

THE HISTORY

This is a story about memory. And this much can be remembered . . .

. . . that the Death of the Discworld, for reasons of his own, once rescued a baby girl and took her to his home between the dimensions. He let her grow to become sixteen because he believed that older children were easier to deal with than younger children, and this shows that you can be an immortal anthropomorphic personification and still get things, as it were, dead wrong . . .

. . . that he later hired an apprentice called Mortimer, or Mort for short. Between Mort and Ysabell there was an instant dislike and everyone knows what that means in the long term. As a substitute for the Grim Reaper Mort was a spectacular failure, causing problems that led to a wobbling of Reality and a fight between him and Death which Mort lost . . .

. . . and that, for reasons of his own, Death spared his life and sent him and Ysabell back into the world.

No one knows why Death started to take a practical interest in the human beings he had worked

with for so long. It was probably just curiosity. Even the most efficient rat-catcher will sooner or later take an interest in rats. They might watch rats live and die, and record every detail of rat existence, although they may never themselves actually know what it is like to run the maze.

But if it is true that the act of observing changes the thing which is observed,* it's even more true that it changes the observer.

Mort and Ysabell got married.

They had a child.

This is also a story about sex and drugs and Music With Rocks In.

Well . . .

. . . one out of three ain't bad.

Actually, it's only thirty-three per cent, but it could be worse.

*Because of quantum.

WHERE TO FINISH?

A dark, stormy night. A coach, horses gone, plunging through the rickety, useless fence and dropping, tumbling into the gorge below. It doesn't even strike an outcrop of rock before it hits the dried river-bed far below, and erupts into fragments.

Miss Butts shuffled the paperwork nervously.

Here was one from the gel aged six:

What We Did On our Holiday: What I did On my holiday I staid with grandad he has a big White hors and a garden it is al Black. We had Eg and chips.

Then the oil from the coach-lamps ignites and there is a second explosion, out of which rolls – because there are certain conventions, even in tragedy – a burning wheel.

And another paper, a drawing done at age seven. All in black. Miss Butts sniffed. It wasn't as though the gel had only a black crayon. It was a fact that the Quirm College for Young Ladies had quite expensive crayons of all colours.

* * *

And then, after the last of the ember spits and crackles, there is silence.

And the watcher.

Who turns, and says to someone in the darkness:

YES. I COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING.

And rides away.

Miss Butts shuffled paper again. She was feeling distracted and nervous, a feeling common to anyone who had much to do with the gel. Paper usually made her feel better. It was more dependable.

Then there had been the matter of . . . the accident.

Miss Butts had broken such news before. It was an occasional hazard when you ran a large boarding school. The parents of many of the gels were often abroad on business of one sort or another, and it was sometimes the kind of business where the chances of rich reward go hand in hand with the risks of meeting unsympathetic men.

Miss Butts knew how to handle these occasions. It was painful, but the thing ran its course. There was shock and tears, and then, eventually, it was all over. People had ways of dealing with it. There was a sort of script built into the human mind. Life went on.

But the child had just sat there. It was the *politeness* that scared the daylight out of Miss Butts. She was not an unkind woman, despite a lifetime of being gently dried out on the stove of education, but

she was conscientious and a stickler for propriety and thought she knew how this sort of thing should go and was vaguely annoyed that it wasn't going.

'Er . . . if you would like to be alone, to have a cry—' she'd prompted, in an effort to get things moving on the right track.

'Would that help?' Susan had said.

It would have helped Miss Butts.

All she'd been able to manage was: 'I wonder if, perhaps, you fully understood what I have told you?'

The child had stared at the ceiling as though trying to work out a difficult problem in algebra and then said, 'I expect I will.'

It was as if she'd already known, and had dealt with it in some way. Miss Butts had asked the teachers to watch Susan carefully. They'd said that was hard, because . . .

There was a tentative knock on Miss Butts's study door, as if it was being made by someone who'd really prefer not to be heard. She returned to the present.

'Come,' she said.

The door swung open.

Susan always made no sound. The teachers had all remarked upon it. It was uncanny, they said. She was always in front of you when you least expected it.

'Ah, Susan,' said Miss Butts, a tight smile scuttling across her face like a nervous tick over a worried sheep. 'Please sit down.'

'Of course, Miss Butts.'

Miss Butts shuffled the papers.

‘Susan . . .’

‘Yes, Miss Butts?’

‘I’m sorry to say that it appears you have been missed in lessons again.’

‘I don’t understand, Miss Butts.’

The headmistress leaned forward. She felt vaguely annoyed with herself, but . . . there was something frankly unlovable about the child. Academically brilliant at the things she liked doing, of course, but that was just it; she was brilliant in the same way that a diamond is brilliant, all edges and chilliness.

‘Have you been . . . doing it?’ she said. ‘You promised you were going to stop this silliness.’

‘Miss Butts?’

‘You’ve been making yourself invisible again, haven’t you?’

Susan blushed. So, rather less pinkly, did Miss Butts. I mean, she thought, it’s *ridiculous*. It’s against all reason. It’s— oh, no . . .

She turned her head and shut her eyes.

‘Yes, Miss Butts?’ said Susan, just before Miss Butts said, ‘Susan?’

Miss Butts shuddered. This was something else the teachers had mentioned. Sometimes Susan answered questions just before you asked them . . .

She steadied herself.

‘You’re still sitting there, are you?’

‘Of course, Miss Butts.’

Ridiculous.

It wasn’t invisibility, she told herself. She just makes herself inconspicuous. She . . . who . . .

She concentrated. She'd written a little memo to herself against this very eventuality, and it was pinned to the file.

She read:

You are interviewing Susan Sto Helit. Try not to forget it.

'Susan?' she ventured.

'Yes, Miss Butts?'

If Miss Butts concentrated, Susan was sitting in front of her. If she made an effort, she could hear the gel's voice. She just had to fight against a pressing tendency to believe that she was alone.

'I'm afraid Miss Cumber and Miss Greggs have complained,' she managed.

'I'm always in class, Miss Butts.'

'I dare say you are. Miss Traitor and Miss Stamp say they see you all the time.' There'd been quite a staffroom argument about that.

'Is it because you *like* Logic and Maths and don't like Language and History?'

Miss Butts concentrated. There was no way the child could have left the room. If she really stressed her mind, she could catch a suggestion of a voice saying, 'Don't know, Miss Butts.'

'Susan, it is really *most* upsetting when—'

Miss Butts paused. She looked around the study, and then glanced at a note pinned to the papers in front of her. She appeared to read it, looked puzzled for a moment, and then rolled it up and dropped it into the wastepaper basket. She picked up a pen and, after staring into space for a moment, turned her attention to the school accounts.

Susan waited politely for a while, and then got up and left as quietly as possible.

Certain things have to happen before other things. Gods play games with the fates of men. But first they have to get all the pieces on the board, and look all over the place for the dice.

It was raining in the small, mountainous country of Llamedos. It was always raining in Llamedos. Rain was the country's main export. It had rain mines.

Imp the bard sat under the evergreen, more out of habit than any real hope that it would keep the rain off. Water just dribbled through the spiky leaves and formed rivulets down the twigs, so that it was really a sort of rain concentrator. Occasional *lumps* of rain would splat on to his head.

He was eighteen, extremely talented and, currently, not at ease with his life.

He tuned his harp, his beautiful new harp, and watched the rain, tears running down his face and mingling with the drops.

Gods *like* people like this.

It is said that whosoever the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. In fact, whosoever the gods wish to destroy, they first hand the equivalent of a stick with a fizzing fuse and Acme Dynamite Company written on the side. It's more interesting, and doesn't take so long.

Susan mooched along the disinfectant-smelling corridors. She wasn't particularly worried about what Miss Butts was going to think. She didn't

usually worry about what anyone thought. She didn't know why people forgot about her when she wanted them to, but afterwards they seemed a bit embarrassed about raising the subject.

Sometimes, some teachers had trouble seeing her. This was fine. She'd generally take a book into the classroom and read it peacefully, while all around her The Principal Exports of Klatch happened to other people.

It was, undoubtedly, a beautiful harp. Very rarely a craftsman gets something so right that it is impossible to imagine an improvement. He hadn't bothered with ornamentation. That would have been some kind of sacrilege.

And it was new, which was very unusual in Llamedos. Most of the harps were old. It wasn't as if they wore out. Sometimes they needed a new frame, or a neck, or new strings – but the *harp* went on. The old bards said they got better as they got older, although old men tend to say this sort of thing regardless of daily experience.

Imp plucked a string. The note hung in the air, and faded. The harp was fresh and bright and already it sang out like a bell. What it might be like in a hundred years' time was unimaginable.

His father had said it was rubbish, that the future was written in stones, not notes. That had only been the start of the row.

And then he'd said things, and *he'd* said things, and suddenly the world was a new and unpleasant place, because things can't be unsaid.

He'd said, 'You don't know anything! You're just

a stupid old man! But I'm giving my life to music! One day soon *everyone* will say I was the greatest musician in the world!

Stupid words. As if any bard cared for any opinions except those of other bards, who'd spent a lifetime learning how to listen to music.

But said, nevertheless. And, if they're said with the right passion and the gods are feeling bored, sometimes the universe will reform itself around words like that. Words have always had the power to change the world.

Be careful what you wish for. You never know who will be listening.

Or what, for that matter.

Because, perhaps, something could be drifting through the universes, and a few words by the wrong person at the right moment may just cause it to veer in its course . . .

Far away in the bustling metropolis of Ankh-Morpork there was a brief crawling of sparks across an otherwise bare wall and then . . .

. . . there was a shop. An old musical instrument shop. No one remarked on its arrival. As soon as it appeared, it had always been there.

Death sat staring at nothing, chinbone resting on his hands.

Albert approached very carefully.

It had continually puzzled Death in his more introspective moments, and this was one of them, why his servant always walked the same path across the floor.

I MEAN, he thought, CONSIDER THE SIZE OF THE ROOM . . .

. . . which went on to infinity, or as near infinity as makes no difference. In fact it was about a mile. That's big for a room, whereas infinity you can hardly see.

Death had got rather flustered when he'd created the house. Time and space were things to be manipulated, not obeyed. The internal dimensions had been a little too generous. He'd forgotten to make the outside bigger than the inside. It was the same with the garden. When he'd begun to take a little more interest in these things, he'd realized the role people seemed to think that *colour* played in concepts like, for example, roses. But he'd made them black. He liked black. It went with anything. It went with everything, sooner or later.

The humans he'd known – and there had been a few – had responded to the impossible size of the rooms in a strange way, by simply ignoring them.

Take Albert, now. The big door had opened, Albert had stepped through, carefully balancing a cup and saucer . . .

. . . and a moment later had been well inside the room, on the edge of the relatively small square of carpet that surrounded Death's desk. Death gave up wondering how Albert covered the intervening space when it dawned on him that, to his servant, there was *no* intervening space . . .

'I've brought you some camomile tea, sir,' said Albert.

HMM?

‘Sir?’

SORRY. I WAS THINKING. WHAT WAS IT YOU SAID?
‘Camomile tea?’

I THOUGHT THAT WAS A KIND OF SOAP.

‘You can put it in soap *or* tea, sir,’ said Albert. He was worried. He was always worried when Death started to think about things. It was the wrong job for thinking about things. And he thought about them in the wrong way.

HOW VERY USEFUL. CLEAN INSIDE AND OUT.

Death put his chin on his hands again.

‘Sir?’ said Albert, after a while.

HMM?

‘It’ll get cold if you leave it.’

ALBERT . . .

‘Yessir?’

I HAVE BEEN WONDERING . . .

‘Sir?’

WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT? SERIOUSLY? WHEN YOU GET RIGHT DOWN TO IT?

‘Oh. Er. Couldn’t really say, sir.’

I DIDN’T WANT TO DO IT, ALBERT. YOU KNOW THAT. NOW I KNOW WHAT SHE MEANT. NOT JUST ABOUT THE KNEES.

‘Who, sir?’

There was no reply.

Albert looked back when he’d reached the door. Death was staring into space again. No one could stare quite like him.

Not being seen wasn’t a big problem. It was the things that *she* kept seeing that were more of a worry.

There were the dreams. They were only dreams, of course. Susan knew that modern theory said that dreams were only images thrown up while the brain was filing the day's events. She would have been more reassured if the day's events had *ever* included flying white horses, huge dark rooms and lots of skulls.

At least they were only dreams. She'd seen other things. For example, she'd never mentioned the strange woman in the dormitory the night Rebecca Snell put a tooth under the pillow. Susan had watched her come through the open window and stand by the bed. She looked a bit like a milkmaid and not at all frightening, even though she had walked *through* the furniture. There had been the jingle of coins. Next morning the tooth had gone and Rebecca was richer by one 50-pence coin.

Susan hated that sort of thing. She knew that mentally unstable people told children about the Tooth Fairy, but that was no reason for one to exist. It suggested woolly thinking. She disliked woolly thinking, which in any case was a major misdemeanour under the regime of Miss Butts.

It was not, otherwise, a particularly bad one. Miss Eulalie Butts and her colleague, Miss Delcross, had founded the college on the astonishing idea that, since gels had nothing much to do until someone married them, they may as well occupy themselves with learning things.

There were plenty of schools in the world, but they were all run either by the various churches or by the Guilds. Miss Butts objected to churches on

logical grounds and deplored the fact that the only Guilds that considered girls worth educating were the Thieves and the Seamstresses. But it was a big and dangerous world out there, and a gel could do worse than face it with a sound knowledge of geometry and astronomy under her bodice. For Miss Butts sincerely believed that there were no basic differences between boys and gels.

At least, none worth talking about.

None that Miss Butts would talk about, anyway.

And therefore she believed in encouraging logical thought and a healthy enquiring mind among the nascent young women in her care, a course of action which is, as far as wisdom is concerned, on a par with going alligator-hunting in a cardboard boat during the sinking season.

For example, when she lectured to the school, pointed chin trembling, on the perils to be found outside in the town, three hundred healthy enquiring minds decided that 1) they should be sampled at the earliest opportunity, and logical thought wondered 2) exactly how Miss Butts *knew* about them. And the high, spike-topped walls around the college grounds looked simple enough to anyone with a fresh mind full of trigonometry and a body honed by healthy fencing, calisthenics and cold baths. Miss Butts could make peril seem really *interesting*.

Anyway, that was the incident of the midnight visitor. After a while, Susan considered that she must have imagined it. That was the only logical explanation. And Susan was good at those.

* * *

Everyone, they say, is looking for something.

Imp was looking for somewhere to go.

The farm cart that had brought him the last stretch of the way was rumbling off across the fields.

He looked at the signpost. One arm pointed to Quirm, the other to Ankh-Morpork. He knew just enough to know that Ankh-Morpork was a big city, but built on loam and therefore of no interest to the druids in his family. He had three Ankh-Morpork dollars and some change. It probably wasn't very much in Ankh-Morpork.

He didn't know anything about Quirm, except that it was on the coast. The road to Quirm didn't look very worn, while the one to Ankh-Morpork was heavily rutted.

It'd be sensible to go to Quirm to get the feel of city life. It'd be sensible to learn a bit about how city people thought before heading for Ankh-Morpork, which they said was the largest city in the world. It'd be sensible to get some kind of job in Quirm and raise a bit of extra cash. It'd be sensible to learn to walk before he started to run.

Common sense told Imp all these things, so he marched off firmly towards Ankh-Morpork.

As far as looks were concerned, Susan had always put people in mind of a dandelion on the point of telling the time. The college dressed its gels in a loose navy-blue woollen smock that stretched from neck to just above the ankle – practical, healthy and as attractive as a plank. The waistline was somewhere around knee level. Susan was beginning to fill it out,

however, in accordance with the ancient rules hesitantly and erratically alluded to by Miss Delcross in Biology and Hygiene. Gels left her class with the vague feeling that they were supposed to marry a rabbit. (Susan had left with the feeling that the cardboard skeleton on the hook in the corner looked like someone she'd known . . .)

It was her hair that made people stop and turn to watch her. It was pure white, except for a black streak. School regulations required that it be in two plaits, but it had an uncanny tendency to unravel itself and spring back into its preferred shape, like Medusa's snakes.*

And then there was the birthmark, if that's what it was. It only showed up if she blushed, when three faint pale lines appeared across her cheek and made it look exactly as though she'd been slapped. On the occasions when she was angry – and she was quite often angry, at the sheer stupidity of the world – they glowed.

In theory it was, around now, Literature. Susan hated Literature. She'd much prefer to read a good book. Currently she had Wold's *Logic and Paradox* open on her desk and was reading it with her chin in her hands.

She listened with half an ear to what the rest of the class was doing.

It was a poem about daffodils.

*The question seldom addressed is *where* Medusa had snakes. Underarm hair is an even more embarrassing problem when it keeps biting the top of the deodorant bottle.

Apparently the poet had liked them very much.

Susan was quite stoical about this. It was a free country. People could like daffodils if they wanted to. They just should not, in Susan's very definite and precise opinion, be allowed to take up more than a page to say so.

She got on with her education. In her opinion, school kept on trying to interfere with it.

Around her, the poet's vision was taken apart with inexpert tools.

The kitchen was built on the same gargantuan lines as the rest of the house. An army of cooks could get lost in it. The far walls were hidden in the shadows and the stovepipe, supported at intervals by soot-covered chains and bits of greasy rope, disappeared into the gloom somewhere a quarter of a mile above the floor. At least, it did to the eye of the outsider.

Albert spent his time in a small tiled patch big enough to contain the dresser, the table and the stove. And a rocking chair.

'When a man says "What's it all about then, seriously, when you get right down to it?" he's in a bad way,' he said, rolling a cigarette. 'So I don't know what it means when *he* says it. It's one of his fancies again.'

The room's only other occupant nodded. His mouth was full.

'All that business with his daughter,' said Albert. 'I mean . . . daughter? And then he heard about apprentices. Nothing would do but he had to go and get one! Hah! Nothing but trouble, that was. And

you, too, come to think of it . . . you're one of his fancies. No offence meant,' he added, aware of who he was talking to. 'You worked out all right. You do a good job.'

Another nod.

'He always gets it wrong,' said Albert. 'That's the trouble. Like when he heard about Hogswatchnight? Remember that? We had to do the whole thing, the oak tree in a pot, the paper sausages, the pork dinner, him sitting there with a paper hat on saying IS THIS JOLLY? I made him a little desk ornament thing and he gave me a brick.'

Albert put the cigarette to his lips. It had been expertly rolled. Only an expert could get a rollup so thin and yet so soggy.

'It was a good brick, mind. I've still got it somewhere.'

SQUEAK, said the Death of Rats.

'You put your finger on it, right enough,' said Albert. 'At least, you would have done if you had a proper one. He always misses the point. You see, he can't get over things. He can't forget.'

He sucked on the wretched homemade until his eyes watered.

'“What's it all about, seriously, when you get right down to it?”' said Albert. 'Oh, dear.'

He glanced up at the kitchen clock, out of a special human kind of habit. It had never worked since Albert had bought it.

'He's normally in by this time,' he said. 'I'd better do his tray. Can't think what's keeping him.'

* * *

The holy man sat under a holy tree, legs crossed, hands on knees. He kept his eyes shut in order to focus better on the Infinite, and wore nothing but a loincloth in order to show his disdain of discly things.

There was a wooden bowl in front of him.

He was aware, after a while, that he was being watched. He opened one eye.

There was an indistinct figure sitting a few feet away. Later on, he was sure that the figure had been of . . . someone. He couldn't quite remember the description, but the person must certainly have had one. He was about . . . this tall, and sort of . . . definitely . . .

EXCUSE ME.

'Yes, my son?' His brow wrinkled. 'You are male, aren't you?' he added.

YOU TOOK A LOT OF FINDING. BUT I AM GOOD AT IT.

'Yes?'

I AM TOLD YOU KNOW EVERYTHING.

The holy man opened the other eye.

'The secret of existence is to disdain earthly ties, shun the chimera of material worth, and seek oneness with the Infinite,' he said. 'And keep your thieving hands off my begging bowl.'

The sight of the supplicant was giving him trouble.

I'VE SEEN THE INFINITE, said the stranger, IT'S NOTHING SPECIAL.

The holy man glanced around.

'Don't be daft,' he said. 'You can't see the Infinite. 'cos it's *infinite*.'

I HAVE.

‘All right, what did it look like?’

IT’S BLUE.

The holy man shifted uneasily. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. A quick burst of the Infinite and a meaningful nudge in the direction of the begging bowl was how it was supposed to go.

‘S black,’ he muttered.

NOT, said the stranger, WHEN SEEN FROM THE OUTSIDE. THE NIGHT SKY IS BLACK. BUT THAT IS JUST SPACE. INFINITY, HOWEVER, IS BLUE.

‘And I suppose you know what sound is made by one hand clapping, do you?’ said the holy man nastily.

YES. CL. THE OTHER HAND MAKES THE AP.

‘Ah-ha, no, you’re wrong there,’ said the holy man, back on firmer ground. He waved a skinny hand. ‘No sound, see?’

THAT WASN’T A CLAP. THAT WAS JUST A WAVE.

‘It *was* a clap. I just wasn’t using both hands. What kind of blue, anyway?’

YOU JUST WAVED. I DON’T CALL THAT VERY PHILOSOPHICAL. DUCK EGG.

The holy man glanced down the mountain. Several people were approaching. They had flowers in their hair and were carrying what looked very much like a bowl of rice.

OR POSSIBLY EAU-DE-NIL.

‘Look, my son,’ the holy man said hurriedly, ‘what exactly is it you want? I haven’t got all day.’

YES, YOU HAVE. TAKE IT FROM ME.

‘What do you *want*?’

WHY DO THINGS HAVE TO BE THE WAY THEY ARE?

‘Well—’

YOU DON’T KNOW, DO YOU?

‘Not *exactly*. The whole thing is meant to be a mystery, see?’

The stranger stared at the holy man for some time, causing the man to feel that his head had become transparent.

THEN I WILL ASK YOU A SIMPLER QUESTION. HOW DO HUMANS FORGET?

‘Forget what?’

FORGET ANYTHING. EVERYTHING.

‘It . . . er . . . it happens automatically.’ The prospective acolytes had turned the bend on the mountain path. The holy man hastily picked up his begging bowl.

‘Let’s say this bowl is your memory,’ he said, waving it vaguely. ‘It can only hold so much, see? New things come in, so old things must overflow—’

NO. I REMEMBER EVERYTHING. EVERYTHING. DOORKNOBS. THE PLAY OF SUNLIGHT ON HAIR. THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER. FOOTSTEPS. EVERY LITTLE DETAIL. AS IF IT HAPPENED ONLY YESTERDAY. AS IF IT HAPPENED ONLY TOMORROW. *EVERYTHING*. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

The holy man scratched his gleaming bald head.

‘Traditionally,’ he said, ‘the ways of forgetting include joining the Klatchian Foreign Legion, drinking the waters of some magical river, no one knows where it is, and imbibing vast amounts of alcohol.’

AH, YES.

‘But alcohol debilitates the body and is a poison to the soul.’

SOUNDS GOOD TO ME.

‘Master?’

The holy man looked around irritably. The acolytes had arrived.

‘Just a minute, I’m talking to—’

The stranger had gone.

‘Oh, master, we have travelled for many miles over—’ said the acolyte.

‘Shut up a minute, will you?’

The holy man put out his hand, palm turned vertical, and waved it a few times. He muttered under his breath.

The acolytes exchanged glances. They hadn’t expected this. Finally, their leader found a drop of courage.

‘Master—’

The holy man turned and caught him across the ear. The sound this made was definitely a *clap*.

‘Ah! Got it!’ said the holy man. ‘Now, what can I do for—’

He stopped as his brain caught up with his ears.

‘What did he mean, *humans*?’

Death walked thoughtfully across the hill to the place where a large white horse was placidly watching the view.

He said, GO AWAY.

The horse watched him warily. It was considerably more intelligent than most horses, although this was not a difficult achievement. It

seemed aware that things weren't right with its master.

I MAY BE SOME TIME, said Death.
And he set out.

It wasn't raining in Ankh-Morpork. This had come as a big surprise to Imp.

What had also come as a surprise was how fast money went. So far he'd lost three dollars and twenty-seven pence.

He'd lost it because he'd put it in a bowl in front of him while he played, in the same way that a hunter puts out decoys to get ducks. The next time he'd looked down, it had gone.

People came to Ankh-Morpork to seek their fortune. Unfortunately, other people sought it too.

And people didn't seem to want bards, even ones who'd won the mistletoe award and centennial harp in the big Eisteddfod in Llamedos.

He'd found a place in one of the main squares, tuned up and played. No one had taken any notice, except sometimes to push him out of the way as they hurried past and, apparently, to nick his bowl. Eventually, just when he was beginning to doubt that he'd made the right decision in coming here at all, a couple of watchmen had wandered up.

'That's a harp he's playing, Nobby,' said one of them, after watching Imp for a while.

'Lyre.'

'No, it's the honest truth, I'm—' The fat guard frowned and looked down.

'You've just been waiting all your life to say

that, ain't you, Nobby,' he said. 'I bet you was *born* hoping that one day someone'd say "That's a harp" so you could say "lyre", on account of it being a pun or play on words. Well, har har.'

Imp stopped playing. It was impossible to continue, in the circumstances.

'It *is* a harp, actualllly,' he said. 'I won it in—'

'Ah, you're from Llamedos, right?' said the fat guard. 'I can tell by your accent. Very musical people, the Llamedese.'

'Sounds like garglin' with gravel to *me*,' said the one identified as Nobby. 'You got a licence, mate?'

'Licence?' said Imp.

'Very hot on licences, the Guild of Musicians,' said Nobby. 'They catch you playing music without a licence, they take your instrument and they shove—'

'Now, now,' said the other watchman. 'Don't go scaring the boy.'

'Let's just say it's not much fun if you're a piccolo player,' said Nobby.

'But surely music is as free as the air and the sky, see,' said Imp.

'Not round here it's not. Just a word to the wise, friend,' said Nobby.

'I never ever heard of a Guillard of Musicians,' said Imp.

'It's in Tin Lid Alley,' said Nobby. 'You want to be a musician, you got to join the Guild.'

Imp had been brought up to obey the rules. The Llamedese were very law-abiding.

'I shall go there directlly,' he said.

The guards watched him go.

‘He’s wearing a nightdress,’ said Corporal Nobbs.

‘Bardic robe, Nobby,’ said Sergeant Colon. The guards strolled onwards. ‘Very bardic, the Llamedese.’

‘How long d’you give him, sarge?’

Colon waved a hand in the flat rocking motion of someone hazarding an informed guess.

‘Two, three days,’ he said.

They rounded the bulk of Unseen University and ambled along The Backs, a dusty little street that saw little traffic or passing trade and was therefore much favoured by the Watch as a place to lurk and have a smoke and explore the realms of the mind.

‘You know salmon, sarge,’ said Nobby.

‘It is a fish of which I am aware, yes.’

‘You know they sell kind of slices of it in tins . . .’

‘So I am given to understand, yes.’

‘Weell . . . how come all the tins are the same size? Salmon gets thinner at both ends.’

‘Interesting point, Nobby. I think—’

The watchman stopped, and stared across the street. Corporal Nobbs followed his gaze.

‘That shop,’ said Sergeant Colon. ‘That shop there . . . was it there yesterday?’

Nobby looked at the peeling paint, the little grime-encrusted window, the rickety door.

‘Course,’ he said. ‘It’s *always* been there. Been there *years*.’

Colon crossed the street and rubbed at the grime. There were dark shapes vaguely visible in the gloom.

‘Yeah, right,’ he mumbled. ‘It’s just that . . . I mean . . . was it there for years *yesterday*?’

‘You all right, sarge?’

‘Let’s go, Nobby,’ said the sergeant, walking away as fast as he could.

‘Where, sarge?’

‘Anywhere not here.’

In the dark mounds of merchandise, something felt their departure.

Imp had already admired the Guild buildings – the majestic frontage of the Assassins’ Guild, the splendid columns of the Thieves’ Guild, the smoking yet still impressive hole where the Alchemists’ Guild had been up until yesterday. And it was therefore disappointing to find that the Guild of Musicians, when he eventually located it, wasn’t even a building. It was just a couple of poky rooms above a barber shop.

He sat in the brown-walled waiting room, and waited. There was a sign on the wall opposite. It said ‘For Your Comforte And Convenience YOU WILL NOT SMOKE’. Imp had never smoked in his life. Everything in Llamedos was too soggy to smoke. But he suddenly felt inclined to try.

The room’s only other occupants were a troll and a dwarf. He was not at ease in their company. They kept looking at him.

Finally the dwarf said, ‘Are you elvish?’

‘Me? No!’

‘You look a bit elvish around the hair.’

‘Not ellvish at allll. Honestly.’

‘Where you from?’ said the troll.

‘Llamedos,’ said Imp. He shut his eyes. He knew

what trolls and dwarfs traditionally did to people suspected of being elves. The Guild of Musicians could take lessons.

‘What dat you got dere?’ said the troll. It had two large squares of darkish glass in front of its eyes, supported by wire frames hooked around its ears.

‘It’s a harp, see.’

‘Dat what you play?’

‘Yes.’

‘You a druid, den?’

‘No!’

There was silence again as the troll marshalled its thoughts.

‘You *look* like a druid in dat nightie,’ it rumbled, after a while.

The dwarf on the other side of Imp began to snigger.

Trolls disliked druids, too. Any sapient species which spends a lot of time in a stationary, rock-like pose objects to any other species which drags it sixty miles on rollers and buries it up to its knees in a circle. It tends to feel it has cause for disgruntlement.

‘Everyone dresses like this in Llamedos, see,’ said Imp. ‘But I’m a bard! I’m not a druid. I hate rocks!’

‘Whoops,’ said the dwarf quietly.

The troll looked Imp up and down, slowly and deliberately. Then it said, without any particular trace of menace, ‘You not long in dis town?’

‘Just arrived,’ said Imp. I won’t even reach the door, he thought. I’m going to be mashed into a pulp.

‘Here is some free advice what you should know.

It is free advice I am giving you gratis for nothing. In dis town, “rock” is a word for troll. A bad word for troll used by stupid humans. You call a troll a rock, you got to be prepared to spend some time looking for your head. Especially if you looks a bit elvish around de ears. Dis is free advice ’cos you are a bard and maker of music, like me.’

‘Right! Thank you! Yes!’ said Imp, awash with relief.

He grabbed his harp and played a few notes. That seemed to lighten the atmosphere a bit. Everyone knew elves had never been able to play music.

‘Lias Bluestone,’ said the troll, extending something massive with fingers on it.

‘Imp y Celyn,’ said Imp. ‘Nothing to do with moving rocks around at alllll in any way!’

A smaller, more knobbly hand was thrust at Imp from another direction. His gaze travelled up its associated arm, which was the property of the dwarf. He was small, even for a dwarf. A large bronze horn lay across his knees.

‘Glod Glodsson,’ said the dwarf. ‘You just play the harp?’

‘Anything with strings on it,’ said Imp. ‘But the harp is the queen of instruments, see.’

‘I can blow anything,’ said Glod.

‘Realllly?’ said Imp. He sought for some polite comment. ‘That must make you very popullar.’

The troll heaved a big leather sack off the floor.

‘Dis is what I play,’ he said. A number of large round rocks tumbled out on to the floor. Lias picked one up and flicked it with a finger. It went *bam*.

‘Music made from rocks?’ said Imp. ‘What do you call it?’

‘We call it *Ggroohauga*,’ said Lias, ‘which means, music made from rocks.’

The rocks were all of different sizes, carefully tuned here and there by small nicks carved out of the stone.

‘May I?’ said Imp.

‘Be my guest.’

Imp selected a small rock and flicked it with his finger. It went *bop*. A smaller one went *bing*.

‘What do you do with them?’ he said.

‘I bang them together.’

‘And then what?’

‘What do you mean, “And then what?”’

‘What do you do after you’ve banged them together?’

‘I bang them together again,’ said Lias, one of nature’s drummers.

The door to the inner room opened and a man with a pointed nose peered around it.

‘You lot together?’ he snapped.

There was indeed a river, according to legend, one drop of which would rob a man of his memory.

Many people assumed that this was the river Ankh, whose waters can be drunk or even cut up and chewed. A drink from the Ankh would quite probably rob a man of his memory, or at least cause things to happen to him that he would on no account wish to recall.

In fact there was another river that would do the

trick. There was, of course, a snag. No one knows where it is, because they're always pretty thirsty when they find it.

Death turned his attention elsewhere.

'Seventy-five dollllars?' said Imp. 'Just to pplay music?'

'That's twenty-five dollars registration fee, twenty per cent of fees, and fifteen dollars voluntary compulsory annual subscription to the Pension Fund,' said Mr Clete, secretary of the Guild.

'But we haven't got that much money!'

The man gave a shrug which indicated that, although the world did indeed have many problems, this was one of them that was not his.

'But maybe we shallll be able to pay when we've earned some,' said Imp weakly. 'If you could just, you know, llet us have a week or two—'

'Can't let you play anywhere without you being members of the Guild,' said Mr Clete.

'But we can't be members of the Guild until we've played,' said Glod.

'That's right,' said Mr Clete cheerfully. 'Hat. Hat. Hat.'

It was a strange laugh, totally mirthless and vaguely birdlike. It was very much like its owner, who was what you would get if you extracted fossilized genetic material from something in amber and then gave it a suit.

Lord Vetinari had encouraged the growth of the Guilds. They were the big wheels on which the clockwork of a well-regulated city ran. A drop of oil

here . . . a spoke inserted there, of course . . . and by and large it all *worked*.

And gave rise, in the same way that compost gives rise to worms, to Mr Clete. He was not, by the standard definitions, a bad man; in the same way a plague-bearing rat is not, from a dispassionate point of view, a bad animal.

Mr Clete worked hard for the benefit of his fellow men. He devoted his life to it. For there are many things in the world that need doing that people don't want to do and were grateful to Mr Clete for doing for them. Keeping minutes, for example. Making sure the membership roll was quite up to date. Filing. *Organizing*.

He'd worked hard on behalf of the Thieves' Guild, although he hadn't been a thief, at least in the sense normally meant. Then there'd been a rather more senior vacancy in the Fools' Guild, and Mr Clete was no fool. And finally there had been the secretaryship of the Musicians.

Technically, he should have been a musician. So he bought a comb and paper. Since up until that time the Guild had been run by real musicians, and therefore the membership roll was unrolled and hardly anyone had paid any dues lately and the organization owed several thousand dollars to Chrysoprase the troll at punitive interest, he didn't even have to audition.

When Mr Clete had opened the first of the unkempt ledgers and looked at the unorganized mess, he had felt a deep and wonderful feeling. Since then, he'd never looked back. He had spent a long

time looking down. And although the Guild had a president and council, it also had Mr Clete, who took the minutes and made sure things ran smoothly and smiled very quietly to himself. It is a strange but reliable fact that whenever men throw off the yoke of tyrants and set out to rule themselves there emerges, like a mushroom after rain, Mr Clete.

Hat. Hat. Hat. Mr Clete laughed at things in inverse proportion to the actual humour of the situation.

‘But that’s nonsense!’

‘Welcome to the wonderful world of the Guild economy,’ said Mr Clete. ‘Hat. Hat. Hat.’

‘What happens if we pplay without belonging to the Guild, then?’ said Imp. ‘Do you confiscate our instruments?’

‘To start with,’ said the president. ‘And then we sort of give them back to you. Hat. Hat. Hat. Incidentally . . . you’re not elvish, are you?’

‘Seventy-five dollars is *criminall*,’ said Imp, as they plodded along the evening streets.

‘Worse than criminal,’ said Glod. ‘I hear the Thieves’ Guild just charges a percentage.’

‘And dey give you a proper Guild membership and everything,’ Lias rumbled. ‘Even a pension. And dey have a day trip to Quirm and a picnic every year.’

‘Music *should* be free,’ said Imp.

‘So what we going to do now?’ said Lias.

‘Anyone got any money?’ said Glod.

‘Got a dollar,’ said Lias.

‘Got some pennies,’ said Imp.

‘Then we’re going to have a decent meal,’ said Glod. ‘Right here.’

He pointed up at a sign.

‘Gimlet’s Hole Food?’ said Lias. ‘Gimlet? Sounds dwarfish. Vermincelli and stuff?’

‘Now he’s doing troll food too,’ said Glod. ‘Decided to put aside ethnic differences in the cause of making more money. Five types of coal, seven types of coke and ash, sediments to make you dribble. You’ll like it.’

‘Dwarf bread too?’ said Imp.

‘*You* like dwarf bread?’ said Glod.

‘I love it,’ said Imp.

‘What, *proper* dwarf bread?’ said Glod. ‘*You sure?*’

‘Yes. It’s nice and crunchy, see.’

Glod shrugged.

‘That proves it,’ he said. ‘No one who likes dwarf bread can be elvish.’

The place was almost empty. A dwarf in an apron that came up to its armpits watched them over the top of the counter.

‘You do fried rat?’ said Glod.

‘Best damn fried rat in the city,’ said Gimlet.

‘Okay. Give me four fried rats.’

‘And some dwarf bread,’ said Imp.

‘And some coke,’ said Lias patiently.

‘You mean rat heads or rat legs?’

‘No. Four fried rats.’

‘And some coke.’

‘You want ketchup on those rats?’

‘No.’

‘You *sure*?’
‘No ketchup.’
‘And some coke.’
‘And two hard-boiled eggs,’ said Imp.
The others gave him an odd look.
‘Wellll? I just llike hard-boiled eggs,’ he said.
‘And some coke.’
‘And two hard-boiled eggs.’
‘And some coke.’
‘Seventy-five dollars,’ said Glod, as they sat down.
‘What’s three times seventy-five dollars?’
‘Many dollars,’ said Lias.
‘More than two hundred dollllars,’ said Imp.
‘I don’t think I’ve even *seen* two hundred dollars,’
said Glod. ‘Not while I’ve been awake.’
‘We raise money?’ said Lias.
‘We can’t raise money by being musicians,’ said
Imp. ‘It’s the Guilld llaw. If they catch you, they take
your instrument and shove—’ He stopped. ‘Llet’s
just say it’s not much fun for the piccollo pllayer,’ he
added from memory.
‘I shouldn’t think the trombonist is very happy
either,’ said Glod, putting some pepper on his rat.
‘I can’t go back home now,’ said Imp. ‘I said I’d
. . . I can’t go back home yet. Even if I *could*, I’d have
to raise monolliths llike my brothers. Allll they care
about is stone circles.’
‘If I go back home now,’ said Lias, ‘I’ll be club-
bing druids.’
They both, very carefully, sidled a little further
away from each other.
‘Then we play somewhere where the Guild won’t

find us,' said Glod cheerfully. 'We find a club somewhere—'

'Got a club,' said Lias, proudly. 'Got a *nail* in it.'

'I mean a night club,' said Glod.

'Still got a nail in it at night.'

'I happen to know,' said Glod, abandoning that line of conversation, 'that there's a lot of places in the city that don't like paying Guild rates. We could do a few gigs and raise the money with *no* trouble.'

'Alllll three of us together?' said Imp.

'Sure.'

'But we pllay dwarf music and human music and trollll music,' said Imp. 'I'm not sure they'llll go together. I mean, dwarfs llisten to dwarf music, humans llisten to human music, trolllls llisten to trollll music. What do we get if we mix it allll together? It'd be dreadful.'

'We're getting along okay,' said Lias, getting up and fetching the salt from the counter.

'We're musicians,' said Glod. 'It's not the same with real people.'

'Yeah, right,' said the troll.

Lias sat down.

There was a cracking noise.

Lias stood up.

'Oh,' he said.

Imp reached over. Slowly and with great care he picked the remains of his harp off the bench.

'Oh,' said Lias.

A string curled back with a sad little sound.

It was like watching the death of a kitten.

'I won that at the Eisteddfod,' said Imp.

‘Could you glue it back together?’ said Glod, eventually.

Imp shook his head.

‘There’s no one left in Llamedos who knows how, see.’

‘Yes, but in the Street of Cunning Artificers—’

‘I’m real sorry. I mean real sorry, I don’t know how it got dere.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

Imp tried, ineffectually, to fit a couple of pieces together. But you couldn’t repair a musical instrument. He remembered the old bards saying that. They had a soul. All instruments had a soul. If they were broken, the soul of them escaped, flew away like a bird. What was put together again was just a thing, a mere assemblage of wood and wire. It would play, it might even deceive the casual listener, but . . . You might as well push someone over a cliff and then stitch them together and expect them to come alive.

‘Um . . . maybe we could get you another one, then?’ said Glod. ‘There’s . . . a nice little music shop in The Backs—’

He stopped. Of *course* there was a nice little music shop in The Backs. It had *always* been there.

‘In The Backs,’ he repeated, just to make sure. ‘Bound to get one there. In The Backs. Yes. Been there *years*.’

‘Not one of these,’ said Imp. ‘Before a craftsman even touches the wood he has to spend two weeks sitting wrapped in a bulllllock hide in a cave behind a waterfallll.’