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WATCH . . .
This is space. It's sometimes called the final frontier.

(Except that of course you can't have a *final* frontier, because there'd be nothing for it to be a frontier *to*, but as frontiers go, it's pretty penultimate . . .)

And against the wash of stars a nebula hangs, vast and black, one red giant gleaming like the madness of gods . . .

And then the gleam is seen as the glint in a giant eye and it is eclipsed by the blink of an eyelid and the darkness moves a flipper and Great A'Tuin, star turtle, swims onward through the void.

On its back, four giant elephants. On their shoulders, rimmed with water, glittering under its tiny orbiting sunlet, spinning majestically around the mountains at its frozen Hub, lies the Discworld, world and mirror of worlds.

Nearly unreal.

Reality is not digital, an on-off state, but analog. Something *gradual*. In other words, reality is a quality that things possess in the same way that they possess, say, weight. Some people are more real than others, for example. It has been estimated that there are only about five hundred *real* people on any given planet, which is why they keep unexpectedly

running into one another all the time.

The Discworld is as unreal as it is possible to be while still being just real enough to exist.

And just real enough to be in real trouble.

About thirty miles Turnwise of Ankh-Morpork the surf boomed on the wind-blown, seagrass-waving, sand-dune-covered spit of land where the Circle Sea met the Rim Ocean.

The hill itself was visible for miles. It wasn't very high, but lay amongst the dunes like an upturned boat or a very unlucky whale, and was covered in scrub trees. No rain fell here, if it could possibly avoid it. Although the wind sculpted the dunes around it, the low summit of the hill remained in an everlasting, ringing calm.

Nothing but the sand had changed here in hundreds of years.

Until now.

A crude hut of driftwood had been built on the long curve of the beach, although describing it as 'built' was a slander on skilled crude hut builders throughout the ages; if the sea had simply been left to pile the wood up it might have done a better job.

And, inside, an old man had just died.

'Oh,' he said. He opened his eyes and looked around the interior of the hut. He hadn't seen it very clearly for the past ten years.

Then he swung, if not his legs, then at least the memory of his legs off the pallet of sea-heather and stood up. Then he went outside, into the diamond-bright morning. He was interested to see that he was still wearing a ghostly image of his ceremonial robe – stained and frayed, but still recognizable as having

originally been a dark red plush with gold frogging – even though he was dead. Either your clothes died when you did, he thought, or maybe you just mentally dressed yourself from force of habit.

Habit also led him to the pile of driftwood beside the hut. When he tried to gather a few sticks, though, his hands passed through them.

He swore.

It was then that he noticed a figure standing by the water's edge, looking out to sea. It was leaning on a scythe. The wind whipped at its black robes.

He started to hobble towards it, remembered he was dead, and began to stride. He hadn't stridden for decades, but it was amazing how it all came back to you.

Before he was halfway to the dark figure, it spoke to him.

DECCAN RIBOBE, it said.

'That's me.'

LAST KEEPER OF THE DOOR.

'Well, I suppose so.'

Death hesitated.

YOU ARE OR YOU AREN'T,' he said.

Deccan scratched his nose. Of course, he thought, you have to be able to touch *yourself*. Otherwise you'd fall to bits.

'*Technic*'ly, a Keeper has to be invested by the High Priestess,' he said. 'And there ain't been a High Priestess for thousands o' years. See, I just learned it all from old Tendo, who lived here before me. He jus' said to me one day, "Deccan, it looks as though I'm dyin', so it's up to you now, 'cos if there's no-one left that remembers properly it'll all start happening again and you know what that means." Well, fair enough.'

But that's not what you'd call a proper investmenting, I'd say.'

He looked up at the sandy hill.

'There was jus' me and him,' he said. 'And then jus' me, remembering Holy Wood. And now . . .' He raised his hand to his mouth.

'Oe-er,' he said.

YES, said Death.

It would be wrong to say a look of panic passed across Deccan Ribobe's face, because at that moment it was several yards away and wearing a sort of fixed grin, as if it had seen the joke at last. But his spirit was definitely worried.

'See, the thing is,' it said hastily, 'no-one ever comes here, see, apart from the fishermen from the next bay, and they just leaves the fish and runs off on account of superstition and I couldn't sort of go off to find an apprentice or somethin' because of keepin' the fires alight and doin' the chantin' . . .'

YES.

' . . . It's a terrible responsibility, bein' the only one able to do your job . . .'

YES, said Death.

'Well, of course, I'm not telling *you* anything . . .'

NO.

' . . . I mean, I was hopin' someone'd get shipwrecked or somethin', or come treasure huntin', and I could explain it like old Tendo explained it to me, teach 'em the chants, get it all sorted out before I died . . .'

YES?

'I s'pose there's no chance that I could sort of . . .'

NO.

'Thought not,' said Deccan despondently.

He looked at the waves crashing down on the shore.

‘Used to be a big city down there, thousands of years ago,’ he said. ‘I mean, where the sea is. When it’s stormy you can hear the ole temple bells ringin’ under the sea.’

I KNOW.

‘I used to sit out here on windy nights, listenin’. Used to imagine all them dead people down there, ringin’ the bells.’

AND NOW WE MUST GO.

‘Ole Tendo said there was somethin’ under the hill there that could make people do things. Put strange fancies in their ’eads,’ said Deccan, reluctantly following the stalking figure. ‘I never had any strange fancies.’

BUT YOU WERE CHANTING, said Death. He snapped his fingers.

A horse ceased trying to graze the sparse dune grass and trotted up to Death. Deccan was surprised to see that it left hoofprints in the sand. He’d have expected sparks, or at least fused rock.

‘Er,’ he said, ‘can you tell me, er . . . what happens now?’

Death told him.

‘Thought so,’ said Deccan glumly.

Up on the low hill the fire that had been burning all night collapsed in a shower of ash. A few embers still glowed, though.

Soon they would go out.

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They went out. **Copyrighted Material**

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Nothing happened for a whole day. Then, in a little hollow on the edge of the brooding hill, a few grains of sand shifted and left a tiny hole.

Something emerged. Something invisible. Something joyful and selfish and marvellous. Something as intangible as an idea, which is exactly what it was. A wild idea.

It was old in a way not measurable by any calendar known to Man and what it had, right now, was memories and needs. It remembered life, in other times and other universes. It needed people.

It rose against the stars, changing shape, coiling like smoke.

There were lights on the horizon.

It *liked* lights.

It regarded them for a few seconds and then, like an invisible arrow, extended itself towards the city and sped away.

It liked *action*, too . . .

And several weeks went past.

There's a saying that all roads lead to Ankh-Morpork, greatest of Discworld cities.

At least, there's a *saying* that there's a saying that all roads lead to Ankh-Morpork.

And it's wrong. All roads lead away from Ankh-Morpork, but sometimes people just walk along them the wrong way.

Poets long ago gave up trying to describe the city. Now the more cunning ones try to excuse it. They say,

well, maybe it is smelly, maybe it is overcrowded, maybe it is a bit like Hell would be if they shut the fires off and stabled a herd of incontinent cows there for a year, but you must admit that it is full of sheer, vibrant, dynamic *life*. And this is true, even though it is poets that are saying it. But people who aren't poets say, so what? Mattresses tend to be full of life too, and no-one writes odes to them. Citizens hate living there and, if they have to move away on business or adventure or, more usually, until some statute of limitations runs out, can't wait to get back so they can enjoy hating living there some more. They put stickers on the backs of their carts saying 'Ankh-Morpork – Loathe It or Leave It'. They call it The Big Wahooni, after the fruit.*

Every so often a ruler of the city builds a wall around Ankh-Morpork, ostensibly to keep enemies out. But Ankh-Morpork doesn't fear enemies. In fact it welcomes enemies, provided they are enemies with money to spend.† It has survived flood, fire, hordes, revolutions and dragons. Sometimes by accident, admittedly, but it has survived them. The cheerful and irrecoverably venal spirit of the

* This is the one that grows only in certain parts of heathen Howondaland. It's twenty feet long, covered in spikes the colour of ear wax, and smells like an anteater that's eaten a very bad ant.

† In fact the Guild of Merchants' famous publication *Wellcome to Ankh-Morporke, Citie of One Thousand Surprises* now has an entire section entitled 'Soe you're a Barbaerian Invader?' which has notes on night life, folklorique bargains in the bazaar and, under the heading 'Steppe-ing Out', a list of restaurants that do a dependable mares' milk and yak pudding. And many a pointed-helmeted vandal has trotted back to his freezing yurt wondering why he seems to be a great deal poorer and the apparent owner of a badly-woven rug, a litre of undrinkable wine and a stuffed purple donkey in a straw hat.

city has been proof against anything.

Until now.

Boom.

The explosion removed the windows, the door and most of the chimney.

It was the sort of thing you expected in the Street of Alchemists. The neighbours *preferred* explosions, which were at least identifiable and soon over. They were better than the smells, which crept up on you.

Explosions were part of the scenery, such as was left.

And this one was pretty good, even by the standards of local connoisseurs. There was a deep red heart to the billowing black smoke which you didn't often see. The bits of semi-molten brickwork were more molten than usual. It was, they considered, quite impressive.

Boom.

A minute or two after the explosion a figure lurched out of the ragged hole where the door had been. It had no hair, and what clothes it still had were on fire.

It staggered up to the small crowd that was admiring the devastation and by chance laid a sooty hand on a hot-meat-pie-and-sausage-in-a-bun salesman called Cut-me-own-Throat Dibbler, who had an almost magical ability to turn up wherever a sale might be made.

'Looking,' it said, in a dreamy, stunned voice, 'f'r a word. Tip of my tongue.'

'Blister?' volunteered Throat.

He recovered his commercial senses. 'After an

experience like that,' he added, proffering a pastry case full of so much reclaimed organic debris that it was very nearly sapient, 'what you need is to get a hot meat pie inside you—'

'Nonono. 'S not blister. 'S what you say when you've discovered something. You goes running out into the street shoutin'," said the smouldering figure urgently. "'S'pecial word,' it added, its brow creasing under the soot.

The crowd, reluctantly satisfied that there were going to be no more explosions, gathered around. This might be nearly as good.

'Yeah, that's right,' said an elderly man, filling his pipe. 'You runs out shouting "Fire! Fire!"' He looked triumphant.

'S not that . . . ?

'Or, "Help!" or—'

'No, he's right,' said a woman with a basket of fish on her head. 'There's a special word. It's foreign.'

'Right, right,' said her neighbour. 'Special foreign word for people who've discovered something. It was invented by some foreign bugger in his bath—'

'Well,' said the pipe man, lighting it off the alchemist's smouldering hat, 'I for one don't see why people in this city need to go round shouting heathen lingo just 'cos they've had a bath. Anyway, look at him. He ain't had a bath. He *needs* a bath, but he ain't had one. What's he want to go round shouting foreign lingo for? We've got perfectly satisfactory words for shoutin.'

'Like what?' said Cut-me-own-Throat.

The pipe-smoker hesitated. 'Well,' he said, 'like . . . "I've discovered something" . . . or . . . "Hooray" . . .'

'No, I'm thinking about the bugger over Tsort way,

or somewhere. He was in his bath and he had this idea for something, and he ran out down the street yelling.'

'Yelling what?'

'Dunno. P'raps "Give me a towel!"'

'Bet he'd be yellin' all right if he tried that sort of thing round here,' said Throat cheerfully. 'Now, ladies and gents, I have here some sausage in a bun that'd make your—'

'Eureka,' said the soot-coloured one, swaying back and forth.

'What about it?' said Throat.

'No, that's the word. Eureka.' A worried grin spread across the black features. 'It means "I have it"'

'Have what?' said Throat.

'*It*. At least, I *had* it. Octo-cellulose. Amazing stuff. Had it in my hand. But I held it too close to the fire,' said the figure, in the perplexed tones of the nearly concussed. 'V'ry important fact. Mus' make a note of it. *Don't let it get hot*. V'ry important. Mus' write down v'ry important fact.'

He tottered back into the smoking ruins.

Dibbler watched him go.

'Wonder what that was all about?' he said. Then he shrugged and raised his voice to a shout. 'Meat pies! Hot sausages! Inna bun! So fresh the pig h'an't noticed they're gone!'

The glittering, swirling idea from the hill had watched all this. The alchemist didn't even know it was there. All he knew was that he was being unusually inventive today.

Now it had spotted the pie merchant's mind.

It knew that kind of mind. It loved minds like that.

A mind that could sell nightmare pies could sell dreams.

It leaped.

On a hill far away the breeze stirred the cold, grey ash.

Further down the hill, in a crack in a hollow between two rocks where a dwarf juniper bush struggled for a living, a little trickle of sand began to move.

Boom.

A fine film of plaster dust drifted down on to the desk of Mustrum Ridcully, the new Archchancellor of Unseen University, just as he was trying to tie a particularly difficult fly.

He glanced out of the stained-glass window. A smoke cloud was rising over uptown Morpork.

‘Bursaar!’

The Bursar arrived within a few seconds, out of breath. Loud noises always upset him.

‘It’s the alchemists, Master,’ he panted.

‘That’s the third time this week. Blasted firework merchants,’ muttered the Archchancellor.

‘I’m afraid so, Master,’ said the Bursar.

‘What do you think they’re doing?’

‘I really couldn’t say, Master,’ said the Bursar, getting his breath back. ‘Alchemy has never interested me. It’s altogether too . . . too . . .’

‘Dangerous,’ said the Archchancellor firmly. ‘Lot of damn mixin’ things up and saying, hey, what’ll happen if we add a drop of the yellow stuff, and then goin’ around without yer eyebrows for a fortnight.’

‘I was going to say impractical,’ said the Bursar. ‘Trying to do things the hard way when we have perfectly simple everyday magic available.’

‘I thought they were trying to cure the philosopher’s stones, or somethin’ said the Archchancellor. ‘Lot of damn nonsense, if you ask me. Anyway, I’m off.’

As the Archchancellor began to sidle out of the room the Bursar hastily waved a handful of papers at him.

‘Before you go, Archchancellor,’ he said desperately, ‘I wonder if you would just care to sign a few—’

‘Not now, man,’ snapped the Archchancellor. ‘Got to see a man about a horse, what?’

‘What?’

‘Right.’ The door closed.

The Bursar stared at it, and sighed.

Unseen University had had many different kinds of Archchancellor over the years. Big ones, small ones, cunning ones, slightly insane ones, extremely insane ones – they’d come, they’d served, in some cases not long enough for anyone to be able to complete the official painting to be hung in the Great Hall, and they’d died. The senior wizard in a world of magic had the same prospects of long-term employment as a pogo stick tester in a minefield.

However, from the Bursar’s point of view this didn’t really have to matter. The name might change occasionally, but what *did* matter was that there always was *an* Archchancellor and the Archchancellor’s most important job, as the Bursar saw it, was to sign things, preferably, from the Bursar’s point of view, without reading them first.

This one was different. For one thing, he was hardly ever in, except to change out of his muddy clothes. And he shouted at people. Usually at the Bursar.

And yet, at the time, it had seemed a really good

idea to elect an Archchancellor who hadn't set foot in the University in forty years.

There had been so much in-fighting between the various orders of wizardry in recent years that, just for once, the senior wizards had agreed that what the University needed was a period of stability, so that they could get on with their scheming and intriguing in peace and quiet for a few months. A search of the records turned up Ridcully the Brown who, after becoming a Seventh Level mage at the incredibly young age of twenty-seven, had quit the University in order to look after his family's estates deep in the country.

He looked ideal.

'Just the chap,' they all said. 'Clean sweep. New broom. A country wizard. Back to the thingumajigs, the *roots* of wizardry. Jolly old boy with a pipe and twinkling eyes. Sort of chap who can tell one herb from another, roams-the-high-forest-with-every-beast-his-brother kind of thing. Sleeps under the stars, like as not. Knows what the wind is saying, we shouldn't wonder. Got a name for all the trees, you bank on it. Speaks to the birds, too.'

A messenger had been sent. Ridcully the Brown had sighed, cursed a bit, found his staff in the kitchen garden where it had been supporting a scarecrow, and had set out.

'And if he's any problem,' the wizards had added, in the privacy of their own heads, 'anyone who talks to trees should be *no* trouble to get rid of.'

And then he'd arrived, and it turned out that Ridcully the Brown *did* speak to the birds. In fact he shouted at birds, and what he normally shouted was, 'Winged you, yer bastard!'

The beasts of the field and fowls of the air *did* know

Ridcully the Brown. They'd got so good at pattern-recognition that, for a radius of about twenty miles around the Ridcully estates, they'd run, hide or in desperate cases attack violently at the mere sight of a pointy hat.

Within twelve hours of arriving, Ridcully had installed a pack of hunting dragons in the butler's pantry, fired his dreadful crossbow at the ravens on the ancient Tower of Art, drunk a dozen bottles of red wine, and rolled off to bed at two in the morning singing a song with words in it that some of the older and more forgetful wizards had to look up.

And then he got up at five o'clock to go duck hunting down in the marshes on the estuary.

And came back complaining that there wasn't a good trout fishin' river for miles. (You couldn't fish in the river Ankh; you had to jump up and down on the hooks even to make them sink.)

And he ordered beer with his breakfast.

And told *jokes*.

On the other hand, thought the Bursar, at least he didn't interfere with the actual running of the University. Ridcully the Brown wasn't the least interested in running anything except maybe a string of hounds. If you couldn't shoot arrows at it, hunt it or hook it, he couldn't see much point in it.

Beer at breakfast! The Bursar shuddered. Wizards weren't at their best before noon, and breakfast in the Great Hall was a quiet, fragile occasion, broken only by coughs, the quiet shuffling of the servants, and the occasional groan. People shouting for kidneys and black pudding and beer were a new phenomenon.

The only person not terrified of the ghostly man was old Windle Poons, who was one hundred and

thirty years old and deaf and, while an expert on ancient magical writings, needed adequate notice and a good run-up to deal with the present day. He'd managed to absorb the fact that the new Archchancellor was going to be one of those hedgerow-and-dickie-bird chappies, it would take a week or two for him to grasp the change of events, and in the meantime he made polite and civilized conversation based on what little he could remember about Nature and things.

On the lines of:

'I expect it must be a, mm, a change for you, mm, sleeping in a real bed, instead of under the, mm, stars?' And: 'These things, mm, here, are called knives and forks, mm.' And: 'This, mm, *green* stuff on the scrambled egg, mm, would it be parsley, do you think?'

But since the new Archchancellor never paid much attention to anything anyone said while he was eating, and Poons never noticed that he wasn't getting any answers, they got along quite well.

Anyway, the Bursar had other problems.

The Alchemists, for one thing. You couldn't trust alchemists. They were too serious-minded.

Boom.

And that was the last one. Whole days went by without being punctuated by small explosions. The city settled down again, which was a foolish thing to do.

What the Bursar failed to consider was that no more bangs doesn't mean they've stopped doing it, whatever it is. It just means they're doing it *right*.

It was midnight. The surf boomed on the beach, and made a phosphorescent glow in the night. Around the

ancient hill, though, the sound seemed as dead as if it was arriving through several layers of velvet.

The hole in the sand was quite big now.

If you could put your ear to it, you might think you could hear applause.

It was still midnight. A full moon glided above the smoke and fumes of Ankh-Morpork, thankful that several thousand miles of sky lay between it and them.

The Alchemists' Guildhall was new. It was always new. It had been explosively demolished and rebuilt four times in the last two years, on the last occasion without a lecture and demonstration room in the hope that this might be a helpful move.

On this night a number of muffled figures entered the building in a surreptitious fashion. After a few minutes the lights in a window on the top floor dimmed and went out.

Well, nearly out.

Something was happening up there. A strange flickering filled the window, very briefly. It was followed by a ragged cheering.

And there was a noise. Not a bang this time, but a strange mechanical purring, like a happy cat at the bottom of a tin drum.

It went *clickaclickaclickaclicka . . . click*.

It went on for several minutes, to a background of cheers. And then a voice said:

'That's all, folks.'

'That's all what?' said the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork, next morning.

The man in front of him shivered with fear.

‘Don’t know, lordship,’ he said. ‘They wouldn’t let me in. They made me wait outside the door, lordship.’

He twisted his fingers together nervously. The Patrician’s stare had him pinned. It was a good stare, and one of the things it was good at was making people go on talking when they thought they had finished.

Only the Patrician knew how many spies he had in the city. This particular one was a servant in the Alchemists’ Guild. He had once had the misfortune to come up before the Patrician accused of malicious lingering, and had then chosen of his own free will to become a spy.*

‘That’s *all*, lordship,’ he whined. ‘There was just this clicking noise and this sort of flickery *glow* under the door. And, er, they said the daylight here was wrong.’

‘Wrong? How?’

‘Er. Dunno, sir. Just wrong, they said. They ought to go somewhere where it was better, they said. Uh. And they told me to go and get them some food.’

The Patrician yawned. There was something infinitely boring about the antics of alchemists.

‘Indeed,’ he said.

‘But they’d had their supper only fifteen minutes before,’ the servant blurted out.

‘Perhaps whatever they were doing makes people hungry,’ said the Patrician.

‘Yes, and the kitchen was all shut up for the night and I had to go and buy a tray of hot sausages in buns from Throat Dibbler.’

‘Indeed.’ The Patrician looked down at the

* The alternative was choosing of his own free will to be thrown into the scorpion pit.

paperwork on his desk. 'Thank you. You may go.'

'You know what, lordship? They liked them. They actually liked them!'

That the Alchemists had a Guild at all was remarkable. Wizards were just as unco-operative, but they also were by nature hierarchical and competitive. They *needed* organization. What was the good of being a wizard of the Seventh Level if you didn't have six other levels to look down on and the Eighth Level to aspire to? You needed other wizards to hate and despise.

Whereas every alchemist was an alchemist alone, working in darkened rooms or hidden cellars and endlessly searching for the big casino – the Philosopher's Stone, the Elixir of Life. They tended to be thin, pink-eyed men, with beards that weren't really beards but more like groups of individual hairs clustering together for mutual protection, and many of them had that vague, unworldly expression that you get from spending too much time in the presence of boiling mercury.

It wasn't that alchemists hated other alchemists. They often didn't notice them, or thought they were walruses.

And so their tiny, despised Guild had never aspired to the powerful status of the Guilds of, say, the Thieves or the Beggars or the Assassins, but devoted itself instead to the aid of widows and families of those alchemists who had taken an overly relaxed attitude to potassium cyanide, for example, or had distilled some interesting fungi, drunk the result, and then stepped off the roof to play with the fairies. There weren't actually very many widows and

orphans, of course, because alchemists found it difficult to relate to other people long enough, and generally if they ever managed to marry it was only to have someone to hold their crucibles.

By and large, the only skill the alchemists of Ankh-Morpork had discovered so far was the ability to turn gold into less gold.

Until now . . .

Now they were full of the nervous excitement of those who have found an unexpected fortune in their bank account and don't know whether to draw people's attention to it or simply take the lot and run.

'The wizards aren't going to like it,' said one of them, a thin, hesitant man called Lully. 'They're going to call it magic. You know they get really *pissed* if they think you're doing magic and you're not a wizard.'

'There isn't any magic involved,' said Thomas Silverfish, the president of the Guild.

'There's the imps.'

'That's not magic. That's just ordinary occult.'

'Well, there's the salamanders.'

'Perfectly normal natural history. Nothing wrong with that.'

'Well, all right. But they'll *call* it magic. You know what they're like.'

The alchemists nodded gloomily.

'They're reactionaries,' said Sendivoge, the Guild secretary. 'Bloated thaumocrats. And the other Guilds, too. What do they know about the march of progress? What do they care? They could have been doing something like this for years, but did they? Not them! Just *think* how we can make people's lives so much . . . well, better. The possibilities are immense.'

'Educational,' said Silverfish.

‘Historical,’ said Lully.

‘And of course there’s entertainment,’ said Peavie, the Guild treasurer. He was a small, nervous man. Most alchemists were nervous, in any case; it came from not knowing what the crucible of bubbling stuff they were experimenting with was going to do next.

‘Well, yes. Obviously some entertainment,’ said Silverfish.

‘Some of the great historical dramas,’ said Peavie. ‘Just picture the scene! You get some actors together, they act it just once, and people all over the Disc will be able to see it as many times as they like! A great saving in wages, by the way,’ he added.

‘But tastefully done,’ said Silverfish. ‘We have a great responsibility to see that nothing is done which is in any way . . .’ his voice trailed off, ‘. . . you know . . . *coarse*.’

‘They’ll stop us,’ said Lully darkly. ‘I know those wizards.’

‘I’ve been giving that some thought,’ said Silverfish. ‘The light’s too bad here anyway. We agreed. We need clear skies. And we need to be a long way away. I think I know just the place.’

‘You know, I can’t believe we’re doing this,’ said Peavie. ‘A month ago it was just a mad idea. And now it’s all worked! It’s just like magic! Only not magical, if you see what I mean,’ he added quickly.

‘Not just illusion, but *real* illusion,’ said Lully.

‘I don’t know if anyone’s thought about this,’ said Peavie, ‘but this could make us a bit of money. Um?’

‘But that isn’t important,’ said Silverfish.

‘No. No, of course not,’ muttered Peavie. He glanced at the others.

‘Shall we watch it again?’ he said, shyly. ‘I don’t

mind turning the handle. And, and . . . well, I know I haven't contributed very much to this project, but I did come up with this, er, this stuff.'

He pulled a very large bag from the pocket of his robe and dropped it on the table. It fell over, and a few fluffy, white mis-shapen balls rolled out.

The alchemists stared at it.

'What is it?' said Lully.

'Well,' said Peavie, uncomfortably, 'what you do is, you take some corn, and you put it in, say, a Number 3 crucible, with some cooking oil, you see, and then you put a plate or something on top of it, and when you heat it up it goes bang, I mean, not *seriously* bang, and when it's stopped banging you take the plate off and it's metamorphosed into these, er, things . . .' he looked at their uncomprehending faces. 'You can eat it,' he mumbled apologetically. 'If you put butter and salt on it, it tastes like salty butter.'

Silverfish reached out a chemical-stained hand and cautiously selected a fluffy morsel. He chewed it thoughtfully.

'Don't really know why I did it,' said Peavie, blushing. 'Just sort of had an idea that it was *right*.'

Silverfish went on chewing.

'Tastes like cardboard,' he said, after a while.

'Sorry,' said Peavie, trying to scoop the rest of the heap back into the sack. Silverfish laid a gentle hand on his arm.

'Mind you,' he said, selecting another puffed morsel, 'it *does* have a certain something, doesn't it? They *do* seem right. What did you say it's called?'

'Hasn't really got a name,' said Peavie. 'I just call it banged grains.'

Silverfish took another one. ‘Funny how you want to go on eating them,’ he said. ‘Sort of more-ish. Banged grains? Right. Anyway . . . gentlemen, let us turn the handle one more time.’

Lully started to wind the film back into the unmagical lantern.

‘You were saying you knew a place where we could really build up the project and where the wizards wouldn’t bother us?’ he said.

Silverfish grabbed a handful of banged grains.

‘It’s along the coast a way,’ he said. ‘Nice and sunny and no-one ever goes there these days. Nothing there but some wind-blown old forest and a temple and sand dunes.’

‘A temple? Gods can get really *pissed* if you—’ Peavie began.

‘Look,’ said Silverfish, ‘the whole area’s been deserted for centuries. There’s nothing there. No people, no gods, no nothing. Just lots of sunlight and land, waiting for us. It’s our chance, lads. We’re not allowed to make magic, we can’t make gold, we can’t even make a living – so let’s make *moving pictures*. Let’s make *history!*’

The alchemists sat back and looked more cheerful.

‘Yeah,’ said Lully.

‘Oh. Right,’ said Peavie.

‘Here’s to moving pictures,’ said Sendivoge, holding up a handful of banged grains. ‘How’d you hear about this place?’

‘Oh, I—’ Silverfish stopped. He looked puzzled. ‘Don’t know,’ he said, eventually. ‘Can’t . . . quite remember. Must have heard about it once and forgot it, and then it just popped into my head. You know how these things happen.’

‘Yeah,’ said Lully. ‘Like with me and the film. It was like I was *remembering* how to do it. Funny old tricks the mind can play.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Yeah.’

‘S’n idea whose time has come, see.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Yeah.’

‘That must be it.’

A slightly worried silence settled over the table. It was the sound of minds trying to put their mental fingers on something that was bothering them.

The air seemed to glitter.

‘What’s this place called?’ said Lully, eventually.

‘Don’t know what it was called in the old days,’ said Silverfish, leaning back and pulling the banged grains towards him. ‘These days they call it the Holy Wood.’

‘Holy Wood,’ said Lully. ‘Sounds . . . familiar.’

There was another silence while they thought about it. It was broken by Sendivog.

‘Oh, well,’ he said cheerfully, ‘Holy Wood, here we come.’

‘Yeah,’ said Silverfish, shaking his head as if to dislodge a disquieting thought. ‘Funny thing, really. I’ve got this feeling . . . that we’ve been going there . . . all this time.’

Several thousand miles under Silverfish, Great A’Tuin the world turtle sculled dreamily on through the starry night.

Reality is a curve.

That’s not the problem. The *problem* is that there isn’t as much as there should be. According to some of

the more mystical texts in the stacks of the library of Unseen University –

– the Discworld’s premier college of wizardry and big dinners, whose collection of books is so massive that it distorts Space and Time –

– at least nine-tenths of all the original reality ever created lies outside the multiverse, and since the multiverse by definition includes absolutely everything that is anything, this puts a bit of a strain on things.

Outside the boundaries of the universes lie the raw realities, the could-have-beens, the might-bes, the never-weres, the wild ideas, all being created and uncreated chaotically like elements in fermenting supernovas.

Just occasionally where the walls of the worlds have worn a bit thin, they can leak *in*.

And reality leaks out.

The effect is like one of those deep-sea geysers of hot water, around which strange submarine creatures find enough warmth and food to make a brief tiny oasis of existence in an environment where there shouldn’t be any existence at all.

The idea of Holy Wood leaked innocently and joyfully into the Discworld.

And reality leaked out.

And was found. For there are Things outside, whose ability to sniff out tiny frail conglomerations of reality made the thing with the sharks and the trace of blood seem very boring indeed.

They began to gather.

A storm slid in across the sand dunes but, where it reached the low hill, the clouds seemed to curve away.

Only a few drops of rain hit the parched soil, and the gale became nothing more than a faint breeze.

It blew sand over the long-dead remains of a fire.

Further down the slope, near a hole that was now big enough for, say, a badger, a small rock dislodged itself and rolled away.

A month went by quickly. It didn't want to hang around.

The Bursar knocked respectfully at the Archchancellor's door and then opened it.

A crossbow bolt nailed his hat to the woodwork.

The Archchancellor lowered the bow and glared at him.

'Bloody dangerous thing to do, wasn't it?' he said. 'You could have caused a nasty accident.'

The Bursar hadn't got where he was today, or rather where he had been ten seconds ago, which was where a calm and self-assured personality was, rather than where he was now, which was on the verge of a mild heart attack, without a tremendous ability to recover from unexpected upsets.

He unpinned his hat from the target chalked on the ancient woodwork.

'No harm done,' he said. No voice could be as calm as that without tremendous effort. 'You can barely see the hole. Why, er, are you shooting at the door, Master?'

'Use your common sense, man! It's dark outside and the damn walls are made of stone. You don't expect me to shoot at the damn walls?'

'Ah,' said the Bursar. 'The door is, er, five hundred

years old, you know,' he added, with finely-tuned reproach.

'Looks it,' said the Archchancellor, bluntly. 'Damn great black thing. What we need around here, man, is a lot less stone and wood and a bit more jolliness. A few sportin' prints, yer know. An ornament or two.'

'I shall see to it directly,' lied the Bursar smoothly. He remembered the sheaf of papers under his arm. 'In the meantime, Master, perhaps you would care to—'

'Right,' said the Archchancellor, ramming his pointed hat on his head. 'Good man. Now, got a sick dragon to see to. Little devil hasn't touched his tar oil for days.'

'Your signature on one or two of—' the Bursar burred hurriedly.

'Can't be havin' with all that stuff,' said the Archchancellor, waving him away. 'Too much damn paper around here as it is. And—' He stared through the Bursar, as if he had just remembered something. 'Saw a funny thing this mornin',' he said. 'Saw a monkey in the quad. Bold as brass.'

'Oh, yes,' said the Bursar, cheerfully. 'That would be the Librarian.'

'Got a pet, has he?'

'No, you misunderstand me, Archchancellor,' said the Bursar cheerfully. 'That *was* the Librarian.'

The Archchancellor stared at him.

The Bursar's smile began to glaze.

'The Librarian's a *monkey*?'

It took some time for the Bursar to explain matters clearly, and then the Archchancellor said: 'What yer tellin' me, then, is that this chap got himself turned into a monkey by magic?'

‘An accident in the Library, yes. Magical explosion. One minute a human, next minute an orang-utan. And you mustn’t call him a monkey, Master. He’s an ape.’

‘Same damn difference, surely?’

‘Apparently not. He gets very, er, aggressive if you call him a monkey.’

‘He doesn’t stick his bottom out at people, does he?’

The Bursar closed his eyes and shuddered. ‘No, Master. You’re thinking of baboons.’

‘Ah.’ The Archchancellor considered this. ‘Haven’t got any of them workin’ here, then?’

‘No, Master. Just the Librarian, Master.’

‘Can’t have it. Can’t have it, yer know. Can’t have damn great hairy things shambling around the place,’ said the Archchancellor firmly. ‘Get rid of him.’

‘Good grief, no! He’s the best Librarian we’ve ever had. And tremendous value for money.’

‘Why? What d’we pay him?’

‘Peanuts,’ said the Bursar promptly. ‘Besides, he’s the only one who knows how the Library actually works.’

‘Turn him back, then. No life for a man, bein’ a monkey.’

‘Ape, Archchancellor. And he seems to prefer it, I’m afraid.’

‘How d’yer know?’ said the Archchancellor suspiciously. ‘Speaks, does he?’

The Bursar hesitated. There was always this trouble with the Librarian. Everyone had got so accustomed to him it was hard to remember a time when the Library was *not* run by a yellow-fanged ape with the strength of three men. If the abnormal goes on long enough it becomes the normal. It was just that,

when you came to explain it to a third party, it sounded odd. He coughed nervously.

‘He says “ook”, Archchancellor,’ he said.

‘And what’s that mean?’

‘Means “no”, Archchancellor.’

‘And how does he say “yes”, then?’

The Bursar had been dreading this. “Oook”, Archchancellor,’ he said.

‘That was the same ook as the other ook!’

‘Oh, no. No. I assure you. There’s a different inflection . . . I mean, when you get used to . . .’, the Bursar shrugged. ‘I suppose we’ve just got into the way of understanding him, Archchancellor.’

‘Well, at least he keeps himself fit,’ said the Archchancellor nastily. ‘Not like the rest of you fellows. I went into the Uncommon Room this morning, and it was full of chaps snoring!’

‘That would be the senior masters, Master,’ said the Bursar. ‘I would say that they are supremely fit, myself.’

‘*Fit?* The Dean looks like a man who’s swallowed a bed!’

‘Ah, but Master,’ said the Bursar, smiling indulgently, ‘the word “fit”, as I understand it, means “appropriate to a purpose”, and I would say the body of the Dean is supremely appropriate to the purpose of sitting around all day and eating big heavy meals.’ The Bursar permitted himself a little smile.

The Archchancellor gave him a look so old-fashioned it might have belonged to an ammonite.

‘That a joke?’ he said, in the suspicious tones of someone who wouldn’t really understand the term ‘sense of humour’ even if you sat down for an hour and explained it to him with diagrams.

'I was just making an observation, Master,' said the Bursar cautiously.

The Archchancellor shook his head. 'Can't stand jokes. Can't stand chaps goin' around tryin' to be funny the whole time. Comes of spendin' too much time sitting indoors. A few twenty-mile runs and the Dean'd be a different man.'

'Well, yes,' said the Bursar. 'He'd be dead.'

'He'd be healthy.'

'Yes, but still dead.'

The Archchancellor irritably shuffled the papers on his desk.

'Slackness,' he muttered. 'Far too much of it going on. Whole place gone to pot. People goin' round sleepin' all day and turnin' into monkeys the whole time. We never even *thought* of turnin' into a monkey when I was a student.' He looked up irritably.

'What was it you wanted?' he snapped.

'What?' said the Bursar, unnerved.

'You wanted me to do somethin', didn't you? You came in to ask me to do somethin'. Probably because I'm the only feller here not fast asleep or sittin' in a tree whoopin' every mornin',' the Archchancellor added.

'Er. I think that's gibbons, Archchancellor.'

'What? What? Do try and make some sense, man!'

The Bursar pulled himself together. He didn't see why he had to be treated like this.

'In *fact*, I wanted to see you about one of the students, Master,' he said coldly.

'Students?' barked the Archchancellor.

'Yes, Master. You know? They're the thinner ones with the pale faces? Because we're a *university*? They come with the whole thing, like rats—'

'I thought we paid people to deal with 'em.'

‘The teaching staff. Yes. But sometimes . . . well, I wonder, Archchancellor, if you would care to look at these examination results . . .’

It was midnight – not the same midnight as before, but a very similar midnight. Old Tom, the tongueless bell in the University bell tower, had just rolled its twelve sonorous silences.

Rainclouds squeezed their last few drops over the city. Ankh-Morpork sprawled under a few damp stars, as real as a brick.

Ponder Stibbons, student wizard, put down his book and rubbed his face.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Ask me anything. Go on. Anything at all.’

Victor Tugelbend, student wizard, picked up his battered copy of *Necrotelicomnicon Discussed for Students, with Practical Experiments* and turned the pages at random. He was lying on Ponder’s bed. At least, his shoulder blades were. His body extended up the wall. This is a perfectly normal position for a student taking his ease.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Right. OK? What, right, what is the name of the outer-dimensional monster whose distinctive cry is “Yerwhatyerwhatyerwhat”?’

‘Yob Soddoth,’ said Ponder promptly.

‘Yeah. How does the monster Tshup Aklathep, Infernal Star Toad with A Million Young, torture its victims to death?’

‘It . . . don’t tell me . . . it holds them down and shows them pictures of its children until their brains implode.’

‘Yep. Always wondered how that happens, myself,’ said Victor, flicking through the pages. ‘I suppose after

you've said "Yes, he's got your eyes" for the thousandth time you're about ready to commit suicide in any case.'

'You know an awful lot, Victor,' said Ponder admiringly. 'I'm amazed you're still a student.'

'Er, yes,' said Victor. 'Er. Just unlucky at exams, I guess.'

'Go on,' said Ponder, 'Ask me one more.'

Victor opened the book again.

There was a moment's silence.

Then he said, 'Where's Holy Wood?'

Ponder shut his eyes and pounded his forehead. 'Hang on, hang on . . . don't tell me . . .' He opened his eyes. 'What do you mean, where's Holy Wood?' he added sharply. 'I don't remember anything about any Holy Wood.'

Victor stared down at the page. There was nothing about any Holy Wood there.

'I could have sworn I heard . . . I think my mind must be wandering,' he finished lamely. 'It must be all this revision.'

'Yes. It really gets to you, doesn't it? But it'll be worth it, to be a wizard.'

'Yes,' said Victor. 'Can't wait.'

Ponder shut the book.

'Rain's stopped. Let's go over the wall,' he said. 'We deserve a drink.'

Victor wagged a finger. 'Just one drink, then. Got to keep sober,' he said. 'It's Finals tomorrow. Got to keep a clear head!'

'Huh!' said Ponder.

Of course, it is very important to be sober when you take an exam. Many worthwhile careers in the street-cleansing, fruit-picking and subway-guitar-