was early in the morning, elsewhere it was . . .

. . . but there were no hours here. There was dawn and dusk, morning and afternoon, and presumably there was midnight and midday, but mainly there was heat. And redness. Something as artificial and human as an hour wouldn't last five minutes here. It would be dried out and shrivelled up in seconds.

Above all, there was silence. It was not the chilly, bleak silence of endless space, but the burning organic silence you get when, across a thousand miles of shimmering red horizons, everything is too tired to make a sound.

But, as the ear of observation panned across the desert, it picked up something like a chant, a reedy little litany that beat against the all-embracing silence like a fly bumping against the windowpane of the universe.

The rather breathless chanter was lost to view because he was standing in a hole dug in the red earth; occasionally some earth was thrown up on the heap behind him. A stained and battered pointy hat bobbed about in time with the tuneless tune. The word 'Wizzard' had, perhaps, once been embroidered on it in sequins. They had fallen off, but the word was

still there in brighter red where the hat's original colour showed through. Several dozen small flies orbited it.

The words went something like this:

'Grubs! That's what we're going to eat! That's why they call it grub! And what're we doing to get the grub? Why, we're grubbing for it! Hooray!' Another shovelful of earth arced on to the heap, and the voice said, rather more quietly: 'I wonder if you can eat flies?'

They say the heat and the flies here can drive a man insane. But you don't have to believe that, and nor does that bright mauve elephant that just cycled past.

Strangely enough, the madman in the hole was the only person currently on the continent who might throw any kind of light on a small drama being enacted a thousand miles away and several metres below, where the opal miner known only to his mates as Strewth was about to make the most valuable yet dangerous discovery of his career.

Strewth's pick knocked aside the rock and dust of millennia, and something gleamed in the candlelight.

It was green, like frosty green fire.

Carefully, his mind suddenly as frozen as the light under his fingers, he picked away at the loose rock. The opal picked up and reflected more and more light on to his face as the debris fell away. There seemed to be no end to the glow.

Finally, he let his breath out in one go.

'Strewth!'

If he'd found a little piece of green opal, say about

the size of a bean, he'd have called his mates over and they'd have knocked off for a few beers. A piece the size of his fist would have had him pounding the floor. But with this . . . He was still standing there, brushing it gently with his fingers, when the other miners noticed the light and hurried over.

At least . . . they started out hurrying. As they came closer, they slowed to a kind of reverential walk.

No one said anything for a moment. The green light shone on their faces.

Then one of the men whispered: 'Good on yer, Strewth.'

'There isn't enough money in all the world, mate.'

'Watch out, it might just be a glaze . . .'

'Still worth a mint. Go on, Strewth . . . get it out.'

They watched like cats as the pick pried loose more and more rock, and found an edge. And another edge.

Now Strewth's fingers began to shake.

'Careful, mate . . . there's a side of it . . .'

The men took a step back as the last of the obscuring earth was knocked away. The thing *was* oblong, although the bottom edge was a confusion of twisted opal and dirt.

Strewth reversed his pick and laid the wooden handle against the glowing crystal.

'Strewth, it's no good,' he said. 'I just *gots* to know . . .'

He tapped the rock.

It echoed.

'Can't be hollow, can it?' said one of the miners. 'Never heard of that.'

Strewh picked up a crowbar. ‘Right! Let’s—’

There was a faint *plink*. A large piece of opal broke away near the bottom. It turned out to be no thicker than a plate.

It revealed a couple of toes, which moved very slowly inside their iridescent shell.

‘Oh, *strewh*,’ said a miner, as they backed further away. ‘It’s *alive*.’

Ponder *knew* he should never have let Ridcully look at the invisible writings. Wasn’t it a basic principle never to let your employer know what it is you actually *do* all day?

But no matter what precautions you took, sooner or later the boss was bound to come in and poke around and say things like, ‘Is this where you work, then?’ and ‘I thought I sent a memo out about people bringing in potted plants,’ and ‘What d’you call that thing with the keyboard?’

And this had been particularly problematical for Ponder, because reading the invisible writings was a delicate and meticulous job, suited to the kind of temperament that follows Grand Prix Continental Drift and keeps bonsai mountains as a hobby or even drives a Volvo. It needed painstaking care. It needed a mind that could enjoy doing jigsaw puzzles in a dark room. It did not need Mustrum Ridcully.

The hypothesis behind invisible writings was laughably complicated. All books are tenuously connected through L-space and, therefore, the content of any book ever written *or yet to be written*

may, in the right circumstances, be deduced from a sufficiently close study of books already in existence. Future books exist *in potentia*, as it were, in the same way that a sufficiently detailed study of a handful of primal ooze will eventually hint at the future existence of prawn crackers.

But the primitive techniques used hitherto, based on ancient spells like Weezencake's Unreliable Algorithm, had meant that it took years to put together even the ghost of a page of an unwritten book.

It was Ponder's particular genius that he had found a way around this by considering the phrase, 'How do you know it's not possible until you've tried?' And experiments with Hex, the University's thinking engine, had found that, indeed, many things are not impossible *until* they have been tried.

Like a busy government which only passes expensive laws prohibiting some new and interesting thing when people have actually found a way of doing it, the universe relied a great deal on things *not* being tried at all.

When something *is* tried, Ponder found, it often does turn out to be impossible very quickly, but takes a little while for this to really be the case* – in effect, for the overworked laws of causality to hurry to the scene and pretend it has been impossible all along. Using Hex to remake the attempt in minutely different ways at very high speed had resulted in a high success rate, and

* In the case of cold fusion, this was longer than usual.

he was now assembling whole paragraphs in a matter of hours.

‘It’s like a conjurin’ trick, then,’ Ridcully had said. ‘You’re pullin’ the tablecloth away before all the crockery has time to remember to fall over.’

And Ponder had winced and said, ‘Yes, exactly like that, Archchancellor. Well done.’

And that had led to all the trouble with *How to Dynamically Manage People for Dynamic Results in a Caring Empowering Way in Quite a Short Time Dynamically*. Ponder didn’t know when this book would be written, or even in which world it might be published, but it was obviously going to be popular because random trawls in the depths of L-space often turned up fragments. Perhaps it wasn’t even just one book.

And the fragments had been on Ponder’s desk when Ridcully had been poking around.

Unfortunately, like many people who are instinctively bad at something, the Archchancellor prided himself on how good at it he was. Ridcully was to management what King Herod was to the Bethlehem Playgroup Association.

His mental approach to it could be visualized as a sort of business flowchart with, at the top, a circle entitled ‘Me, who does the telling’ and, connected below it by a line, a large circle entitled ‘Everyone else’.

Until now this had worked quite well, because, although Ridcully was an impossible manager, the University was impossible to manage and so everything worked seamlessly.

And it would have continued to do so if he hadn't suddenly started to see the point in preparing career development packages and, worst of all, job descriptions.

As the Lecturer in Recent Runes put it: 'He called me in and asked me what I did, exactly. Have you ever heard of such a thing? What sort of question is that? This is a *university!*'

'He asked *me* whether I had any personal worries,' said the Senior Wrangler. 'I don't see why I have to stand for that sort of thing.'

'And did you see that sign on his desk?' the Dean had said.

'You mean the one that says, "The Buck Starts Here"?'

'No, the other one. The one which says, "When You're Up to Your Ass in Alligators, Today Is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life."'

'And that means . . . ?'

'I don't think it's supposed to *mean* anything. I think it's just supposed to *be*.'

'Be what?'

'Pro-active, I think. It's a word he's using a lot.'

'What does that mean?'

'Well . . . in favour of activity, I suppose.'

'Really? Dangerous. In my experience, inactivity sees you through.'

Altogether, it was not a happy university at the moment, and mealtimes were the worst. Ponder tended to be isolated at one end of the High Table as the unwilling architect of this sudden tendency on the

part of the Archchancellor to try to Weld Them Into A Lean Mean Team. The wizards had no intention of being lean, but were getting as mean as anything.

On top of that, Ridcully's sudden interest in taking an interest meant that Ponder had to explain something about his own current project, and one aspect of Ridcully that had not changed was his horrible habit of, Ponder suspected, deliberately misunderstanding things.

Ponder had long been struck by the fact that the Librarian, an ape – at least generally an ape, although this evening he seemed to have settled on being a small table set with a red-furred tea service – was, well, so human shaped. In fact, so many things were pretty much the *same* shape. Nearly everything you met was really a sort of complicated tube with two eyes and four arms or legs or wings. Oh, or they were fish. Or insects. All right, spiders as well. And a few odd things like starfish and whelks. But still there was a remarkably unimaginative range of designs. Where were the six-armed, six-eyed monkeys pinwheeling through the jungle canopy?

Oh, yes, octopussies too, but that was the point, they were really only a kind of underwater spider . . .

Ponder had poked around among the University's more or less abandoned Museum of Quite Unusual Things, and noticed something rather odd. Whoever had designed the skeletons of creatures had even less imagination than whoever had done the outsides. At least the outside-designer had tried a few novelties in the spots, wool and stripes department, but the

bone-builder had generally just put a skull on a ribcage, shoved a pelvis in further along, stuck on some arms and legs and had the rest of the day off. Some ribcages were longer, some legs were shorter, some hands became wings, but they all seemed to be based on one design, one size stretched or shrunk to fit all.

Not to his very great surprise, Ponder seemed to be the only one around who found this at all interesting. He'd point out to people that fish were amazingly fish-shaped, and they'd look at him as if he'd gone mad.

Palaeontology and archaeology and other skulduggery were not subjects that interested wizards. Things are buried for a reason, they considered. There's no point in wondering what it was. Don't go digging things up in case they won't let you bury them again.

The most coherent theory was one he recalled from his nurse when he was small. Monkeys, she'd averred, were bad little boys who hadn't come in when called, and seals were bad little boys who'd lazed around on the beach instead of attending to their lessons. She hadn't said that birds were bad little boys who'd gone too close to the cliff edge, and in any case jellyfish would be more likely, but Ponder couldn't help thinking that, harmlessly insane though the woman had been, she might have had just the glimmerings of a point . . .

He was spending most nights now watching Hex trawl the invisible writings for any hints. In theory,