

to find some point in the twisting, knotting, ravelling nets of space-time
on
which a metaphorical finger can be put to indicate that here, here, is the
point
where it all began...
Something began when the Guild of Assassins enrolled Mister Teatime,
who saw
things differently from other people, and one of the ways that he saw
things
differently from other people was in seeing other people as things (later,
Lord
Downey of the Guild said, 'We took pity on him because he'd lost both
parents at
an early age. I think that, on reflection, we should have wondered a bit
more
about that.')

But it was much earlier even than that when most people forgot that the
very
oldest stories are, sooner or later, about blood. Later on they took the
blood
out to make the stories more acceptable to children, or at least to the
people
who had to read them to children rather than the children themselves
(who, on
the whole, are quite keen on blood provided it's being shed by the
deserving[1]), and then wondered where the stories went.

And earlier still when something in the darkness of the deepest caves
and
gloomiest forests thought: what are they, these creatures? I will observe
them.

And much, much earlier than that, when the Discworld was formed,
drifting

alternative hypothesis as 'Things just happen. What the hell.'
The senior wizards of Unseen University stood and looked at the door.
There was no doubt that whoever had shut it wanted it to stay shut.
Dozens of
nails secured it to the door frame. Planks had been nailed right across.
And
finally it had, up until this morning, been hidden by a bookcase that had
been
put in front of it.
'And there's the sign, Ridcully,' said the Dean. 'You have read it, I
assume.
You know? The sign which says "Do not, under any circumstances,
open this
door"?'
'Of course I've read it,' said Ridcully. 'Why d'yer think I want it opened?'
'Er ... why?' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.
'To see why they wanted it shut, of course.' [2]
He gestured to Modo, the University's gardener and oddjob dwarf, who
was
standing by with a crowbar.
'Go to it, lad.'
The gardener saluted. 'Right you are, sir.'
Against a background of splintering timber, Ridcully went on: 'It says on
the
plans that this was a bathroom. There's nothing frightening about a
bathroom,
for gods' sake. I want a bathroom. I'm fed up with sluicing down with you
fellows. It's unhygienic. You can catch stuff. My father told me that.
Where you
get lots of people bathing together, the Verruca Gnome is running
around with
his little sack.'

little silver bells.

At about the same time as the Archchancellor was laying down the law,
Susan

Sto-Helit was sitting up in bed, reading by candlelight.

Frost patterns curled across the windows.

She enjoyed these early evenings. Once she had put the children to bed
she was

more or less left to herself. Mrs Gaiter was pathetically scared of giving
her

any instructions even though she paid Susan's wages.

Not that the wages were important, of course. What was important was
that she

was being her Own Person and holding down a Real job. And being a
governess was

a real job. The only tricky bit had been the embarrassment when her
employer

found out that she was a duchess, because in Mrs Gaiter's book, which
was a

rather short book with big handwriting, the upper crust wasn't supposed
to work.

It was supposed to loaf around. It was all Susan could do to stop her
curtseying

when they met.

A flicker made her turn her head.

The candle flame was streaming out horizontally, as though in a howling
wind.

She looked up. The curtains billowed away from the window, which-
-flung itself open with a clatter.

But there was no wind.

At least, no wind in this world.

Images formed in her mind. A red ball ... The sharp smell of snow... And
then

they were gone, and instead there were...

She sighed. 'Yes, Twyla.'

'I'm afraid of the monster in the cellar, Thusan. It's going to eat me up.'

Susan shut her book firmly and raised a warning finger.

'What have I told you about trying to sound ingratiatingly cute, Twyla?'

she

said.

The little girl said, 'You said I mustn't. You said that exaggerated lisp-

is

a hanging offence and I only do it to get attention.'

'Good. Do you know what monster it is this time?'

'It's the big hairy one wif-'

Susan raised the finger. 'Uh?' she warned.

'-with eight arms,' Twyla corrected herself.

'What, again? Oh, all right.'

She got out of bed and put on her dressing gown, trying to stay quite calm while

the child watched her. So they were coming back. Oh, not the monster in the

cellar. That was all in a day's work. But it looked as if she was going to start

remembering the future again.

She shook her head. However far you ran away, you always caught yourself up.

But monsters were easy, at least. She'd learned how to deal with monsters. She

picked up the poker from the nursery fender and went down the back stairs, with

Twyla following her.

The Gaiters were having a dinner party. Muffled voices came from the direction

of the dining room.

Then, as she crept past, a door opened and yellow light spilled out and a voice

Yes, said Susan simply.

'Susan's our governess,' said Mrs Gaiter. 'Er ... I told you about her.'

There was a change in the expression on the faces peering out from the dining

room. It became a sort of amused respect.

'She beats up monsters with a poker?' said someone.

'Actually, that's a very clever idea,' said someone else. 'Little gel gets it into her head there's a monster in the cellar, you go in with the poker and make

a few bashing noises while the child listens, and then everything's all right.

Good thinkin', that girl. Ver' sensible. Ver' modem.'

'Is that what you're doing Susan?' said Mrs Gaiter anxiously.

'Yes, Mrs Gaiter,' said Susan obediently.

'This I've got to watch, by lo! It's not every day you see monsters beaten up by

a gel,' said the man behind her. There was a swish of silk and a cloud of cigar

smoke as the diners poured out into the hall.

Susan sighed again and went down the cellar stairs, while Twyla sat demurely at

the top, hugging her knees.

A door opened and shut.

There was a short period of silence and then a terrifying scream. One woman

fainted and a man dropped his cigar.

'You don't have to worry, everything will be all right,' said Twyla calmly.

'She always wins. Everything will be all right.'

There were thuds and clangs, and then a whirring noise, and finally a sort of

bubbling.

And, er, now, Sir Geomey, if you'd all like to come back into the parlour - I mean, the drawing room-'

The party went back up the hall. The last thing Susan heard before the door shut was 'Dashed convincin', the way she bent the poker like that-'

She waited.

'Have they all gone, Twyla?'

'Yes, Susan.'

'Good.' Susan went back into the cellar and emerged towing something large and hairy with eight legs. She managed to haul it up the steps and down the other passage to the back yard, where she kicked it out. It would evaporate before dawn.

'That's what we do to monsters,' she said.

Twyla watched carefully.

'And now it's bed for you, my girl,' said Susan, picking her up.

'C'n I have the poker in my room for the night?'

'All right.'

'It only kills monsters, doesn't it...?' the child said sleepily, as Susan carried her upstairs.

'That's right,' Susan said. 'All kinds.'

She put the girl to bed next to her brother and leaned the poker against the toy cupboard.

The poker was made of some cheap metal with a brass knob on the end. She would, Susan reflected, give quite a lot to be able to use it on the children's previous governess.

'G'night.'

'Goodnight.'

had, just

for a few seconds, streamed in the wind.

As Susan sought sleep, Lord Downey sat in his study catching up on the paperwork.

Lord Downey was an assassin. Or, rather, an Assassin. The capital letter was

important. It separated those curs who went around murdering people for money

from the gentlemen who were occasionally consulted by other gentlemen who wished

to have removed, for a consideration, any inconvenient razorblades from the

candyfloss of life.

The members of the Guild of Assassins considered themselves cultured men who

enjoyed good music and food and literature. And they knew the value of human

life. To a penny, in many cases.

Lord Downey's study was oak-panelled and well carpeted. The furniture was very

old and quite worn, but the wear was the wear that comes only when very good

furniture is carefully used over several centuries. It was matured furniture.

A log fire burned in the grate. In front of it a couple of dogs were sleeping in

the tangled way of large hairy dogs everywhere.

Apart from the occasional doggy snore or the crackle of a shifting log, there

were no other sounds but the scratching of Lord Downey's pen and the ticking of

the longcase clock by the door ... small, private noises which only served to

appear to
have woken up. The squeaky floorboards haven't. Other little
arrangements which

I will not specify seem to have been bypassed. That severely limits the
possibilities. I really doubt that you are a ghost and gods generally do
not

announce themselves so politely. You could, of course, be Death, but I
don't

believe he bothers with such niceties and, besides, I am feeling quite
well.

Hmm!

Something hovered in the air in front of his desk.

'My teeth are in fine condition so you are unlikely to be the Tooth Fairy.
I've

always found that a stiff brandy before bedtime quite does away with the
need

for the Sandman. And, since I can carry a tune quite well, I suspect I'm
not

likely to attract the attention of Old Man Trouble. Hmm.'

The figure drifted a little nearer.

'I suppose a gnome could get through a mousehole, but I have traps
down,' Downey

went on. 'Bogeymen can walk through walls but would be very loath to
reveal

themselves. Really, you have me at a loss. Hmm?'

And then he looked up.

A grey robe hung in the air. It appeared to be occupied, in that it had a
shape,

although the occupant was not visible.

The prickly feeling crept over Downey that the occupant wasn't invisible,
merely

not, in any physical sense, there at all.

'Good evening,' he said.

you a
commission.
'You wish someone inhumed?' said Downey.
Brought to an end.
Downey considered this. It was not as unusual as it appeared. There
were
precedents. Anyone could buy the services of the Guild. Several
zombies had, in
the past, employed the Guild to settle scores with their murderers. In
fact the
Guild, he liked to think practised the ultimate democracy. You didn't
need
intelligence, social position, beauty or charm to hire it. You just needed
money
which, unlike the other stuff, was available to everyone. Except for the
poor,
of course, but there was no helping some people.
'Brought to an end...' That was an odd way of putting it.
'We can-' he began.
The payment will reflect the difficulty of the task.
'Our scale of fees-'
The payment will be three million dollars.
Downey sat back. That was four times higher than any fee yet earned
by any
member of the Guild, and that had been a special family rate, including
overnight guests.
'No questions asked, I assume?' he said, buying time.
No questions answered.
'But does the suggested fee represent the difficulty involved? The client
is
heavily guarded?'
Not guarded at all. But almost certainly impossible to delete with
conventional

Really? What is it you addit?

Everything.

'I think we need to know something about you.'

We are the people with three million dollars.

Downey took the point, although he didn't like it. Three million dollars could

buy a lot of no questions.

'Really?' he said. 'In the circumstances, since you are a new client, I think we

would like payment in advance.'

As you wish. The gold is now in your vaults.

'You mean that it will shortly be in our vaults,' said Downey.

No. It has always been in your vaults. We know this because we have just put it there.

Downey watched the empty hood for a moment, and then without shifting his gaze

he reached out and picked up the speaking tube.

'Mr Winvoe?' he said, after whistling into it. 'Ah. Good. Tell me, how much do

we have in our vaults at the moment? Oh, approximately. To the nearest million,

say.' He held the tube away from his ear for a moment, and then spoke into it

again. 'Well, be a good chap and check anyway, will you?'

He hung up the tube and placed his hands flat on the desk in front of him.

'Can I offer you a drink while we wait?' he said.

Yes. We believe so.

Downey stood up with some relief and walked over to his large drinks cabinet.

His hand hovered over the Guild's ardent and valuable tantalus, with its labelled decanters of Mur, Nig, Trop and Yksihw.[3]

Yes, Mr. Wilkove? Really? Indeed? I myself have frequently found loose change under sofa cushions, it's amazing how it mou ... No, no, I wasn't being ... Yes, I did have some reason to ... No, no blame attaches to you in any ... No, I could hardly see how it ... Yes, go and have a rest, what a good idea. Thank you.'

He hung up the tube again. The cowl hadn't moved.

'We will need to know where, when and, of course, who,' he said, after a moment.

The cowl nodded. The location is not on any map. We would like the task to be completed within the week. This is essential. As for the who...

A drawing appeared on Downey's desk and in his head arrived the words: Let us call him the Fat Man.

'Is this a joke?' said Downey.

We do not joke.

No, you don't, do you, Downey thought. He drummed his fingers.

'There are many who would say this... person does not exist,' he said.

He must exist. How else could you so readily recognize his picture? And many are in correspondence with him.

'Well, yes, of course, in a sense he exists...

In a sense everything exists. It is cessation of existence that concerns us here.

'Finding him would be a little difficult.'

You will find persons on any street who can tell you his approximate address.

of commissioned, but never employed. Only servants were employed.

'What is it that I misunderstand, exactly?' he said.

We pay. You find the ways and means.

The cowl began to fade.

'How can I contact you?' said Downey.

We will contact you. We know where you are. We know where everyone is.

The figure vanished. At the same moment the door was flung open to reveal the

distraught figure of Mr Winvoe, the Guild Treasurer.

'Excuse me, my lord, but I really had to come up!' He flung some discs on the

desk. 'Look at them!'

Downey carefully picked up a golden circle. It looked like a small coin, but -

'No denomination!' said Winvoe. 'No heads, no tails, no milling! It's just a blank disc! They're all just blank discs!'

Downey opened his mouth to say, 'Valueless?' He realized that he was half hoping

that this was the case. If they, whoever they were, had paid in worthless metal

then there wasn't even the glimmering of a contract. But he could see this

wasn't the case. Assassins learned to recognize money early in their careers.

'Blank discs,' he said, 'of pure gold.'

Winvoe nodded mutely.

'That,' said Downey, 'will do nicely.'

'It must be magical!' said Winvoe. 'And we never accept magical money!'

Downey bounced the coin on the desk a couple of times. It made a satisfyingly

into space

for a while, and then smiled. 'Is Mister Teatime still in the building?'

Winvoe stood back. 'I thought the council had agreed to dismiss him,' he said

stiffly. 'After that business with---'

'Mister Teatime does not see the world in quite the same way as other people.'

said Downey, picking up the picture from his desk and looking at it thoughtfully.

'Well, indeed, I think that is certainly true.'

'Please send him up.'

The Guild attracted all sorts of people, Downey reflected. He found himself

wondering how it had come to attract Winvoe, for one thing. It was hard to

imagine him stabbing anyone in the heart in case he got blood on the victim's

wallet. Whereas Mister Teatime...

The problem was that the Guild took young boys and gave them a splendid

education and incidentally taught them how to kill, cleanly and dispassionately,

for money and for the good of society, or at least that part of society that had

money, and what other kind of society was there?

But very occasionally you found you'd got someone like Mister Teatime, to whom

the money was merely a distraction. Mister Teatime had a truly brilliant mind,

but it was brilliant like a fractured mirror, all marvellous facets and rainbows

but, ultimately, also something that was broken.

Mister Teatime enjoyed himself too much. And other people, also.

one. That

sort of thing led to talk.

On the other hand, Teatime's corkscrew of a mind was exactly the tool to deal

with something like this. And if he didn't ... well, that was hardly Downey's

fault, was it?

He turned his attention to the paperwork for a while. It was amazing how the

stuff mounted up. But you had to deal with it. It wasn't as though they were

murderers, after all...

There was a knock at the door. He pushed the paperwork aside and sat back.

'Come in, Mister Teatime,' he said. It never hurt to put the other fellow slightly in awe of you.

In fact the door was opened by one of the Guild's servants, carefully balancing

a tea tray.

'Ah, Carter,' said Lord Downey, recovering magnificently. 'Just put it on the

table over there, will you?'

'Yes, sir,' said Carter. He turned and nodded. 'Sorry, sir, I will go and fetch

another cup directly, sir.'

'What?'

'For your visitor, sir.'

'What visitor? Oh, when Mister Teati-'

He stopped. He turned.

There was a young man sitting on the hearthrug, playing with the dogs.

'Mister Teatime!'

'It's pronounced Teh-ah-tim-eh, sir,' said Teatime, with just a hint of reproach. 'Everyone gets it wrong, sir.'

Really . . .

'Oh, yes, sir.'

Downey nodded. The tendency of old buildings to be honeycombed with sealed

chimney flues was a fact you learned early in your career. And then, he told

himself, you forgot. It always paid to put the other fellow in awe of you, too.

He had forgotten they taught that, too.

'The dogs seem to like you,' he said.

'I get on well with animals, sir.'

Teatime's face was young and open and friendly. Or, at least, it smiled all the

time. But the effect was spoiled for most people by the fact that it had only

one eye. Some unexplained accident had taken the other one, and the missing orb

had been replaced by a ball of glass. The result was disconcerting. But what

bothered Lord Downey far more was the man's other eye, the one that might

loosely be called normal. He'd never seen such a small and sharp pupil. Teatime

looked at the world through a pinhole.

He found he'd retreated behind his desk again. There was that about Teatime. You

always felt

happier if you had something between you and him.

'You like animals, do you?' he said. 'I have a report here that says you nailed

Sir George's dog to the ceiling.'

'Couldn't have it barking while I was working, sir.'

'Some people would have drugged it.'

And ... the servants...? He said.

'Couldn't have them bursting in, sir.'

Downey nodded, half hypnotized by the glassy stare and the pinhole eyeball. No,

you couldn't have them bursting in. And an Assassin might well face serious

professional opposition, possibly even by people trained by the same teachers.

But an old man and a maidservant who'd merely had the misfortune to be in the

house at the time...

There was no actual rule, Downey had to admit. It was just that, over the years,

the Guild had developed a certain ethos and members tended to be very neat about

their work, even shutting doors behind them and generally tidying up as they

went. Hurting the harmless was worse than a transgression against the moral

fabric of society, it was a breach of good manners. It was worse even than that.

It was bad taste. But there was no actual rule...

'That was all right, wasn't it, sir?' said Teatime, with apparent anxiety.

'It, uh ... lacked elegance,' said Downey.

'Ah. Thank you, sir. I am always happy to be corrected. I shall remember that

next time.'

Downey took a deep breath.

'It's about that I wish to talk,' he said. He held up the picture of ... what had the thing called him? ... the Fat Man?

'As a matter of interest,' he said, 'how would you go about inhuming this

...

gentleman?'

nodded respectfully to Lord Downey and crept out again.

'Right, sir,' said Teatime.

'I'm sorry?' said Downey, momentarily distracted.

'I have now thought of a plan, sir,' said Teatime, patiently.

'You have?'

'Yes, sir.'

'As quickly as that?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Ye gods!'

'Well, sir, you know we are encouraged to consider hypothetical problems.

'Oh, yes. A very valuable exercise----' Downey stopped, and then looked shocked.

'You mean you have actually devoted time to considering how to inhume the

Hogfather?' he said weakly. 'You've actually sat down and thought out how to do

it? You've actually devoted your spare time to the problem?'

'Oh, yes, sir. And the Soul Cake Duck. And the Sandman. And Death.'

Downey blinked again. 'You've actually sat down and considered how to--'

'Yes, sir. I've amassed quite an interesting file. In my own time, of course.'

'I want to be quite certain about this, Mister Teatime. You ... have ... applied

... yourself to a study of ways of killing Death?'

'Only as a hobby, sir.'

'Well, yes, hobbies, yes, I mean, I used to collect butterflies myself,' said Downey, recalling those first moments of awakening pleasure at the use of poison

and the pin, 'but-' .

'Actually, sir, the basic methodology is exactly the same as it would be for a

Deils.

'My word,' he said aloud.

'I may have to check some details, sir. I'd appreciate access to some of the

books in the Dark Library. But, yes, I think I can see the basic shape.'

'And yet ... this person ... some people might say that he is technically immortal.'

Everyone has their weak point, sir.'

Even Death?'

'Oh, yes. Absolutely. Very much so.'

'Really?'

Downey drummed his fingers on the desk again. The boy couldn't possibly have a

real plan, he told himself. He certainly had a skewed mind - skewed? It was a

positive helix - but the Fat Man wasn't just another target in some mansion

somewhere. It was reasonable to assume that people had tried to trap him before.

He felt happy about this. Teatime would fail, and possibly even fail fatally if

his plan was stupid enough. And maybe the Guild would lose the gold, but maybe

not.

'Very well,' he said. 'I don't need to know what your plan is.'

'That's just as well, sir.'

'What do you mean?'

'Because I don't propose to tell you, sir. You'd be obliged to disapprove of

it.'

'I am amazed that you are so confident that it can work, Teatime.'

'I just think logically about the problem, sir,' said the boy. He sounded reproachful.

wailop

generally did the trick. They were amazed that anyone else saw them.

'Gawain?' she said, eyeing a nervous bear who had suddenly spotted her and was

now trying to edge away nonchalantly.

'Yes?'

'You meant to tread on that crack so that I'd have to thump some poor creature

whose

only fault is wanting to tear you limb from limb.'

'I was just skipping-'

'Quite. Real children don't go hoppity-skip unless they are on drugs.'

He grinned at her.

'If I catch you being twee again I will knot your arms behind your head,' said

Susan levelly.

He nodded, and went to push Twyla off the swings.

Susan relaxed, satisfied. It was her personal discovery. Ridiculous threats

didn't worry them at all, but they were obeyed. Especially the ones in graphic detail.

The previous governess had used various monsters and bogeymen as a form of

discipline. There was always something waiting to eat or carry off bad boys and

girls for crimes like stuttering or defiantly and aggravatingly persisting in writing with their left hand. There was always a Scissor Man waiting for a

little girl who sucked her thumb, always a bogeyman in the cellar. Of such

bricks is the innocence of childhood constructed.

out, hit it over the head with the nursery poker, dislocated its shoulder
as a
means of emphasis and kicked it out of the back door.
The children refused to disbelieve in the monsters because, frankly,
they knew
damn well the things were there.
But she'd found that they could, very firmly, also believe in the poker.
Now she sat down on a bench and read a book. She made a point of
taking the
children, every day, somewhere where they could meet others of the
same age. If
they got the hang of the playground, she thought, adult life would hold
no
fears. Besides, it was nice to hear the voices of little children at play,
provided you took care to be far enough away not to hear what they
were actually
saying.
There were lessons later on. These were going a lot better now she'd
got rid of
the reading books about bouncy balls and dogs called Spot. She'd got
Gawain on
to the military campaigns of General Tacticus, which were suitably
bloodthirsty
but, more importantly, considered too difficult for a child. As a result his
vocabulary was doubling every week and he could already use words
like
'disembowelled' in everyday conversation. After all, what was the point
of
teaching children to be children?
They were naturally good at it.
And she was, to her mild horror, naturally good with them. She
wondered

grandfather,
to put it bluntly. This had, she felt, left her a little twisted up.
Of course, to be fair, that was a parent's job. The world was so full of sharp
bends that if they didn't put a few twists in you, you wouldn't stand a chance
of fitting in. And they'd been conscientious and kind and given her a good home
and even an education.
It had been a good education, too. But it had only been later on that she'd
realized that it had been an education in, well, education. It meant that if ever anyone needed to calculate the volume of a cone, then they could confidently call on Susan Sto-Helit. Anyone at a loss to recall the campaigns of
General Tacticus or the square root of 27.4 would not find her wanting.
If you
needed someone who could talk about household items and things to buy in the
shops in five languages, then Susan was at the head of the queue.
Education had
been easy.
Learning things had been harder.
Getting an education was a bit like a communicable sexual disease. It made you
unsuitable for a lot of jobs and then you had the urge to pass it on.
She'd become a governess. It was one of the few jobs a known lady could do. And
she'd taken to it well. She'd sworn that if she did indeed ever find herself dancing on rooftops with chimney sweeps she'd beat herself to death with her own
umbrella.

twinge about what he had done. Which proves that you can be excused
just about
anything if you're a hero, because no one asks inconvenient questions.
And now,'
she closed the book with a snap, 'it's time for bed.'
The previous governess had taught them a prayer which included the
hope that
some god or other would take their soul if they died while they were
asleep and,
if Susan was any judge, had the underlying message that this would be
a good
thing.
one day, Susan averred, she'd hunt that woman down.
'Susan,' said Twyla, from somewhere under the blankets.
'Yes?'
'You know last week we wrote letters to the Hogfather?'
'Yes?'
'Only ... in the park Rachel says he doesn't exist and it's your father
really.
And everyone else said she was right.'
There was a rustle from the other bed. Twyla's brother had turned over
and was
listening surreptitiously.
Oh dear, thought Susan. She had hoped she could avoid this. It was
going to be
like that business with the Soul Cake Duck all over again.
'Does it matter if you get the presents anyway?' she said, making a
direct
appeal to greed.
'Yes.'
Oh dear, oh dear. Susan sat down on the bed, wondering how the hell
to get
through this. She patted the one visible hand.

the realities of the physical universe as an oyster has of mountaineering

...

yes, Twyla: there is a Hogfather.'

There was silence from under the bedclothes, but she sensed that the tone of

voice had worked. The words had meant nothing. That, as her grandfather might

have said, was humanity all over.

'G' night.'

'Good night,' said Susan.

It wasn't even a bar. It was just a room where people drank while they waited

for other people with whom they had business. The business usually involved the

transfer of ownership of something from one person to another, but then, what

business doesn't?

Five businessmen sat round a table, lit by a candle stuck in a saucer. There was

an open bottle between them. They were taking some care to keep it away from the

candle flame.

' 's gone six,' said one, a huge man with dreadlocks and a beard you could keep

goats in. 'The clocks struck ages ago. He ain't coming. Let's go.

'Sit down, will you? Assassins are always late. 'cos of style, right?'

'This one's mental.'

'Eccentric.'

'What's the difference?'

'A bag of cash.'

The three that hadn't spoken yet looked at one another.

'What's this? You never said he was an Assassin,' said Chickenwire. 'He never

an assortment of cooking gear and an entire colony of ants short of a picnic

'mental. And he's got a funny eye.'

'It's just glass, all right?' said the one known as Catseye, signalling a waiter

for four beers and a glass of milk. 'And he's paying ten thousand dollars each.

I don't care what kind of eye he's got.'

'I heard it was made of the same stuff they make them fortune-telling crystals

out of. You can't tell me that's right. And he looks at you with it,' said the first speaker. He was known as Peachy, although no one had ever found out

why[4].

Catseye sighed. Certainly there was something odd about Mister Teatime, there

was no doubt about that. But there was something weird about all Assassins. And

the man paid well. Lots of Assassins used informers and locksmiths. It was

against the rules, technically, but standards were going down everywhere,

weren't they? Usually they paid you late and sparsely, as if they were doing the

favour. But Teatime was OK. True, after a few minutes talking to him your eyes

began to water and you felt you needed to scrub your skin even on the inside,

but no one was perfect, were they?

Peachy leaned forward. 'You know what?' he said. 'I reckon he could be here

already. In disguise! Laughing at us! Well, if he's in here laughing at us-'
He

With that eye of his?

'That guy sitting by the fire has got an eye patch,' said Medium Dave.

Medium

Dave didn't speak much. He watched a lot.

The others turned to stare.

'He'll wait till we're off our guard then go ahahaha,' said Peachy.

'They can't kill you unless it's for money,' said Catseye. But now there was a

soupcón of doubt in his voice.

They kept their eyes on the hooded man. He kept his eye on them.

If asked to describe what they did for a living, the five men around the table

would have said something like 'This and that' or 'The best I can', although in

Banjo's case he'd have probably said 'Dur?' They were, by the standards of an

uncaring society, criminals, although they wouldn't have thought of themselves

as such and couldn't even spell words like 'nefarious'. What they generally did

was move things around. Sometimes the things were on the wrong side of a steel

door, say, or in the wrong house. Sometimes the things were in fact people who

were far too unimportant to trouble the Assassins' Guild with, but who were

nevertheless inconveniently positioned where they were and could much better be

located on, for example, a sea bed somewhere[5]. None of the five belonged to

any formal guild and they generally found their clients among those people who,

for their own dark reasons, didn't want to put the guilds to any trouble,

Good evening,' said Teatime, putting down the tray.

They stared at him in silence.

He gave them a friendly smile.

Peachy's huge hand slapped the table.

'You crept up on us, you little- he began.

Men in their line of business develop a certain prescience. Medium Dave and

Catseye, who were sitting on either side of Peachy, leaned away nonchalantly.

'Hi!' said Teatime. There was a blur, and a knife shuddered in the table between

Peachy's thumb and index finger.

He looked down at it in horror.

'My name's Teatime,' said Teatime. 'Which one are you?'

'I'm ... Peachy,' said Peachy, still staring at the vibrating knife.

'That's an interesting name,' said Teatime. 'Why are you called Peachy, Peachy?'

Medium Dave coughed.

Peachy looked up into Teatime's face. The glass eye was a mere ball of faintly

glowing grey. The other eye was a little dot in a sea of white. Peachy's only

contact with intelligence had been to beat it up and rob it whenever possible,

but a sudden sense of selfpreservation glued him to his chair.

'cos I don't shave,' he said.

'Peachy don't like blades, mister,' said Catseye.

'And do you have a lot of friends, Peachy?' said Teatime.

'Got a few, yeah.'

With a sudden whirl of movement that made the men start, Teatime spun away,

grabbed a chair, swung it up to the table and sat down on it. Three of them had

Assassins' Guild, a number of paintings and busts of famous members who had, in the past, put ... no, of course, that wasn't right. There were paintings and busts of the famous clients of members, with a noticeably modest brass plaque screwed somewhere nearby, bearing some unassuming little comment like 'Departed this vale of tears on Grune 3, Year of the Sideways Leech, with the assistance of the Hon. K. W. Dobson (Viper House)'. Many fine old educational establishments had dignified memorials in some hall listing the Old Boys who had laid down their lives for monarch and country. The Guild's was very similar, except for the question of whose life had been laid. Every Guild member wanted to be up there somewhere. Because getting up there represented immortality. And the bigger your client, the more incredibly discreet and restrained would be the little brass plaque, so that everyone couldn't help but notice your name. In fact, if you were very, very renowned, they wouldn't even have to write down your name at all... The men around the table watched him. It was always hard to know what Banjo was thinking, or even if he was thinking at all, but the other four were thinking along the lines of: bumptious little tit, like all Assassins. Thinks he knows it all. I could take him down one-handed, no trouble. But ... you hear stories. Those eyes give me the creeps...

while we wait for the other members of our little troupe.'

Chickenwire saw Medium Dave's lips start to frame the opening letters 'Who-'

These letters he deemed inauspicious at this time. He kicked Medium Dave's leg under the table.

The door opened slightly. A figure came in, but only just. It inserted itself in the gap and sidled along the wall in a manner calculated not to attract attention. Calculated, that is, by someone not good at this sort of calculation.

It looked at them over its turned-up collar.

'That's a wizard,' said Peachy.

The figure hurried over and dragged up a chair.

'No I'm not!' it hissed. 'I'm incognito!'

'Right, Mr Gnito,' said Medium Dave. 'You're just someone in a pointy hat. This is my brother Banjo, that's Peachy, this is Chick---'

The wizard looked desperately at Teatime.

'I didn't want to come!'

'Mr Sideney here is indeed a wizard,' said Teatime. 'A student, anyway. But down on his luck at the moment, hence his willingness to join us on this venture.'

'Exactly how far down on his luck?' said Medium Dave.

The wizard tried not to meet anyone's gaze.

'I made a misjudgement to do with a wager,' he said.

'Lost a bet, you mean?' said Chickenwire.

'I paid up on time,' said Sideney.

'Yes, but Chrysoprase the troll has this odd little thing about money that turns

I believe so. According to legend. But nothing very much.

Medium Dave narrowed his eyes. 'There's valuable stuff in this ... tower?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Why ain't there many guards, then?'

'The ... person who owns the property probably does not realize the value of

what ... of what they have.'

'Locks?' said Medium Dave.

'On our way we shall be picking up a locksmith.'

'Who?'

'Mr Brown.'

They nodded. Everyone - at least, everyone in 'the business', and everyone in

'the business' knew what 'the business' was, and if you didn't know what 'the

business' was you weren't a businessman - knew Mr Brown. His presence anywhere

around a job gave it a certain kind of respectability. He was a neat, elderly

man who'd invented most of the tools in his big leather bag. No matter what

cunning you'd used to get into a place, or overcome a small army, or find the

secret treasure room, sooner or later you sent for Mr Brown, who'd turn up with

his leather bag and his little springy things and his little bottles of strange

alchemy and his neat little boots. And he'd do nothing for ten minutes but look

at the lock, and then he'd select a piece of bent metal from a ring of several

just want to be prepared, that's all, he mumbled.

'Good reconnaissance is the essence of a successful operation,' said Teatime. He

turned and looked up at the bulk that was Banjo and added, 'What is this?'

'This is Banjo,' said Medium Dave, rolling himself a cigarette.

'Does it do tricks?'

Time stood still for a moment. The other men looked at Medium Dave. He was known

to Ankh-Morpork's professional underclass as a thoughtful, patient man, and

considered something of an intellectual because some of his tattoos were spelled

right. He was reliable in a tight spot and, above all, he was honest, because

good criminals have to be honest. If he had a fault, it was a tendency to deal

out terminal and definitive retribution to anyone who said anything about his

brother.

If he had a virtue, it was a tendency to pick his time. Medium Dave's fingers

tucked the tobacco into the paper and raised it to his lips.

'No,' he said.

Chickenwire tried to defrost the conversation. 'He's not what you'd call bright,

but he's always useful. He can lift two men in each hand. By their necks.'

'Yur,' said Banjo.

'He looks like a volcano,' said Teatime.

'Really?' said Medium Dave Lilywhite. Chickenwire reached out hastily and pushed

him back down in his seat.

dollars, possibly even more.

'Good,' said Teatime. He looked Banjo up and down. 'Then I suppose we might as well make a start.'

And he hit Banjo very hard in the mouth.

Death in person did not turn up upon the cessation of every life. It was not necessary. Governments govern, but prime ministers and presidents do not personally turn up in people's homes to tell them how to run their lives, because of the mortal danger this would present. There are laws instead.

But from time to time Death checked up to see that things were functioning properly or, to put it another and more accurate way, properly ceasing to function in the less significant areas of his jurisdiction.

And now he walked through dark seas.

Silt rose in clouds around his feet as he strode along the trench bottom.

His robes floated out around him.

There was silence, pressure and utter, utter darkness. But there was life down here, even this far below the waves. There were giant squid, and lobsters with teeth on their eyelids. There were spidery things with their stomachs on their feet, and fish that made their own light. It was a quiet, black nightmare world, but life lives everywhere that life can. Where life can't, this takes a little longer.

Death's destination was a slight rise in the trench floor. Already the water

need
air or light. It did not even need food in the way that most other species would

understand the term.

It just grew at the edge of the streaming column of water, looking like a cross

between a worm and a flower.

Death kneeled down and peered at it, because it was so small. But for some

reason, in this world without eyes or light, it was also a brilliant red. The profligacy of life in these matters never ceased to amaze him.

He reached inside his robe and pulled out a small roll of black material, like a

jeweller's toolkit. With great care he took from one of its pouches a scythe

about an inch long, and held it expectantly between thumb and forefinger.

Somewhere overhead a shard of rock was dislodged by a stray current and tumbled

down, raising little puffs of silt as it bounced off the tubes.

It landed just beside the living flower and then rolled, wrenching it from the

rock.

Death flicked the tiny scythe just as the bloom faded ...

The omnipotent eyesight of various supernatural entities is often remarked upon.

It is said they can see the fall of every sparrow.

And this may be true. But there is only one who is always there when it hits the

ground.

The soul of the tube worm was very small and uncomplicated. It wasn't bothered

-but they weren't.

In the same way that the best of engineers can hear the tiny change that signals

a bearing going bad long before the finest of instruments would detect anything

wrong, Death picked up a discord in the symphony of the world. It was one wrong

note among billions but all the more noticeable for that, like a tiny pebble in

a very large shoe.

He waved a finger in the waters. For a moment a blue, door-shaped outline

appeared He stepped through it and was gone.

The tube creatures didn't notice him go.

They hadn't noticed him arrive. They never ever noticed anything.

A cart trundled through the freezing foggy streets, the driver hunched in his

seat. He seemed to be all big thick brown overcoat.

A figure darted out of the swirls and was suddenly on the box next to him

'Hi!' it said. 'My name's Teatime. What's yours?'

'ere, you get down, I ain't allowed to give li-'

The driver stopped. It was amazing how Teatime had been able to thrust a knife

through four layers of thick clothing and stop it just at the point where it pricked the flesh.

'Sorry?' said Teatime, smiling brightly.

'Er - there ain't nothing valuable, y'know, nothing valuable, only a few bags

of-'

'Oh, dear,' said Teatime, his face a sudden acre of concern. 'Well, we'll just

have to see, won't we ... What is your name, sir?'

figures, a huge shambling mound of a creature, was carrying a long bundle over its shoulder. The bundle moved and made muffled noises.

'Do stop shaking, Ernie. We just need a lift said Teatime, as the cart rumbled over the cobbles.

'Where to, mister?'

'Oh, we don't mind. But first, I'd like you to stop in Sator Square, near the second fountain.'

The knife was withdrawn. Ernie stopped trying to breathe through his ears.

'Er . . .'

'What is it? You do seem tense, Ernie. I always find a neck massage helps.'

'I ain't rightly allowed to carry passengers, see Charlie'll give me a right telling-off . . .'

'Oh, don't you worry about that,' said Tea time, slapping him on the back.

'We're all friends here!'

'What're we bringing the girl for?' said a voice behind them.

's not right, hittin' girls,' said a deep voice. 'Our mam said no hittin' girls. Only bad boys do that, our mam said!'

'You be quiet, Banjo.'

'Our mam said-'

'Shssh! Emie here doesn't want to listen to our troubles,' said Teatime, not taking his gaze off the driver.

'Me? Deaf as a post, me,' burred Ernie, who in some ways was a very quick learner. 'Can't hardly see more'n a few feet, neither. Cot no recollection for

we
are. Oh dear. There seems to be some excitement.'
There was the sound of fighting somewhere ahead, and then a couple
of masked
trolls ran past with three Watchmen after them. They all ignored the cart.
'I heard the De Bris gang were going to have a go at Packley's
strongroom
tonight,' said a voice behind Ernie.
'Looks like Mr Brown won't be joining us, then,' said another voice.
There was
a snigger.
'Oh, I don't know about that, Mr Lilywhite, I don't know about that at all,'
said a third voice, and this one was from the direction of the fountain.
'Could
you take my bag while I climb up, please? Do be careful, it's a little
heavy.'
It was a neat little voice. The owner of a voice like that kept his money in
a
shovel purse and always counted his change carefully. Ernie thought all
this,
and then tried very hard to forget that he had.
'On you go, Ernie,' said Teatime. 'Round behind the University, I think.'
As the cart rolled on, the neat little voice said, 'You grab all the money
and
then you get out very smartly. Am I right?'
There was a murmur of agreement.
'Learned that on my mother's knee, yeah.'
'You learned a lot of stuff across your ma's knee, Mr Lilywhite.'
'Don't you say nuffin' about our mam!' The voice was like an earthquake.
'This is Mr Brown, Banjo. You smarten up.'
'He dint ort to tork about our mam!'
'All right! All right! Hello, Banjo ... I think I may have a sweet somewhere

...

might
say. Never take the lot and run. Take a little and walk. Dress neat.
That's my
motto. Dress neat and walk away slowly. Never run. Never run. The
Watch'll
always chase a running man. They're like terriers for giving chase. No,
you walk
out slow, you walk round the corner, you wait till there's a lot of
excitement,
then you turn around and walk back. They can't cope with that, see. Half
the
time they'll stand aside to let you walk past. "Good evening, officers,"
you
say, and then you go home for your tea.'
'Wheee! Gets you out of trouble, I can see that. If you've got the nerve.'
'Oh, no, Mr Peachy. Doesn't get you out of. Keeps You out of.'
It was like a very good schoolroom, Ernie thought (and immediately tried
to
forget). Or a back-street gym when a champion prizefighter had just
strolled in.
'What's up with your mouth, Banjo?'
'He lost a tooth, Mr Brown,' said another voice, and sniggered.
'Lost a toot, Mr Brown,' said the thunder that was Banjo.
'Keep your eyes on the road, Ernie,' said Teatime beside him. 'We don't
want an
accident, do we. . .'
The road here was deserted, despite the bustle of the city behind them
and the
bulky of the University nearby. There were a few streets, but the buildings
were
abandoned. And something was happening to the sound. The rest of
AnkhMorpork

protect em. Bit of magic here, bit of
magic there... Stands to reason it's got to go somewhere, right?'
'There used to be warning signs up,' said the neat voice from behind.
'Yeah, well, warning signs in Ankh-Morpork might as well have "Good
firewood"
written on them,' said someone else.
'I mean, stands to reason, they chuck out an old spell for exploding this,
and
another one for twiddlin' that, and another one for making carrots grow,
they
finish up interfering with one another, who knows what they'll end up
doing?'
said Ernie. 'Great-grandpa said sometimes they'd wake up in the
morning and the
cellar'd be higher than the attic. And that weren't the worst,' he added
darkly.
'Yeah, I heard where it got so bad you could walk down the street and
meet
yourself coming the other way,' someone supplied. 'It got so's you didn't
know
it was bum or breakfast time, I heard.'
'The dog used to bring home all kinds of stuff,' said Ernie. 'Great-
grandpa said
half the time they used to dive behind the sofa if it came in with anything
in
its mouth. Corroded fire spells startin' to fizz, broken wands with green
smoke
coming out of 'em and I don't know what else ... and if you saw the cat
playing
with anything, it was best not to try to find out what it was, I can tell you.'
He twitched the reins, his current predicament almost forgotten in the
tide of
hereditary resentment.

ifty thousand

years." Bloody wizards.'

The horse turned a corner.

This was a dead-end street. Half-collapsed houses, windows smashed, doors

stolen, leaned against one another on either side.

'I heard they said they were going to clean up this place,' said someone.

'Oh, yeah,' said Ernie, and spat. When it hit the ground it ran away. 'And you

know what? You get loonies coming in all the time now, poking around, pulling

things about--'

'Just at the wall up ahead,' said Teatime conversationally. 'I think you generally go through just where there's a pile of rubble by the old dead tree,

although you wouldn't see it unless you looked closely. But I've never seen how

you do it ... '

"ere, I can't take you lot through,' said Ernie. 'Lifts is one thing, but not taking people through- '

Teatime sighed. 'And we were getting on so well. Listen, Ernie ... Ern ... you

will take us through or, and I say this with very considerable regret, I will have to kill you. You seem a nice man. Conscientious. A very serious

overcoat

and sensible boots.'

'But if'n I take you through-'

'What's the worst that can happen?' said Teatime. 'You'll lose your job. Whereas

if you don't, you'll die. So if you look at it like that, we're actually doing you a favour. Oh, do say yes.'

'Er . . .' Ernie's brain felt twisted up. The lad was definitely what Ernie

that
probably knows the route better than the driver.
Ernie fumbled in his overcoat pocket and took out a small tin, rather like
a
snuff box. He opened it. There was glowing dust inside.
'What do you do with that?' said Teatime, all interest.
'Oh, you just takes a pinch and throws it in the air and it goes twing and
it
opens the soft place,' said Ernie.
'SO ... you don't need any special training or anything?'
'Er... you just chucks it at the wall there and it goes twing,' said Ernie.
'Really? May I try?'
Teatime took the tin from his unresisting hand and threw a pinch of dust
into
the air in front of the horse. It hovered for a moment and then produced
a
narrow, glittering arch in the air. It sparkled and went...
... twing.
'Aw,' said a voice behind them. 'Innat nice, eh, our Davey?'
'Yeah.'
'All pretty sparkles...'
'And then you just drive forward?' said Teatime.
'That's right,' said Ernie. 'Quick, mind. It only stays open for a little
while.'
Teatime pocketed the little tin. 'Thank you very much, Ernie. Very much
indeed.'
His other hand lashed out. There was a glint of metal. The carter
blinked, and
then fell sideways off his seat.
There was silence from behind, tinted with horror and possibly just a
little
terrible admiration.
'Wasn't he dull?' said Teatime, picking up the reins.

absolutely nothing distinguished the robes - is that there is so much else

we

will control.

Quite, said another. It is really amazing how they think. A sort of ...
illogical logic.

Children, said another. Who would have thought it? But today the
children,

tomorrow the world.

Give me a child until he is seven and he's mine for life, said another.

There was a dreadful pause.

The consensus beings that called themselves the Auditors did not
believe in

anything, except possibly immortality. And the way to be immortal, they
knew,

was to avoid living. Most of all they did not believe in personality. To be
a

personality was to be a creature with a beginning and an end. And since
they

reasoned that in an infinite universe any life was by comparison
unimaginably

short, they died instantly. There was a flaw in their logic, of course, but
by

the time they found this out it was always too late. In the meantime,
they scrupulously avoided any comment, action or experience that set
them apart

...

You said 'me', said one.

Ah. Yes. But, you see, we were quoting, said the other one hurriedly.
Some

religious person said that. About educating children. And so would
logically say

'me'. But I wouldn't use that term of myself, of - damn!

The robe vanished in a little puff of smoke.

The dark figure stopped by the dead carter and reached down.

COULD I GIVE YOU A HAND?

Ernie looked up gratefully.

'Cor, yeah,' he said. He got to his feet, swaying a little. 'Here, your fingers're cold, mister!'

SORRY.

'What'd he go and do that for? I did what he said. He could've killed me.'

Ernie felt inside his overcoat and pulled out a small and, at this point, strangely transparent silver flask.

'I always keep a nip on me these cold nights,' he said. 'Keeps me spirits up.'

YES INDEED. Death looked around briefly and sniffed the air.

'How'm I going to explain all this, then, eh?' said Ernie, taking a pull.

SORRY? THAT WAS VERY RUDE OF ME. I WASN'T PAYING ATTENTION.

'I said what'm I going to tell people? Letting some blokes ride off with my cart

neat as you like ... That's gonna be the sack for sure, I'm gonna be in big

trouble . . .'

All. WELL. THERE AT LEAST I HAVE SOME GOOD NEWS, ERNEST. AND, THEN AGAIN, I HAVE

SOME BAD NEWS.

Ernie listened. Once or twice he looked at the corpse at his feet. He looked

smaller from the outside. He was bright enough not to argue. Some things are

fairly obvious when it's a seven-foot skeleton with a scythe telling you them.

'So I'm dead, then,' he concluded.

CORRECT.

'Er ... The priest said that ... you know. after you're dead . . . it's like

He was looking for us, said another. Did you notice? He suspects something. He gets so ... concerned about things. Yes ... but the beauty of this plan, said a third, is that he can't interfere. He can go everywhere, said one. No, said another. Not quite everywhere. And, with ineffable smugness, they faded into the foreground. It started to snow quite heavily. It was the night before Hogswatch. All through the house... ...one creature stirred. It was a mouse. And someone, in the face of all appropriateness, had baited a trap. Although, because it was the festive season, they'd used a piece of pork crackling. The smell of it had been driving the mouse mad all day but now, with no one about, it was prepared to risk it. The mouse didn't know it was a trap. Mice aren't good at passing on information. Young mice aren't taken up to famous trap sites and told, 'This is where your Uncle Arthur passed away.' All it knew was that, what the hey, here was something to eat. On a wooden board with some wire round it. A brief scurry later and its jaw had closed on the rind. Or, rather, passed through it. The mouse looked around at what was now lying under the big spring, and thought, 'Oops . . .'

Then its gaze went up to the black-clad figure that had faded into view by the wainscoting. 'Squeak?' it asked. SQUEAK, said the Death of Rats.

feature
seldom found in most holes or even quite civilized cats.
The Death of Rats took a leap onto a chair and from there on to the table and in fact right into a glass of amber liquid, which tipped over and broke. A puddle spread around four turnips and began to soak into a note which had been written rather awkwardly on pink writing paper.
It read:

Dere Hogfather,
For Hogswatch I would like a drum an a dolly an a teddybear an a Gharstley Omnian Inquisition Torchure Chamber with Wind-up Rack and Nearly Real Blud You Can Use Again, you can get it From the toyshoppe in Short Strete, it is \$5.99p. I have been good an here is a glars of Sherre an a Pork pie for you and turnips for Gouger an Rooter an Snot Snouter. I hop the Chimney is big enough but my friend Willaim Says you are your father really.
Yrs. Virginia Prood

The Death of Rats nibbled a bit of the pork pie because when you are the personification of the death of small rodents you have to behave in certain ways. He also piddled on one of the turnips for the same reason, although only metaphorically, because when you are a small skeleton in a black robe there are also some things you technically cannot do.

then looked up at the mantelpiece.

He reached it in one jump, and ambled curiously through the cards that had been

ranged along it. His grey whiskers twitched at messages like 'Wifhin you Joye

and all Goode Cheer at Hogswatchtime & All Through The Yeare'. A couple of them

had pictures of a big jolly fat man carrying a sack. In one of them he was riding in a sledge drawn by four enormous pigs.

The Death of Rats sniffed at a couple of long stockings that had been hung from

the mantelpiece, over the fireplace in which a fire had died down to a few

sullen ashes.

He was aware of a subtle tension in the air, a feeling that here was a scene

that was also a stage, a round hole, as it were, waiting for a round peg

There was a scraping noise. A few lumps of soot thumped into the ashes.

The Grim Squeaker nodded to himself.

The scraping became louder, and was followed by a moment of silence and then a

clang as something landed in the ashes and knocked over a set of ornamental fire

irons.

The rat watched carefully as a red-robed figure pulled itself upright and staggered across the hearthrug, rubbing its shin where it had been

caught by the

toasting fork.

It reached the table and read the note. The Death of Rats thought he heard a

groan.

had, just visible, the words 'victim Figures NOT included. 3-10 yrs.'

The Death of Rats couldn't see much of the donor of this munificence.

The big

red hood hid all the face, apart from a long white beard.

Finally, when the figure finished, it stood back and pulled a list out of its pocket. It held it up to the hood and appeared to be consulting it. It

waved its

other hand vaguely at the fireplace, the sooty footprints, the empty sherry

glass and the stocking. Then it bent forward, as if reading some tiny print.

AH, YES, it said. ER... HO. HO. HO.

With that, it ducked down and entered the chimney. There was some scrabbling

before its boots gained a purchase, and then it was gone.

The Death of Rats realized he'd begun to know his little scythe's handle in

sheer shock.

SQUEAK?

He landed in the ashes and swarmed up the sooty cave of the chimney.

He emerged

so fast that he shot out with his legs still scrabbling and landed in the snow

on the roof.

There was a sledge hovering in the air by the gutter.

The red-hooded figure had just climbed in and appeared to be talking to someone

invisible behind a pile of sacks.

HERE'S ANOTHER PORK PIE.

'Any mustard?' said the sacks. 'They're a treat with mustard.'

IT DOES NOT APPEAR SO.

'Oh, well. Pass it over anyway.'

IT LOOKS VERY BAD.

I meant we're not going to be intimidated by the certain prospect of complete
and utter failure, master.'
AREN'T WE? OH, GOOD. WELL, I SUPPOSE WE'D BETTER BE
GOING. The figure picked up
the reins. UP, GOUGER! UP, ROOTER! UP, TUSKER! UP, SNOUTER!
GIDDYUP!

The four large boars harnessed to the sledge did not move.
WHY DOESN'T THAT WORK? said the figure in a puzzled, heavy
voice.

'Beats me, master,' said the sacks.
IT WORKS ON HORSES.
'You could try "Pig-hooley! "'
PIG-HOOEY. They waited. NO ... DOESN'T SEEM TO REACH THEM.
There was some whispering.
REALLY? YOU THINK THAT WOULD WORK?
'It'd bloody well work on me if I was a pig, master.'
VERY WELL, THEN.
The figure gathered up the reins again.
APPLE! SAUCE!
The pigs' legs blurred. Silver light flicked across them, and exploded
outwards.

They dwindled to a dot, and vanished.
SQUEAK?
The Death of Rats skipped across the snow, slid down a drainpipe and
landed on
the roof of a shed.
There was a raven perched there. It was staring disconsolately at
something.
SQUEAK!
'Look at that, willya?' said the raven rhetorically. It waved a claw at a
bird

myself can recite poems and repeat many humorous phrases--
SQUEAK!

'Yes? What?'

The Death of Rats pointed at the roof and then the sky and jumped up
and down

excitedly. The raven swivelled one eye upwards.

'Oh, yes. Him,' he said. 'Turns up at this time of year. Tends to be
associated

distantly with robins, which--'

SQUEAK! SQUEE IK IR IK! The Death of Rats pantomimed a figure
landing in a grate

and walking around a room. SQUEAK EEK IK IK, SQUEAK 'HEEK
HEEK HEEK!' IK IK

SQUEAK!

'Been overdoing the Hogswatch cheer, have you? Been rustling around
in the

brandy butter?'

SQUEAK?

The raven's eyes revolved.

'Look, Death's Death. It's a full-time job right?

it's not as though you can run, like, a window cleaning round on the side
or nip

round after work cutting people's lawns.'

SQUEAK!

'Oh, please yourself.'

The raven crouched a little to allow the tiny figure to hop on to its back,
and

then lumbered into the air.

'Of course, they can go mental, your occult types,' it said, as it swooped
over

the moonlit garden. 'Look at Old Man Trouble, for one--'

SQUEAK.

'Oh, I'm not suggestin---'

probably

eaten their relatives, or at least someone's relatives.

Biers was where the undead drank. And when Igor the barman was asked for a

Bloody Mary, he didn't mix a metaphor.

The regular customers didn't ask questions, and not only because some of them

found anything above a growl hard to articulate. None of them was in the answers

business. Everyone in Biers drank alone. even when they were in groups. Or

packs.

Despite the decorations put up inexpertly by Igor the barman to show willing,[8]

Biers was not a family place.

Family was a subject Susan liked to avoid.

Currently she was being aided in this by a gin and tonic. In Biers, unless you

weren't choosy, it paid to order a drink that was transparent because Igor also

had undirected ideas about what you could stick on the end of a cocktail stick.

If you saw something spherical and green, you just had to hope that it was an

olive.

She felt hot breath on her ear. A bogeyman had sat down on the stool beside her.

'Woss a normo doin' in a place like this, then?' it rumbled, causing a cloud of

vaporized alcohol and halitosis to engulf her. 'Hah, you fink it's cool comin'

down here an' swannin' around in a black dress wid all the lost boys, eh?

shot

back so quickly that he fell off his stool.

And when the girl spoke, what she said was only partly words but also a statement, written in stone, of how the future was going to be.

'GO AWAY AND STOP BOTHERING ME.'

She turned back and gave Igor a polite and slightly apologetic smile.

The

bogeyman struggled frantically out of the wreckage of his stool and loped

towards the door.

Susan felt the drinkers turn back to their private preoccupations. It was amazing what you could get away with in Biers.

Igor put down the glass and looked up at the window. For a drinking den that

relied on darkness it had rather a large one but, of course, some customers did

arrive by air.

Something was tapping on it now.

Igor lurched over and opened it.

Susan looked up.

'Oh, no . . . '

The Death of Rats leapt down onto the counter, with the raven fluttering after

it.

SQUEAK SQUEAK EEK! EEK! SQUEAK IK IK 'HEEK HEEK HEEK!' SQ
'Go away,' said Susan coldly. 'I'm not interested. You're just a figment of

my

imagination.'

The raven perched on a bowl behind the bar and said, 'Ah, great.'

SQUEAK!

'What're these?' said the raven, flicking something off the end of its beak.

'Onions? Pfah!'

Search me. Of course, it can happen, as I was telling the rat only just now-'

Susan put her hands over her ears, more for desperate theatrical effect than for

the muffling they gave.

'I don't want to know! I don't have a grandfather!'

She had to hold on to that.

The Death of Rats squeaked at length.

'The rat says you must remember, he's tall, not what you'd call fleshy, he

carries a scythe-'

'Go away! And take the ... the rat with you!'

She waved her hand wildly and, to her horror and shame, knocked the little

hooded skeleton over an ashtray.

EEK?

The raven took the rat's cowl in its beak and tried to drag him away, but a tiny

skeletal fist shook its scythe.

EEK IK EEK SQUEAK!

'He says, you don't mess with the rat,' said the raven.

In a flurry of wings they were gone.

Igor dosed the window. He didn't pass any comment.

'They weren't real,' said Susan, hurriedly. 'Well, that is ... the raven's probably real, but he hangs around with the rat--'

'Which isn't real,' said Igor.

'That's right!' said Susan, gratefully. 'You probably didn't see a thing.'

'That's right,' said Igor. 'Not a thing.'

'Now ... how much do I owe you?' said Susan.

Igor counted on his fingers.

'That'll be a dollar for the drinks,' he said, 'and fivepence because the raven

that wasn't here messed in the pickles.'

more than he
knew, and was quite happy knowing this. He didn't meddle with the fabric of time

and space, and they kept out of his greenhouses. The way he saw it, it was a partnership.

He'd been particularly careful to scrub the floors. Mr Ridcully had been very specific about that.

'Verruca Gnome,' he said to himself, giving tap a last polish. 'What an imagination the Gentlemen do have.'

Far off, unheard by anyone, was a faint little noise, like the ringing of tiny silver bells.

Glingleglinglegingle...

And someone landed abruptly in a snowdrift and said, 'Buzzer!', which is a terrible thing to say as your first word ever.

Overhead, heedless of the new and somewhat angry life that was even now dusting

itself off, the sledge soared onwards through time and space.

I'M FINDING THE BEARD A BIT OF A TRIAL, said Death.

'Why've you got to have the beard?' said the voice from among the sacks. 'I

thought you said people see what they expect to see.'

CHILDREN DON'T. TOO OFTEN THEY SEE WHAT'S THERE.

'Well, at least it's keeping you in the right frame of mind, master. In character, sort of thing.'

BUT GOING DOWN THE CHIMNEY? WHERE'S THE SENSE IN THAT? I CAN JUST WALK THROUGH THE WALLS.

'Walking through the walls is not right, neither,' said the voice from the sacks.

IT WORKS FOR ME.

through
walls?' it said. 'And the "Ho, ho, ho" could use some more work, if you don't

mind my saying so.'

HO. HO. HO.

'No, no, no!' said Albert. 'You got to put a bit of life in it, sir, no offence intended. It's got to be a big fat laugh. You got to ... you got to sound like

you're pissing brandy and crapping plum pudding, sir, excuse my Klatchian.'

REALLY? HOW DO YOU KNOW ALL THIS?

'I was young once, sir. Hung up my stocking like a good boy every year. For to

get it filled with toys, just like you're doing. Mind you, in those days basically it was sausages and black puddings if you were lucky. But

you always got a pink sugar piglet in the toe. It wasn't a good Hogswatch unless

you'd eaten so much you were sick as a pig, master.'

Death looked at the sacks.

It was a strange but demonstrable fact that the sacks of toys carried by the

Hogfather, no matter what they really contained, always appeared to have

sticking out of the top a teddy bear, a toy soldier in the kind of colourful uniform that would stand out in a disco, a drum and a red-and-white candy cane.

The actual contents always turned out to be something a bit garish and costing

\$5.99.

Death had investigated one or two. There had been a Real Agatean Ninja, for

Then there was this business of deciding who'd been naughty or nice.
He'd never
had to think about that sort of thing before. Naughty or nice, it was
ultimately
all the same.

Still, it had to be done right. Otherwise it wouldn't work.

The pigs pulled up alongside another chimney.

'Here we are, here we are,' said Albert. 'James Riddle, aged eight.'

HAH, YES. HE ACTUALLY SAYS IN HIS LETTER, 'I BET YOU DON'T
EXIST 'COS EVERYONE

KNOWS ITS YORE PARENTS.' OH YES, said Death, with what almost
sounded like

sarcasm, I'M SURE HIS PARENTS ARE JUST IMPATIENT TO BANG
THEIR ELBOWS IN TWELVE

FEET OF NARROW UNSWEPT CHIMNEY, I DON'T THINK. I SHALL
TREAD EXTRA SOOT INTO HIS

CARPET.

'Right, sir. Good thinking. Speaking of which - down you go, sir.'

HOW ABOUT IF I DON'T GIVE HIM ANYTHING AS A PUNISHMENT
FOR NOT BELIEVING?

'Yeah, but what's that going to prove?'

Death sighed. I SUPPOSE YOU'RE RIGHT.

'Did you check the list?'

YES. TWICE. ARE YOU SURE THAT'S ENOUGH?

'Definitely.'

COULDN'T REALLY MAKE HEAD OR TAIL OF IT, TO TELL YOU THE
TRUTH. HOW CAN I TELL

IF HE'S BEEN NAUGHTY OR NICE, FOR EXAMPLE?

'Oh, well ... I don't know ... Has he hung his clothes up, that sort of thing.

AND IF HE HAS BEEN GOOD I MAY GIVE HIM THIS KLATCHIAN
WAR CHARIOT WITH REAL

OPINION...

Albert: looked across the snowy rooftops and sighed. This wasn't right.

He was

helping because, well, Death was his master and that's all there was to it, and

if the master had a heart it would be in the right place. But...

'Are you sure we ought to be doing this, master?'

Death stopped, halfway out of the chimney.

CAN YOU THINK OF A BETTER ALTERNATIVE, ALBERT?

And that was it. Albert couldn't.

Someone had to do it.

There were bears on the street again.

Susan ignored them and didn't even make a point of not treading on the cracks.

They just stood around, looking a bit puzzled and slightly transparent, visible

only to children and Susan. News like Susan gets around. The bears had heard

about the poker. Nuts and berries, their expressions seemed to say. That's

what we're here for. Big sharp teeth? What big shar--- Oh, these big sharp

teeth? They're just for, er, cracking nuts. And some of these berries can be

really vicious.

The city's clocks were striking six when she got back to the house. She was

allowed her own key. It wasn't as if she was a servant, exactly.

You couldn't be a duchess and a servant. But it was all right to be a governess.

It was understood that it wasn't exactly what you were, it was merely a way of

of worried deference she thought was due to anyone who'd known the difference

between a serviette and a napkin from birth.

Susan had never before come across the idea that you could rise in Society by,

as it were, gaining marks, especially since such noblemen as she'd met in her

father's house had used neither serviette nor napkin but a state of mind, which

was 'Drop it on the floor, the dogs'll eat it.'

When Mrs Gaiter had tremulously asked her how one addressed the second cousin of

a queen,

Susan had replied without thinking, 'We called him Jamie, usually,' and Mrs

Gaiter had had to go and have a headache in her room.

Mr Gaiter just nodded when he met her in a passage and never said very much to

her. He was pretty sure he knew where he stood in boots and shoes and that was

that.

Gawain and Twyla, who'd been named by people who apparently loved them, had been

put to bed by the time Susan got in, at their own insistence. It's a widely held

belief at a certain age that going to bed early makes tomorrow come faster.

She went to tidy up the schoolroom and get things ready for the morning, and

began to pick up the things the children had left lying around. Then something

tapped at a window pane.

'You wanted maybe some dear little robin? Listen, your grand-
'Go away!'

Susan slammed the window and pulled the curtains across. She put her
back to

them, to make sure, and tried to concentrate on the room. It helped to
think

about ... normal things.

There was the Hogswatch tree, a rather smaller version of the grand
one in the

hall. She'd helped the children to make paper decorations for it. Yes.
Think

about that.

There were the paperchains. There were the bits of holly, thrown out
from the

main rooms for not having enough berries on them, and now given fake
modelling

clay berries and stuck in anyhow on shelves and behind pictures.

There were two stockings hanging from the mantelpiece of the small
schoolroom

grate. There were Twyla's paintings, all blobby blue skies and violently
green

grass and red houses with four square windows. There were ...

Normal things ...

She straightened up and stared at them, her fingernails beating a
thoughtful

tattoo on a wooden pencil case.

The door was pushed open. It revealed the tousled shape of Twyla,
hanging onto

the doorknob with one hand.

'Susan, there's a monster under my bed again . . .'

The click of Susan's fingernails stopped.

' . . . I can hear it moving about . . .'

Susan sighed and turned towards the child.

of hair. She pulled.
The bogeyman came out like a cork but before it could get its balance it found itself spreadeagled against the wall with one arm behind its back. But it did manage to turn its head, to see Susan's face glaring at it from a few inches away.

Gawain bounced up and down on his bed.

'Do the Voice on it! Do the Voice on it!' he shouted.

'Don't do the Voice, don't do the Voice!' pleaded the bogeyman urgently.

'Hit it on the head with the poker!'

'Not the poker! Not the poker!'

'It's you, isn't it,' said Susan. 'From this afternoon . . .'

'Aren't you going to poke it with the poker?' said Gawain.

'Not the poker!' whined the bogeyman.

'New in town?' whispered Susan.

'Yes!' The bogeyman's forehead wrinkled with puzzlement. 'Here, how come you can see me?'

'Then this is a friendly warning, understand? Because it's Hogswatch.'

The bogeyman tried to move. 'You call this friendly?'

'Ah, you want to try for unfriendly?' said Susan, adjusting her grip.

'No, no, no, I like friendly!'

'This house is out of bounds, right?'

'You a witch or something?' moaned the bogeyman.

'I'm just ... something. Now ... you won't be around here again, will you? Otherwise it'll be the blanket next time.'

'No!'

'I mean it. We'll put your head under the blanket.'

'No!'

'It's got fluffy bunnies on it. '

Am. Nice. The bogeyman grinned hugely. It was amazing the sort of mischief that could be caused in a house where no one in authority thought you existed.

'I'll be off, then,' it said. 'Er. Happy Hogswatch.'

'Possibly,' said Susan, as it slunk away.

'That wasn't as much fun as the one last month,' said Gawain, getting between the sheets again. 'You know, when you kicked him in the trousers-'

'Just you two get to sleep now,' said Susan.

'Verity said the sooner we got to sleep the sooner the Hogfather would come,' said Twyla conversationally.

'Yes,' said Susan. 'Unfortunately, that might be the case.'

The remark passed right over their heads. She wasn't sure why it had gone through hers, but she knew enough to trust her senses.

She hated that kind of sense. It ruined your life. But it was the sense she had been born with.

The children were tucked in, and she closed the door quietly and went back to the schoolroom.

Something had changed.

She glared at the stockings, but they were unfulfilled. A paperchain rustled.

She stared at the tree. Tinsel had been twined around it, badly pasted-together decorations had been hung on it. And on top was the fairy made of

She crossed her arms, looked up at the ceiling, and sighed theatrically.

'It's you, isn't it?' she said.

SQUEAK?

on the other side of the room. There was a clicking noise and the raven's voice added,

'These damn eyeballs are hard, aren't they?'

Susan raced across the room and snatched the bowl away so fast that the raven

somersaulted and landed on its back.

'They're walnuts!' she shouted, as they bounced around her. 'Not eyeballs! This

is a schoolroom! And the difference between a school and a-a-a raven delicatessen is that they hardly ever have eyeballs lying around in bowls in

case a raven drops in for a quick snack! Understand? No eyeballs! The world is

full of small round things that aren't eyeballs! OK?'

The raven's own eyes revolved.

' ' n' I suppose a bit of warm liver's out of the question---'

'Shut up! I want both of you out of here right now! I don't know how you got in

here-'

'There's a law against coming down the chimney on Hogswatchnight?'

'-but I don't want you back in my life, understand?'

'The rat said you ought to be warned even if you were crazy,' said the raven

sulkily. 'I didn't want to come, there's a donkey dropped dead just outside the

city gates, I'll be lucky now if I get a hoof---'

'Warned?'

Susan. There it was again. The change in the weather of the mind, a sensation of

tangible time ...

The Death of Rats nodded.

There were others at work on this shining Hogswatch Eve. The Sandman was out and about, dragging his sack from bed to bed. Jack Frost wandered from window pane to window pane, making icy patterns.

And one tiny hunched shape slid and slithered along the gutter, squelching its feet in slush and swearing under its breath.

It wore a stained black suit and, on its head, the type of hat known in various parts of the multiverse as 'bowler', 'derby' or 'the one that makes you look a

bit of a tit'. The hat had been pressed down very firmly and, since the creature had long pointy ears, these had been forced out sideways and gave it the look of a small malignant wing-nut.

The thing was a gnome by shape but a fairy by profession. Fairies aren't necessarily little twinkly creatures. It's purely a job description, and the commonest ones aren't even visible.[9] A fairy is simply any creature currently

employed under supernatural laws to take things away or, as in the case of the

small creature presently climbing up the inside of a drainpipe and swearing, to bring things.

Oh, yes. He does. Someone has to do it, and he looks the right gnome for the job.

Oh, yes. Sideney was worried. He didn't like violence, and there had been a lot of it in

the last few days, if days passed in this place. The men ... well, they

He reminded Sideney too much of Ronnie Jenks, the bully who'd made his life miserable at Cammer Wimblestone's dame school. Ronnie hadn't been a pupil. He was the old woman's grandson or nephew or something, which gave him a licence to hang around the place and beat up any kid smaller or weaker or brighter than he was, which more or less meant he had the whole world to choose from. In those circumstances, it was particularly unfair that he always chose Sideney. Sideney hadn't hated Ronnie. He'd been too frightened. He'd wanted to be his friend. Oh, so much. Because that way, just possibly, he wouldn't have his head trodden on such a lot and would actually get to eat his lunch instead of having it thrown in the privy. And it had been a good day when it had been his lunch. And then, despite all Ronnie's best efforts, Sideney had grown up and gone to university. Occasionally his mother told him how Ronnie was getting on (she assumed, in the way of mothers, that because they had been small boys at school together they had been friends). Apparently he ran a fruit stall and was married to a girl called Angie.[10] This was not enough punishment, Sideney considered. Banjo even breathed like Ronnie, who had to concentrate on such an intellectual exercise and always had one blocked nostril. And his mouth open all the time. He looked as though he was living on invisible plankton.

On, it'll keep going for ever,' said Sideney.

'The simple ones do. It's just a state change, powered by the ... the ... it just keeps going

He swallowed.

'So,' he said, 'I was thinking ... since you don't actually need me, sir, perhaps ...'

'Mr Brown seems to be having some trouble with the locks on the top floor,' said

Teatime. 'That door we couldn't open, remember? I'm sure you'll want to help.'

Sideney's face fell.

'Urn, I'm not a locksmith. '

'They appear to be magical.'

Sideney opened his mouth to say, 'But I'm very bad at magical locks,' and then

thought much better of it. He had already fathomed that if Teatime wanted you to

do something, and you weren't very good at it, then your best plan, in fact

quite possibly your only plan, was to learn to be good at it very quickly.

Sideney was not a fool. He'd seen the way the others reacted around Teatime, and

they were men who did things he'd only dreamed of.[11]

At which point he was relieved to see Medium Dave walk down the stairs, and it

said a lot for the effect of Teatime's stare that anyone could be relieved to

have it punctuated by someone like Medium Dave.

'We've found another guard, sir. Up on the sixth floor. He's been hiding.'

Teatime stood up. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'Not trying to be heroic, was he?'

'He's just scared. Shall we let him go?'

'Let him go?' said Teatime. 'Far too messy. I'll go up there. Come along, Mr

University, although technically Sidney had not alumni. What threw
the eye was
the absence of shadows. You didn't notice shadows, how they
delineated things,
how they gave texture to the world, until they weren't there. The white
marble,
if that's what it was seemed to glow from the inside. Even when the
impossible
sun shone through a window it barely caused faint grey smudges where
honest
shadows should be. The tower seemed to avoid darkness.
That was even more frightening than the times when, after a
complicated landing,
you found yourself walking up by stepping down the underside of a stair
and the
distant floor now hung overhead like a ceiling. He'd noticed that even
the other men shut their eyes when that happened. Teatime, though,
took those
stairs three at a time, laughing like a kid with a new toy.
They reached an upper landing and followed a corridor. The others were
gathered
by a closed door.
'He's barricaded himself in,' said Chickenwire.
Teatime tapped on it. 'You in there,' he said. 'Come on out. You have
my word
you won't be harmed.'
'No!'
Teatime stood back. 'Banjo, knock it down,' he said.
Banjo lumbered forward. The door withstood a couple of massive kicks
and then
burst open.
The guard was cowering behind an overturned cabinet. He cringed back
as Teatime

NO, in fact I'm---

The guard sagged. 'Awww, not the one where there's all this kind of, you know,

mud and then everything goes blue---

'No, I'm---

'Oh, shit, then you're the one where there's this door only there's no floor

beyond it and then there's these claws-

'No,' said Teatime. 'Not that one.' He withdrew a dagger from his sleeve.

'I'm

the one where this man comes out of nowhere and kills you stone dead.'

The guard grinned with relief. 'Oh, that one,' he said. 'But that one's not very-'

He crumpled around Teatime's suddenly outthrust fist. And then, just like the

others had done, he faded.

'Rather a charitable act there, I feel,' Teatime said as the man vanished.

'But

it is nearly Hogswatch, after all.'

Death, pillow slipping gently under his red robe, stood in the middle of the

nursery carpet . . .

It was an old one. Things ended up in the nursery when they had seen a complete

tour of duty in the rest of the house. Long ago, someone had made it by carefully knotting long bits of brightly coloured rag into a sacking base, giving it the look of a deflated Rastafarian hedgehog. Things lived among the

rag. There were old rusks, bits of toy, buckets of dust. It had seen life.

It

may even have evolved some.

Now the occasional lump of grubby melting snow dropped onto it.

Susan was crimson with anger.

wearing a
false beard and has got a damn cushion shoved up his robe! I mean,
why?'

Death looked nervous.

ALBERT SAID IT WOULD HELP ME GET INTO THE SPIRIT OF THE
THING. ER

AGAIN

There was a small squelchy noise.

Susan spun around, grateful right now for any distraction.

'Don't think I can't hear you! They're grapes, understand? And the other
things

are satsumas! Get out of the fruit bowl!'

'Can't blame a bird for trying,' said the raven sulkily, from the table.

'And you, you leave those nuts alone! They're for tomorrow!'

SKQUEAF, said the Death of Rats, swallowing hurriedly.

Susan turned back to Death. The Hogfather's artificial stomach was now
at groin

level.

'This is a nice house,' she said. 'And this is a

. IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU

good job. And it's real, with normal people. And I was looking forward to
a real

life, where normal things happen! And suddenly the old circus comes to
town.

Look at yourselves. Three Stooges, No Waiting! Well, I don't know
what's going

on, but you can all leave again, right? This is my life. It doesn't belong to
any of you. It's not going to-'

There was a muffled curse, a rush of soot, and a skinny old man landed
in the

grate.

'Bum!' he said.

11.
Albert pulled the pointy hat off his head and spat out some soot.
'Right. He did. Twice,' he said. 'Anything to drink around here?'
'So what have you turned up for?' Susan demanded. 'And if it's for
business
reasons, I will add, then that outfit is in extremely poor taste--'
THE HOGFATHER IS ... UNAVAILABLE.
'Unavailable? At Hogswatch?'
YES.
'Why?'
HE IS LET ME SEE THERE ISN'T AN ENTIRELY
APPROPRIATE HUMAN WORD, SO
... LET'S SETTLE FOR ... DEAD. YES. HE IS DEAD.
Susan had never hung up a stocking. She'd never looked for eggs laid
by the Soul
Cake Duck. She'd never put a tooth under her pillow in the serious
expectation
that a dentally inclined fairy would turn up.
It wasn't that her parents didn't believe in such things. They didn't need
to
believe in them. They knew they existed. They just wished they didn't.
Oh, there had been presents, at the right time, with a careful label
saying who
they were from. And a superb egg on Soul Cake Morning, filled with
sweets.
Juvenile teeth earned no less than a dollar each from her father, without
argument.[12] But it was all straightforward.
She knew now that they'd been trying to protect her. She hadn't known
then that
her father had been Death's apprentice for a while, and that her mother
was
Death's adopted daughter. She'd had very dim recollections of being
taken a few

tone of
voice that was more like actions than words, that somehow reached
inside people

and operated all the right switches. And her hair ...

That had only happened recently, though. It used to be unmanageable,
but at

around the age of seventeen she had found it more or less managed
itself.

That had lost her several young men. Someone's hair rearranging itself
into a

new style, the tresses curling around themselves like a nest of kittens,
could

definitely put the crimp on any relationship.

She'd been making good progress, though. She could go for days now
without

feeling anything other than entirely human.

But it was always the case, wasn't it? You could go out into the world,
succeed

on your own terms, and sooner or later some embarrassing old relative
was bound

to turn up.

Grunting and swearing, the gnome clambered out of another drainpipe,
jammed its

hat firmly on its head, threw its sack onto a snowdrift and jumped down
after

it.

' 's a good one,' he said. 'Ha, take 'im weeks to get rid of that one!'

He took a crumpled piece of paper out of a pocket and examined it
closely. Then

he looked at an elderly figure working away quietly at the next house.

It was standing by a window, drawing with great concentration on the
glass.

The gnome wandered up, interested, and watched critically.

ceiling

with gods 'n' angels and suchlike, what'd you do then?'

'He could have as many gods and angels as he liked, provided they-

'-looked like ferns?'

'I resent the implication that I am solely fernfixated,' said Jack Frost. 'I can

also do a very nice paisley pattern.'

'What's that look like, then?'

'Well . . . it does, admittedly, have a certain ferny quality to the uninitiated

eye.' Frost leaned forward. 'Who're you?'

The gnome took a step backwards.

'You're not a tooth fairy, are you? I see more and more of them about these

days. Nice girls.'

'Nah. Nah. Not teeth,' said the gnome, clutching his sack.

'What, then?'

The gnome told him.

'Really?' said Jack Frost. 'I thought they just turned up.'

'Well, come to that, I thought frost on the windows just happened all by itself,' said the gnome. 'ere, you don't half look spiky. I bet You go through a

lot of bedsheets.'

'I don't sleep,' said Frost icily, turning away. 'And now, if you'll excuse me,

I have a large number of windows to do. Ferns aren't easy. You need a steady

hand.'

'What do you mean dead?' Susan demanded. 'How can the Hogfather be dead? He's

... isn't he what you are? An-'

ANTHROPOMORPHIC PERSONIFICATION. YES. HE HAS BECOME SO. THE SPIRIT OF HOGSWATCH.

She pushed it shut quickly.

'And what are you doing here, Albert?' she said, clutching at the straw. 'I thought you'd die if you ever came back to the world!'

AH, BUT WE ARE NOT IN THE WORLD, said Death. WE ARE IN THE SPECIAL CONGRUENT

REALITY CREATED FOR THE HOGFATHER. NORMAL RULES HAVE TO BE SUSPENDED. HOW ELSE

COULD ANYONE GET AROUND THE ENTIRE WORLD IN ONE NIGHT?

' 's right,' said Albert, leering. 'One of the Hogfather's Little Helpers, me.

Official. Cot the pointy green hat and everything.' He spotted the glass of

sherry and couple of turnips that the children had left on the table, and bore

down on them.

Susan looked shocked. A couple of days earlier she'd taken the children to the

Hogfather's Grotto in one of the big shops in The Maul. Of course, it wasn't the

real one, but it had turned out to be a fairly good actor in a red suit.

There

had been people dressed up as pixies, and a picket outside the shop by the Campaign for Equal Heights.[13]

None of the pixies had looked anything like Albert. If they had, people would

have only gone into the grotto armed.

'Been good, 'ave yer?' said Albert, and spat into the fireplace.

Susan stared at him.

Death leaned down. She stared up into the blue glow of his eyes.

YOU ARE KEEPING WELL? he said.

'Yes.'

SELF-RELIANT? MAKING YOUR OWN WAY IN THE WORLD?

'Yes!'

PINK PAPER WITH A MOUSE IN THE CORNER. THE MOUSE IS WEARING A DRESS.

'I ought to point out that she decided to do that so the Hogfather would think

she was sweet,' said Susan. 'Including the deliberate bad spelling. But look,

why are you-'

SHE SAYS SHE IS FIVE YEARS OLD.

'In years, yes. In cynicism, she's about thirtyfive. Why are you doing the-

BUT SHE BELIEVES IN THE HOGFATHER?

'She'd believe in anything if there was a dolly in it for her. But you're not going to leave without telling me---'

Death hung the stockings back on the mantelpiece.

NOW WE MUST BE GOING. HAPPY HOGSWATCH. ER ... OH, YES: HO. HO. HO.

'Nice sherry,' said Albert, wiping his mouth.

Rage overtook Susan's curiosity. It had to travel quite fast.

'You've actually been drinking the actual drinks little children leave out for

the actual Hogfather?' she said.

'Yeah, why not? He ain't drinking 'em. Not where he's gone.'

'And how many have you had, may I ask?'

'Dunno, ain't counted,' said Albert happily.

ONE MILLION, EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND, SEVEN HUNDRED AND SIX, said Death. AND

SIXTY

EIGHT THOUSAND, THREE HUNDRED AND NINETEEN PORK PIES. AND ONE TURNIP.

'It looked pork-pie shaped,' said Albert. 'Everything does, after a while.'

'Then why haven't you exploded?'

'Dunno. Always had a good digestion.'

And they were gone.

The sledge hurtled across the sky.

'She'll try to find out what this is all about, you know,' said Albert.

OH DEAR.

'Especially after you told her not to.'

YOU THINK SO?

'Yeah,' said Albert.

DEAR ME. I STILL HAVE A LOT TO LEARN ABOUT HUMANS, DON'T

I?

'Oh ... I dunno... ' said Albert.

OBVIOUSLY IT WOULD BE QUITE WRONG TO INVOLVE A HUMAN

IN ALL THIS. THAT IS WHY,

YOU WILL RECALL, I CLEARLY FORBADE HER TO TAKE AN INTEREST.

'Yeah ... you did. .

BESIDES, IT'S AGAINST THE RULES.

'You said them little grey buggers had already broken the rules.'

YES, BUT I CAN'T JUST WAVE A MAGIC WAND AND MAKE IT ALL BETTER. THERE MUST BE

PROCEDURES. Death stared ahead for a moment and then shrugged. AND WE HAVE SO

MUCH TO DO. WE HAVE PROMISES TO KEEP.

'Well, the night is young,' said Albert, sitting back in the sacks.

THE NIGHT IS OLD. THE NIGHT IS ALWAYS OLD.

The pigs galloped on. Then, 'No, it ain't.'

I'M SORRY?

'The night isn't any older than the day, master. It stands to reason.

There must

have been a day before anyone knew what the night was.'

YES, BUT IT'S MORE DRAMATIC.

'Oh. Right, then.'

Susan stood by the fireplace.

Fairy. Oh, yes. Old man trouble ... now there was a nasty one for you...
But honestly, what kind of sick person went round creeping into little
children's bedrooms all night?

Well, the Hogfather, of course, but...

There was a little tinkling sound from somewhere near the base of the
Hogswatch
tree.

The raven backed away from the shards of one of the glittering balls.

'Sorry,' it mumbled. 'Bit of a species reaction there. You know . . . round,
glittering

sometimes you just gotta peck-'

'That chocolate money belongs to the children!'

SQUEAK? said the Death of Rats, backing away from the shiny coins.

'Why's he doing this?'

SQUEAK.

'You don't know either?'

SQUEAK.

'Is there some kind of trouble? Did he do something to the real
Hogfather?'

SQUEAK.

'Why won't he tell me?'

SQUEAK.

'Thank you. You've been very helpful.'

Something ripped, behind her. She turned and saw the raven carefully
removing a

strip of red wrapping paper from a package.

'Stop that this minute!'

It looked up guiltily.

'It's only a little bit,' it said. 'No one's going to miss it.'

'What do you want it for, anyway?'

'We're attracted to bright colours, right? Automatic reaction.'

'That's jackdaws!'

'Damn. Is it?'

But it could happen, couldn't it? He's very old, and I suppose he sees a lot of terrible things.'

SQUEAK.

'All the trouble in the world,' the raven translated.

'I understood,' said Susan. That was a talent, too. She didn't understand what the rat said. She just understood what it meant.

'There's something wrong and he won't tell me?' said Susan.

That made her even more angry.

'But Albert is in on it too,' she added.

She thought: thousands, millions of years in the same job. Not a nice one. It isn't always cheerful old men passing away at a great age. Sooner or later, it was bound to get anyone down.

Someone had to do something. It was like that time when Twyla's grandmother had started telling everyone that she was the Empress of Krull and had stopped wearing clothes.

And Susan was bright enough to know that the phrase 'Someone ought to do something' was not, by itself, a helpful one. People who used it never added the rider 'and that someone is me'. But someone ought to do something, and right now the whole pool of someones consisted of her, and no one else.

Twyla's grandmother had ended up in a nursing home overlooking the sea at Quirm.

That sort of option probably didn't apply here. Besides, he'd be unpopular with the other residents.

She'd always wondered, when she was small, why visits to her grandfather could go on for days and yet, when they got back, the calendar was still plodding along as if they'd never been away.

Now she knew the why, although probably no human being would ever really understand the how. Sometimes, somewhere, somehow, the numbers on the clock did not count.

Between every rational moment were a billion irrational ones. Somewhere behind the hours there was a place where the Hogfather rode, the tooth fairies climbed their ladders, Jack Frost drew his pictures, the Soul Cake Duck laid her chocolate eggs. In the endless spaces between the clumsy seconds

Death moved like a witch dancing through raindrops, never getting wet. Humans could live- No, humans couldn't live here, no, because even when you

diluted a glass of wine with a bathful of water you might have more liquid but you still have the same amount of wine. A rubber band was still the same rubber

band no matter how far it was stretched. Humans could exist here, though.

It was never too cold, although the air did prickle like winter air on a sunny

day. But out of human habit Susan got her cloak out of the closet. SQUEAK.

'Haven't you got some mice and rats to see to, then?' 'Nah, 's pretty quiet just before Hogswatch,' said the raven, who was trying to

There was a lot of traffic in the street, but it was fossilized in time. She walked carefully between it until she reached the entrance to the park. The snow had done what even wizards and the Watch couldn't do, which was clean up AnkhMorpork. It hadn't had time to get dirty. In the morning it'd probably look as though the city had been covered in coffee meringue, but for now it mounded the bushes and trees in pure white. There was no noise. The curtains of snow shut out the city lights. A few yards into the park and she might as well be in the country. She stuck her fingers into her mouth and whistled. 'Yknow, that could've been done with a bit more ceremony,' said the raven, who'd perched on a snowencrusted twig. 'Shut up.' ' 's good, though. Better than most women could do.' 'Shut up.' They waited. 'Why have you stolen that piece of red paper from a little girl's present?' said Susan. 'I've got plans,' said the raven darkly. They waited again. She wondered what would happen if it didn't work. She wondered if the rat would snigger. It had the most annoying snigger in the world. Then there were hoofbeats and the floating snow burst open and the horse was there. Binky trotted round in a circle, and then stood and steamed. He wasn't saddled. Death's horse didn't let you fall.

woman is her

daughter.

One said, She is human?

One said, Mostly.

One said, Can she be killed?

One said, Oh, yes.

One said, Well, that's all right, then.

One said, Er ... we don't think we're going to get into trouble over this,
do

we? All this is not exactly ... authorized. We don't want questions asked.

One said, We have a duty to rid the universe of sloppy thinking.

One said, Everyone will be grateful when they find out.

Binky touched down lightly on Death's lawn.

Susan didn't bother with the front door but went round the back, which
was never

locked.

There had been changes. One significant change, at least.

There was a cat-flap in the door.

She stared at it.

After a second or two a ginger cat came through the flap, gave her an
I'm-not-hungry-and-you're-not-interesting look, and padded off into the
gardens.

Susan pushed open the door into the kitchen.

Cats of every size and colour covered every surface. Hundreds of eyes
swivelled

to watch her.

It was Mrs Gammage all over again, she thought. The old woman was a
regular in

Biers for the company and was quite gaga, and one of the symptoms of
those going

completely yoyo was that they broke out in chronic cats. Usually cats
who'd

somewhere

else in any case and strolled off, licking their chops.

The bowl slowly filled up again.

They were obviously living cats. Only life had colour here. Everything else was

created by Death. Colour, along with plumbing and music, were arts that escaped

the grasp of his genius.

She left them in the kitchen and wandered along to the study.

There were changes here, too. By the look of it, he'd been trying to learn to

play the violin again. He'd never been able to understand why he couldn't play

music.

The desk was a mess. Books lay open, piled on one another. They were the ones

Susan had never learned to read. Some of the characters hovered above the pages

or moved in complicated little patterns as they read you while you read them.

Intricate devices had been scattered across the top. They looked vaguely

navigational, but on what oceans and under which stars?

Several pages of parchment had been filled up with Death's own handwriting. It

was immediately recognizable. No one else Susan had ever met had handwriting

with serifs.

It looked as though he'd been trying to work something out.

NOT KLATCH. NOT HOWOWONDALAND. NOT THE EMPIRE.

LET US SAY 20 MILLION CHILDREN AT 2LB OF TOYS PER CHILD.

EQUALS 17,857 TONS. 1,785 TONS PER HOUR.

up ... humanity. Not the real thing, but something that might pass for it
until
you examined it closely.
The house even imitated human houses. Death had created a bedroom
for himself,
despite the fact that he never slept. If he really picked things up from
humans,
had he tried insanity? It was very popular, after all.
Perhaps, after all these millennia, he wanted to be nice.
She let herself into the Room of Lifetimers. She'd liked the sound of it,
when
she was a little girl. But now the hiss of sand from millions of
hourglasses,
and the little pings and pops as full ones vanished and new empty ones
appeared,
was not so enjoyable. Now she knew what was going on. Of course,
everyone died
sooner or later. It just wasn't right to be listening to it happening.
She was about to leave when she noticed the open door in a place
where she had
never seen a door before.
It was disguised. A whole section of shelving, complete with its
whispering
glasses, had swung out.
Susan pushed it back and forth with a finger. When it was shut, you'd
have to
look hard to see the crack.
There was a much smaller room on the other side. It was merely the
size of, say,
a cathedral. And it was lined floor to ceiling with more hourglasses that
Susan
could just see dimly in the
light from the big room. She stepped inside and snapped her fingers.

knew. They just unwinded away to a voice on the wind and a footnote in
some
textbook on religion.
There were other gods lined up. She recognized a few of them.
But there were smaller lifetimers on the shelf. When she saw the labels
she
nearly burst out laughing.
'The Tooth Fairy? The Sandman? John Barleycorn? The Soul Cake
Duck? The God of
what?'
She stepped back, and something crunched under her feet.
There were shards of glass on the floor. She reached down and picked
up the
biggest. Only a few letters remained of the name etched into the glass
HOGFA...
'Oh, no ... it's true. Granddad, what have you done?'
When she left, the candles winked out. Darkness sprang back.
And in the darkness, among the spilled sand, a faint sizzle and a tiny
spark of
light...
Mustrum Ridcully adjusted the towel around his waist.
'How're we doing, Mr Modo?'
The University gardener saluted.
'The tanks are full, Mr Archchancellor sir!' he said brightly. 'And I've
been
stoking the hotwater boilers an day!'
The other senior wizards clustered in the doorway.
'Really, Mustrum, I really think this is most unwise,' said the Lecturer in
Recent Runes. 'It was surely sealed up for a purpose.'
'Remember what it said on the door,' said the Dean.
'Oh, they just wrote that on it to keep people out,' said Ridcully, opening
a
fresh bar of soap.

around this.

The late (or at least severely delayed) Bergholt Stuttley Johnson was generally recognized as the worst inventor in the world, yet in a very specialized sense.

Merely bad inventors made things that failed to operate. He wasn't among these

small fry. Any fool could make something that did absolutely nothing when you

pressed the button. He scorned such fumble-fingered amateurs. Everything he

built worked. It just didn't do what it said on the box. If you wanted a small

ground-to-air missile, you asked Johnson to design an ornamental fountain. It

amounted to pretty much the same thing. But this never discouraged him, or the

morbid curiosity of his clients. Music, landscape gardening, architecture

-
there was no start to his talents.

Nevertheless, it was a little bit surprising to find that Bloody Stupid had turned to bathroom design. But, as Ridcully said, it was known that he had

designed and built several large musical organs and, when you got right down to

it, it was all just plumbing, wasn't it?

The other wizards, who'd been there longer than the Archchancellor, took the

view that if Bloody Stupid Johnson had built a fully functional bathroom he'd

actually meant it to be something else.

'Y'know, I've always felt that Mr Johnson was a much maligned man,' said

Listen, it's just water, snapped Ridcully. Even Johnson couldn't do much harm
with water. Modo, open the sluices!
The rest of the wizards backed away as the gardener turned a couple of ornate
brass wheels.
'I'm fed up with groping around for the soap like you fellows!' shouted the
Archchancellor, as water gushed through hidden channels. 'Hygiene. That's the
ticket!
'Don't say we didn't warn you,' said the Dean, shutting the door.
'Er, I still haven't worked out where all the pipes lead, sir,' Modo ventured.
'We'll find out, never you fear,' said Ridcully happily. He removed his hat and
put on a shower cap of his own design. In deference to his profession, it was
pointy. He picked up a yellow rubber duck.
'Man the pumps, Mr Modo. Or dwarf them, of course, in your case.'
'Yes, Archchancellor.'
Modo hauled on a lever. The pipes started a hammering noise and steam leaked out
of a few joints.
Ridcully took a last look around the bathroom.
It was a hidden treasure, no doubt about it. Say what you like, old Johnson must
sometimes have got it right, even if it was only by accident. The entire room,
including the floor and ceiling, had been tiled in white, blue and green. In the
centre, under its crown of pipes, was Johnson's Patent 'Typhoon' Superior Indoor

panel covered with brass taps cast in the shape of mermaids and shells
and, for
some reason, pomegranates. There were separate feeds for salt water,
hard water
and soft water and huge wheels for accurate control of temperature.

Ridcully

inspected them with care.

Then he stood back, looked around at the tiles and sang, 'Mi, mi, mi!'

His voice reverberated back at him.

'A perfect echo!' said Ridcully, one of nature's bathroom baritones.

He picked up a speaking tube that had been installed to allow the bather
to

communicate with the engineer.

'All cisterns go, Mr Modo!'

'Aye, aye, sir!'

Ridcully opened the tap marked 'Spray' and leapt aside, because part of
him was

still well aware that Johnson's inventiveness didn't just push the edge of
the

envelope but often went across the room and out through the wall of the
sorting

office.

A gentle shower of warm water, almost a caressing mist, enveloped
him.

'My word!' he exclaimed, and tried another tap.

'Shower' turned out to be a little more invigorating. 'Torrent' made him
gasp

for breath and 'Deluge' sent him groping to the panel because the top of
his

head felt that it was being removed. 'Wave' sloshed a wall of warm salt
water

from one side of the cubicle to the other before it disappeared into the
grating

And ... Where was F All yes. Chorus.

Something something, a humorously shaped vegetable, a turnip, I believe,

something something and the sweet nightingaleeeeeaarggoooooh-
ARGHH oh oh oh-'

The song shut off suddenly. All Modo could hear was a ferocious gushing noise.

'Archchancellor?'

After a moment a voice answered from near the ceiling. It sounded somewhat high and hesitant.

'Er . . . I wonder if you would be so very good as to shut the water off from

out there, my dear chap? Er ... quite gently, if you wouldn't mind. . .'

Modo carefully spun a wheel. The gushing sound gradually subsided.

'Ah. Well done,' said the voice, but now from somewhere nearer floor level.

'Well. Jolly good job. I think we can definitely call it a success. Yes, indeed.

Er. I wonder if you could help me walk for a moment. I inexplicably feel a little unsteady on my feet . . . '

Modo pushed open the door and helped Ridcully out and onto a bench. He looked

rather pale.

'Yes, indeed,' said the Archchancellor, his eyes a little glazed.

'Astoundingly successful. Er. Just a minor point, Modo-'

'Yes, sir?'

'There's a tap in there we perhaps should leave alone for now,' said Ridcully.

'I'd esteem it a service if you could go and make a little sign to hang on it.'

When Mudo had gone the Archchancellor slowly began to dry himself on a big fluffy towel. As he got his composure back, so another song wormed its way under his breath.

'On the second day of Hogswatch I ... sent my true love back

A nasty little letter, hah, yes indeed, and a partridge in a pear tree---

The gnome slid down onto the tiles and crept up behind the briskly shaking shape.

Ridcully, after a few more trial runs, settled on a song which evolves somewhere

on every planet where there are winters. It's often dragooned into the service

of some local religion and a few words are changed, but it's really about things

that have to do with gods only in the same way that roots have to do with leaves.

'-the rising of the sun, and the running of the deer---

Ridcully spun. A corner of wet towel caught the gnome on the ear and flicked it onto its back.

'I saw you creeping up!' roared the Archchancellor. 'What's the game, then?

Small-time thief, are you?'

The gnome slid backwards on the soapy surface.

' 'ere, what's your game, mister, you ain't supposed to be able to see me!

'I'm a wizard! We can see things that are really there, you know,' said

Ridcully. 'And in the case of the Bursar, things that aren't there, too. What's in this bag?'

The gnome gave up.

'Well ... you know the Tooth Fairy?'

'Yes. Of course,' said Ridcully.

'Well ... I ain't her. But ... it's sort of like the same business . . .'

'What? You take things away?'

'Er ... not take away, as such. More sort of
... bring ...

'Ah ... like new teeth?'

'Er ... like new verrucas,' said the gnome.

Death threw the sack into the back of the sledge and climbed in after it.

'You're doing well, master,' said Albert.

THIS CUSHION IS STILL UNCOMFORTABLE, said Death, hitching his
belt. I AM NOT

USED TO A BIG FAT STOMACH.

'Just a stomach's the best I could do, master. You're starting off with a
handicap, sort of thing.'

Albert unscrewed the top off a bottle of cold tea. All the sherry had made
him

thirsty.

'Doing well, master,' he repeated, taking a pull. 'All the soot in the
fireplace, the footprints, them swigged sherries, the sleigh tracks all over
the

roofs ... it's got to work.'

YOU THINK SO?

'Sure.'

AND I MADE SURE SOME OF THEM SAW ME. I KNOW IF THEY ARE
PEEPING, Death added

proudly.

'Well done, sir.'

YES.

'Though here's a tip, though. Just "Ho. Ho. Ho,- will do. Don't say,
"Cower,

accident.

Good for the old belief muscles.'

REALLY? HO. HO. HO.

'Right, right, that's really good, master. Where was I ... yes ... the shops'll

be open late. Lots of kiddies get taken to see the Hogfather, you see.

Not the

real one, of course. just some ole geezer with a pillow up his jumper, saving

yer presence, master.'

NOT REAL? HO. HO. HO.

'Oh, no. And you don't need-'

THE CHILDREN KNOW THIS? HO. HO. HO.

Albert scratched his nose. 'S'pose so, master.'

THIS SHOULD NOT BE. NO WONDER THERE HAS BEEN . . . THIS DIFFICULTY. BELIEF WAS

COMPROMISED? HO. HO. HO.

'Could be, master. Er, the "ho, ho-"

WHERE DOES THIS TRAVESTY TAKE PLACE? HO. HO. HO.

Albert gave up. 'Well, Crumley's in The Maul, for one. Very popular, the Hogfather Grotto. They always have a good Hogfather, apparently.'

LET'S GET THERE AND SLEIGH THEM. HO. HO. HO.

'Right you are, master.'

THAT WAS A PUNE OR PLAY ON WORDS, ALBERT. I DON'T KNOW IF YOU NOTICED.

'I'm laughing like hell deep down, sir.'

HO. HO. HO.

Archchancellor Ridcully grinned.

He often grinned. He was one of those men who grinned even when they were

annoyed, but right now he grinned because he was proud. A little sore still,

perhaps, but still proud.

everything, this place.

'A special pot for nail clippings?' said the Verruca Gnome.

'Oh, can't be too careful,' said Ridcully, lifting the lid of an ornate jar marked BATH SALTS and pulling out a bottle of wine. 'Get hold of something like

someone's nail clipping and you've got 'em under your control. That's real old

magic. Dawn of time stuff.'

He held the wine bottle up to the light.

'Should be cooled nicely by now,' he said, extracting the cork. 'Verrucas, eh?'

'Wish I knew why,' said the gnome.

'You mean you don't know?'

'Nope. Suddenly I wake up and I'm the Verruca Gnome.'

'Puzzling, that,' said Ridcully. 'My dad used to say the Verruca Gnome turned up

if you walked around in bare feet but I never knew you existed. I thought he

just made it up. I mean, tooth fairies, yes, and them little buggers that live

in flowers, used to collect 'em myself as a lad, but can't recall anything about

verrucas.' He drank thoughtfully. 'Cot a distant cousin called Verruca, as a

matter of fact. It's quite a nice sound, when you come to think of it.'

He looked at the gnome over the top of his glass.

You didn't become Archchancellor without a feeling for subtle wrongness in a

situation. Well, that wasn't quite true. It was more accurate to say that you

didn't remain Archchancellor for very long.

'Good job, is it?' he said thoughtfully.

The Grotto took up nearly all of the first floor. One of the pixies had been Disciplined for smoking behind the Magic Tinkling Waterfall and the clockwork

Dolls of All Nations showing how We Could All Get Along were a bit jerky and

giving trouble but all in all, he told himself, it was a display to Delight the Hearts of Kiddies everywhere.

The kiddies were queueing up with their parents and watching the display

owlishly.

And the money was coming in. Oh, how the money was coming in.

So that the staff would not be Tempted, Mr Crumley had set up an arrangement of

overhead wires across the ceilings of the store. In the middle of each floor was

a cashier in a little cage. Staff took money from customers, put it in a little

clockwork cable car, sent it whizzing overhead to the cashier, who'd make change

and start it rattling back again. Thus there was no possibility of Temptation,

and the little trolleys were shooting back and forth like fireworks.

Mr Crumley loved Hogswatch. It was for the Kiddies, after all.

He tucked his fingers in the pockets of his waistcoat and beamed.

'Everything going well, Miss Harding?'

'Yes, Mr Crumley,' said the cashier, meekly.

'Jolly good.' He looked at the pile of coins.

A bright little zig-zag crackled off them and earthed itself on the metal grille.

Mr Crumley blinked. In front of him sparks flashed off the steel rims of Miss

Harding's spectacles.

didn't have
pointy ears and rings through their noses. But the creatures were huge
and grey

and bristly and a cloud of acrid mist hung over each one.

And they didn't look sweet. There was nothing charming about them.
One turned to

look at him with small, red eyes, and didn't go 'oink', which was the
sound that

Mr Crumley, born and raised in the city, had always associated with
pigs.

It went 'Ghnaaarrrwnkh?'

The sleigh had changed, too. He'd been very pleased with that sleigh. It
had

delicate silver curly bits on it. He'd personally supervised the gluing on
of

every twinkling star. But the splendour of it was lying in glittering shards
around a sledge that looked as though it had been built of crudely sawn
tree

trunks laid on two massive wooden runners. It looked ancient and there
were

faces carved on the wood, nasty crude grinning faces that looked quite
out of
place.

Parents were yelling and trying to pull their children away, but they
weren't

having much luck. The children were gravitating towards it like flies to
jam.

Mr Crumley ran towards the terrible thing, waving his hands.

'Stop that! Stop that!' he screamed. 'You'll frighten the Kiddies!'

He heard a small boy behind him say, 'They've got tusks! Cool!'

His sister said, 'Hey, look, that one's doing a wee!' A tremendous cloud
of

One of the boars turned to look at him. The boy moved behind his mother.

Mr Crumley, tears of anger streaming clown his face, fought through the milling crowd until he reached the Hogfather's Grotto. He grabbed a frightened pixie.

'It's the Campaign for Equal Heights that've done this, isn't it!' he shouted.

'They're out to ruin me! And they're ruining it for all the Kiddies! Look at the lovely dolls!'

The pixie hesitated. Children were clustering around the pigs, despite the continued efforts of their mothers. The small girl was giving one of them an orange.

But the animated display of Dolls of All Nations was definitely in trouble. The

musical box underneath was still playing 'Wouldn't It Be Nice If Everyone Was

Nice' but the rods that animated the figures had got twisted out of shape, so

that the Klatchian boy was rhythmically hitting the Omnian girl over the head

with his ceremonial spear, while the girl in Agatean national costume was

kicking a small Llamedosian druid repeatedly in the ear. A chorus of small

children was cheering them on indiscriminately.

'There's, er, there's more trouble in the Grotto, Mr Crum' the pixie began.

A red and white figure pushed its way through the crush and rammed a false beard

It was definitely in something like a Hogfather costume but Mr Crumley's eye kept slipping, it wouldn't focus, it skittered away and tried to put the figure on the very edge of vision. It was like trying to look at your own ear. 'What's going on here? What's going on here?' Crumley demanded. A hand took his shoulder firmly. He turned round and looked into the face of a Grotto Pixie. At least, it was wearing the costume of a Grotto Pixie, although somewhat askew, as if it had been put on in a hurry. 'Who are you?' The pixie took the soggy cigarette end out of its mouth and leered at him. 'Call me Uncle Heavy,' he said. 'You're not a pixie!' 'Nah, I'm a fairy cobbler, mister.' Behind Crumley, a voice said: AND WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR HOGSWATCH, SMALL HUMAN? Mr Crumley turned in horror. In front of - well, he had to think of it as the usurping Hogfather - was a small child of indeterminate sex who seemed to be mostly woollen bobble hat. Mr Crumley knew how it was supposed to go. It was supposed to go like this: the child was always struck dumb and the attendant mother would lean forward and catch the Hogfather's eye and say very pointedly, in that voice adults use when they're conspiring against children: 'You want a Baby Tinkler Doll, don't you, Doreen? And the Just Like Mummy

its sleeves. It held them up for inspection.

'Clubs,' it said.

I SEE. VERY PRACTICAL.

'Are you weal?' said the bobble hat.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The bobble hat sniggered. 'I saw your piggie do a weel!' it said, and implicit in

the tone was the suggestion that this was unlikely to be dethroned as the most

enthraling thing the bobble hat had ever seen.

OH. ER ... GOOD.

'It had a gwate big-'

WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR HOGSWATCH? said the Hogfather hurriedly.

Mother took her economic cue again, and said briskly: 'She wants a-'

The Hogfather snapped his fingers impatiently. The mother's mouth slammed shut.

The child seemed to sense that here was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and

spoke quickly.

'I wanta narmy. Anna big castle wif pointy bits,' said the child. 'Anna swored.'

WHAT DO YOU SAY? prompted the Hogfather.

'A big swored?' said the child, after a pause for deep cogitation.

THAT'S RIGHT.

Uncle Heavy nudged the Hogfather.

'They're supposed to thank you,' he said.

ARE YOU SURE? PEOPLE DON'T, NORMALLY.

'I meant they thank the Hogfather,' Albert hissed. 'Which is you, right?'

YES, OF COURSE. AHM. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO SAY THANK YOU.

'nk you.'

AND BE GOOD. THIS IS PART OF THE ARRANGEMENT.

MEANT TO BE SAFE.

'She's a child!' shouted Crumley.

IT'S EDUCATIONAL.

'What if she cuts herself?'

THAT WILL BE AN IMPORTANT LESSON.

Uncle Heavy whispered urgently.

REALLY? OH, WELL. IT'S NOT FOR ME TO ARGUE, I SUPPOSE.

The blade went wooden.

'And she doesn't want all that other stuff!' said Doreen's mother, in the face

of previous testimony. 'She's a girl! Anyway, I can't afford big posh stuff like

that!'

I THOUGHT I GAVE IT AWAY, said the Hogfather, sounding bewildered.

'You do?' said the mother.

'You do?' said Crumley, who'd been listening in horror. 'You don't! That's our

Merchandise! You can't give it away! Hogswatch isn't about giving it all away! I

mean ... yes, of course, of course things are given away,' he corrected himself,

aware that people were watching, 'but first they have to be bought, d'you see, I

mean ... haha.' He laughed nervously, increasingly aware of the strangeness

around him and the rangy look of Uncle Heavy. 'It's not as though the toys are

made by little elves at the Hub, ahaha . - .'

'Damn right,' said Uncle Heavy sagely. 'You'd have to be a maniac even to think

of giving an elf a chisel, less'n you want their initials carved on your forehead.'

were reporting something else, but they couldn't agree on what. A couple had shut down completely. The words escaped through his teeth. 'It ... seems to be,' he said. Although it was Hogswatch the University buildings were bustling. Wizards didn't go to bed early in any case,[14] and of course there was the Hogswatchnight Feast to look forward to at midnight. It would give some idea of the scale of the Hogswatchnight Feast that a light snack at UU consisted of a mere three or four courses, not counting the cheese and nuts. Some of the wizards had been practising for weeks. The Dean in particular could now lift a twenty-pound turkey on one fork. Having to wait until midnight merely put a healthy edge on appetites already professionally honed. There was a general air of pleasant expectancy about the place, a general sizzling of salivary glands, a general careful assembling of the pills and powders against the time, many hours ahead, when eighteen courses would gang up somewhere below the ribcage and mount a counterattack. Ridcully stepped out into the snow and turned up his collar. The lights were all on in the High Energy Magic Building. 'I don't know, I don't know,' he muttered. 'Hogswatchnight and they're still working. It's just not natural. When I was a student I'd have been sick twice by

lisen
would draw plans for extra bits that he - it needed. It all gave Ridcully
the
willies, and an additional willy was engendered right now when he saw
the Bursar
sitting in front of the thing. For a moment, he forgot all about verrucas.
'What're you doing here, old chap?' he said. 'You should be inside,
jumping up
and down to make more room for tonight.'
'Hooray for the pink, grey and green,' said the Bursar.
'Er ... we thought Hex might be of . . . you
know . . . help, sir,' said Ponder Stibbons, who liked to think of himself
as
the University's token sane person.
'With the Bursar's problem. We thought it might be a nice Hogswatch
present for
him.'
'Ye gods, Bursar's got no problems,' said Ridcully, and patted the
aimlessly
smiling man on the head while mouthing the words 'mad as a spoon'.
'Mind just
wanders a bit, that's all. I said MIND WANDERS A BIT, eh? Only to be
expected,
spends far too much time addin' up numbers. Doesn't get out in the
fresh air. I
said, YOU DON'T GET OUT IN THE FRESH AIR, OLD CHAP!'
'We thought, er, he might like someone to talk to,' said Ponder.
'What? What? But I talk to him all the time! I'm always trying to take him
out
of himself,' said Ridcully. 'It's important to stop him mopin' around the
place.'
'Er ... yes ... certainly,' said Ponder diplomatically. He recalled the
Bursar

Ridcully suspiciously.

'Yes, Archchancellor.' Ponder cleared his throat. 'Sound, you see, comes in waves-'

He stopped. Wizardly premonitions rose in his mind. He just knew Ridcully was going to assume he was talking about the sea. There was going to be one of those

huge bottomless misunderstandings that always occurred whenever anyone tried to

explain anything to the Archchancellor. Words like 'surf, and probably 'ice cream' and 'sand' were just ...

'It's all done by magic, Archchancellor,' he said, giving up.

'Ah. Right,' said Ridcully. He sounded a little disappointed. 'None of that complicated business with springs and cogwheels and tubes and stuff, then.'

'That's right, sir,' said Ponder. 'Just magic. Sufficiently advanced magic.'

'Fair enough. What's it do?'

'Hex can hear what you say.'

'Interesting. Saves all that punching holes in bits of cards and hitting keys

you lads are forever doing, then-'

'Watch this, sir,' said Ponder. 'All right, Adrian, initialize the GBU

'How do you do that, then?' said Ridcully, behind him.

'It ... it means pull the great big lever,' Ponder said, reluctantly.

'Ah. Takes less time to say.'

Ponder sighed. 'Yes, that's right, Archchancellor.'

He nodded to one of the students, who pulled a large red lever marked 'Do Not

Pull'. Gears spun, somewhere inside Hex. Little trap-doors opened in the ant

The says, SAY SOMETHING, BURSAAAA! yelled Ridcully helpfully, into the Bursar's ear.

'Corkscrew? It's a tickler, that's what Nanny says,' said the Bursar.

Things started to spin inside Hex. At the back of the room a huge converted waterwheel covered with sheep skulls began to turn, ponderously.

And the quill pen in its network of springs and guiding arms started to write:

+++ Why Do You Think You Are A Tickler? +++

For a moment the Bursar hesitated. Then he said, 'I've got a spoon of my own, you know.'

+++ Tell Me About Your Spoon +++

'Er ... it's a little spoon. . .'

+++ Does Your Spoon Worry You? +++

The Bursar frowned. Then he seemed to rally. 'Whoops, here comes Mr Jelly,' he said, but he didn't sound as though his heart was in it.

+++ How Long Have You Been Mr Jelly? +++

The Bursar glared. 'Are you making fun of me?' he said.

'Amazin!' said Ridcully. 'It's got him stumped! 's better than dried frog pills! How did you work it out?'

'Er said Ponder. 'It sort of just happened

'Amazin',' said Ridcully. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe on Hex's 'Anthill

Inside' sticker, causing Ponder to wince. 'This thing's a kind of big artificial brain, then?'

'You could think of it like that,' said Ponder, carefully. 'Of course, Hex doesn't actually think. Not as such. It just appears to be thinking.'

'Ah. Like the Dean,' said Ridcully. 'Any chance of fitting a brain like this into the Dean's head?'

unreal about Hogswatchnight, said Ridcully. Last night of the year and so on.

The Hogfather whizzin' around and so forth. Time of the darkest shadows and so

on. All the old year's occult rubbish pilin' up. Anythin' could happen. I just

thought you fellows might check up on this. Probably nothing to worry about.'

'A Verruca Gnome?' said Ponder.

The gnome clutched his sack protectively.

'Makes about as much sense as a lot of things, I suppose,' said Ridcully.

'After

all, there's a Tooth Fairy, ain' there? You might as well wonder why we have a

God of Wine and not a God of Hangovers---

He stopped.

'Anyone else hear that noise just then?' he said.

'Sorry, Archchancellor?'

'Sort of glingleglinglegingle? Like little tinkly bells?'

'Didn't hear anything like that, sir.'

'Oh.' Ridcully shrugged. 'Anyway ... what was I saying ... yes ... no one's ever

heard of a Verruca Gnome until tonight.'

'That's right,' said the gnome. 'Even I've never heard of me until tonight, and

I'm me.'

'We'll see what we can find out, Archchancellor,' said Ponder diplomatically.

'Good man.' Ridcully put the gnome back in his pocket and looked up at Hex.

'Amazin',' he said again. 'He just looks as though he's thinking, right?'

'Er ... yes.'

'But he's not actually thinking?'

so on.

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'Amazin',' he said again. 'He just looks as though he's thinking, right?'

'Er ... yes.'

'But he's not actually thinking?'

'Er ... no.'

ALL SORTS DON'T EXIST?

'Correct. This is just a bit of seasonal frippery and, I may say, rampantly commercial. My mother's already bought my presents. I instructed her as to the

right ones, of course. She often gets things wrong.'

The Hogfather glanced briefly at the smiling, worried image of maternal ineffectiveness hovering nearby.

HOW OLD ARE YOU, BOY?

The child rolled his eyes. 'You're not supposed to say that,' he said. 'I have

done this before, you know. You have to start by asking me my name.'

AARON FIDGET, 'THE PINES', EDGEWAY ROAD, ANKHMORPORK.

'I expect someone told you,' said Aaron. 'I expect these people dressed up as

pixies get the information from the mothers.'

AND YOU ARE EIGHT, GOING ON ... OH, ABOUT FORTY-FIVE, said the Hogfather.

'There's forms to fill in when they pay, expect,' said Aaron.

AND YOU WANT WALNUT'S INOFFENSIVE REPTILES OF THE STO PLAINS, A DISPLAY CABINET,

A COLLECTOR'S ALBUM, A KILLING JAR AND A LIZARD PRESS. WHAT IS A LIZARD PRESS?

'You can't glue them in when they're still fat, or didn't you know that? I expect she told you about them when I was momentarily distracted by the display

of pencils. Look, shall we end this charade? just give me my orange and we'll

say no more about it.'

I CAN GIVE FAR MORE THAN ORANGES.

'Yes, yes, I saw all that. Probably done in collusion with accomplices to attract gullible customers. Oh dear, you've even got a false beard. By the way,

old chap, did you know that your pig----'

the earlobe, myself.

OH, I'M SURE HE'LL SEE THE ERROR OF HIS WAYS. The red hood turned so that only

Albert could see into its depths. RIGHT AROUND THE TIME HE OPENS THOSE BOXES HIS MOTHER WAS CARRYING ... HO. HO. HO.

'Don't tie it so tight! Don't tie it so tight!'

SQUEAK.

There was a bickering behind Susan as she sought along the shelves in the

canyons of Death's huge library, which was so big that clouds would form in it

if they dared.

'Right, right,' said the voice she was trying to ignore. 'That's about right.

I've got to be able to move my wings, right?'

SQUEAK.

'Ah,' said Susan, under her breath. 'The Hogfather. . .'

He had several shelves, not just one book. The first volume seemed to be written

on a roll of animal skin. The Hogfather was old.

'OK, OK. How does it look?'

SQUEAK.

'Miss?' said the raven, seeking a second opinion.

Susan looked up. The raven bounced past, its breast bright red.

'Twit, twit,' it said. 'Bobbly bobbly bob. Hop hop hopping along . . .'

'You're fooling no one but yourself,' said Susan. 'I can see the string.'

She unrolled the scroll.

'Maybe I should sit on a snowy log,' mumbled the raven behind her.

'Thats

probably the trick, right enough.'

'I can't read this!' said Susan. 'The letters are all ... odd. . .'

'Ethereal runes,' said the raven. 'The Hogfather ain't human, after all.'

looked as though it was made of strips of bark. Characters hovered over
the
surface. Whatever they were, they had never been designed to be read
by the eye;
you could believe they were a Braille for the touching mind. Images
ribboned
across her senses - wet fur, sweat, pine, soot, iced air, the tang of damp
ash,
pig ... manure, her governess mind hastily corrected. There was blood
... and
the taste of . . .beans? It was all images without words. Almost ...
animal.

'But none of this is right! Everyone knows he's a jolly old fat man who
hands

out presents to kids!' she said aloud.

'Is. Is. Not was. You know how it is,' said the raven.

'Do I?'

'It's like, you know, industrial re-training,' said the bird. 'Even gods have
to

move with the times, am I right? He was probably quite different
thousands of

years ago. Stands to reason. No one wore stockings, for one thing.' He.

scratched at his beak.

'Yersss,' he continued expansively, 'he was probably just your basic
winter

demi-urge. You know ... blood on the snow, making the sun come up.
Starts off

with animal sacrifice, y'know, hunt some big hairy animal to death, that
kind of

stuff. You know there's some people up on the Ramtops who kill a wren
at

Hogswatch and walk around from house to house singing about it? With
a

a
special bean in his tucker, oho, everyone says, you're king, mate, and he thinks

"This is a bit of all right" only they don't say it wouldn't be a good idea to start any long books, 'cos next thing he's legging it over the snow with a dozen

other buggers chasing him with holy sickles so's the earth'll come to life again

and all this snow'll go away. Very, you know ... ethnic. Then some bright spark

thought, hey, looks like that damn sun comes up anyway, so how come we're giving

those druids all this free grub? Next thing you know, there's a job vacancy.

That's the thing about gods. They'll always find a way to, you know ... hang

on.'

'The damn sun comes up anyway,' Susan repeated. 'How do you know that?'

'Oh, observation. It happens every morning. I seen it.'

'I meant all that stuff about holy sickles and things.'

The raven contrived to look smug.

'Very occult bird, your basic raven,' he said. 'Blind lo the Thunder God used to

have these myffic ravens that flew everywhere and told him everything that was

going on.'

'Used to?'

'WeeeeW ... you know how he's not got eyes in his face, just these, like, you

know, free-floating eyeballs that go and zoom around . . .' The raven coughed in

species embarrassment. 'Bit of an accident waiting to happen, really.'

Dead,

perhaps, but only like the world in winter

'All right,' she said. 'Let's see what happened to him . . .'

She reached out for the last book and tried to open it at random ...

The feeling lashed at her out of the book, like a whip ...

... hooves, fear, blood, snow, cold, night . . .

She dropped the scroll. It slammed shut.

SQUEAK?

'I'm. . . all right.'

She looked down at the book and knew that she'd been given a friendly warning,

such as a pet animal might give when it was crazed with pain but just still tame

enough not to claw and bite the hand that fed it - this time. Wherever the Hogfather was - dead, alive, somewhere - he wanted to be left alone ...

She eyed the Death of Rats. His little eye sockets flared blue in a disconcertingly familiar way.

SQUEAK. EEK?

'The rat says, if he wanted to find out about the Hogfather, he'd go to the Castle of

'Oh, that's just a nursery tale,' said Susan. 'That's where the letters are supposed to go that are posted up the chimney. That's just an old story.'

She turned. The rat and the raven were staring at her. And she realized that

she'd been too normal.

SQUEAK?

'The rat says, "What d'you mean, just?"' said the raven.

Chickenwire sidled towards Medium Dave in the garden. If you could call it a

garden. It was the land round the ... house. If you could call it a house.

No

one said much about it, but every so often you just had to get out. It didn't

bunch of
kids and watched that wet wizard do all his chanting it was all I could do
to

keep a straight face. What's he after now?'

'He just said if it was locked that bad he wanted to see inside.'

'I thought we were supposed to do what we came for and go!'

'Yeah? You tell him. Want a roll-up?'

Chickenwire took the bag of tobacco and relaxed. 'I've seen some bad
places in

my time, but this takes the serious biscuit.'

'Yeah.'

'It's the cute that wears you down. And there's got to be something else
to eat

than apples.'

'Yeah.'

'And that damn sky. That damn sky is really getting on my nerves.'

'Yeah.'

They kept their eyes averted from that damn sky. For some reason, it
made you

feel that it was about to fall on you. And it was worse if you let your eyes
stray to the gap where a gap shouldn't be. The effect was like getting
toothache

in your eyeballs.

In the distance Banjo was swinging on a swing. Odd, that, Dave
thought. Banjo

seemed perfectly happy here.

'He found a tree that grows lollipops yesterday,' he said moodily. 'Well, I
say

yesterday, but how can you tell? And he follows the man around like a
dog. No

one ever laid a punch on Banjo since our mam died. He's just like a little
boy,

-7-

'Yeah, well, I didn't sign up for world domination,' said Medium Dave.
'That
sort of thing gets you into trouble.'
'I remember your mam saying that sort of thing,' said Chickenwire.
Medium Dave
rolled his eyes. Everyone remembered Ma Lilywhite. 'Very straight lady,
was your
ma. Tough but fair.'
'Yeah ... tough.'
'I recall that time she strangled Glossy Ron with his own leg,'
Chickenwire went
on. 'She had a wicked right arm on her, your mam.'
'Yeah. Wicked.'
'She wouldn't have stood for someone like Teatime.'
'Yeah,' said Medium Dave.
'That was a lovely funeral you boys gave her. Most of the Shades turned
up. Very
respectful. All them flowers. An' everyone looking so . . .'

Chickenwire
floundered'... happy. In a sad way, o' course.'
'Yeah.'
'Have you got any idea how to get back home?'
Medium Dave shook his head.
'Me neither. Find the place again, I suppose.' Chickenwire shivered. 'I
mean,
what he did to that carter ... I mean, well, I wouldn't even act like that to
me
own dad---'
'Yeah.'
'Ordinary mental, yes, I can deal with that. But he can be talking quite
normal,
and then-'
'Yeah.'

in the face, fleas, that sort of thing. So you got to hang on. Think of the money. There's bags of it in there. You saw it.'

'I keep thinking of. that glass eye watching me. I keep thinking it can see right in my head.'

'Don't worry, he doesn't suspect you of anything.,

'How d'you know?'

'You're still alive, yeah?'

In the Grotto of the Hogfather, a round-eyed child.

HAPPY HOGSWATCH. HO. HO. HO. AND YOUR NAME IS ...
EUPHRASIA COAT, CORRECT?

'Go on, dear, answer the nice man.'

' 's.'

AND YOU ARE SIX YEARS OLD.

'Go on, dear. They're all the same at this age, aren't they . . .'

' 's.'

AND YOU WANT A PONY

' 's.' A small hand pulled the Hogfather's hood down to mouth level.

Heavy Uncle

Albert heard a ferocious whispering. Then the Hogfather leaned back.

YES, I KNOW. WHAT A NAUGHTY PIG IT WAS, INDEED.

His shape flickered for a moment, and then a hand went into the sack.

HERE IS A BRIDLE FOR YOUR PONY, AND A SADDLE, AND A
RATHER STRANGE HARD HAT AND

A PAIR OF THOSE TROUSERS THAT MAKE YOU LOOK AS
THOUGH YOU HAVE A LARGE RABBIT IN
EACH POCKET.

'But we can't have a pony, can we, Euffie, because we live on the third
floor .

.

OH, YES. IT'S IN THE KITCHEN.

'I'm sure you're making a little joke, Hogfather,' said Mother, sharply.

HO. HO. YES. WHAT A JOLLY FAT MAN I AM. IN THE KITCHEN?
WHAT A JOKE. DOLLIES AND

to believe all right.

YES. YOU KNOW, I THINK I'M GETTING THE HANG OF THIS. HO.
HO. HO.

At the Hub of the Discworld, the snow burned blue and green. The
Aurora Corealis

hung in the sky, curtains of pale cold fire that circled the central
mountains

and cast their spectral light over the ice.

They billowed, swirled and then trailed a ragged arm on the end of
which was a

tiny dot that became, when the eye of imagination drew nearer, Binky.

He trotted to a halt and stood on the air. Susan looked down.

And then found what she was looking for. At the end of a valley of snow-
mounded

trees something gleamed brightly, reflecting the sky.

The Castle of Bones.

Her parents had sat her down one day when she was about six or seven
and

explained how such things as the Hogfather did not really exist, how
they were

pleasant little stories that it was fun to know, how they were not real.

And she

had believed it. All the fairies and bogeymen,

all those stories from the blood and bone of humanity, were not really
real.

They'd lied. A seven-foot skeleton had turned out to be her grandfather.
Not a

flesh and blood grandfather, obviously. But a grandfather, you could
say, in the

bone.

Binky touched down and trotted over the snow.

Was the Hogfather a god? Why not? thought Susan. There were
sacrifices, after

name, the woodcut artist had endeavoured to make it look ... sort of jolly.
It wasn't jolly. The pillars at the entrance were hundreds of feet high.
Each of the steps leading up was taller than a man. They were the greygreen of old ice.
Ice. Not bone. There were faintly familiar shapes to the pillars, possibly a suggestion of femur or skull, but it was made of ice.
Binky was not challenged by the high stairs. It wasn't that he flew. It was simply that he walked on a ground level of his own devising.
Snow had blown over the ice. Susan looked down at the drifts. Death left no tracks, but there were the faint outlines of booted footprints. She'd be prepared to bet they belonged to Albert. And ... yes, half obscured by the snow ... it looked as though a sledge had stood here. Animals had milled around. But the snow was covering everything.
She dismounted. This was certainly the place described, but it still wasn't right. It was supposed to be a blaze of light and abuzz with activity, but it looked like a giant mausoleum.
A little way beyond the pillars was a very large slab of ice, cracked into pieces. Far above, stars were visible through the hole it had left in the roof.
Even as she stared up, a few small lumps of ice thumped into a snowdrift.
The raven popped into existence and fluttered wearily on to a stump of ice beside her.
'This place is a morgue,' said Susan.

So where's all the lights?' it said. 'Where's all the noise? Where's all the jolly little buggers in pointy hats and red and green suits, hitting wooden toys unconvincingly yet

rhythmically with hammers?'

'This is more like the temple of some old thunder god,' said Susan.

SQUEAK.

'No' I read the map right. Anyway, Albert's been here too. There's fag ash all over the place.'

The rat jumped down and walked around for a moment, bony snout near the ground.

After a few moments of snuffling it gave a squeak and hurried off into the gloom.

Susan followed. As her eyes grew more accustomed to the faint blue-green light

she made out something rising out of the floor. It was a pyramid of steps, with a big chair on top.

Behind her, a pillar groaned and twisted slightly.

SQUEAK.

'That rat says this place reminds him of some old mine,' said the raven. 'You know, after it's been deserted and no one's been paying attention to the roof

supports and so on? We see a lot of them.'

At least these steps were human sized, Susan thought, ignoring the chatter. Snow

had come in through another gap in the roof. Albert's footprints had stamped around quite a lot here.

'Maybe the old Hogfather crashed his sleigh,' the raven suggested.

light
recorder.'
SQUEAK!
'Yes, but he's an old man. Probably shouldn't be in the sky at his time of
life.'
Susan pulled at something half buried in the snow.
It was a red-and-white-striped candy cane.
She kicked the snow aside elsewhere and found a wooden toy soldier in
the kind
of uniform that would only be inconspicuous if you wore it in a nightclub
for
chameleons on hard drugs. Some further probing found a broken
trumpet.
There was some more groaning in the darkness.
The raven cleared its throat.
'What the rat meant about this place being like a mine,' he said, 'was
that
abandoned mines tend to creak and groan in the same way, see? No
one looking
after the pit props. Things fall in. Next thing you know you're a squiggle
in
the sandstone. We shouldn't hang around is what I'm saying.'
Susan walked further in, lost in thought.
This was all wrong. The place looked as though
-
it had been deserted for years, which couldn't be true.
The column nearest her creaked and twisted slightly. A fine haze of ice
crystals
dropped from the roof.
Of course, this wasn't exactly a normal place. You couldn't build an ice
palace
this big. It was a bit like Death's house. If he abandoned it for too long
all

planned to make
snow angels and had then decided against it.
And it wore a little crown, apparently of vine leaves.
And it kept groaning.
She looked up. The roof was open here, too. But no one could have
fallen that
far and survived.
No one human, anyway.
He looked human and, in theory, quite young. But it was only in theory
because,
even by the second-hand light of the glowing snow, his face looked like
someone
had been sick with it.
'Are you all right?' she ventured.
The recumbent figure opened its eyes and stared straight up.
'I wish I was dead . . .' it moaned. A piece of ice the size of a house fell
down in the far depths of the building and exploded in a shower of sharp
little
shards.
'You may have come to the right place,' said Susan. She grabbed the
boy under
his arms and hauled him out of the snow. 'I think leaving would be a
very good
idea around now, don't you? This place is going to fall apart.'
'Oh, me . . .'
She managed to get one of his arms around her neck.
'Can you walk?'
'Oh, me ...'
'It might help if you stopped saying that and tried walking.'
'I'm sorry, but I seem to have too many legs. Ow.'
Susan did her best to prop him up as, swaying and slipping, they made
their way
back to the exit.

could

you?'

'I wouldn't do it at all!'

'Well, someone's got to do it,' said the imp.

'He's part. Of the. Arrangement,' said the boy.

'Yeah, see?' said the imp. 'Can you hold the hammer while I go and coat

his

tongue with yellow gunk?'

'Get down right now!'

Susan made a grab for the creature. It leapt away, still clutching the hammer,

and grabbed a pillar.

'I'm part of the arrangement, I am!' it yelled.

The boy clutched his head.

'I feel awful,' he said. 'Have you got any ice?' Whereupon, because there are

conventions stronger than mere physics, the building fell in.

The collapse of the Castle of Bones was stately and impressive and seemed to go

on for a long time. Pillars fell in, the slabs of the roof slid down, the ice

crackled and splintered. The air above the tumbling wreckage filled with a haze

of snow and ice crystals.

Susan watched from the trees. The boy, who she'd leaned against a handy trunk,

opened his eyes.

'That was amazing,' he managed.

'Why, you mean the way it's all turning bark into snow?'

'The way you just picked me up and ran.

'Oh, that.'

The grinding of the ice continued. The fallen pillars didn't stop moving when

they collapsed, but went on tearing themselves apart.

head and say, 'Oh God . . . How many of you are standing here?'

'What? There's just me!'

'Ah. Fine. Fine.'

'I've never heard of a God of Hangovers . . .'

'You've heard of Bibulous, the God of Wine?'

'Oh. yes.'

'Big fat man, wears vine leaves round his head, always pictured with a glass in

his hand ... Ow. Well, you know why he's so cheerful? Him and his big face? It's

because he knows he's going to feel good in the morning! It's because it's me

that---

'-gets the hangovers?' said Susan.

'I don't even drink! Ow! But who is it who ends up head down in the privy every

morning? Arrgh.' He stopped and clutched at his head. 'Should your skull feel

like it's lined with dog hair?'

'I don't think so.'

'Ah.' Bilious swayed. 'You know when people say "I had fifteen lagers last

night and when I woke up my head was clear as a bell"?''

'Oh, yes.'

'Bastards! That's because I was the one who woke up groaning in a pile of

recycled chill Just once, I mean just once, I'd like to open my eyes in the morning without my head sticking to something.' He paused. 'Are there

any

giraffes in this wood?'

'Up here? I shouldn't think so.'

He looked nervously past Susan's head.

voice from a branch. It was the raven. Got a neck with a knee in it.

The oh god reappeared after a noisy interlude.

'I know I must eat,' he mumbled. 'It's just that the only time I remember seeing

my food it's always going the other way . . .'

'What were you doing in there?' said Susan.

'Ouch! Search me,' said the oh god. 'It's only a mercy I wasn't holding a traffic sign and wearing a-----' he winced and paused '---having some kind of

women's underwear about my person.' He sighed. 'Someone somewhere has a lot of

fun,' he said wistfully. 'I wish it was me.'

'Get a drink inside you, that's my advice,' said the raven. 'Have a hair of the

dog that bit someone else.'

'But why there?' Susan insisted.

The oh god stopped h-ling to glare at the raven. 'I don't know, where was there

exactly?'

Susan looked back at where the castle had been. It was entirely gone.

'There was a very important building there a moment ago,' she said.

The oh god nodded carefully.

'I often see things that weren't there a moment ago,' he said. 'And they often

aren't there a moment later. Which is a blessing in most cases, let me tell you.

So I don't usually take a lot of notice.'

He folded up and landed in the snow again.

There's just snow now, Susan thought. Nothing but snow and the wind. There's not

even a ruin.

The certainty stole over her again that the Hogfather's castle wasn't simply not

thead. It

turned a beady eye up towards Susan.

'All right by you, is it?' said the imp, producing its huge hammer. 'Some of us

have a job to do, you know, even if we are of a metaphorical, nay, folkloric

persuasion.'

'Oh, go away.'

'If you think I'm bad, wait until you see the little pink elephants,' said the imp.

'I don't believe you.'

'They come out of his ears and fly around his head making tweeting noises.'

'Ah,' said the raven, sagely. 'That sounds more like robins. I wouldn't put anything past them.'

The oh god grunted.

Susan suddenly felt that she didn't want to leave him. He was human. Well, human

shaped.

Well, at least he had two arms and legs. He'd freeze to death here. Of course,

gods, or even oh gods, probably couldn't, but humans didn't think like that. You

couldn't just leave someone. She prided herself on this bit of normal thinking.

Besides, he might have some answers, if she could make him stay awake enough to

understand the questions.

From the edge of the frozen forest.. animal eyes watched them go.

Mr Crumley sat on the damp stairs and sobbed. He couldn't get any nearer to the

toy department. Every time he tried he got lifted off his feet by the mob and

tear, right. You sent a runner to the watchhouse and we have hereby responded with commendable speed, sir,' said Corporal Nobbs. 'Despite it being Hogswatchnight and there being a lot of strange things happening and most importantly it being the occasion of our Hogswatchly piss-up, sir. But this is all right because Washpot, that's Constable Visit here, he doesn't drink, sir, it being against his religion, and although I do drink, sir, I volunteered to come because it is my civic duty, sir.' Nobby tore off a salute, or what he liked to believe was a salute. He did not add, 'And turning out for a rich bugger such as your good self is bound to put the officer concerned in the way of a seasonal bottle or two or some other tangible evidence of gratitude,' because his entire stance said it for him. Even Nobby's ears could look suggestive.

Unfortunately, Mr Crumley wasn't in the right receptive frame of mind.

He stood

up and waved a shaking finger towards the top of the stairs.

'I want you to go up there,' he said, 'and arrest him!'

'Arrest who, sir?' said Corporal Nobbs.

'The Hogfather!'

'What for, sir?'

'Because he's sitting up there as bold as brass in his Grotto, giving away presents!'

Corporal Nobbs thought about this.

'You haven't been having a festive drink, have you, sir?' he said hopefully.

'I do not drink!'

'Very wise, sir,' said Constable Visit. 'Alcohol is the tarnish of the soul.

Ossory, Book Two, Verse Twentyfour.'

'I know, I always thought that,' said Nobby. 'I thought, every year, the Hogfather spends a fortnight sitting in a wooden grotto in a shop in Ankh-Morpork? At his busy time, too? Hah! Not likely! Probably just some old man

in a beard, I thought.'

'I meant ... he's not the Hogfather we usually have,' said Crumley, struggling

for firmer ground. 'He just barged in here'

'Oh, a different impostor? Not the real impostor at all?'

'Well ... yes ... no ...'

'And started giving stuff away?' said Corporal Nobbs.

'That's what I said! That's got to be a Crime, hasn't it?'

Corporal Nobbs rubbed his nose.

'Well, nearly,' he conceded, not wishing to totally relinquish the chance of any

festive remuneration. Realization dawned. 'He's giving away your stuff, sir?'

'No! No, he brought it in with him!'

'Ah? Giving away your stuff, now, if he was doing that, yes, I could see the

problem. That's a sure sign of crime, stuff going missing. Stuff turning up, weerlll, that's a tricky one. Unless it's stuff like arms and legs, o' course. We'd be on safer ground if he was nicking stuff, sir, to tell you the

truth.'

'This is a shop,' said Mr Crumley, finally getting to the root of the problem.

'We do not give Merchandise away. How can we expect people to buy things if some

Person is giving them away? Now please go and get him out of here.'

'Arrest the Hogfather, style of thing?'

'Yes!'

'On Hogswatchnight?'

Nobbs.

The sentence hung in the air with its hand out.

'You won't find me ungrateful,' said Mr Crumley, at last.

'Just you leave it to us,' said Corporal Nobbs, magnanimous in victory.

'You

just nip down to your office and treat yourself to a nice cup of tea and we'll

sort this out in no time. You'll be ever so grateful.'

Crumley gave him a look of a man in the grip of serious doubt, but staggered

away nonetheless. Corporal Nobbs rubbed his hands together.

'You don't have Hogswatch back where you come from do you, Washpot?' he said, as

they climbed the stairs to the first floor. 'Look at this carpet, you'd think a pig'd pissed on it . . .'

'We call it the Fast of St Ossory,' said Visit, who was from Omnia. 'But it is

not an occasion for superstition and crass commercialism. We simply get together

in family groups for a prayer meeting and a fast.'

'What, turkey and chicken and that?'

'A fast, Corporal Nobbs. We don't eat anything.'

'Oh, right. Well, each to his own, I s'pose. And at least you don't have to get

up early in the morning and find that the nothing you've got is too big to fit

in the oven. No presents neither?'

They stood aside hurriedly as two children scuttled down the stairs carrying a

large toy boat between them.

'It is sometimes appropriate to exchange new religious pamphlets, and of course

they'd take the hint, wouldn't you?

'Abominable, I call it,' said Constable Visit.

The first floor was a mob.

'Huh, look at them. Mr Hogfather never brought me anything when I was a kid,'

said Corporal Nobbs, eyeing the children gloomily. 'I used to hang up my

stocking every Hogswatch, regular. All that ever happened was my dad was sick in

it once.' He removed his helmet.

Nobby was not by any measure a hero, but there was the sudden gleam in his eye

of someone who'd seen altogether too many empty stockings plus one rather full

and dripping one. A scab had been knocked off some wound in the corrugated

little organ of his soul.

'I'm going in,' he said.

In between the University's Great Hall and its main door is a rather smaller

circular hall or vestibule known as Archchancellor Bowell's Remembrance,

although no one now knows why, or why an extant bequest pays. for one small

currant bun and one copper penny to be placed on a high stone shelf on one wall

every second Wednesday.[15] Ridcully stood in the middle of the floor, looking

upwards.

'Ten me, Senior Wrangler, we never invited any women to the Hogswatchnight

Feast, did we?'

The Senior Wrangler turned in a circle, still staring upwards.

'Welt er ... it's ... well, it's ... it's symbolic, Archchancellor.'

'Ah?'

The Senior Wrangler felt that something more was expected. He groped around in

the dusty attics of his education.

'Of ... the leaves, d'y'see ... they're symbolic of ... of green, d'y'see whereas the berries, in fact, yes, the berries symbolize . . . symbolize white.

Yes. White and green. Very ... symbolic.'

He waited. He was not, unfortunately, disappointed.

'What of?'

The Senior Wrangler coughed.

'I'm not sure there has to be an of,' he said.

'Ah? So,' said the Archchancellor, thoughtfully,

'it could be said that the white and green symbolize a small parasitic plant?'

'Yes, indeed,' said the Senior Wrangler.

'So mistletoe, in fact, symbolizes mistletoe?'

'Exactly, Archchancellor,' said the Senior Wrangler, who was now just hanging

on.

'Funny thing, that,' said Ridcully, in the same thoughtful tone of voice.

'That

statement is either so deep it would take a lifetime to fully comprehend every

particle of its meaning, or it is a load of absolute tosh. Which is it, I wonder?'

'It could be both,' said the Senior Wrangler desperately.

'And that comment,' said Ridcully, 'is either very perceptive, or very trite.'

'It might be bo--'

'Don't push it, Senior Wrangler.'

There was a hammering on the outer door.

over its shoulder.

The Senior Wrangler stepped backwards quickly.

'Oh ... no, not tonight . . .'

And then he noticed that what he had taken for a robe had lace around the

bottom, and the hood, while quite definitely a hood, was nevertheless rather

more stylish than the one he had first mistaken it for.

'Putting down or taking away?' said Ridcully.

Susan pushed back her hood.

'I need your help, Mr Ridcully,' she said.

'You're . . . aren't you Death's granddaughter?' said Ridcully. 'Didn't I meet

you a few---

'Yes,' sighed Susan.

'And ... are you helping out?' said Ridcully. His wagging eyebrows indicated

the slumbering figure over her shoulder.

'I need you to wake him up,' said Susan.

'Some sort of miracle, you mean?' said the Senior Wrangler, who was a little

behind.

'He's not dead,' said Susan. 'He's just resting.'

'That's what they all say,' the Senior Wrangler quavered.

Ridcully, who was somewhat more practical, lifted the oh god's head.

There was a

groan.

'Looks a bit under the weather,' he said.

'He's the God of Hangovers,' said Susan. 'The Oh God of Hangovers.'

'Really?' said Ridcully. 'Never had one of those myself. Funny thing, I can

drink all night and feel as fresh as a daisy in the morning.'

The oh god's eyes opened. Then he soared

NAME, AGED SEVEN, I BELIEVE? GOOD. YES, I KNOW IT DID. ALL
OVER THE NICE CLEAN
FLOOR, YES. THEY DO, YOU KNOW. THAT'S ONE OF THE THINGS
ABOUT REAL PIGS. HERE WE
ARE, DON'T MENTION IT. HAPPY HOGSWATCH AND BE GOOD. I
WILL KNOW IF YOU'RE GOOD
OR BAD, YOU KNOW. HO. HO. HO.

'Well, you brought some magic into that little life,' said Albert, as the next
child was hurried away.

IT'S THE EXPRESSION ON THEIR LITTLE FACES I LIKE, said the
Hogfather.

'You mean sort of fear and awe and not knowing whether to laugh or cry
or wet
their pants?'

YES. NOW THAT IS WHAT I CALL BELIEF.

The oh god was carried into the Great Hall and laid out on a bench. The
senior

wizards gathered round, ready to help those less fortunate than
themselves
remain that way.

'I know what's good for a hangover,' said the Dean, who was feeling in a
party
mood.

They looked at him expectantly.

'Drinking heavily the previous night!' he said.

He beamed at them.

'That was a good word joke,' he said, to break the silence.

The silence came back.

'Most amusing,' said Ridcully. He turned back and stared thoughtfully at
the oh
god.

'Raw eggs are said to be good----' he glared at the Dean '-I mean bad
for a

Ridcully looked at him, surprised.

'That sounded almost relevant,' he said. 'Well done. I should leave it at that

if I were you, Bursar. Hmm. Of course, my uncle always used to swear at Wow-Wow

Sauce,' he added.

'You mean swear by, surely?' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

'Possibly both,' said Ridcully. 'I know he once drank a whole bottle of it as a

hangover cure and it certainly seemed to cure him. He looked very peaceful when

they came to lay him out.'

'Willow bark' said the Bursar.

'That's a good idea,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. 'It's an analgesic.'

'Really? Well, possibly, though it's probably better to give it to him by mouth,' said Ridcully. 'I say, are you feeling yourself, Bursar? You seem somewhat coherent.'

The oh god opened his crusted eyes.

'Will all that stuff help?' he mumbled.

'It'll probably kill you,' said Susan.

'Oh. Good.'

'We could add Englebert's Enhancer,' said the Dean. 'Remember when Modo put some

on his peas? We could only manage one each!'

'Can't you do something more, well, magical?' said Susan. 'Magic the alcohol out

of him or something?'

'Yes, but it's not alcohol by this time, is it?' said Ridcully. 'It'll have turned into a lot of nasty little poisons all dancin' round on his liver.'

'Spold's Unstirring Divisor would do it,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

Broadly, yes, he said. Living tissue, certainly. And definitely sober.

'I think we had in mind something that would leave him the same shape and still

breathing,' said Susan.

'Well, you might've said . . .'

Then the Dean repeated the mantra that has had such a marked effect on the

progress of knowledge throughout the ages.

'Why don't we just mix up absolutely everything and see what happens?' he said.

And Ridcully responded with the traditional response.

'It's got to be worth a try,' he said.

The big glass beaker for the cure had been placed on a pedestal in the middle of

the floor. The wizards liked to make a ceremony of everything in any case, but

felt instinctively that if they were going, to cure the biggest hangover in the

world it needed to be done with style.

Susan and Bilious watched as the ingredients were added. Round about halfway the

mixture, which was an orange-brown colour, went gloop. 'Not a lot of improvement, I feel,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

Englebert's Enhancer was the penultimate ingredient. The Dean dropped in a

greenish ball of light that sank under the surface. The only apparent effect was

that it caused purple bubbles to creep over the sides of the beaker and drip

onto the floor.

'That's it?' said the oh god.

'I think the yoghurt probably wasn't a good idea,' said the Dean.

'I'm not drinking that,' said Bilious firmly, and then clutched at his head.

evening like this . . .

He blew on the glass and polished it. Then he brightened up.

'Why, here he is, the little rascal! On Dunmanifestin, I do believe. Yes ...

yes

... reclining on his couch, surrounded by naked maenads.'

'What? Maniacs?' said the Dean.

'He means ... excitable young women,' said Susan. And it seemed to her that

there was a general ripple of movement among the wizards, a sort of nonchalant

drawing towards the glittering ball.

'Can't quite see what he's doing said

Ridcully.

'Let me see if I can make it out,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies hopefully. Ridcully half turned to keep the ball out of his reach.

'Ah., yes,' he said. 'It looks like he's drinking . . . yes, could very wen be lager and blackcurrant, if I'm any judge . . .'

'Oh, me . . .' moaned the oh god.

'These young women, now--' the Lecturer in Recent Runes began.

'I can see there's some bottles on the table,' Ridcully continued. 'That one,

hmm, yes, could be scumble which, as you know, is made from apple.-,

'Mainly apples,' the Dean volunteered. 'Now, about these poor mad girls-'

The oh god slumped to his knees.

'. . . and there's ... that drink, you know, there's a worm in the bottle . . .'

'Oh, me . . .'

'. . . and ... there's an empty glass, a big one, can't quite see what it contained, but there's a paper umbrella in it. And some cherries on a stick. Oh,

and an amusing little monkey.'

'oohhh . . .'

'...of course, there's a lot of other bottles too,'

Only just made this for Hogswatch dinner,' said Ridcully. 'Hasn't had much time to mature yet.'

He put down the crystal and fished a pair of heavy gloves out of his hat.

The wizards spread like an opening flower. One moment they were gathered around

Ridcully, the next they were standing close to various items of heavy furniture.

Susan felt she was present at a ceremony and hadn't been told the rules.

'What's that?' she said, as Ridcully carefully lifted up the bottle.

'Wow-Wow Sauce,' said Ridcully. 'Finest condiment known to man. A happy

accompaniment to meat, fish, fowl, eggs and many types of vegetable dishes. It's

not safe to drink it when sweat's still condensing on the bottle, though.'

He

peered at the bottle, and then rubbed at it, causing a glassy, squeaky noise.

'On the other hand,' he said brightly, 'if it's a kill-or-cure remedy then we are, given that the patient is practically immortal, probably on to a winner.'

He placed a thumb over the cork and shook the bottle vigorously. There was a

crash as the Chair of Indefinite Studies and the Senior Wrangler tried to get under the same table.

'And these fellows seem to have taken against it for some reason,' he said,

approaching the beaker.

'I prefer a sauce that doesn't mean you mustn't make any jolting movements for

inevitably

inert.

Ridcully sniffed suspiciously at the bottle.

'I wonder if I added enough grated wahooni?' he said, and then upturned the

sauce and let most of it slide into the mixture.

It merely went gloop.

The wizards began to stand up and brush themselves off, giving one another the

rather embarrassed grins of people who know that they've just been part of a

synchronized making-a-fool-of-yourself team.

'I know we've had that asafetida rather a long time,' said Ridcully. He turned

the bottle round, peering at it sadly.

Finally he tipped it up for the last time and thumped it hard on the base.

A trickle of sauce arrived on the lip of the bottle and glistened there for a moment. Then it began to form a bead.

As if drawn by invisible strings, the heads of the wizards turned to look at it.

Wizards wouldn't be wizards if they couldn't see a little way into the future.

As the bead swelled and started to go pearshaped they turned and, with a

surprising turn of speed for men so wealthy in years and waistline, began to

dive for the floor.

The drop fen.

It went gloop.

And that was all.

Ridcully, who'd been standing like a statue, sagged in relief.

'I don't know,' he said, turning away, 'I wish you fellows would show some

sent out sparkles like a spinning diamond.

'My word . . .' breathed the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

Ridcully picked himself up off the floor. Wizards tended to roll well, or in any

case are well. padded enough to bounce.

Slowly, the flickering brilliance casting their long shadows on the walls, the

wizards gravitated towards the beaker.

'Well, what is it?' said the Dean.

'I remember my father tellin' me some very valuable advice about drinks,' said

Ridcully. 'He said, "Son, never drink any drink with a paper umbrella in it,

never drink any drink with a humorous name, and never drink any drink that

changes colour when the last ingredient goes in. And never, ever, do this---" '

He dipped his finger into the beaker.

It came out with one glistening drop on the end.

'Careful, Archchancellor,' warned the Dean. 'What you have there might represent

pure sobriety.'

Ridcully paused with the finger halfway to his lips.

'Good point,' he said. 'I don't want to start being sober at my time of life.'

He looked around. 'How do we usually test stuff?'

'Generally we ask for student volunteers,' said the Dean.

'What happens if we don't get any?'

'We give it to them anyway.'

'Isn't that a bit unethical?'

'Not if we don't tell them, Archchancellor.'

'Ah, good point.'

'I'll try it,' the oh god mumbled.

coming out of the mouth, screams, clutching at the throat, lying down
under the
cold tap, that sort of thing-'
Death found, to his amazement, that dealing with the queue was very
enjoyable.

Hardly anyone had ever been pleased to see him before.

NEXT! AND WHAT'S YOUR NAME, LITTLE ... He hesitated, but rallied,
and continued

... PERSON?

'Nobby Nobbs, Hogfather,' said Nobby. Was it him, or was this knee he
was

sitting on a lot bonier than it should be? His buttocks argued with his
brain,

and were sat on.

AND HAVE YOU BEEN A GOOD BO ... A GOOD DWA ... A GOOD
GNO ... A GOOD INDIVIDUAL?

And suddenly Nobby found he had no control at all of his tongue. Of its
own

accord, gripped by a terrible compulsion, it said:

's.'

He struggled for -self-possession as the great voice went on: SO I
EXPECT YOU'LL

WANT A PRESENT FOR A GOOD MON ... A GOOD HUM ... A GOOD
MALE?

Aha, got you bang to rights, you'll be coming along with me, my old
chummy, I

bet you don't remember the cellar at the back of the shoelace maker's in
Old

Cobblers, eh, all those Hogswatch mornings with a little hole in my
world, eh?

The words rose in Nobby's throat but were overridden by something
ardent before

they reached his voice box, and to his amazement were translated into:

miss, say? Or, for instance, say a
friend of mine was on patrol, sort of thing, and found a shopkeeper had
left his

door unlocked at night. I mean, anyone could walk in, right, but suppose
this

friend took one or two things, sort of like, you know, a gratuity, and then
called the shopkeeper out and got him to lock up, that counts as "good",
does

it?'

Good and bad were, to Nobby's way of thinking, entirely relative terms.
Most of

his relatives, for example, were criminals. But, again, this invitation to
philosophical debate was ambushed somewhere in his head by sheer
dread of the

big beard in the sky.

' 's,' he squeaked.

NOW, I WONDER WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE?

Nobby gave up, and sat mute. Whatever was going to happen next was
going to

happen, and there was not a thing he could do about it . . . Right now,
the

light at the end of his mental tunnel showed only more tunnel.

AH, YES ...

The Hogfather reached into his sack and pulled out an awkwardly
shaped present

wrapped in festive Hogswatch paper which, owing to some slight
confusion on the

current Hogfather's part, had merry ravens on it. Corporal Nobbs took it
in

nervous hands.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

'nk you.'

OFF YOU GO.

can't believe

crossbow with a polished walnut stock and engraved silver facings!

'--a crass commercialization of a date which is purely of astronomical significance,' said Visit, who seldom paid attention when he was in mid-denounce. 'If it is to be celebrated at all, then--'

'I saw this in Bows and Ammo! It got Editor's Choice in the 'What to Buy When

Rich Uncle Sidney Dies" category! They had to break both the reviewer's arms to

get him to let go of it!

'---ought to be commemorated in a small service of---'

'It must cost more'n a year's salary! They only make 'em to order! You have to

wait ages!

'-religious significance.' It dawned on Constable Visit that something behind

him was amiss.

'Aren't we going to arrest this impostor, corporal?' he said.

Corporal Nobbs looked blearily at him through the mists of possessive pride.

'You're foreign, Washpot,' he said. 'I can't expect you to know the real meaning of Hogswatch.'

The oh god blinked.

'Ah,' he said. 'That's better. Oh, yes. That's a lot better. Thank you.'

The wizards, who shared the raven's belief in the essential narrative conventions of life, watched him cautiously.

'Any minute now,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes confidently, 'it'll probably

start with some kind of amusing yell---'

'You know,' said the oh god, 'I think I could just possibly eat a soft-boiled egg.'

'---or maybe the cars spinning round---'

'And perhaps drink a glass of milk' said the oh god.

butt?' said Ridcully.

'Er . . . not really,' said the oh god. 'But I'd like some toast, if that helps.'

The Dean took off his hat and pulled a thaumameter out of the point.

'Something

happened,' he said. 'There was a massive thaumic surge.'

'Didn't it even taste a bit ... well, spicy?' said Ridcully.

'It didn't taste of anything, really,' said the oh god.

'Oh, look, it's obvious,' said Susan. 'When the God of Wine drinks, Bilious here

gets the aftereffects, so when the God of Hangovers drinks a hangover cure then

the effects must jump back across the same link.'

'That could be right,' said the Dean. 'He is, after all, basically a conduit.'

'I've always thought of myself as more of a tube,' said the oh god.

'No, no, she's right,' said Ridcully. 'When he drinks, this lad here gets the

nasty result. So, logically, when our friend here takes a hangover cure the side

effects should head back the same way--'

'Someone mentioned a crystal ball just now,' said the oh god in a voice suddenly

clanging with vengeance. 'I want to see this--'

It was a big drink. A very big and a very long drink. It was one of those special cocktails where each very sticky, very strong ingredient is poured in

very slowly, so that they layer on top of one

another. Drinks like this tend to get called Traffic Lights or Rainbow's Revenge

or, in places where truth is more highly valued, Hello and Goodbye, Mr Brain

Cell.

In addition, this drink had some lettuce floating in it. And a slice of lemon

There was a tumba going on in the background. There were also a couple of young ladies snuggling up to him. It was going to be a good night. It was always a good night.

'Happy Hogswatch, everyone!' he said, and raised the glass.

And then: 'Can anyone hear something?'

Someone blew a paper squeaker at him.

'No, seriously ... like a sort of descending note

Since no one paid this any attention he shrugged, and nudged one of his fellow drinkers.

'How about we have a couple more and go to this club I know?' he said.

And then

The wizards leaned back, and one or two of them grimaced.

Only the oh god stayed glued to the glass, face contorted in a vicious smile.

'We have eructation!' he shouted, and punched the air. 'Yes! Yes! Yes! The worm

is on the other boot now, eh? Hah! How do you like them apples, huh?'

'Well, mainly apples--' said the Dean.

'Looked like a lot of other things to me,' said Ridcully. 'It seems we have reversed the cause-effect flow . . .'

'Will it be permanent?' said the oh god hopefully.

'I shouldn't think so. After all, you are the God of Hangovers. It'll probably just reverse itself again when the potion wears off.'

'Then I may not have much time. Bring me ... let's see ... twenty pints of lager, some pepper vodka and a bottle of coffee liqueur! With an umbrella in it!

Let's see how he enjoys that, Mr You've Cot Room For Another One In There!'

Susan grabbed his hand and pulled him over to a bench.

headaches ... but never having a head. That can't be right, can it?

'You existed in potentia?' said Ridcully.

'Did P'

'Did he?' said Susan.

Ridcully paused. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'I think I did it, didn't I? I said something to young Stibbons about drinking and hangovers, didn't I ... ?'

'And you created him just like that?' said the Dean. 'I find that very hard to believe, Mustrum. Hah! Out of thin air? I suppose we can all do that, can we?'

Anyone care to think up some new pixie?'

'Like the Hair Loss Fairy?' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. The other wizards

laughed.

'I am not losing my hair!' snapped the Dean. 'It is just very finely spaced.'

'Half on your head and half on your hairbrush,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

'No sense in bein' bashful about goin' bald,' said Ridcully evenly. 'Anyway, you

know what they say about bald men, Dean.'

'Yes, they say, "Look at him, he's got no hair,"' said the Lecturer in Recent

Runes. The Dean had been annoying him lately.

'For the last time,' shouted the Dean, 'I am not--'

He stopped.

There was a glingleglinglegling noise.

'I wish I knew where that was coming from,' said Ridcully.

'Er . . .' the Dean began. 'Is there ... something on my head?'

The other wizards stared.

Something was moving under his hat.

Expanding Scalp

Sickness.

Susan grabbed it.

'Are you the Hair Loss Fairy?' she said.

'Apparently,' said the gnome, wriggling in her grip.

The Dean ran his hands desperately through his hair.

'What have you been doing with my hair?' he demanded.

'Went some of it I think I have to put on hairbrushes,' said the gnome,

'but

sometimes I

think I weave it into little mats to block up the bath with.'

'What do you mean, you think?' said Ridcully.

'Just a minute,' said Susan. She turned to the oh god. 'Where exactly

were you

before I found you in the snow?'

'Er . . . sort of ... everywhere, I think,' said the oh god. 'Anywhere where

drink had been consumed in beastly quantities some time previously,

you could

say.'

'Ah-ha,' said Ridcully. 'You were an immanent vital force, yes?'

'I suppose I could have been,' the oh god conceded.

'And when we joked about the Hair Loss Fairy it suddenly focused on
the Dean's

head,' said Ridcully, 'where its operations have been noticeable to all of

us in

recent months although of course we have been far too polite to pass

comment on

the subject.'

'You're calling things into being,' said Susan.

'Things like the Give the Dean a Huge Bag of Money Goblin?' said the
Dean, who

could think very quickly at times. He looked around hopefully. 'Anyone
hear any

The wizards gave this some thought. Then they all heard it - the little
crinkly
tinkling noise of magic taking place.
The Archchancellor pointed dramatically skywards.
'To the laundry!' he said.
'It's downstairs, Ridcully,' said the Dean.
'Down to the laundry!'
'And you know Mrs Whitlow doesn't like us going in there,' said the
Chair of
Indefinite Studies.
'And who is Archchancellor of this University, may I ask?' said Ridcully.
'Is it
Mrs Whitlow? I don't think so! Is it me? Why, how amazing, I do believe
it is!'
'Yes, but you know what she can be like,' said the Chair.
'Er, yes, that's true--' Ridcully began.
'I believe she's gone to her sister's for the holiday,' said the Bursar.
'We certainly don't have to take orders from any kind of housekeeper!'
said the
Archchancellor. 'To the laundry!'
The wizards surged out excitedly, leaving Susan, the oh god, the
Verruca Gnome
and the Hair Loss Fairy.
'Tell me again who those people were,' said the oh god.
'Some of the cleverest men in the world,' said Susan.
'And I'm sober, am W
'Clever isn't the same as sensible,' said Susan, 'and they do say that if
you wish to walk the path to wisdom then for your first step you must
become as
a small child.'
'Do you think they've heard about the second step?'
Susan sighed. 'Probably not, but sometimes they fall over it while they're

years on a mountain and a daily bowl of rice and yak-butter tea that would give

it any kind of meaning. While evidence says that the road to Hell is paved with

good intentions, they're probably all on first steps.

The Dean was always at his best at times like this. He led the way between the

huge, ardent copper vats, prodding with his staff into dark corners and going

'Hut! Hut!' under his breath.

'Why would it turn up here?' whispered the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

'Point of reality instability,' said Ridcully, standing on tiptoe to look into a bleaching cauldron. 'Every damn thing turns up here. You should know that by

now.'

'But why now?' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

'No talking!' hissed the Dean, and leapt out into the next alleyway, staff held

protectively in front of him.

'Hall!' he screamed, and then looked disappointed

'Er, how big would this sock-stealing thing be?' said the Senior Wrangler.

'Don't know,' said Ridcully. He peered behind a stack of washboards.

'Come to

think of it, I must've lost a ton of socks over the years.'

'Me too,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

'So ... should we be looking in small places or very large places?' the Senior

Wrangler went on, in the voice of one whose train of thought has just entered a

long dark tunnel.

'Good point,' said Ridcully. 'Dean, why do you keep referring to sheds all the

They all heard it.

... grnf, grnf, grnf ...

It was a busy sound, the sound of something with a serious appetite to satisfy.

'The Eater of Socks,' moaned the Senior Wrangler, with his eyes shut.

'How many tentacles would you expect it to have?' said the Lecturer in

Recent

Runes. 'I mean, roughly speaking?'

'It's a very large sort of noise, isn't it?' said the Bursar.

'To the nearest dozen, say,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes, edging backwards.

... grnf, grnf, grnf ...

'It'd probably tear our socks off as soon as look at us . . .' wailed the

Senior

Wrangler.

'Ah. So at least five or six tentacles, then, would you say?' said the

Lecturer

in Recent Runes.

'Seems to me it's coming from one of the washing engines,' said the

Dean.

The engines were each two storeys high, and usually only used when the

University's population soared during term time. A huge treadmill connected to a

couple of big bleached wooden paddles in each vat, which were heated via

the fireboxes underneath. In full production the washing engines needed at least

half a dozen people to manhandle the loads, maintain the fires and oil the

scrubbing arms. Ridcully had seen them at work once, when it had looked like a

ON THE WHOLE, I THINK THAT WENT VERY WELL, DON'T YOU?

'Yes, master,' said Albert.

I WAS RATHER PUZZLED BY THE LITTLE BOY IN THE CHAIN MAIL, THOUGH.

'I think that was a Watchman, master.'

REALLY? WELL, HE WENT AWAY HAPPY, AND THAT'S THE MAIN THING.

'Is it, master?' There was worry in Albert's voice. Death's osmotic nature tended to pick up new ideas altogether too quickly. Of course, Albert understood

why they had to do all this,

but the master ... well, sometimes the master lacked the necessary mental

equipment to work out what should be true and what shouldn't ...

AND I THINK I'VE GOT THE LAUGH WORKING REALLY WELL NOW. HO. HO. HO.

'Yeah, sir, very jolly,' said Albert. He looked down at the list. 'Still, work goes on, eh? The next one's pretty dose, master, so I should keep them down low

if I was you.'

JOLLY GOOD. HO. HO. HO.

'Sarah the little match girl, doorway of Thimble's Pipe and Tobacco Shop, Money

Trap Lane, it says here.'

AND WHAT DOES SHE WANT FOR HOGSWATCH? HO. HO. HO.

'Dunno. Never sent a letter. By the way, just a tip, you don't have to say "Ho,

ho, ho, " all the time, master. Let's see ... It says here...' Albert's lips moved as he read.

I EXPECT A DOLL IS ALWAYS ACCEPTABLE. OR A SOFT TOY OF SOME DESCRIPTION. THE

SACK SEEMS TO KNOW. WHAT'VE WE GOT FOR HER, ALBERT? HO. HO. HO.

July is

knowing there're people who ain't,' said Albert, in a matter-of-fact voice.

'That's how it goes, master. Master?'

No. Death stood Up. THIS IS HOW IT SHOULDN'T GO.

The University's Great Hall had been set for the Hogswatchnight Feast.

The

tables were already groaning under the weight of the cutlery, and it would be

hours before any real food was put on them. It was hard to see where there would

be space for any among the drifts of ornamental fruit bowls and forests of wine

glasses.

The oh god picked up a menu and turned to the fourth page.

'Course four: molluscs and crustaceans. A medley of lobster, crab, king crab,

prawn, shrimp, oyster, clam, giant mussel, green-lipped mussel, thin-lipped

mussel and Fighting Tiger Limpet. With a herb and butter dipping sauce.

Wine:

"Three Wizards" Chardonnay, Year of the Talking Frog. Beer: Winkles'

Old

Peculiar.' He put it down. 'That's one course?' he said.

'They're big men in the food department,' said Susan.

He turned the menu over. On the cover was the University's coat of arms and,

over it, three large letters in ardent script:

h b p

'Is this some sort of magic word?'

'No.' Susan sighed. 'They put it on all their menus. You might call it the unofficial motto of the University.'

'What's it mean?'

'Eta Beta Pi.'

then you laugh. It's called a pun or play on words. Eta Beta Pi. She eyed him carefully. 'You laugh,' she said. 'With your mouth. Only, in fact, you don't laugh, because you're not supposed to laugh at things like this.'

'Perhaps I could find that glass of milk,' said the oh god helplessly, peering at the huge array of jugs and bottles. He'd clearly given up on sense of humour.

'I gather the Archchancellor won't have milk in the University,' said Susan. 'He says he knows where it comes from and it's unhygienic. And that's a man who eats three eggs for breakfast every day, mark you. How do you know about milk, by the way?'

'I've got ... memories,' said the oh god. 'Not exactly of anything, er, specific. just, you know, memories. Like, I know trees usually grow greenend up ... that sort of thing. I suppose gods just know things.'

'Any special god-like powers?'

'I might be able to turn water into an enervescent drink.' He pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Is that any help? And it's just possible I can give people a blinding headache.'

'I need to find out why my grandfather is ... acting strange.'

'Can't you ask him?'

'He won't tell me!'

'Does he throw up a lot?'

'I shouldn't think so. He doesn't often eat. The occasional curry, once or twice a month.'

'He must be pretty thin.'

'You've no idea.'

I said Death.

'Sorry?'

'Death. You know ... Death?'

'You mean the robes, the---'

'-scythe, white horse, bones yes. Death.'

'I just want to make sure I've got this dear,' said the oh god in a reasonable

tone of voice. 'You think your grandfather is Death and you think he's acting

strange?'

The Eater of Socks looked up at the wizards, cautiously. Then its jaws started

to work again.

... grnf, grnf ...

'Here, thats one of mine!' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies, making a grab.

The Eater of Socks backed away hurriedly.

It looked like a very small elephant with a very wide, flared trunk, up which

one of the Chair's socks was disappearing.

'Funny lookin' little thing, ain't it?' said Ridcully, leaning his staff against the wall.

'Let go, you wretched creature!' said the Chair, making a grab for the sock.

'Shoo!'

The sock eater tried to get away while remaining where it was. This should be

impossible, but it is in fact a move attempted by many small animals when they

are caught eating something forbidden. The legs scabble hurriedly but the

neck and feverishly working jaws merely stretch and pivot around the food.

This was
turning out to be a far more interesting evening than he had anticipated.
'We've got to get this sorted out,' he said, as the first few puffs filled the
washing hall with the scent of autumn bonfires. 'Can't have creatures
just

popping into existence because someone's thought about them. It's
unhygienic.'

The sleigh slewed around at the end of Money Trap Lane.

COME ON, ALBERT.

'You know you're not supposed to do this sort of thing, master. You
know what
happened last time.'

THE HOGFATHER CAN DO IT, THOUGH.

'But ... little match girls dying in the snow is part of what the Hogswatch
spirit is all about,

master,' said Albert desperately. 'I mean, people hear about it and say,
"We may

be poorer than a disabled banana and only have mud and old boots to
eat, but at

least we're better off than the poor little match girl," master. It makes
them

feel happy and grateful for what they've got, see.'

I KNOW WHAT THE SPIRIT OF HOGSWATCH IS, ALBERT.

'Sorry, master. But, look, it's all right, anyway, because she wakes up
and it's

all bright and shining and tinkling music and there's angels, master.'

Death stopped.

AH. THEY TURN UP AT THE LAST MINUTE WITH WARM CLOTHES
AND A HOT DRINK?

Oh dear, thought Albert. The master's really in one of his funny moods
now.

'Er. No. Not exactly at the last minute, master. Not as such.'

WELL?

on the air and touched it with a finger. A spark flashed across.
'You ain't really allowed to do that,' said Albert, feeling wretched.
THE HOGFATHER CAN. THE HOGFATHER GIVES PRESENTS.
THERE'S NO BETTER PRESENT THAN
A FUTURE.

'Yeah, but---'

ALBERT.

'All right, master.'

Death scooped up the girl and strode to the end of the alley.

The snowflakes fell like angel's feathers. Death stepped out into the street and

accosted two figures who were tramping through the drifts.

TAKE HER SOMEWHERE WARM AND GIVE HER A GOOD DINNER,
he commanded, pushing the

bundle into the arms of one of them. AND I MAY

WELL BE CHECKING UP LATER.

Then he turned and disappeared into the swirling snow.

Constable Visit looked down at the little girl in his arms, and then at Corporal

Nobbs.

'What's all this about, corporal?'

Nobby pulled aside the blanket.

'Search me,' he said. 'Looks like we've been chosen to do a bit of charity.'

'I don't call it very charitable, just dumping someone on people like this.'

'Come on, there'll still be some grub left in the Watchhouse,' said Nobby. He'd

got a very deep and certain feeling that this was expected of him. He remembered

a big man in a grotto, although he couldn't quite remember the face. And he

was pretty
certain that Hex thought about things by turning them all into numbers
and
crunching them (a clothes wringer from the laundry, or CWL, had been
plumbed in
for this very purpose), but why did it need a lot of small religious
pictures?
And there was the mouse. It didn't seem to do much, but whenever they
forgot to
give it its cheese Hex stopped working. There were all those ram skulls.
The
ants wandered over to them occasionally but they didn't seem to do
anything.
What Ponder was worried about was the fear that he was simply
engaged in a cargo
cult. He'd
read about them. Ignorant[16] and credulous[17] people, whose island
might once
have been visited by some itinerant merchant vessel that traded pearls
and
coconuts for such fruits of civilization as glass beads, mirrors, axes and
sexual diseases, would later make big model ships out of bamboo in the
hope of
once again attracting this magical cargo. Of course, they were far too
ignorant
and credulous to know that just because you built the shape you didn't
get the
substance ...
He'd built the shape of Hex and, it occurred to him, he'd built it in a
magical
university where the border between the real and 'not real' was
stretched so
thin you could almost see through it. He got the horrible suspicion that,

able to stick Adrian onto the ceiling, and it hadn't had any effect on Hex.

Then

they'd tried tying a lot of cats to a wheel which, when revolved against some

beads of amber, caused any amount of electricity all over the place. The wretched stuff hung around for days, but there didn't seem any way of ladling it

into Hex and anyway no one could stand the noise.

So far the Archchancellor had vetoed the lightning rod idea.

All this depressed Ponder. He was certain that the world ought to work in a more

efficient way.

And now even the things that he thought were going right were going wrong.

- He stared glumly at Hex's quill pen in its tangle of springs and wire.

The door was thrown open. Only one person could make a door bang on its hinges

like that. Ponder didn't even turn round.

'Hello again, Archchancellor.'

'That thinking engine of yours working?' said Ridcully. 'Only there's an interesting little---'

'It's not working,' said Ponder.

'It ain't. What's this, a half-holiday for Hogswatch?'

'Look' said Ponder.

Hex wrote: +++ Whoops! Here Comes The Cheese! +++MELON
MELON MELON +++ Error At

Address: 14, Treacle Mine Road, AnkhMorpork+++ !!!!!
+++Oneoneoneoneoneoneone +++

Redo From Start +++

'What's going on?' said Ridcully, as the others pushed in behind them.

'I know it -sounds stupid, Archchancellor, but we think it might have caught

something off the Bursar.'

said

Ridcully.

'Well, metaphorically,' said the Dean.

'And if you hang around with a bunch of idiots you're bound to become pretty

daft yourself,' Ridcully went on.

'I suppose in a manner of speaking . .

'And you've only got to talk to the poor old Bursar for five minutes and you

think you're going a bit potty yourself, am I right?'

The wizards nodded glumly. The Bursar's company, although quite harmless, had a

habit of making one's brain squeak.

'So Hex here has caught daftness off the Bursar,' said Ridcully. 'Simple.

Real

stupidity beats artificial intelligence every time.' He banged his pipe on the

side of Hex's listening tube and shouted: 'FEELING ALL RIGHT, OLD CHAP?'

Hex wrote: +++ Hi Mum Is Testing +++ MELON MELON MELON +++
Out Of Cheese Error

+++ !!!!! +++ Mr Jelly! Mr Jelly! +++

'Hex seems perfectly able to work out anything purely to do with numbers but

when it tries anything else it does this,' said Ponder.

'See? Bursar Disease,' said Ridcully. 'The bee's knees when it comes to adding

up, the pig's ear at everything else. Try giving him dried frog pills?'

'Sorry, sir, but that is a very uninformed suggestion,' said Ponder. 'You can't

give medicine to machines.'

'Don't see why not,' said Ridcully. He banged on the tube again and bellowed,

Seems to me' he said, 'that this thing believes what it's told, right?'
'Well, it's true that Hex has, if you want to put it that way, no idea of an untruth.'

'Right. Well, I've just told the thing it's had a lot of dried frog pills. It's not going to call me a liar, is it?'

There was some clickings and whirrings within the structure of Hex.

Then it wrote: +++ Good Evening, Archchancellor. I Am Fully Recovered

And

Enthusiastic About My Tasks +++

'Not mad, then?'

+++ I Assure You I Am As Sane As The Next Man +++

'Bursar, just move away from the machine, will you?' said Ridcully. 'Oh well, I

expect it's the best we're going to get. Right, let's get all this sorted out.

We want to find out what's going on.'

'Anywhere specific or just everywhere?' said Ponder, a shade sarcastically.

There was a scratching noise from Hex's pen. Ridcully glanced down at the paper.

'Says here "Implied Creation Of Anthropomorphic Personification",' he said.

'What's that mean?'

'Er ... I think Hex has tried to work out the answer,' said Ponder.

'Has it, bigods? I hadn't even worked out what the question was yet . . .'

'It heard you talking, sir.'

Ridcully raised his eyebrows. Then he leaned down towards the speaking tube.

'CAN YOU HEAR ME IN THERE?'

The pen scratched.

+++ Yes +++

'LOOKIN' AFTER YOU ALL RIGHT, ARE THEY?'

'You don't have to shout, Archchancellor,' said Ponder.

'What's this Implied Creation, then?' said Ridcully.

wisdom tooth

Goblin? You know, bringing them extra ones? Some little devil with a bag of big teeth?'

There was silence. But in the depths of the silence there was a little tingly

fairy bell sound.

'Er ... do you think I might have---' Ridcully began.

'Sounds logical to me,' said the Senior Wrangler. 'I remember the agony I had

when my wisdom teeth came through.'

'Last week?' said the Dean, and smirked.

'Ah,' said Ridcully. He didn't look embarrassed because people like Ridcully are

never, ever embarrassed about anything, although often people are embarrassed on

their behalf. He bent down to the ear Hex again.

'YOU STILL IN THERE?'

Ponder Stibbons rolled his eyes.

'MIND TELLING US WHAT THE REALITY IS LW ROUND HERE?'

The pen wrote: +++ On A Scale Of One To Ten Query +++

FINE,' Ridcully shouted.

++ Divide By Cucumber Error. Please Reinstall Universe And Reboot
+++

'Interestin',' said Ridcully. 'Anyone know what that means?'

'Damn,' said Ponder. 'It's crashed again.'

Ridcully looked mystified. 'Has it? I never even saw it take off.'

'I mean its ... its sort of gone a little bit mad,' said Ponder.

'Ah,' said Ridcully. 'Well, we're experts at that around here.'

He thumped on the drum again.

'WANT SOME MORE DRIED FROG PILLS, OLD CHAP?' he shouted.

'Er, I should let us sort it out, Archchancellor,' said Ponder, trying to steer

figures.

'It must do. These figures can't be right!'

Ridcully grinned again. 'You mean either the whole world has gone wrong or your machine is wrong?'

'Yes!'

'Then I'd imagine the answer's pretty easy, wouldn't you?' said Ridcully.

'Yes. It certainly is. Hex gets thoroughly tested every day,' said Ponder Stibbons.

'Good point, that man,' said Ridcully. He banged on Hex's listening tube once

more.

'YOU DOWN THERE---'

'You really don't need to shout, Archchancellor,' said Ponder.

-what's this Anthropomorphic Personification, then?'

+++ Humans Have Always Ascribed Random, Seasonal, Natural Or Inexplicable

Actions To HumanShaped Entities. Such Examples Are jack Frost, The Hogfather,

The Tooth Fairy And Death +++

'Oh, them. Yes, but they exist,' said Ridcully. 'Met a couple of 'em myself.'

+++ Humans Are Not Always Wrong +++

'All right, but I'm damn sure there's never been an Eater of Socks or God of

Hangovers.'

+++ But There Is No Reason Why There Should Not Be +++

'The thing's right, you know,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. 'A little man

who carries verrucas around is no more ridiculous than someone who takes away

children's teeth for money, when you come to think about it.'

I know what you mean,' said Ponder. 'It's like pencils. I must have bought hundreds of pencils over the years, but how many have I ever actually worn down to the stub? Even I've caught myself thinking that something's creeping up and eating them---'

There was a faint glinglegingle noise. He froze. 'What was that?' he said.

'Should I look round? Will I see something horrible?'

'Looks like a very puzzled bird,' said Ridcully.

'With a very odd-shaped beak,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

'I wish I knew who's making that bloody tinkling noise,' said the Archchancellor.

The oh god listened attentively. Susan was amazed. He didn't seem to disbelieve

anything. She'd never been able to talk like this before, and said so.

'I think that's because I haven't got any preconceived ideas,' said the oh god.

'It comes of not having been conceived, probably.'

'Well, that's how it is, anyway,' said Susan. 'Obviously I haven't inherited

... physical characteristics. I suppose I just look at the world in a certain way.'

'What way?'

'It ... doesn't always present barriers. Like this, for example.'

She dosed her eyes. She felt better if she didn't see what she was doing. Part

of her would keep on insisting it was impossible.

All she felt was a faintly cold, prickling sensation.

'What did I just do?' she said, her eyes still shut.

'Er . . . you waved your hand through the table,' said the oh god.

'You see?'

saying, yes, there is a chair here, it's a real thing, you can sit on it.

'There's other things,' she said. 'I can remember things. Things that haven't

happened yet.'

'Isn't that useful?'

'No! Because I never know what they - look, it's like looking at the future through a keyhole. You see bits of things but you never really know what they

mean until you arrive where they are and see where the bit fits in.'

'That could be a problem,' said the oh god politely.

'Believe me. Its the waiting that's the worst part. You keep watching out for

one of the bits to go past. I mean I don't usually remember anything useful

about the future, just twisted little dues that don't make sense until it's too

late. Are you sure you don't know why you turned up at the Hogfather's castle?'

'No. I just remember being a ... well, can you understand what I mean by a disembodied mind?'

'Oh, yes.'

.'Good. Now can you understand what I mean by a disembodied headache? And then,

next moment, I was lying on a back I didn't used to have in a lot of cold white

stuff I'd never seen before. But I suppose if you're going to pop into existence, you've got to do it somewhere.'

'Somewhere where someone else, who should have existed, didn't,' said Susan,

half to herself.

'Pardon?'

'The Hogfather wasn't there.' said Susan. 'He shouldn't have been there anyway,

underneath.

'Hmph,' said Albert. He sniffed.

WHAT DO YOU CALL THAT WARM FEELING YOU GET INSIDE;

'Heartburn!' Albert snapped.

DO I DETECT A NOTE OF UNSEASONAL

GRUMPINESS? said Death. NO SUGAR PIGGYWIGGY FOR YOU,
ALBERT.

'I don't want any present, master.' Albert sighed. 'Except maybe to wake
up and

find it's all back to normal. Look, you know it always goes, wrong when
you

start changing things. . .'

BUT THE HOGFATHER CAN CHANGE THINGS. LITTLE MIRACLES
ALL OVER THE PLACE, WITH

MANY A MERRY HO, HO, HO. TEACHING PEOPLE THE REAL
MEANING OF HOGSWATCH, ALBERT.

'What, you mean that the pigs and cattle have all been slaughtered and
with any

luck everyone's got enough food for the winter?'

WELL, WHEN I SAY THE REAL MEANING

'Some wretched devil's had his head chopped off in a wood somewhere
'cos he

found a bean in his dinner and now the summer's going to come back?'

NOT EXACTLY THAT, BUT-

'Oh, you mean that they've chased down some poor beast and shot
arrows up into

their apple trees and now the shadows are going to go away?'

THAT IS DEFINITELY A MEANING, BUT I

'Ah, then you're talking about the one where they light a bloody big
bonfire to

give the sun a hint and tell it to stop lurking under the horizon and do a
proper day's work?'

Death paused, while the hogs hurtled over a range of hills.

THERE ARE WORSE BATTLE CRIES.

'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear . .

EXCUSE ME ...

Death reached into his robe and pulled out an hourglass.

TURN THE SLEIGH AROUND, ALBERT. DUTY CALLS.

'Which one?'

A MORE POSITIVE ATTITUDE WOULD ASSIST AT THIS POINT,
THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH.

'Fascinatin'. Anyone got another pencil?' said Ridcully.

'It's had four already,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. 'Right down to
the

stub, Archchancellor. And you know we buy our own these days.'

It was a sore point. Like most people with no grasp whatsoever of real
economics, Mustrum Ridcully equated 'proper financial control' with the
counting

of paperclips. Even senior wizards had to produce a pencil stub to him
before

they were allowed a new one out of the locked cupboard below his
desk. Since of

course hardly anyone retained a half-used pencil, the wizards
had been reduced to sneaking out and buying new ones with their own
money.

The reason for the dearth of short pencils was perched in front of them,
whirring away as it chewed an HB down to the eraser on the end, which
it spat at

the Bursar.

Ponder Stibbons had been making notes.

'I think it works like this,' he said. 'What we're getting is the
personification of forces, just like Hex said. But it only works if the thing
is

... well, logical.' He swallowed. Ponder was a great believer in logic, in
the

pencil.
'Welt sir ... firstly, you've never mysteriously received huge bags of money and
needed to find a hypothesis to explain them, and secondly, no one else would
think it at all likely.'
'Huh!'
'Why's it happening now?' said Ridcully. 'Look its hopped onto my finger! Anyone
got another pencil?'
'Well, these ... forces have always been here,' said Ponder. 'I mean, socks and
pencils have always inexplicably gone missing, haven't they? But why they're
suddenly getting personified like this ... I'm afraid I don't know.'
'Well, we'd better find out, hadn't we?' said Ridcully. 'Can't have this sort of
thing going on. Daft anti-gods and miscellaneous whatnots being created just
because people've thought about 'em? We could have anything turn up, anyway.
Supposing some idiot says there must be a god of indigestion, eh?'
Glingleglinglegingle.
'Er . . . I think someone just did, sir,' said Ponder.
'What's the matter? What's the matter?' said the oh god. He took Susan by the
shoulders.
They felt bony under his hands.
'DAMN,' said Susan. She pushed him away and steadied herself on the table,
taking care that he didn't see her face.
Finally, with a measure of the self-control she'd taught herself over the last

restyling itself, which it always did when it was anxious. You know how
stuff
runs in families? Blue eyes, buck teeth, that sort of thing? Well, Death
runs in
my family.'

'Er ... in everybody's family, doesn't it?' said the oh god.

'Just shut up, please, don't gabble,' said Susan. 'I didn't mean death, I
meant
Death with a capital D. I remember things that haven't happened yet
and I Can
TALK THAT TALK and stalk that stalk and ... if he gets sidetracked, then
I'll
have to do it. And he does get sidetracked. I don't know what's really
happened
to the real Hogfather or why Grandfather's doing his job, but I know a bit
about
how he thinks and he's got no ... no mental shields like we have. He
doesn't
know how to forget things or ignore things. He takes everything literally
and
logically and doesn't understand why that doesn't always work----'

She saw his bemused expression.

'Look ... how would you make sure everyone in the world was well fed?'

she
demanded.

'Me? Oh, well, I...!' The oh god spluttered for a moment. 'I suppose you'd
have
to think about the prevalent political systems, and the proper division
and
cultivation of arable land, and---'

'Yes, yes. But he'd just give everyone a good meat' said Susan.

'Oh, I see. Very impractical. Hah, it's as silly as saying you could clothe
the

crazy car chase. Some narrative conventions are so strong that
equivalents
happen even on planets where the rocks boil at noon. And when a fully
laden
table collapses, one miraculously unbroken plate always rolls across the
floor
and spins to a halt.
Susan and the oh god watched it, and then turned their attention to the
huge
figure now lying in what remained of an enormous centrepiece made of
fruit.
'He just ... came right out of the air,' whispered the oh god.
'Really? Don't just stand there. Give me a hand to help him up, will you?'
said
Susan, pulling at a large melon.
'Er, that's a bunch of grapes behind his ear---'
'Well?'
'I don't like even to think about grapes---'
'Oh, come on.'
Together they managed to get the newcomer on to his feet.
'Toga, sandals ... he looks a bit like you,' said Susan, as the fruit victim
swayed heavily.
'Was I that green colour?'
'Close.'
'Is ... is there a privy nearby?' mumbled their burden, through clammy
lips.
'I believe it's through that arch over there,' said Susan. 'I've heard it's not
very pleasant, though.'
'That's not a rumour, that's a forecast,' said the fat figure, and lurched
off.
'And then can I please have a glass of water and one charcoal biscuit. .
'
They watched him go.

Just teeth. Lots of teeth. But not horrible teeth. Just lots and lots of little teeth. Almost ... sad?'

'Yes! How did you know?'

'Oh, I ... maybe I remember you telling me before you told me. I don't know. How about a big shiny red globe?'

The oh god looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, 'No, can't help you

there, I'm afraid. It's just teeth. Rows and rows of teeth.'

'I don't remember rows,' said Susan. 'I just felt ... teeth were important.'

'Nah, it's amazing what you can do with a beak,' said the raven, who'd been

investigating the laden table and had succeeded in levering a lid off a jar.

'What have you got there?' said Susan wearily.

'Eyeballs,' said the raven. 'Hah, wizards know how to live all right," eh?'

They

don't want for nothing around here, I can tell you.'

'They're olives,' said Susan.

'Tough luck,' said the raven. 'They're mine now.'

'They're a kind of fruit! Or a vegetable or something!'

'You sure?' The raven swivelled one doubtful eye on the jar and the other on

her.

'Yes!'

The eyes swivelled again.

'So you're an eyeball expert all of a sudden?'

'Look they're green, you stupid bird!'

'They could be very old eyeballs,' said the raven defiantly. 'Sometimes they go

like that---'

SQUEAK, said the Death of Rats, who was halfway through a cheese.

'And not so much of the stupid,' said the raven. 'Corvids are exceptionally

Oh, you see her around a lot these days,' said Susan. Of them, rather.

Its a

sort of franchise operation. You get the ladder, the moneybelt and the pliers

and you're set up.'

'Pliers?'

'If she can't make change she has to take an extra tooth on account.

But, look,

the tooth fairies are harmless enough. I've met one or two of them.

They're just

working girls. They don't menace anyone.'

SQUEAK.

'I just hope Grandfather doesn't take it into his head to do their job as well.

Good grief, the thought of it---'

'They collect teeth?'

'Yes. Obviously.'

'Why?'

'Why? It's their job.'

'I meant why, where do they take the teeth after they collect them?'

'I don't know! They just ... well, they just take the teeth and leave the money,' said Susan. 'What sort of question is that - 'Where do they take

the

teeth?''?

'I just wondered, that's all. Probably all humans know, I'm probably very silly

for asking, it's probably a wellknown fact.'

Susan looked thoughtfully at the Death of Rats.

'Actually ... where do they take the teeth?'

SQUEAK?

'He says search him,' said the raven. 'Maybe they sell 'em?' It pecked at another jar. 'How about these, these look nice and wrinkl---'

the stones
fitted together so you could hardly put a knife between them, you know,
and

it's obvious they had flying machines, right, because of the way the
earthworks

can only be seen from above, yeah? and there's this museum I read
about where

they found a pocket calculator under the altar of this ancient temple, you
know

what I'm saying? but the government hushed it up ... [18]

Mustrum Ridcully believed that knowledge could be acquired by
shouting at

people, and was endeavouring to do so. The wizards were sitting
around the

Uncommon Room table, which was piled high with books.

'It is Hogswatch, Archchancellor,' said the Dean reproachfully, thumbing
through

an ancient volume.

'Not until midnight,' said Ridcully. 'Sortin' this out will give you fellows an
appetite for your dinner.'

'I think I might have something, Archchancellor,' said the Chair of
Indefinite

Studies. 'This is Woddeley's Basic Gods. There's some stuff here about
lares and

penates that seems to it the bill.'

'Lares and penates? What were they when they were at home?' said
Ridcully.

'Hahaha,' said the Chair.

'What?' said Ridcully.

'I thought you were making a rather good joke, Archchancellor,' said the
Chair.

'Was I? I didn't mean to,' said Ridcully.

'Nothing new there,' said the Dean, under his breath.

a
big fat God of Indigestion being ill in the privy. By the way,. where's the Bursar?'

'He was in the privy, Archchancellor,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. 'What, when the-?'

'Yes, Archchancellor.'

'Oh, well, Im sure he'll be all right,' said Ridcully, in the matter-of-fact voice of someone contemplating something nasty that was happening to someone else out of earshot. 'But we don't want any more of these ... what're they, Chair?'

'Lares and penates, Archchancellor, but I wasn't suggesting---'

'Seems dear to me. Something's gone wrong and these little devils are coming back. All we have to do is find out what's gone wrong and put it right.'

'Oh, well, I'm glad that's all sorted out,' said the Dean.

'Household gods,' said Ridcully. 'That's what they are, Chair?' He opened the drawer in his hat and took out his pipe.

'Yes, Archchancellor. It says here they used to be the ... local spirits, I suppose. They saw to it that the bread rose and the butter churned properly.'

'Did they eat pencils? What was their attitude in the socks department?'

'This was back in the time of the First Empire,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. 'Sandals and togas and so on.'

'Ah. Not noticeably socked?'

'Not excessively so, no. And it was nine hundred years before Osrice Pencillium first discovered, in the graphiterich sands of the remote island of Sumtri, the small bush which, by dint

He stopped.

'I just said that, didn't P' he said.

The wizards nodded glumly.

'And this is the first time anyone's mentioned it?'

The wizards nodded again.

'Well, dammit, it's amazing, you can never find a dean towel when---'

There was a rising wheeee noise. A towel went by at shoulder height.

There was a

suggestion of many small wings.

'That was mine,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes reproachfully. The towel

disappeared in the direction of the Great Hall.

'Towel Wasps,' said the Dean. 'Well done, Archchancellor.'

'Well, I mean, dammit, it's human nature, isn't it?' said Ridcully hotly.

'Things go wrong, things get lost, it's natural to invent little creatures that - All right, all right, I'll be careful. I'm just saying man is naturally a mythopoeic creature.'

'What's that mean?' said the Senior Wrangler. 'Means we make things up as we go

along,' said the Dean, not looking up.

'Um ... excuse me, gentlemen,' said Ponder Stibbons, who had been scribbling

thoughtfully at the end of the table. 'Are we suggesting that things are coming

back? Do we think that's a viable hypothesis?'

The wizards looked at one another around the table.

'Definitely viable.'

'Viable, right enough.' - 'Yes, that's the stuff to give the troops.'

'What is? Whats the stuff to give the troops?'

'Well ... tinned rations? Decent weapons, good boots ... that sort of thing.'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

NO!

'That's a bit mean, isn't it?'

Ponder just let it happen. It's because their minds are so often involved with deep and problematic matters, he told himself,

that their mouths are allowed to wander around making a nuisance of themselves.

'I don't hold with using that thinking machine,' said the Dean. 'I've said this

before. It's meddling with the Cult. The occult has always been good enough for

me, thank you very much.'

'On the other hand it's the only person round here who can think straight and it

does what it's told,' said Ridcully.

The sleigh roared through the snow, leaving rolling trails in the sky.

'Oh, what fun,' muttered Albert, hanging on tightly.

The runners hit a roof near the University and the pigs trotted to a halt.

Death looked at the hourglass again.

ODD, he said.

'It's a scythe job, then?' said Albert. 'You won't be wanting the false beard

and the jolly laugh?' He looked around, and puzzlement replaced sarcasm. 'Hey

... how could anyone be dead up here?

Someone was. A corpse lay in the snow.

It was dear that the man had only just died. Albert squinted up at the sky.

'There's nowhere to fall from and there's no footprints in the snow,' he said,

as Death swung his scythe. 'So where did he come from? Looks like someone's personal guard. Been stabbed to death. Nasty knife wound there,

YES. IT DOES.

'Where's that come from?'

A PLACE I CANNOT GO.

Albert looked down at the mysterious corpse and then back up at Deaths impassive skull.

'I keep thinking it was a funny thing, us bumping into your granddaughter like

that,' he said.

YES.

Albert put his head on one side. 'Given the large number of chimneys and kids in

the world, ekcetra.'

INDEED...

'Amazing coincidence, really.'

IT JUST GOES TO SHOW.

'Hard to believe, you might say.'

LIFE CERTAINLY SPRINGS A FEW SURPRISES.

'Not just life, I reckon,' said Albert. 'And she got real worked up, didn't she? Flew right off the ole handle. Wouldn't be surprised if she started asking questions.'

THAT'S PEOPLE FOR YOU.

on her. 'But Rat is hanging around, ain't he? He'll probably keep an eye socket

Guide her path, prob'ly.'

HE IS A LITTLE SCAMP, ISN'T HE?

Albert knew he couldn't win. Death had the ultimate poker face.

I'M SURE SHE'LL ACT SENSIBLY.

'Oh, yeah,' said Albert, as they walked back to the sleigh. 'It runs in the family, acting sensibly.'

Like many barmen, Igor kept a club under the bar to deal with those little upsets that occurred around closing time, although in fact Biers never closed

the creeping fingers were forming into a pattern of three little dogs
looking
out of a boot.
Then someone had tapped him on the
shoulder. He spun around, club already in his hand, and relaxed.
'Oh ... it's you, miss. I didn't hear the door.'
There hadn't been the door. Susan was in a hurry.
'Have you seen Violet lately, Igor?'
'The tooth girl?' Igor's one eyebrow writhed in concentration. 'Nah,
haven't
seen her for a week or two.'
The eyebrow furrowed into a V of annoyance as he spotted the raven,
which tried
to shuffle behind a halfempty display card of beer nuts.
'You can get that out of here, miss,' he said. 'You know the rule 'bout
pets and
familiar. If it can't turn back into human on demand, it's out.'
'Yeah, well, some of us have more brain cells than fingers,' muttered a
voice
from behind the beer nuts.
'Where does she live?'
'Now, miss, you know I never answers questions like that--'
'WHERE DOES SHE LIVE, IGOR?'
'Shamlegger Street, next to the picture framers,' said Igor automatically.
The
eyebrow knotted in anger as he realized what he'd said.
'Now, miss, you know the rules! I don't get bitten, I don't get me froat
torn
out and no one hides behind me door! And you don't try your granddad's
voice on
me! I could ban you for messin' me about like that!'
'Sorry, it's important,' said Susan. Out of the corner of her eye she could
see

never

demanded much out of life. After a while he heard a muffled voice say:

'I 'ot 'un! I 'ot 'un!'

It was indistinct because the raven had speared a pickled egg with its beak.

Igor sighed, and picked up his club. And it would have gone very hard for the

raven if the Death of Rats hadn't chosen that moment to bite Igor on the ear.

DOWN THERE, said Death.

The reins were hauled so sharply so quickly that the hogs ended up facing the

other way.

Albert fought his way out of a drift of teddy bears, where he'd been dozing.

'What's up? What's up? Did we hit something?' he said.

Death pointed downwards. An endless white snowfield lay below, only the

occasional glow of

a window candle or a half-covered hut indicating the presence on this world of

brief mortality.

Albert squinted, and then saw what Death had spotted.

' 's some old bugger trudging through the snow,' he said. 'Been gathering wood,

by the look of it. A bad night to be out,' he said. 'And I'm out in it too, come

to that. Look, master, I'm sure you've done enough now to make sure----

SOMETHING'S HAPPENING DOWN THERE. HO. HO. HO.

'Look, he's all right,' said Albert, hanging on as the sleigh tumbled downwards.

What do you mean, you can't walk through the door?' said Susan. 'You walked through the door in the bar.'

'That was different. I have certain god-like powers in the presence of alcohol.'

Anyway, we've knocked and she hasn't answered and whatever happened to Mr Manners?' Susan shrugged, and walked through the cheap woodwork. She knew she probably shouldn't. Every time she did something

like this she used up a certain amount of, well, normal. And sooner or later

she'd forget what doorknobs were for, just like Grandfather. Come to think of it, he'd never found out what doorknobs were for. She opened the door from the inside. The oh god stepped in and looked around.

This did not take long. It was not a large room. It had been subdivided from a

room that itself hadn't been all that big to start with. 'This is where the Tooth fairy lives?' Bilious said. 'It's a bit ... poky, isn't it? Stuff all over the floor ... What're these things hanging from this line?' 'They're . . . women's clothes,' said Susan, rummaging through the

paperwork on a small rickety table.

'They're not very big,' said the oh god. 'And a bit thin . . .'

'Tell me,' said Susan, without looking up. 'These memories you arrived here with

... They weren't very complicated, were they ... ? Ah...'

He looked over her shoulder as she opened a small red notebook. 'I've only talked to Violet a few times,' she said. 'I think she delivers the teeth somewhere and gets a percentage of the money. It's not a highly

paid

month. She smiled at the neat grey writing. She practically hammered it out because she needed the half-dollar.
'Do you like children?' said the oh god.
She gave him a look. 'Not raw,' she said. 'Other people's are OK. Hold on . . .'

She flicked some pages back and forth.
'There's just blank days,' she said. 'Look, the last few days, all unticked. No names. But if you go back a week or two, look they're all properly marked off and the money added up at the bottom of the page, see? And ... this can't be right, can it?'

There were only five names entered on the first unticked night, for the previous week. Most children instinctively knew when to push their luck and only the greedy or dentally improvident called out the Tooth Fairy around Hogswatch.

'Read the names,' said Susan.
'William Wittles, a.k.a. Willy (home), Tosser (school),
2nd flr bck bdrm, 68 Kicklebury Street;
Sophie Langtree, a.k.a. Daddy's Princess, attic bdrm,
5 The Hippo;
The Hon. Jeffrey Bibbleton, a.k.a. Trouble in Trousers
(home), Foureyes (school), 1st fir bck, Scrote
Manor, Park Lane-'
He stopped. 'I say, this is a bit intrusive, isn't it?'
'It's a whole new world,' said Susan. 'You haven't got there yet. Keep going.'

'Nuhakme Icta, a.k.a. Little Jewel, basement, The Laughing Falafel, Klatchistan

raily?

4 No.'

'Me neither. He sounds like someone who'd expect a visit from the Watch.'

Susan looked around. It really was a crummy room, the sort rented by someone who

probably took it never intending to stay long, the sort where walking across the

floor in the middle of the night would be accompanied by the crack of cockroaches in a death flamenco. It was amazing how many people spent their whole fives in places where they never

intended to stay.

Cheap, narrow bed, crumbling plaster, tiny window

She opened the window and fished around

below the ledge, and felt satisfied when her

questing fingers dosed on a piece of string

which was attached to an oilcloth bag. She hauled

it in.

'What's that?' said the oh god, as she opened it on the table.

'Oh, you see them a lot,' said Susan, taking out some packages wrapped in

second-hand waxed paper. 'You live alone, mice and roaches eat everything,

there's nowhere to store food - but outside the window it's cold and safe. More

or less safe. It's an old trick. Now ... look at this. Leathery bacon, a green

loaf and a bit of cheese you could shave. She hasn't been back home for some

time, believe me.'

'Oh dear. What now?'

clipboard by a piece of string. Only she's a bit behind with the teeth and there's a bit of money owing and Ernie's cart ain't come back and it's got to go

in my report and I come round in case ... in case she was W or something, it not

being nice being alone and ill at Hogswatch-'

'She's not here,' said Susan.

The man gave her a worried look and shook his head sadly.

'There's nearly thirteen dollars in pillow money, see. I'll have to report it.'

'Who to?'

'It has to go higher up, see. I just hope it's not going to be like that business in Quirm where the girl started robbing houses. We never heard the end

of that one-'

'Report to who?'

'And there's the ladder and the pliers,' the man went on, in a litany against a

world that had no understanding of what it meant to have to fill in an AF17

report in triplicate. 'How can I keep track of stocktaking if people go around

taking stock?' He shook his head. 'I dunno, they get the job, they think it's

all nice sunny nights, they get a bit of sharp weather and suddenly it's goodbye

Charlie I'm off to be a waitress in the warm. And then there's Emie. I know him.

It's a nip to keep out the cold, and then another one to keep it company, and

then a third in case the other two get lost ... It's all going to have to go down in

my report, you know, and who's going to get the blame? M tell you---'

the job but I tell them they've got it easy, it's just basic ly ladder work, they don't have to spend their evenings knee-deep in paper and making shortfalls

good out of their own money, I might add---

'You employ the tooth fairies?' said Susan quickly. The oh god was still vertical but his eyes had glazed over.

The little man preened slightly. 'Sort of,' he said. 'Basic'ly I run Bulk Collection and Despatch---

'Where to?'

He stared at her. Sharp, direct questions weren't his forte.

'I just sees to it they gets on the cart,' he mumbled. 'When they're on the cart

and Ernie's signed the CV19 for 'em, that's it done and finished, only like

l
said he ain't turned up this week and-'

'A whole cart for a handful of teeth?'

'Well, there's the food for the guards, and -

'ere, who are you, anyway? What're you doing here?'

Susan straightened up. 'I don't have to put up with this,' she said sweetly, to

no one in particular. She leaned forward again.

WHAT CART ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE, CHARLIE?' The oh god jolted away. The man m

the brown coat shot backwards and splayed against the corridor wall as Susan

advanced.

'Comes Tuesdays,' he panted. "ere, what---

' AND WHERE DOES IT GO?'

'Dunno! Like I said, when he's--'

'Signed the GV19 for them it's you done and finished,' said Susan, in her normal

voice. 'Yes. You said. What's Violet's full name? She never mentioned it.'

we was all to get it in our heads to run on with young wimmin?
He gave Susan the stem look of one who, if it was not for the fact that
the
world needed him, would even now be tiring of painting naked young
ladies on
some tropical island somewhere.

'What happens to the teeth?' said Susan.

He blinked at her. A bully, thought Susan. A very small, weak, very dull
bully,
who doesn't manage any real bullying because there's hardly anyone
smaller and
weaker than him, so he just makes everyone's lives just that little bit
more
difficult ...

'What sort of question is that?' he managed, in the face of her stare.

'You never wondered?' said Susan, and added to herself, I didn't. Did
anyone?

'Well, 's not my job, I just-'

'Oh, yes. You said,' said Susan. 'Thank you. You've been very helpful.
Thank you
very much.'

The man stared at her, and then turned and ran down the stairs.

'Drat,' said Susan.

'That's a very unusual swearword,' said the oh god nervously.

'It's so easy,' said Susan. 'If I want to, I can find anybody. It's a family
trait.'

'Oh. Good.'

'No. Have you any idea how hard it is to be normal? The things you
have to
remember? How to go to sleep? How to forget things? What doorknobs
are for?'

Why ask him, she thought, as she looked at his shocked face. All that's
normal

Or him.

He sat on his stool as curled up on himself as a spider in a flame.

'I'd got a bit of a mess of beans cooking,' he mumbled, looking at his visitors

through filmy eyes.

'Good heavens, you can't eat beans at Hogswatch,' said the king, smiling

hugely. 'That's terribly unlucky, eating beans at Hogswatch. My word, yes!'

'Di'nt know that,' the old man said, looking down desperately at his lap.

'We've brought you this magnificent spread. Don't you think so?'

'I bet you're incredibly grateful for it, too,' said the page, sharply.

'Yes, well, o' course, it's very kind of you gennelmen,' said the old man, in a

voice the size of a mouse. He blinked, uncertain of what to do next.

'The turkey's hardly been touched, still plenty of meat on it,' said the king.

'And do have some

of this cracking good widgeon stuffed with swan's liver.'

'-only I'm partial to a bowl of beans and I've never been beholden to no one nor

nobody,' the old man said, still staring at his lap.

'Good heavens, man, you don't need to worry about that,' said the king heartily.

'It's Hogswatch! I was only just now looking out of the window and I saw you

plodding through the snow and I said to young Jermain here, I said,

'Who's that

chappie?" and he said, "Oh, he's some peasant fellow who lives up by the

forest," and I said, "Well, I couldn't eat another thing and it's Hogswatch, after all," and so we just bundled everything up and here we are!'

'And I expect you're pathetically thankful,' said the page. 'I expect we've

face.
'-well, I'm sure it's very kind of you fine gennelmen but I ain't sure I
knows
how to eat
swans and suchlike, but if you want a bit o' my beans you've only got to
say--'
'Let me make myself absolutely clear,' said the king sharply. 'This is
some
genuine Hogswatch charity, d'you understand? And we're going to sit
here and
watch the smile on your grubby but honest face, is that understood?'
'And what do you say to the good king?' the page prompted.
The peasant hung his head.
' 'nk you.'
'Right,' said the king, sitting back. 'Now, pick up your fork---'
The door burst open. An indistinct figure strode into the room, snow
swirling
around it in a cloud.
WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?
The page started to stand up, drawing his sword. He never worked out
how the
other figure could have got behind him, but there it was, pressing him
gently
down again.
'Hello, son, my name is Albert,' said a voice by his ear. 'Why don't you
put
that sword back very slowly? People might get hurt.'
A finger prodded the king, who had been too shocked to move.
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING, SIRE?
The king tried to focus on the figure. There was an impression of red
and white,
but black, too.

SAT. WHAT A GOOD KING HE
IS.

'Oh, no, he's going too far again-' muttered Albert under his breath. He pushed the page down again. "No, you stay still, sonny. Else you'll just be a paragraph.'

'Whatever it is, it's more than he's got!' snapped the king. 'And all we've had from him is ingratitude---'

YES, THAT DOES SPOIL IT, DOESN'T IT? Death leaned forward. GO AWAY.

To the king's own surprise his body took over and marched him out of the door.

Albert patted the page on the shoulder. 'And you can run along too,' he said.

'-I didn't mean to go upsetting anyone, it's just that I never asked no one for

nothing---' mumbled the old man, in a small humble world of his own, his hands tangling themselves together out of nervousness.

'Best if you leave this one to me, master, if you don't mind,' said Albert.

'I'll be back in just a tick.' Loose ends, he thought, that's my job. Tying up

loose ends. The master never thinks things through.

He caught up with the king outside.

'Ah, there you are, your sire,' he said. 'Just before you go, won't keep you a

minute, just a minor point---' Albert leaned close to the stunned monarch. 'If

anyone was thinking about making a mistake, you know, like maybe sending the

guards down here tomorrow, tipping the old man out of his hovel, chuckin' him in

reached into the sack.

Albert grabbed his arm before he could withdraw his hand.

'Mind taking a bit of advice, master? I was brung up in a place like this.'

DOES IT BRING TEARS TO YOUR EYES?

'A box of matches to me hand, more like. Listen

The old man was only dimly aware of some whispering. He sat hunched up, staring at nothing.

WELL, IF YOU ARE SURE ...

'Been there, done that, chewed the bones,' said Albert. 'Charity ain't giving

people what you wants to give, it's giving people what they need to get.'

VERY WELL.

Death reached into the sack again.

HAPPY HOGSWATCH. HO. HO. HO.

There was a string of sausages. There was a side of bacon. And a small tub of

salt pork. And a mass of chitterlings wrapped up in greased paper.

There was a

black pudding. There were several other tubs of disgusting yet savoury porkadjacent items highly prized in any pig-based economy. And, laid

on the

table with a soft thump, there was

'A pig's head,' breathed the old man. 'A whole one! Ain't had brawn in years!

And a basin of pig knuckles! And a bowl of pork dripping!'

HO. HO. HO.

'Amazing,' said Albert. 'How did you get the head's expression to look like the

king?'

I THINK THAT'S ACCIDENTAL.

Albert patted the old man on the back.

SEEING YOU.

'Ah,' said Albert glumly.

THEY DON'T NORMALLY LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING ME.

'Yes, I expect so.'

EXCEPT IN SPECIAL AND RATHER UNFORTUNATE
CIRCUMSTANCES.

'Right, right.'

AND THEY SELDOM LEAVE A GLASS OF SHERRY OUT.

'I expect they don't, no.'

I COULD GET INTO THE HABIT OF DOING THIS, IN FACT.

'But you won't need to, will you, master?' said Albert hurriedly, with the
horrible prospect of being a permanent Pixie Albert looming in his mind
again.

'Because we'll get the Hogfather back.. right? That's what you said we
were

going to do, right? And young Susan's probably bustling around ...

YES. OF COURSE.

'Not that you asked her to, of course.'

Albert's jittery ears didn't detect any enthusiasm.

Oh dear, he thought.

I HAVE ALWAYS CHOSEN THE PATH OF DUTY.

'Right, master.'

The sleigh sped on.

I AM THOROUGHLY IN CONTROL AND FIRM OF PURPOSE.

'No problem there, then, master.' said Albert.

NO NEED TO WORRY AT ALL.

'Pleased to hear it, master.'

IF I HAD A FIRST NAME, 'DUTY' WOULD BE MY MIDDLE NAME.

'Good.'

NEVERTHELESS ...

Albert strained his ears and thought he heard, just on the edge of
hearing, a
voice whisper sadly.

Someone's going to have to be sick after all that,' he said, raising his voice

above the hubbub. 'I hope you realize that. You think it's clever, do you, reducing yourself to the level of the beasts of the field ... er ... or the level they'd sink to if they drank, I mean.'

They moved away, leaving one mug of beer by the barrel.

The oh god glanced at it, and picked it up and sniffed at it.

'Ugh.'

Susan stepped out of the wall.

'He hasn't been back for- What're you doing?'

'I thought I'd see what beer tastes like,' said the oh god guiltily.

'You don't know what beer tastes like?'

'Not on the way down, no. It's ... quite different by the time it gets to me,' he said sourly. He took another sip, and then a longer one. 'I can't see what

all the fuss is about,' he added.

He tipped up the empty pot.

'I suppose it comes out of this tap here,' he said. 'You know, for once in my

existence I'd like to get drunk.'

'Aren't you always?' said Susan, who wasn't really paying attention.

'No. I've always been drunk. I'm sure I explained.'

'He's been gone a couple of days,' said Susan. 'That's odd. And he didn't say

where he was going. The last night he was here was the night he was on Violet's

list. But he paid for his room for the week, and I've got the number.'

'And the key?' said the oh god.

'What a strange idea.'

Mr Lilywhite's room was small. That wasn't surprising. What was surprising was

how neat it was, how carefully the little bed had been made, how well the floor

Banjo's background would buy.

It turned out to be a book of six pages, one of those that were supposed to

enthral children with the magic of the printed word by pointing out that they

could See Spot Run.

There were no more than ten words on each page and yet, carefully placed between

pages four and five, was a bookmark.

She turned back to the cover. The book was called Happy Tales. There was a blue

sky and trees and a couple of impossibly pink children playing with a jollylooking dog.

It looked as though it had been read frequently, if slowly.

And that was it.

A dead end.

No. Perhaps not ...

On the floor by the bed, as if it had been accidentally dropped, was a small,

silvery halfdollar piece.

Susan picked it up and tossed it idly. She looked the oh god up and down. He was

swilling a mouthful of beer from cheek to cheek and looking thoughtfully at the

ceiling.

She wondered about his likelihood of survival incarnate in Ankh-Morpork at

Hogswatch, especially if the cure wore off. After all, the only purpose of his

existence was to have a headache and throw up. There were not a great many

postgraduate jobs for which these were the main qualifications.

'Tell me,' she said. 'Have you ever ridden a horse?'

every life

...

The squeaking came round the corner.

It was issuing from what looked like a very rickety edifice, several storeys

high. It looked rather like a siege tower, open at the sides. At the base, between the wheels, was a pair of geared treadles which moved the whole thing.

Susan dung to the railing of the topmost platform.

'Can't you hurry up?' she said. 'We're only at the Bi's at the moment.'

'I've been pedalling for ages!' panted the oh god.

'Well, "A" is a very popular letter.'

Susan stared up at the shelves. A was for Anon, among other things. All those

people who, for one reason or another, never officially got a name.

They tended to be short books.

'M ... Bo ... Bod ... Bog ... turn left . .

The library tower squeaked ponderously around the next corner.

'Ah, Bo ... blast, the Bots are at least twenty shelves up.'

'Oh, how nice,' said the oh god grimly.

He heaved on the lever that moved the drive chain from one sprocket to another,

and started to pedal again.

Very ponderously, the creaking tower began to telescope upwards.

'Right, we're there,' Susan shouted down, after a few minutes of slow rise.

'Here's ... let's see ... Aabana Bottler. . .'

'I expect Violet will be a lot further,' said the oh god, trying out irony.

'Onwards!'

Swaying a little, the tower headed down the Bs until.

'Stop!'

It rocked as the oh god kicked the brake block against a wheel.

'I think this is her,' said a voice from above. 'OK, you can lower away.'

a tooth fairy?

'Someone with very sensitive teeth?'

Susan flicked back a few pages. 'It's all ... hoods over her head and people

carrying her and so on. But . . .' she turned a page '. . . it says the last job

she did was on Banjo and ... yes, she got the tooth ... and then she felt as

though someone was behind her and ... there's a ride on a cart ... and the

hood's come off ... and there's a causeway ... and. . .'

'All that's in a book?'

'The autobiography. Everyone has one. It writes down your life as you go along.'

'I've got one?'

'I expect so.'

'Oh, dear. "Got up, was sick, wanted to die." Not a gripping read, really.'

Susan turned the page.

'A tower,' she said. 'She's in a tower. From

what she saw, it was tall and white inside ... but not outside? It didn't look

real. There were apple trees around it, but the trees, the trees didn't look right. And a river, but that wasn't right either. There were goldfish in it ... but they were on top of the water.'

'Ah. Pollution,' said the oh god.

'I don't think so. It says here she saw them swimming!

'Swimming on top of the water?'

'That's how she thinks she saw it.'

'Really? You don't think she'd been eating any of that mouldy cheese, do you?'

'And there was blue sky but ... she must have got this wrong ... it says here

there was only blue sky above . . .'

behind things whenever she tried to concentrate on it.

'I've seen this place,' she said, tapping the page. 'If only she'd looked harder

at the trees ... She says they've got brown trunks and green leaves and it says here she thought they were odd. And ... She concentrated on the next

paragraph. 'Flowers. Growing in the grass. With big round petals.'

She stared unseeing at the oh god again.

'This isn't a proper landscape,' she said.

'It doesn't sound too unreal to me,' said the oh god. 'Sky. Trees. Flowers. Dead

fish.'

'Brown tree trunks? Really they're mostly a sort of greyish mossy colour. You

only ever see brown tree trunks in one place,' said Susan. 'And it's the same

place where the sky is only ever overhead. The blue never comes down to the

ground.'

She looked up. At the far end of the corridor was one of the very tall, very

thin windows. It looked out on to the black gardens. Black bushes, black grass,

black trees. Skeletal fish cruising 'm the black waters of a pool, under black

water lilies.

There was colour, in a sense, but it was the kind of colour you'd get if you

could shine a beam of black through a prism. There were hints of tints, here and

there a black you might persuade yourself was a very deep purple or a midnight

with

flowers.

People like Death lived in the human imagination, and got their shape there,

too. He wasn't the only one ...

... but he didn't like the script, did he? He'd started to take an interest in people. Was that a thought, or just a memory of something that hadn't happened

yet?

The oh god followed her gaze.

'Can we go after her?' said the oh god. 'I say we, I think I've just got drafted

in because I was in the wrong place.'

'She's alive. That means she is mortal,' said Susan. 'That means I can find her,

too.' She turned and started to walk out of the library.

'If she says the sky is just blue overhead, what's between it and the horizon?'

said the oh god, running to keep up.

'You don't have to come,' said Susan. 'It's not your problem.'

'Yes, but given that my problem is that my whole purpose in life is to feel rotten, anything's an improvement.'

'It could be dangerous. I don't think she's there of her own free will.

Would

you be any good in a fight?'

'Yes. I could be sick on people.'

It was a shack, somewhere out on the outskirts of the Plains town of Scrote.

Scrote had a lot of outskirts, spread so widely - a busted cart here, a dead dog

there that often people went through it without even knowing it was there, and

THIS IS REALLY, REALLY STUPID.

'I think the tradition got started when everyone had them big chimneys, master.'

This voice sounded as though it was coming from someone standing on the roof and shouting down the pipe.

INDEED? IT'S ONLY A MERCY IT'S UNLIT.

There was some muffled scratching and banging, and then a thump from within the pot belly of the stove.
DAMN.

'What's up, master?'

THE DOOR HAS NO HANDLE ON THE INSIDE. I CALL THAT INCONSIDERATE.

There were some more bumps, and then a scrape as the stove lid was lifted up and pushed sideways. An arm came out and felt around the front of the stove until it found the handle.

It played with it for a while, but it was obvious that the hand did not belong to a person used to opening things.

In short, Death came out of the stove. Exactly how would be difficult to describe without folding the page. Time and space were, from Death's point of view, merely things that he'd heard described. When it came to Death, they

ticked the box marked Not Applicable. It might help to think of the universe as a rubber sheet, or perhaps not.

'Let us in, master,' a pitiful voice echoed down from the roof. 'It's brass monkeys out here.'

Death's head disappeared. Albert stamped his feet and watched his breath cloud in the air while he listened to the pathetic scrabbling on the other side of the door.

Death's head appeared again.

ER ...

'It's the latch, master,' said Albert wearily.

RIGHT. RIGHT.

'You put your thumb on it and push it down.'

RIGHT.

The head disappeared. Albert jumped up and down a bit, and waited.

The head appeared.

ER ... I WAS WITH YOU UP TO THE THUMB...

Albert sighed. 'And then you press down and pull, master.'

AH. RIGHT. GOT YOU.

The head disappeared.

Oh dear, thought Albert. He just can't get the hang of them, can he ... ?

The door jerked open. Death stood behind it, beaming proudly, as Albert staggered in, snow blowing in with him.

'Blimey, it's getting really parky,' said Albert. 'Any sherry?' he added hopefully.

IT APPEARS NOT.

Death looked at the sock hooked on to the side of the stove. It had a hole in it.

A letter, in erratic handwriting, was attached to it. Death picked it up.

THE BOY WANTS A PAIR OF TROUSERS THAT HE DOESN'T HAVE TO SHARE, A HUGE MEAT PIE,

A SUGAR MOUSE, 'A LOT OF TOYS' AND A PUPPY CALLED SCRUFF.

'Ah, sweet,' said Albert. 'I shall wipe away a tear, 'cos what he's gettin', see, is this little wooden toy and an apple.' He held them out.

YOU HAVE ME THERE.

'It's the hope that's important. Big part of belief, hope. Give people jam today and they'll just sit and eat it. jam tomorrow, now - that'll keep them going for ever.'

AND YOU MEAN THAT BECAUSE OF THIS THE POOR GET POOR THINGS AND THE RICH GET RICH THINGS?

' 's right,' said Albert. 'That's the meaning of Hogswatch.'
Death nearly wailed.

BUT I'M THE HOGFATHER! He looked embarrassed. AT THE MOMENT, I MEAN.

'Makes no difference,' said Albert, shrugging. 'I remember when I was a nipper, one Hogswatch I had my heart set on this huge model horse they had in the shop .

. .' His face creased for a moment in a grim smile of recollection. 'I remember

I spent hours one day, cold as charity the weather was, I spent hours with my nose pressed up against the window . . . until they heard me callin', and unfroze me. I saw them take it out of the window, someone was in there buying

it, and, y'know, just for a second I thought it really was going to be for me ... Oh. I dreamed of that toy horse. It were red and white with a real saddle and everything. And rockers. I'd've killed for that horse.' He shrugged

again. 'Not a chance, of course, 'cos we didn't have a pot to piss in and we even `ad to spit on the bread to make it soft enough to eat---'

OH, I SEE. DO CARRY ON.

'O' course, I still hung up my stocking on Hogswatch Eve, and in the morning,

you know, you know what? Our dad had put in this little horse he'd carved his

very own self . . .'

AH, said Death. AND THAT WAS WORTH MORE THAN ALL THE EXPENSIVE TOY HORSES IN THE WORLD,EH?

Albert gave him a beady look. 'No!' he said. 'It weren't. All I could think of

was it wasnt the big horse in the window.'

Death looked shocked.

BUT HOW MUCH BETTER TO HAVE A TOY CARVED WITH---

'No. Only grown-ups think like that,' said

Albert. 'You're a selfish little bugger when you're seven. Anyway, Dad got

ratted after lunch and trod on it.'

LUNCH?

'All right, mebbe we had a bit of pork chipping tor the bread . . .'

EVEN SO, THE SPIRIT OF HOGSWATCH---

Albert sighed. 'If you like, master. If you like.'

Death looked perturbed.

BUT SUPPOSING THE HOGFATHER HAD BROUGHT YOU THE WONDERFUL HORSE---

'Oh, Dad would've flogged it for a couple of bottles,' said Albert.

BUT WE HAVE BEEN INTO HOUSES WHERE THE CHILDREN HAD MANY TOYS AND BROUGHT THEM

EVEN MORE TOYS, AND IN HOUSES LIKE THIS THE CHILDREN GET PRACTICALLY NOTHING.

'Huh, we'd have given anything to get practically nothing when I were a lad,'

said Albert.

they've got the moon and the stars and suchlike.

I'M SURE THEY WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO PRODUCE THE PAPERWORK.

'All I know is, if Dad'd caught us with a big bag of pricey toys wed just have

got a ding round the earhole for nicking 'em.'

IT IS ... UNFAIR.

'That's life, master.'

BUT I'M NOT.

'I meant this is how it's supposed to go, master,' said Albert.

NO. YOU MEAN THIS IS HOW IT GOES.

Albert leaned against the stove and rolled himself one of his horrible thin cigarettes. It was best to let the master work his own way through these things.

He got over them eventually. It was like that business with the violin. For three days there was nothing but twangs and broken strings, and then he'd never

touched the thing again. That was the trouble, really. Everything the master did

was a bit like that. When things got into his head you just had to wait until

they leaked out again.

He'd thought that Hogswatch was all ... plum pudding and brandy and ho ho ho and

he didn't have the kind of mind that could ignore all the other stuff. And so it

hurt him.

IT IS HOGSWATCH, said Death, AND PEOPLE DIE ON THE STREETS. PEOPLE FEAST BEHIND

LIGHTED WINDOWS AND OTHER PEOPLE HAVE NO HOMES. IS THIS FAIR?

'Well, of course, that's the big issue---' Albert began.

of the rich buggers is bastards? And being poor don't mean being
naughty,
neither. We was poor when I were a kid, but we was honest. Well, more
stupid
than honest, to tell the truth. But basically honest.

He didn't argue, though. The master wasn't in any mood for it. He
always did
what needed to be done.

'You did say we just had to do this so's people'd believe-' he began, and
then

stopped and started again. 'When it comes to fair, master, you yourself-'
I AM EVEN-HANDED TO RICH AND POOR ALIKE, snapped Death.

BUT THIS SHOULD NOT BE A
SAD TIME. THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY.

He wrapped his red robe
around him. AND OTHER THINGS ENDING IN OLLY, he added.

'There's no blade,' said the oh god. 'It's Just a sword hilt.'

Susan stepped out of the light and her wrist moved. A sparkling blue line
flashed in the air, for a moment outlining an edge too thin to be seen.

The oh god backed away.

'What's that?'

'Oh, it cuts tiny bits of the air in half. It can cut the soul away from the
body, so stand back, please.'

'Oh, I will, I will.'

Susan fished the black scabbard out of the umbrella stand.

Umbrella stand! It never rained here, but Death had an umbrella stand.

Practically no one else Susan knew had an umbrella stand. In any list of
useful
furniture, the one found at the bottom would be the umbrella stand.

Death lived in a black world, where nothing was alive and everything
was dark

and his great library only had dust and cobwebs because he'd created
them for

never quite

understood.

'That looks dangerous,' said the oh god.

Susan sheathed the sword.

'I hope so,' she said.

'Er ... where are we going? Exactly?'

'Somewhere under an overhead sky,' said Susan. 'And ... I've seen it before.

Recently. I know the place.'

They walked out to the stable yard. Binky was waiting.

'I said you don't have to come,' said Susan, grasping the saddle. 'I mean,

you're a ... an innocent bystander.'

'But I'm a god of hangovers who's been cured of hangovers,' said the oh god. 'I

haven't really got any function at all.'

He looked so forlorn when he said this that she relented.

'All right. Come on, then.'

She pulled him up behind her.

'Just hang on,' she said. And then she said, 'Hang on somewhere differently, I mean.'

'I'm sorry, was that a problem?' said the oh god, shifting his grip.

'It might take too long to explain and you probably don't know all the words.

Around the waist, please.'

Susan took out Violet's hourglass and held it up. There was a lot of sand left

to run, but she couldn't be certain that was a good sign.

All she could be certain of was that the horse of Death could go anywhere.

The sound of Hex's quill as it scabbled across the paper was like a frantic

It had never, ever occurred to him to contemplate hitting Hex with a mallet. But this was, in fact, what Ridcully was threatening to do.

What was impressive, and also more than a little worrying, was that Hex seemed to understand the concept.

'Right,' said Ridcully, putting the mallet aside. 'Let's have no more of this "Insufficient dates" business, shall we? There's boxes of the damn things back in the Great Hall. You can have the lot as far as I'm concerned---'

'It's data, not dates,' said Ponder helpfully.

'What? You mean like ... more than dates? Extra sticky?'

'No, no, data is Hex's word for ... well, facts,' said Ponder.

'Ridiculous way to behave,' said Ridcully brusquely. 'If he's stumped for an answer, why can't he write "You've got me there" or "Damned if I know," or "That's a bit of a puzzler and no mistake"? All this "Insufficient data" business is just pure contrariness, to my mind. It's just swank-' He turned back to Hex. 'Right, you. Hazard a guess.'

The quill started to write '+++ Insuff ' and then stopped. After quivering for a moment it went down a line and started again.

+++ This Is Just Calculating Aloud, You Understand +++

'Fair enough,' said Ridcully.

.+++ The Amount Of Belief In The World Must Be Subject To An Upper Limit +++

'What an odd question,' said the Dean.

'Sounds sensible,' said Ridcully. 'I suppose people just ... believe in stuff.'

... it follows that if a major focus of belief is removed, there will be
Spare
Belief ...
Ridcully stared at the words.
'You mean ... sloshing around?'
The big wheel with the ram skulls on it began to turn ponderously. The
scurrying
ants in the .glass tubes took on a new urgency.
'What's happening?' said Ridcully, in a loud whisper.
'I think Hex is looking up the word "sloshing",' said Ponder. 'It may be in
long-term storage.'
A large hourglass came down on the spring.
'What's that for?' said Ridcully.
'Er ... it shows Hex is working things out.'
'Oh. And that buzzing noise? Seems to be coming from the other side of
the
wall.'
Ponder coughed.
'That is the long-term storage, Archchancellor.'
'And how does that work?'
'Er ... well, if you think of memory as a series of little shelves or, or, or
holes, Archchancellor, in which you can put things, well, we found a way
of
making a sort of memory which, er, interfaces neatly with the ants, in
fact, but
more importantly can expand its size depending on how much we give it
to
remember and, er, is possibly a bit slow but----'
'It's a very loud buzzing,' said the Dean. 'Is it going wrong.'
'No, that shows it's working,' said Ponder. 'It's, er, beehives.'
He coughed.
'Different types of pollen, different thicknesses of honey, placement of
the

was jerked

in and out of its inkwell.

+++ Yes. Sloshing Around. Accreting +++

'That means forming around new centres, Archchancellor,' said Ponder helpfully.

'I know that,' said Ridcully. 'Blast. Remember when we had all that life force

all over the place? A man couldn't call his trousers his own! So ... there's spare belief sloshing around, thank you, and these little devils are taking advantage of it? 'Coming back? Household gods?'

+++ This Is Possible +++

'All right, then, so what are people not believing in all of a sudden?'

+++ Out Of Cheese Error +++ MELON MELON MELON +++ Redo From Start +++

'Thank you. A simple "I don't know" would have been sufficient,' said Ridcully, sitting back.

'One of the major gods?' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

'Hah, we'd soon know about it if one of those vanished.'

'It's Hogswatch,' said the Dean. 'I suppose the Hogfather is around, is he?'

'You believe in him?' said Ridcully.

'Well, he's for kids, isn't he?' said the Dean. 'But I'm sure they all believe in him. I certainly did. It wouldn't be Hogswatch when I was a kid without

a

pillowcase hanging by the fire--.'

'A pillowcase?' said the Senior Wrangler, sharply.

'Well, you can't get much in a stocking,' said the Dean.

'Yes, but a whole pillowcase?' the Senior Wrangler insisted.

'Yes. What of it?'

'Is it just me, or is that a rather greedy and selfish way to behave? In my family we just hung up very small socks,' said the Senior Wrangler. 'A sugar

were the
stuck-up sort that didn't even open their presents until after Hogswatch
dinner,
eh? One of them with a big snooty Hogswatch tree in the hall?'
'What if---' Ridcully began, but he was too late.
'Well?' said the Dean. 'Of course we waited until after lunch---'
'You know, it really used to wind me right up, people with big snooty
Hogswatch
trees. And I just bet you had one of those swanky fancy nutcrackers like
a big
thumbscrew,' said the Senior Wrangler. 'Some people had to make do
with the coal
hammer out of the outhouse, of course. And had dinner in the middle of
the day
instead of lah-di-dah posh dinner in the evening.'
'I can't help it if my family had money,' said the Dean, and that might
have
defused things a bit had he not added, 'and standards.'
'And big pillowcases!' shouted the Senior Wrangler, bouncing up and
down in
rage. 'And I bet you bought your holly, eh?'
The Dean raised his eyebrows. 'Of course! We didn't go creeping
around the
country pinching it out of other people's hedges, like some people did,'
he
snapped.
'That's traditional! That's part of the fun!'
'Celebrating Hogswatch with stolen greenery?'
Ridcully put his hand over his eyes.
The word for this, he had heard, was 'cabin fever'. When people had
been cooped
up for too long in the dark days of the winter, they always tended to get
on one

silly arguments, all night?

'Oh, yes it is,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies glumly. 'It's exactly the time for silly arguments. In our family we were lucky to get through dinner

without a reprise of What A Shame Henry Didn't Go Into Business With Our Ron. Or

Why Hasn't Anyone Taught Those Kids To Use A Knife? That was another favourite.'

'And the sulks,' said Ponder Stibbons.

'Oh, the sulks,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. 'Not a proper Hogswatch

without everyone sitting staring at different walls.'

'The games were worse,' said Ponder.

'Worse than the kids hitting one another with their toys, do you think? Not a

proper Hogswatch afternoon without wheels and bits of broken dolly everywhere

and everyone whining. Assault and battery included.'

'We had a game called Hunt the Slipper,' said Ponder. 'Someone hid a slipper.

And then we had to find it. And then we had a row.'

'It's not really bad,' said the Lecturer in Recent

Runes. 'I mean, not proper Hogswatch bad, unless everyone's wearing a paper hat.

There's always that bit, isn't there, when someone's horrible great-aunt puts on

a paper hat and smirks at everyone because she's being so bohemian.'

'I'd forgotten about the paper hats,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. 'Oh,

dear.'

'And then later on someone'll suggest a board game,' said Ponder.

'That's right. Where no one exactly remembers all the rules.'

'Which doesn't stop someone suggesting that you play for pennies.'

seen in all that paper, now pregnant with possibilities ... and then you open them and basically the wrapping paper was more interesting and you have to say "How thoughtful, that will come in handy!" It's not better to give than to receive, in my opinion, it's just less embarrassing.'

'I've worked out,' said the Senior Wrangler, 'that over the years I have been a net exporter of Hogswatch presents--'

'Oh, everyone is,' said the Chair. 'You spend a fortune on other people and what you get when all the paper is cleared away is one slipper that's the wrong colour and a book about earwax.'

Ridcully sat in horrified amazement. He'd always enjoyed Hogswatch, every bit of it. He'd enjoyed seeing ardent relatives, he'd enjoyed the food, he'd been good at games like Chase My Neighbour Up The Passage and Hooray Jolly Tinker. He was always the first to don a paper hat. He felt that paper hats lent a special festive air to the occasion. And he always very carefully read the messages on Hogswatch cards and found time for a few kind thoughts about the sender.

Listening to his wizards was like watching someone kick apart a doll's house.

'At least the Hogswatch cracker mottoes are fun...?' he ventured. They all turned to look at him, and then turned away again.

'If you have the sense of humour of a wire coathanger,' said the Senior Wrangler.

'Oh dear,' said Ridcully. 'Then perhaps there isn't a Hogfather if all you chaps

and we were getting on her nerves,' said the Senior Wrangler. 'She'd say "I'll call the Cheerful Fairy if you're. . ." ' He stopped, looking guilty.

The Archchancellor held a hand to his ear in a theatrical gesture denoting

'Hush. What was that I heard?'

'Someone tinkled,' he said. 'Thank you, Senior Wrangler.'

'Oh no,' the Senior Wrangler moaned. 'No, no, no!'

They listened for a moment.

'We might have got away with it,' said Ponder. 'I didn't hear anything - . . .'

'Yes, but you can just imagine her, can't you?' said the Dean. 'The moment you said it, I had this picture in my mind. She's going to have a whole bag of word games, for one thing. Or she'll suggest we go outdoors for our health.'

The wizards shuddered. They weren't against the outdoors, it was simply their place in it they objected to.

'Cheerfulness has always got me down,' said the Dean.

'Welt if some wretched little ball of cheerfulness turns up I shan't have it for one,' said the Senior Wrangler, folding his arms. 'I've put up with monsters and trolls and big green things with teeth, so I'm not sitting still for any kind of--'

'Hello!! Hello !!'

The voice was the kind of voice that reads suitable stories to children. Every vowel was beautifully rounded. And they could hear the extra exclamation marks, born of a sort of desperate despairing jollity, slot into place. They turned.

The Cheerful Fairy was quite short and plump in a tweed skirt and shoes so

hands.
The tiny gauzy wings just visible on her back were probably just for show, but the wizards kept on staring at her shoulder.
'Hello--' she said again, but a lot more uncertainly. She gave them a suspicious look. 'You're rather big boys,' she said, as if they'd become so in order to spite her. She blinked. 'It's my job to chase those blues away,' she added, apparently following a memorized script. Then she seemed to rally a bit and went on. 'So chins up, everyone, and lets see a lot of bright shining faces!!'
Her gaze met that of the Senior Wrangler, who had probably never had a bright shining face in his entire life. He specialized in dull, sullen ones. The one he was wearing now would have won prizes.
'Excuse me, madam,' said Ridcully. 'But is that a chicken on your shoulder?'
'It's, er, its, er, it's the Blue Bird of Happiness,' said the Cheerful Fairy.
Her voice now had the slightly shaking tone of someone who doesn't quite believe what she has just said but is going to go on saying it anyway, just in case saying it will eventually make it true.
'I beg your pardon, but it is a chicken. A live chicken,' said Ridcully. 'It just went cluck.'
'It is blue,' she said hopelessly.
'Well, that at least is true,' Ridcully conceded, as kindly as he could manage.

Cheerful.

'Charades?' said the Cheerful Fairy. 'Or perhaps you've been playing them

already? How about a sing-song? Who knows "Row Row Row Your Boat"?'

Her bright little smile hit the group scowl of the assembled wizards. 'We don't

want to be Mr Grumpy, do we?' she added hopefully.

'Yes,' said the Senior Wrangler.

The Cheerful Fairy sagged, and then patted frantically at her shapeless sleeves

until she tugged out a balled-up handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes.

'It's all going wrong again, isn't it?' she said, her chin trembling. 'No one ever wants to be cheerful these days, and I really do try. I've made a Joke Book

and I've got three boxes of clothes for charades and ... and ... and whenever I

try to cheer people up they all look embarrassed ... and really I do make an

effort . .

She blew her nose loudly.

Even the Senior Wrangler had the grace to look embarrassed.

'Er . . .' he began.

'Would it hurt anyone just occasionally to try to be a little bit cheerful?'

said the Cheerful Fairy.

'Er ... in what way?' said the Senior Wrangler, feeling wretched.

'Well, there's so many nice things to be cheerful about,' said the Cheerful

Fairy, blowing her nose again.

'Er ... raindrops and sunsets and that sort of thing?' said the Senior Wrangler,

managing some sarcasm, but they could tell his heart wasn't in it. 'Er, would

Yes, but not tonight, sir,' said Ponder. The light was out delivering.
'No telling where he'll be, then,' said Ridcully. 'Blast.'
'Of course, he might not have come here yet,' said Ponder.
'Why should he come here?' said Ridcully.
The Librarian pulled the blankets over himself and curled up.

As an orang-utan he hankered for the warmth of the rainforest. The problem was that he'd never even seen a rainforest, having been turned into an orang-utan

when he was already a fully grown human. Something in his bones knew about it, though, and didn't like the cold of winter at all. But he was also a librarian

in those same bones and he flatly refused to allow fires to be lit in the library. As a result, pillows and blankets went missing everywhere else in the University and ended up in a sort of cocoon

in the reference section, in which the ape lurked during the worst of the winter.

He turned over and wrapped himself in the Bursar's curtains.

There was a creaking outside his nest, and some whispering.

'No, don't fight the lamp.'

'I wondered why I hadn't seen him all evening.'

'Oh, he goes to bed early on Hogswatch Eve, sir. Here we are . . .'

There was some rustling.

'We're in luck. It hasn't been filled,' said Ponder. 'Looks like he's used one

of the Bursar's.'

'He puts it up every year?'

'Apparently.'

'But it's not as though he's a child. A certain child-like simplicity, perhaps.'

'It might be different for orang-utans, Archchancellor.'

not. There was a damp gurgling noise in the darkness.

'I think that was supposed to be for the Hogfather, sir.'

'And the banana?'

'I imagine that's been left out for the pigs, sir.'

'Pigs?'

'Oh, you know, sir. Tusker and Snouter and Gouger and Rooter. I mean,' Ponder

stopped, conscious that a grown man shouldn't be able to remember this sort of

thing, 'that's what children believe.'

'Bananas for pigs? That's not traditional, is it? I'd have thought acorns, perhaps. Or apples or swedes.'

'Yes, sir, but the Librarian likes bananas, sir.'

'Very nourishin' fruit, Mr Stibbons.'

'Yes, sir. Although, funnily enough it's not actually a fruit, sir.'

'Really?'

'Yes, sir. Botanically, it's a type of fish, sir. According to my theory it's cladistically associated with the Krullian pipefish, sir, which of course is also yellow and goes around in bunches or shoals.'

'And lives in trees?'

'Well, not usually, sir. The banana is obviously exploiting a new niche.'

'Good heavens, really? It's a funny thing, but I've never much liked bananas and

I've always been a bit suspicious of fish, too. That'd explain it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do they attack swimmers?'

'Not that I've heard, sir. Of course, they may be clever enough to only attack

swimmers who're far from land.'

'What, you mean sort of... high up? In the trees, as it were?'

'Possibly, sir.'

'Cunning, eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

turn
your back for a moment and they may well organize a Maypole dance
and, frankly,

there's no option then but to try and make it to the treeline.

The singers were halfway down Park Lane now, and halfway through
'The Red Rosy

Hen'

in marvellous harmony.[19] Their collecting tins were already full of
donations

for the poor of the city, or at least those sections of the poor who in Mrs
Huggs' opinion were suitably picturesque and not too smelly and could
be relied

upon to say thank you. People had come to their doors to listen. Orange
light

spilled on to the snow. Candle lanterns glowed among the tumbling
flakes. If you

could have taken the lid off the scene, there would have been
chocolates inside.

Or at least an interesting biscuit assortment.

Mrs Huggs had heard that wassailing was an ardent ritual, and you
didn't need

anyone to tell you what that meant, but she felt she'd carefully removed
all

those elements that would affront the refined ear.

And it was only gradually that the singers became aware of the discord.

Around the corner, slipping and sliding on the ice, came another band of
singers.

Some people march to a different drummer. The drummer in question
here must have

been trained elsewhere, possibly by a different species on another
planet.

In front of the group was a legless man on a small wheeled trolley, who
was

although he
never seemed to understand why, or why he was always surrounded by
people who
seemed to see ducks where no ducks could be. And finally, being towed
along by a
small grey dog on a string, was Foul Ole Ron, generally regarded in
AnkhMorpork
as the deranged beggars' deranged beggar. He was probably incapable
of singing,
but at least he was attempting to swear in time to the beat, or beats.
The wassailers stopped and watched them in horror.
Neither party noticed, as the beggars oozed and ambled up the street,
that
little smears of black and grey were spiralling out of drains and
squeezing out
from under tiles and buzzing off into the night. People have always had
the urge
to sing and clang things at the dark stub of the year, when all sorts of
psychic
nastiness has taken advantage of the long grey days and the deep
shadows to lurk
and breed. Lately people had
taken to singing harmoniously, which rather lost the effect. Those who
really
understood just clanged something and shouted.
The beggars were not in fact this well versed in folkloric practice. They
were
just making a din in the wellfounded hope that people would give them
money to
stop.
It was just possible to make out a consensus song in there somewhere.
'Hogswatch is coming,
The pig is getting fat,

to a more salubrious location. Goodwill to all men was a phrase coined by someone who

hadn't met Foul Ole Ron.

The beggars stopped singing, except for Arnold Sideways, who tended to live in

his own small world.

'-nobody knows how good we can live, on boots three times a day...'

Then the change in the air penetrated even his consciousness.

Snow thumped off the trees as a contrary wind brushed them. There was a whirl of

flakes and it was just possible, since the beggars did not always have their

mental compasses pointing due Real, that they heard a brief snatch of conversation.

'It just ain't that simple, master, that's all I'm saying-'

IT IS BETTER TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE, ALBERT.

'No, master, it's just a lot more expensive. You can't just go around-'

Things rained down on the snow.

The beggars looked at them. Arnold Sideways carefully picked up a sugar pig and

bit its nose off. Foul Ole Ron peered suspiciously into a cracker that had bounced off his hat, and then shook it against his ear.

The Duck Man opened a bag of sweets.

'Ah, humbugs?' he said.

Coffin Henry unlooped a string of sausages from around his neck.

'Buggrit?' said Foul Ole Ron.

'It's a cracker,' said the dog, scratching its ear. 'You pull it.'

Ron waved the cracker aimlessly by one end.

'Oh, give it here,' said the dog, and gripped the other end in its teeth.

'My word,' said the Duck Man, fishing in a snowdrift. 'Here's a whole roast pig!

And a big dish of roast potatoes, miraculously uncracked!

Ron's

thinkingbrain dog growl.

'No, no, no, you put the hat on your head and you read the hum'rous mottar.'

'Millennium hand and shrimp?' said Ron, passing the scrap of paper to the Duck

Man. The Duck Man was regarded as the intellectual of the group.

He peered at the motto.

'Ah, yes, let's see now... It says "'Help Help Help Ive Fallen in the Crakker

Machine I Cant Keep Runin on this Roller Please Get me Ou-".' He turned the

paper over a few times. 'That appears to be it, except for the stains.'

'Always the same ole mottars,' said the dog. 'Someone slap Ron on the back, will

you? If he laughs any more he'll - oh, he has. Oh well, nothing new about that.'

The beggars spent a few more minutes picking up hams, jars and bottles that had settled on the snow. They packed them around

Arnold on his trolley and set off down the street.

'How come we got all this?'

' 's Hogswatch, right?'

'Yeah, but who hung up their stocking?'

'I don't think we've got any, have we?'

'I hung up an old boot.'

'Does that count?'

'Dunno. Ron ate it.'

I'm waiting for the Hogfather, thought Ponder Stibbons. I'm in the dark waiting

for the Hogfather. Me. A believer in Natural Philosophy. I can find the square

root of 27.4 in my head.[20] I shouldn't be doing this.

small man, perhaps?

'I don't believe so.'

'Oh, it's all right. I've found a penknife.'

After a while Ridcully heard a faint scratching noise in the dark.

'How do you spell "electricity", sir?'

Ridcully thought for a while. 'You know, I don't think I ever do.'

There was silence again, and then a clang. The Librarian grunted in his sleep.

'What are you doing?'

'I just knocked over the coal shovel.'

'Why are you feeling around on the mantelpiece?'

'Oh, just... you know, just... just looking. A little... experiment. After all, you never know.'

'You never know what?'

'Just... never know, you know.'

'Sometimes you know,' said Ridcully. 'I think I know quite a lot that I didn't

used to know. It's amazing what you do end up knowing, I sometimes think. I

often wonder what new stuff I'll know.'

'Well, you never know.'

'That's a fact.'

High over the city Albert turned to Death, who seemed to be trying to avoid his gaze.

'You didn't get that stuff out of the sack! Not cigars and peaches in brandy and

grub with fancy foreign names!

YES, IT CAME OUT OF THE SACK.

Albert gave him a suspicious look.

'But you put it in the sack in the first place, didn't you?'

NO.

'You did, didn't you?' Albert stated.

whole roast pig does not, in my experience, just lie around.

NO ONE SEEMED TO BE USING THEM, ALBERT.

'Couple of chimneys ago we were over that big posh restaurant...'

REALLY? I DON'T REMEMBER.

'And it seemed to me you were down there a bit longer than usual, if you don't

mind me saying so.'

REALLY.

'How exactly were they just inverted comma lying around inverted comma?'

JUST... LYING AROUND. YOU KNOW. RECUMBENT.

'In a kitchen?'

THERE WAS A CERTAIN CULINARINESS ABOUT THE PLACE, I RECALL.

Albert pointed a trembling finger.

'You nicked someone's Hogswatch dinner, master!'

IT'S GOING TO BE EATEN, said Death defensively. ANYWAY, YOU THOUGHT IT WAS A

GOOD IDEA WHEN I SHOWED THAT KING THE DOOR.

'Yeah, well, that was a bit different,' said Albert, lowering his voice. 'But, I

mean, the Hogfather doesn't drop down the chimney and pinch people's grub!'

THE BEGGARS WILL ENJOY IT, ALBERT.

'Well, yes, but-'

IT WASN'T STEALING. IT WAS JUST... REDISTRIBUTION. IT WILL BE A GOOD DEED IN A

NAUGHTY WORLD.

'No, it won't!'

THEN IT WILL BE A NAUGHTY DEED IN A NAUGHTY WORLD AND WILL PASS COMPLETELY UNNOTICED.

On, the, said the oh god weakly.

'What?' said Susan.

'Try shutting your eyes--'

Susan shut her eyes. Then she reached up to touch her face.

'I'm still seeing. .

'I thought it was just me. It's usually just me.' The swirls vanished.

There was greenery below.

And that was odd. It was greenery. Susan had flown a few times over countryside,

even swamps and jungles, and there had never been a green as green as this. If

green could be a primary colour, this was it.

And that wiggly thing

'That's not a river!' she said.

'Isn't it?'

'It's blue!'

The oh god risked a look down.

'Water's blue,' he said.

'Of course it's not!'

'Grass is green, water's blue... I can remember that. It's some of the stuff I

just know.'

'Well, in a way...!' Susan hesitated. Everyone knew grass was green and water was

blue. Quite

often it wasn't true, but everyone knew it in the same way they knew the sky was

blue, too.

She made the mistake of looking up as she thought that.

There was the sky. It was, indeed, blue. And down there was the land. It was

green.

Blinky landed on the grass beside the river. Or at least on the green. It felt more like sponge, or moss. He nuzzled it.

Susan slid off, trying to keep her gaze low. That meant she was looking at the vivid blue of the water.

There were orange fish in it. They didn't look quite right, as if they'd been created by someone who really did think a fish was two curved lines and a dot and a triangular tail. They reminded her of the skeletal fish in Death's quiet pool. Fish that were... appropriate to their surroundings. And she could see them, even though the water was just a block of colour which part of her insisted ought to be opaque...

She knelt down and dipped her hand in. It felt like water, but what poured through her fingers was liquid blue.

And now she knew where she was. The last piece clicked into place and the knowledge bloomed inside her. She knew if she saw a house just how its windows would be placed, and just how the smoke would come out of the chimney.

There would almost certainly be apples on the trees. And they would be red, because everyone knew that apples were red. And the sun was yellow. And the sky was blue. And the grass was green.

But there was another world, called the real world by the people who believed in it, where the sky could be anything from off-white to sunset red to thunderstorm

I said this is a child's painting, said Susan.

'Oh, me... I think the wizards' potion is wearing off...'

'I've seen dozens of pictures of it,' said Susan,

ignoring him. 'You put the sky overhead because the sky's above you and when you

are a couple of feet high there's not a lot of sideways to the sky in any case.

And everyone tells you grass is green and water is blue. This is the landscape

you paint. Twyla paints like that. I painted like that. Grandfather saved some

of-'

She stopped.

'All children do it, anyway,' she muttered. 'Come on, let's find the house.'

'What house?' the oh god moaned. 'And can you speak quieter, please?'

'There'll be a house,' said Susan, standing up. 'There's always a house.'

With

four windows. And the smoke coming out of the chimney all curly like a spring.

Look, this is a place like gr--- Death's country. It's not really geography.'

The oh god walked over to the nearest tree and banged his head on it as if he

hoped it was going to hurt.

'Feels like geo'fy,' he muttered.

'But have you ever seen a tree like that? A big green blob on a brown stick? It

looks like a lollipop!' said Susan, pulling him along.

'Dunno. Firs' time I ever saw a tree. Arrgh. Somethin' dropped on m'head.' He

blinked owlshly at the ground. ' 's red.'

'It's an apple,' she said. She sighed. 'Everyone knows apples are red.'

There were no bushes. But there were flowers, each with a couple of green

I was born in a palace. Why?

'Praps it's all this house,' muttered the oh. god miserably.

'What? You really think so? Kids' paintings are all of this place? It's in our heads?'

'Don't ask me, I was just making conversation,' said the oh god.

Susan hesitated. The words What Now? loomed. Should she just go and knock?

And she realized that was normal thinking...

In the glittering, clattering, chattering atmosphere a head waiter was having a

difficult time. There were a lot of people in, and the staff should have been

fully stretched, putting bicarbonate of soda in the white wine to make very

expensive bubbles and cutting the vegetables very small to make them cost more.

Instead they were standing in a dejected group in the kitchen.

'Where did it all go?' screamed the manager. 'Someone's been through the cellar, too!'

'William said he felt a cold wind,' said the waiter. He'd been backed up against a hot plate, and now knew why it was called

a hot plate in a way he hadn't fully comprehended before.

'I'll give him a cold wind! Haven't we got anything?'

'There's odds and ends. .

'You don't mean odds and ends, you mean des curieux et des bouts,' corrected the manager.

'Yeah, right, yeah. And, er, and, er . . .

'There's nothing else?'

'Er... old boots. Muddy old boots.'

me, sir.

'Old boots muttered the manager. 'Old boots... old boots... Leather, are they?

Not clogs or rubber or anything?'

'Looks like... just boots. And lots of mud, sir.'

The manager took off his jacket. 'All right. Got any cream, have we? Onions?

Garlic? Butter? Some old beef bones? A bit of pastry?'

'Er, yes...'

The manager rubbed his hands together. 'Right,' he said, taking an apron off a

hook. 'You there, get some water boiling! Lots of water! And find a really large

hammer! And you, chop some onions! The rest of you, start sorting out the boots.

I want the tongues out and the soles off. We'll do them... let's see...

Mousse

de la Boue dans une Panier de la Pate de Chaussures...'

'Where're we going to get that from, sir?'

'Mud mousse in a basket of shoe pastry. Get the idea? It's not our fault if even

Quirmians don't understand restaurant Quirmian. It's not like lying, after all.'

'Well, it's a bit like-' the waiter began. He'd been cursed with honesty at an

early stage.

'Then there's Brodequin rôti Façon Ombres . .

The manager sighed at the head waiter's panicky expression. 'Soldier's boot done

in the Shades fashion,' he translated.

'Er... Shades fashion?'

'In mud. But if we cook the tongues separately we can put on Languette braisée,

and

the sauce right and you're threequarters there.'

'But it's all going to be old boots!' said the waiter.

'Prime aged beef,' the manager corrected him. 'It'll tenderize in no time.'

'Anyway... anyway... we haven't got any soup

'Mud. And a lot of onions.'

'There's the puddings---'

'Mud. Let's see if we can get it to caramelize, you never know.'

'I can't even find the coffee... Still, they probably won't last till the coffee...'

'Mud. Cafe de Terre,' said the manager firmly. 'Genuine ground coffee.'

'Oh, they'll spot that, sir!'

'They haven't up till now,' said the manager darkly.

'We'll never get away with it, sir. Never.'

In the country of the sky on top, Medium Dave Lilywhite hauled another bag of

money down the stairs.

'There must be thousands here,' said Chickenwire.

'Hundreds of thousands,' said Medium Dave.

'And what's all this stuff?' said Catseye, opening a box. ' 's just paper.'

He

tossed it aside.

Medium Dave sighed. He was all for class solidarity, but sometimes

Catseye got

on his nerves.

'They're tittle deeds,' he said. 'And they're better than money.'

Taper's better'n money?' said Catseye. 'Hah, if you can burn it you can't spend

it, that's what I say.'

'Hang on,' said Chickenwire. 'I know about them. The Tooth Fairy owns property?'

'Cot to raise money somehow,' said Medium Dave. 'All those half-dollars under

Right. That's right. You did, said Chickenwire gratefully.

'And there's such a lot,' said Teatime. He gave them a smile. Catseye coughed.

' 's got to be thousands,' said Medium Dave. 'And what about all these deeds and

so on? Look, this one's for that pipe shop in Honey Trap Lane!

In Ankh-Morpork! I buy my tobacco there! Old Thimble is always moaning about the rent, too!

'Ah. So you opened the strongboxes,' said Teatime pleasantly.

'Well... yes...'

'Fine. Fine,' said Teatime. 'I didn't ask you to, but... fine, fine. And how did

you think the Tooth Fairy made her money? Little gnomes in some mine somewhere?

Fairy gold? But that turns to trash in the morning!

He laughed. Chickenwire laughed. Even Medium Dave laughed. And then Teatime was

on him, pushing him irresistibly backwards until he hit the wall.

There was a blur and he tried to blink and his left eyelid was suddenly a rose

of pain.

Teatime's good eye was close to him, if you could call it good. The pupil was a

dot. Medium Dave could just make out his hand, right by Medium Dave's face.

It was holding a knife. The point of the blade could only be the merest fraction

of an inch from Medium Dave's right eye.

'I know people say I'd kill them as soon as look at them,' whispered Teatime.

'And in fact I'd much rather kill you than look at you, Mr Lilywhite. You stand

there, with the blank face he had while he waited for another order of a new
thought to turn up.
'If I thought you were feeling bad thoughts about me I would be so downcast,'
said Teatime. 'I do not have many friends left, Mr Medium Dave.'
He stood back and smiled happily. 'All friends now?' he said, as Medium
Dave
slumped down. 'Help him, Banjo.'
On cue, Banjo lumbered forward.
'Banjo has the heart of a little child,' said Teatime, the knife disappearing
somewhere about his clothing. 'I believe I have, too.'
The others were frozen in place. They hadn't moved since the attack.
Medium Dave
was a heavy-set man and Teatime was a matchstick model, but he'd
lifted Medium
Dave off his feet like a feather.
'As far as the money goes, in fact, I really have no use for it,' said
Teatime,
sitting down on a sack of silver. 'It is small change. You may share it out
amongst yourselves, and no doubt you'll squabble and doublecross one
another
more tiresomely. Oh, dear. It is so awful when friends fall out.'
He kicked the sack. It split. Silver and copper fell in an expensive trickle.
'And you'll swagger and spend it on drink and women,' he said, as they
watched
the coins roll into every corner of the room. 'The thought of investment
will
never cross your scarred little minds---'
There was a rumble from Banjo. Even Teatime waited patiently until the
huge man
had assembled a sentence. The result was:
'I gotta piggy bank.'

Don't be bloody stupid, we wouldn't get ten yards,' said Medium Dave,
still
clutching his face. 'Ugh, this hurts. I think he cut the eyelid... he cut the
damn eyelid...'
'Then let's just leave the stuff and go! I never joined up to ride on tigers!'
'And what'll you do when he comes after you?'
'Why'd he bother with the likes of us?'
'He's got time for his friends,' said Medium Dave bitterly. 'For gods'
sakes,
someone get me a clean rag or something...
'OK, but... but he can't look everywhere.'
Medium Dave shook his head. He'd been through AnkhMorpork's very
own university
of the streets and had graduated with his life and an intelligence made
all the
keener by constant friction. You only had to look into Teatime's
mismatched eyes
to know one thing, which was this: that if Teatime wanted to find you he
would
not look everywhere. He'd look in only one place, which would be the
place where
you were hiding.
'How come your brother likes him so much?'
Medium Dave grimaced. Banjo had always done what he was told,
simply because
Medium Dave had told him. Up to now, anyway.
It must have been that punch in the bar. Medium Dave didn't like to think
about
it. He'd always promised their mother that he'd look after Banjo,[21] and
Banjo
had gone back like a falling tree. And when Medium Dave had risen
from his seat

Fear, it's all your fault, Chickenwire went on.

'Oh, yeah? So it wasn't you who said, wow, ten thousand dollars, count me in?'

Chickenwire backed away. 'I didn't know there was going to be all this creepy

stuff! I want to go home!'

Medium Dave hesitated, despite his pain and rage. This wasn't normal talk for

Chickenwire, for all that he whined and grumbled. This was a strange place, no

lie about that, and all that business with the teeth had been very... odd, but

he'd been out with Chickenwire when jobs had gone wrong and both the Watch and

the Thieves' Guild had been after them and he'd been as cool as anyone. And if

the Guild had been the ones to catch them they'd have nailed their ears to their

ankles and thrown them in the river. In Medium Dave's book, which was a simple

book and largely written in mental crayon, things didn't get creepier than that.

'What's up with you?' he said. 'All of you you're acting like little kids!'

'Would he deliver to apes earlier than humans?'

'Interesting point, sir. Possibly you're referring to my theory that humans may

have in fact descended from apes, of course,' said Ponder. 'A bold hypothesis

which ought to sweep away the

ignorance of centuries if the grants committee

could just see their way clear to letting me hire a

boat and sail around to the islands of --- '

'I just thought he might deliver alphabetically,' said Ridcully.

YOU EXPECT TO COME DOWN

A CHIMNEY ON A NIGHT LIKE THIS, MAY I ASK?

'No, you're not!'

I AM. LOOK, I'VE GOT THE BEARD AND THE PILLOW AND EVERYTHING!

'You look extremely thin in the face!'

I'M... I... I'M NOT WELL. IT'S ALL... YES,

IT'S ALL THIS SHERRY. AND RUSHING AROUND. I AM A BIT ILL.

'Terminally, I should say.' Ridcully grabbed the beard. There was a twang as the string gave way.

'It's a false beard!'

NO IT'S NOT, said Death desperately.

'Here's the hooks for the ears, which must have given you a bit of trouble, I must say!'

Ridcully flourished the incriminating evidence.

'What were you doing coming down the chimney?' he continued. 'Not in marvellous taste, I think.'

Death waved a small grubby scrap of paper defensively.

OFFICIAL LETTER TO THE HOGFATHER. SAYS HERE... he began, and then looked at the

paper again. WELL, QUITE A LOT, IN FACT. IT'S A LONG LIST. LIBRARY STAMPS,

REFERENCE BOOKS, PENCILS, BANANAS...

'The Librarian asked the Hogfather for those things?' said Ridcully. 'Why?'

I DON'T KNOW, said Death. This was a diplomatic answer. He kept his finger over

a reference to the Archchancellor. The orang-utan for 'duck's bottom' was quite

an interesting squiggle.

Death looked down at the list and then back up at Ridcully.
GOOD? he said, in the hope that this was the right response.

Wizards know when they are going to die.[22] Ridcully had no such premonitions,

and to Ponder's horror prodded Death in the cushion.

'Why you?' he said. 'What's happened to the other fellow?'

I SUPPOSE I MUST TELL YOU.

In the house of Death, a whisper of shifting sand and the faintest chink of

moving glass, somewhere in the darkness of the floor...

And, in the dry shadows, the sharp smell of snow and a thud of hooves.

Sideney almost swallowed his tongue when Teatime appeared beside him.

'Are we making progress?'

'Gnk-'

'I'm sorry?' said Teatime.

Sideney recovered himself. 'Er... some,' he said. 'We think we've worked out...

er... one lock.'

Light gleamed off Teatime's eye.

'I believe there are seven of them?' said the Assassin.

'Yes, but... they're half magic and half real and half not there... I mean...

there's parts of them that don't exist all the time-'

Mr Brown, who had been working at one of the locks, laid down his pick.

' 't's no good, mister,' he said. 'Can't even get a purchase with a crowbar.

Maybe if I went back to the city and got a couple of dragons we could do something. You can melt through steel with them if you twist their necks right

and feed 'em carbon.'

'I was told you were the best locksmith in the city,' said Teatime.

Behind him, Banjo shifted position.

Mr Brown looked annoyed...

What about my money?

'Do I owe you any?'

'I came along with you. I don't see it's my fault that this is all magic business. I should get something.'

'Ah, yes, I see your point,' said Teatime. 'Of course, you should get what you deserve. Banjo?'

Banjo lumbered forward, and then stopped.

Mr Brown's hand had come out of the bag holding a crowbar.

'You must think I was born yesterday, you slimy little bugger,' he said. 'I know

your type. You think it's all some kind of game. You make little jokes to yourself and you think no one else notices and you think you're so smart. Well,

Mr Teacup, I'm leaving, right? Right now. With what's coming to me. And you

ain't stopping me. And Banjo certainly ain't. I knew old Ma Lilywhite back in

the good old days. You think you're nasty? You think you're mean? Ma Lilywhite'd

tear your ears off and spit 'em in your eye, you cocky little devil. And I worked with her, so you don't scare me and nor does little Banjo, poor sod that

he is.'

Mr Brown glared at each of them in turn, flourishing the crowbar. Sideney

covered in front of the doors.

He saw Teatime nod gracefully, as if the man had made a small speech of thanks.

'I appreciate your point of view,' said Teatime. 'And, I have to repeat, it's Teh-ah-tim-eh. Now, please, Banjo.'

Banjo loomed over Mr Brown, reached down and lifted him up by the crowbar so

All right, yes!

'D'you like falling down the stairs?'

Medium Dave held up his hands for quiet.

He glared at the gang.

'This place is getting to you, right? But we've all been in bad places before,

right?'

'Not this bad,' said Chickenwire. 'I've never been anywhere where it hurts to

look at the sky. It give me the creeps.'

'Chick's a little baby, nyer nyer nyer,' sang Careers.

They looked at him. He coughed nervously.

'Sorry... don't know why I said that. .

'If we stick together we'll be fine-'

'Teeny meeny minty me...' mumbled Catseye.

'What? What are you talking about?'

'Sorry... it just sort of slipped out...'

'What I'm trying to say,' said Medium Dave, 'is that if--'

'Peachy keeps making faces at me!'

'I didn't!'

'Liar, liar, pants on fire!'

Two things happened at this point. Medium Dave lost his temper, and Peachy

screamed.

A small wisp of smoke was rising from his trousers.

He hopped around, beating desperately at himself.

'Who did that? Who did that?'

'I didn't see anyone,' said Chickenwire. 'I mean, no one was near him.

Catseye

said "pants on fire" and next minute-'

'Now he's sucking his thumb!' Catseye jeered. Nyer nyer nyer! Crying for Mummy!

the
locksmith tumble past, moving quite fast and not at all neatly. A moment
later

his bag somersaulted around the curve of the stairs. It split as it
bounced and

there
was a jangle as tools and lockpicks bounced out and followed their late
owner.

He'd been moving quite fast. He'd probably roll all the way to the
bottom.

Medium Dave looked up. Two turns above him, on the opposite side of
the huge

shaft, Banjo was watching him.

Banjo didn't know right from wrong. He'd always left that sort of thing to
his

brother.

'Er... poor guy must've slipped,' Medium Dave mumbled.

'Oh, yeah... slipped,' said Peachy.

He looked up, too.

It was funny. He hadn't noticed them before. The white tower had
seemed to glow

from within. But now there were shadows, moving across the stone. In
the stone.

'What was that?' he said. 'That sound...'

'What sound?'

'It sounded... like knives scraping,' said Peachy. 'Really close.'

'There's only us here!' said Medium Dave. 'What're you afraid of? Attack
by

daisies? Come on... let's go and help him...'

She couldn't walk through the door. It simply resisted any such effort.
She

ended up merely bruised. So Susan turned the doorknob instead.

It was a large conical heap in the middle of the floor.

It was white. It glistened in the cool light that shone down from the mists.

'It's teeth,' she said.

'I think I'm going to throw up,' said the oh god miserably.

'There's nothing that scary about teeth,' said Susan. She didn't mean it.

The

heap was very horrible indeed.

'Did I say I was scared? I'm just hung over again... Oh, me...'

Susan advanced on the heap, moving warily.

They were small teeth. Children's teeth. Whoever had piled them up hadn't been

very careful about it, either. A few had been scattered across the floor.

She

knew because she trod on one, and the slippery little crunching sound made her

desperate not to tread on any more.

Whoever had piled them up had presumably been the one who'd drawn the chalk

marks around the obscene heap.

'There're so many,' whispered Bilious.

'At least twenty million, given the size of the

average milk tooth,' said Susan. She was shocked to find that it came almost

automatically.

'How can you possibly know that?'

'Volume of a cone,' said Susan. 'Pi times the square of the radius times the

height divided by three. I bet Miss Butts never thought it'd come in handy in a

place like this.'

'That's amazing. You did it in your head?'

'This isn't right,' said Susan quietly. 'I don't think this is what the Tooth

wanted all

the teeth in one place and had drawn a circle to show people where they had to

go.

There were a few symbols scrawled around the circle.

She had a good memory for small details. It was another family trait.

And a

small detail stirred in her memory like a sleepy bee.

'Oh, no,' she breathed. 'Surely no one would try to-'

Someone shouted, someone up in the whiteness.

A body rolled down the stairs nearest her. It

had been a skinny, middle-aged man. Technically it still was, but the long

spiral staircase had not been kind.

It tumbled across the white marble and slid to a boneless halt.

Then, as she hurried towards the body, it faded away, leaving nothing behind but

a smear of blood.

A jingle noise made her look back up the stairs. Spinning over and over, making

salmon leaps in the air, a crowbar bounded over the last dozen steps and landed

point first on a flagstone, staying upright and vibrating.

Chickenwire reached the top of the stairs, panting.

'There's people down there, Mister Teatime!' he wheezed. 'Dave and the others've

gone down to catch them, Mister Teatime!'

'Teh-ah-tim-eh,' said Teatime, without taking his eyes off the wizard.

'That's right, sir!'

'Well?'

Teatime. 'Just... do away with them.'

'Er... one of them's a girl, sir.'

Teatime still didn't look round. He waved a hand vaguely.

'Then do away with them politely.'

them had
creaked.
The other bit, the bit that hung around in dark places nearly at the top of
his
spinal column, said: But it's not one of them, and you know it, because
you know
which door it really is...
He hadn't heard that creak for thirty years.
He gave a little yelp and started to take the stairs four at a time.
In the hollows and corners, the shadows grew darker.
Susan ran up a flight of stairs, dragging the oh god behind her.
'Do you know what they've been doing?' she said. 'You know why
they've got all
those teeth in a circle? The power... oh my...'
'I'm not going to,' said the head waiter, firmly.
'Look, I'll buy you a better pair after Hogswatch-'
'There's two more Shoe Pastry, one for Purée de la Terre and three
more Tourte à
la Boue,' said a waiter, hurrying in.
'Mud pies!' moaned the waiter. 'I can't believe we're selling mud pies.
And now
you want my boots!'
'With cream and sugar, mind you. A real taste of AnkhMorpork. And we
can get at
least four helpings off those boots. Fair's fair. We're all in our socks--'
'Table seven says the steaks were lovely but a bit tough,' said a waiter,
rushing past.
'Right. Use a larger hammer next time and boil them for longer.' The
manager
turned back to the suffering head waiter. 'Look, Bill,' he said, taking him
by
the shoulder. 'This isn't food. No one expects it to be food. If people
wanted

And mud?' said the head waiter, gloomily.

'Isn't there an old proverb that says a man must eat a bushel of dirt before he dies?'

'Yes, but not all at once.'

'Bill?' said the manager, kindly, picking up a spatula.

'Yes, boss?'

'Get those damn boots off right now, will you?'

When Chickenwire reached the bottom of the tower he was trembling, and not just from the effort. He headed straight for the door until Medium Dave grabbed him.

'Let me out! It's after me!'

'Look at his face,' said Catseye. 'Looks like he's seen a ghost!'

'Yeah, well, it ain't a ghost,' muttered Chickenwire. 'It's worse'n a ghost-' Medium Dave slapped him across the face.

'Pull yourself together! Look around! Nothing's chasing you! Anyway, it's not as though we couldn't put up a fight, right?'

Terror had had time to drain away a little. Chickenwire looked back up the stairs. There was nothing there.

'Good,' said Medium Dave, watching his face. 'Now... What happened?'

Chickenwire looked at his feet.

'I thought it was the wardrobe,' he muttered. 'Go on, laugh...'

They didn't laugh.

'What wardrobe?' said Catseye.

'Oh, when I was a kid...!' Chickenwire waved his arms vaguely. 'We had this big ole wardrobe, if you must know. Oak. It had this... this...'

on the door there was this... sort of... face.' He looked at their faces, which were equally wooden. 'I mean, not an actual face, there was... all this...'

voice in a dungeon.

They looked at one another.

'What things?' said Medium Dave.

'I don't know! I always had my head under the pillow! Anyway, it's just something from when I was a kid, all right? Our dad got rid of it in the finish.

Burned it. And I watched.'

They mentally shook themselves, as people do when their minds emerge back into the light.

'It's like me and the dark,' said Catseye.

'Oh, don't you start,' said Medium Dave. 'Anyway, you ain't afraid of the dark.

You're famed for it. I been working with you in all kinds of cellars and stuff.

I mean, that's how you got your name. Catseye. Sees like a cat.'

'Yeah, well... you try an' make up for it, don't you?' said Catseye. "Cos when

you're grown you know it's just shadows and stuff.

Besides, it ain't like the dark we used to have in the cellar.'

'Oh, they had a special kind of a dark when you was a lad, did they?' said

Medium Dave. 'Not like the kind of dark you get these days, eh?'

Sarcasm didn't work.

'No,' said Catseye, simply. 'It wasn't. In our cellar, it wasn't.'

'Our mam used to wallop us if we went down to the cellar,' said Medium Dave.

'She had her still down there.'

'Yeah?' said Catseye, from somewhere far off. 'Well, our dad used to wallop us

if we tried to get out. Now shut up talking about it.'

They reached the bottom of the stairs.

There was an absence of anybody. And any body.

Why're we here?' said Peachy. He started, and looked behind him.

'Taking our money? After us putting up with him?'

'Yeah...' said Peachy distantly, trailing after the others. 'Er... did you hear

that noise just then?'

'What noise?'

'A sort of clipping, snipping... ?'

'No.'

'No.'

'No. You must have imagined it.'

Peachy nodded miserably.

As he walked up the stairs, little shadows raced through the stone and followed

his feet.

Susan darted off the stairs and dragged the oh god along a corridor lined with

white doors.

'I think they saw us,' she said. 'And if they're tooth fairies there's been a really stupid equal opportunities policy...'

She pushed open a door.

There were no windows to the room, but it was lit perfectly well by the walls

themselves. Down the middle of the room was something like a display case, its

lid gaping open. Bits of card littered the floor.

She reached down and picked one up and read: 'Thomas Ague, aged 4 and nearly

three quarters, 9 Castle View, Sto Lat'. The writing was in a meticulous rounded

script.

She crossed the passage to another room, where there was the same scene of

devastation.

Yes. Adults too, by now.

'And you... you could make them think things and do things?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

'You could get them to open Dad's wallet and post the contents to some address?'

'Well, I hadn't thought of that, but yes, I suppose you could...'

'Or go downstairs and smash all the bottles in the drinks cabinet and promise

never to take a drink when they grow up?' said the oh god hopefully.

'What are you talking about?'

'It's all right for you. You don't wake up every morning and see your whole life

flush before your eyes.

Medium Dave and Catseye ran down the passage and stopped where it forked.

'You go that way, I'll-

'Why don't we stick together?' said Catseye.

'What's got into everyone? I saw you bite the throats out of a couple guard dogs when we did that job in Quirm! Want me to

hold your hand? You check the doors down there, I'll check them along here.'

He walked off.

Catseye peered down the other passage.

There weren't many doors down there. It wasn't very long. And, as Teatime had

said, there was nothing dangerous here that they hadn't brought with them.

He heard voices coming from a doorway and sagged with relief.

He could deal with humans.

As he approached, a sound made him look round.

Shadows were racing down the passage behind him. They cascaded down the walls

And there was a pair of boots in the centre of the corridor.
She hadn't remembered any boots there before.

She sniffed. The air tasted of rats, and damp, and mould.

'Let's get out of here,' she said.

'How're we going to find this Violet in all these rooms?'

'I don't know. I should be able to... sense her, but I can't.' Susan peered around the end of the corridor. She could hear men shouting, some way off.

They slipped out on to the stairs again and managed another flight. There were more rooms here, and in each one a cabinet that had been broken open.

Shadows moved in the corners. The effect was as though some invisible light source was gently shifting.

'This reminds me a lot of your... um... of your grandfather's place,' said the

oh god.

'I know,' said Susan. 'There aren't any rules except the ones he makes up as he

goes along. I can't see him being very happy if someone got in and started

pulling the library apart.'

She stopped. When she spoke again her voice had a different tone.

'This is a children's place,' she said. 'The rules are what children believe.'

'Well, that's a relief.'

'You think so? Things aren't going to be right. In the Soul Cake Duck's country

ducks can lay

chocolate eggs, in the same way that Death's country is black and sombre because

when you're
three. Grandfather said it wasn't like that fifty years ago. He said you
often
couldn't see the bed for everyone having a good cry. Now they just tell
the
child that Grandma's gone. For three weeks Twyla thought her uncle'd
been buried
in the sad patch behind the garden shed along with Buster and Meepo
and all
three Bulgies.'
'Three Bulgies?'
'Gerbils. They tend to die a lot,' said Susan. 'The trick is to replace them
when she's not looking. You really don't know anything, do you?'
'Er... hello?'
The voice came from the corridor.
They worked their way round to the next room.
There, sitting on the floor and tied to the leg of
a white display case, was Violet. She looked up in apprehension, and
then in
bewilderment, and finally in growing recognition.
'Aren't you-?'
'Yes, yes, we see each other sometimes in Biers, and when you came
for Twyla's
last tooth you were so shocked that I could see you I had to give you a
drink to
get your nerves back,' said Susan, fumbling with the ropes. 'I don't think
we've
got a lot of time.'
'And who's he?'
The oh god tried to push his lank hair into place.
'Oh, he's just a god,' said Susan. 'His name's Bilius.'
'Do you drink at all?' said the oh god.
'What sort of quest-'

After a moment Susan felt forced to wave a hand across their locked gaze.

'Can we get on?' she said. 'Good. Who brought you here, Violet?'

'I don't know! I was doing the collection as usual, and then I thought I heard

someone following me, and then it all went dark, and when I came to we were...

Have you seen what it's like outside?'

'Yes.'

'Well, we were there. The big one was carrying me. The one they call Banjo. He's

not bad, just a bit... odd. Sort of... slow. He just watches me. The others are

thugs. Watch out for the one with the glass eye. They're all afraid of him.

Except Banjo.'

'Class eye?'

'He's dressed like an Assassin. He's called Teatime. I think they're trying to

steal something... They spent ages carting the teeth out. Little teeth everywhere... It was horrible! Thank you,' she added to the oh god, who

had

helped her on to her feet.

'They've piled them up in a magic circle downstairs,' said Susan.

Violet's eyes and mouth formed three Os. It was like looking at a pink bowling

ball.

'What for?'

'I think they're using them to control the children. By magic.'

Violet's mouth opened wider.

'That's horrid.'

Horrible, thought Susan. The word is 'horrible'. 'Horrid' is a childish word selected to impress

upwards

so fast they simply couldn't keep up.

That worried Medium Dave. So did the smell. There was no smell at all in the

rest of the tower, but just here there was a lingering odour of mushrooms.

His forehead wrinkled. Medium Dave was a thief and a murderer and therefore had

a highly developed moral sense. He preferred not to steal from poor people, and

not only because they never had anything worth stealing. If it was necessary to

hurt anyone, he tried to leave wounds that would heal. And when in the course of

his activities he had to kill people then he made some effort to see that they

did not suffer much or at least made as few noises as possible.

This whole business was getting on his nerves. Usually, he didn't even notice

that he had any.

There was a wrongness to everything that grated on his bones.

And a pair of boots was all that remained of old Catseye.

He drew his sword.

Above him, the creeping shadows moved and flowed away.

Susan edged up to the entrance to the stairways and peered around into the point

of a crossbow.

'Now, all of you step out where I can see you.' said Peachy conversationally.

'And don't touch that sword, lady. You'll probably hurt yourself.'

Susan tried to make herself unseen, and failed. Usually it was so easy to do

he leaned over and touched the point of the arrow.
'Here! What did you do that for?' said Peachy, stepping back.
'I felt it, but of course a certain amount of pain sensation would be part
of
normal sensory
response,' said the oh god. 'I warn you, there's a very good chance that
I might
be immortal.'
'Yes, but we probably aren't,' said Susan.
'Immortal, eh?' said Peachy. 'So if I was to shoot you inna head, you
wouldn't
die?'
'I suppose when you put it like that... I do know I feel pain...'
'Right. You just keep moving, then.'
'When something happens,' said Susan, out of the corner of her mouth,
'you two
try to get downstairs and out, all right? If the worst comes to the worst,
the
horse will take you out of here.'
'If something happens,' whispered the oh god.
'When,' said Susan.
Behind them, Peachy looked around. He knew he'd feel a lot better
when any of
the others turned up. It was almost a relief to have prisoners.
Out of the corner of her eye Susan saw something move on the stairs
on the
opposite side of the shaft. For a moment she thought she saw several
flashes
like metal blades catching the light.
She heard a gasp behind her.
The man with the crossbow was standing very still and staring at the
opposite
stairs.

thing as the Scissor Man, all right?

'Ah... yes. When you were little, did you suck your thumb?' said Susan.

'Because

the only Scissor Man I know is the one people used to frighten children with.

They said he'd turn up and---

'Shutupshutupshutup!' said Peachy, prodding her with the crossbow.

'Kids believe

all kinds of crap! But I'm grown up now, right, and I can open beer bottles with

other people's teeth an- oh, gods...'

Susan heard the snip, snip. It sounded very close now.

Peachy had his eyes shut.

'Is there anything behind me?' he quavered.

Susan pushed the others aside and waved frantically towards the bottom of the

stairs.

'No,' she said, as they hurried away.

'Is there anything standing on the stairs at all?'

'No.'

'Right! If you see that one-eyed bastard you tell him he can keep the money!'

He turned and ran.

When Susan turned to go up the stairs the Scissor Man was there.

It wasn't man-shaped. It was something like an ostrich, and something like a lizard on its hind legs, but almost entirely like

something made out of blades. Every time it moved a thousand blades went snip,

snip.

Its long silver neck curved and a head made of shears stared down at her.

'You're not looking for me,' she said. 'You're not my nightmare.'

Susan ran on toward the top of the tower.

Sideney put a green filter over his lantern and pressed down with a small silver

rod that had an emerald set on its tip. A piece of the lock moved. There was a

whirring from inside the door and something went click.

He sagged with relief. It is said that the prospect of hanging concentrates the

mind wonderfully, but it was Valium compared to being watched by Mister Teatime.

'I, er, think that's the third lock,' he said. 'Green light is what opens it. I remember the fabulous lock of the Hall of Murgle, which could only be opened by

the Hubward wind, although that was---

'I commend your expertise,' said Teatime. 'And the other four?'

Sideney looked up nervously at the silent bulk of Banjo, and licked his lips.

'Well, of course, if I'm right, and the locks depend on certain conditions, well, we could be here for years...' he ventured. 'Supposing they can only be

opened by, say, a small blond child holding a mouse? On a Tuesday? In the rain?'

'You can find out what the nature of the spell is?' said Teatime.

'Yes, yes, of course, yes.' Sideney waved his hands urgently. 'That's how I

worked out this one. Reverse thaumaturgy, yes, certainly. Er. In time.'

'We have lots of time,' said Teatime.

'Perhaps a little more time than that,' Sideney quavered. 'The processes are

very, very, very... difficult.'

'Oh, dear. If it's too much for you, you've only got to say,' said Teatime.

'No!' Sideney yipped, and then managed to get some self-control. 'No. No. No, I

are there?' He said. 'I just can't stand the sight of violent deaths!'

Teatime put a comforting arm around his shoulders. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'm on your side. A violent death is the last thing that'll happen to you.'

'Mister Teatime?'

He turned. Medium Dave stepped onto the landing.

'Someone else is in the tower,' he said. 'They've got Catseye. I don't know how. I've got Peachy watching the stairs and I ain't sure where Chickenwire is.'

Teatime looked back to Sideney, who started prodding at the fourth lock again in a feverish attempt not to die.

'Why are you telling me? I thought I was paying you big strong men a lot of money to deal with this sort of thing.'

Medium Dave's lips framed some words, but when he spoke he said, 'AH right, but what are we up against here? Eh? Old Man Trouble or the bogeyman or what?'

Teatime sighed.

'Some of the Tooth Fairy's employees, I assume,' he said.

'Not if they're like the ones that were here,' said Medium Dave. 'They were just civilians. It looks like the ground opened and swallowed Catseye up.' He thought about this. 'I mean the ceiling,' he corrected himself. A horrible image had just passed across his under-used imagination.

Teatime walked across to the stairwell and looked down. Far below, the pile of teeth looked like a white circle.

'And the girl's gone,' said Medium Dave.

Others, they had no objections in practice to the disposal of anyone who
got
between them and large sums of money, but there was a general
unspoken
resentment at being told by Teatime to kill someone just because he
had no
further use for them. It wasn't that it was unprofessional. Only Assassins
thought like that. It was just that there were things you did do, and things
you
didn't do. And this was one of the things you didn't do.
'We thought... well, you never know...'
'She wasn't necessary,' said Teatime. 'Few people are.'
Sideney thumbed hurriedly through his notebooks.
'Anyway, the place is a maze-' Medium Dave said.
'Sadly, this is so,' said Teatime. 'But I am sure they will be able to find
us.
It's probably too much to hope that they intend something heroic.'
Violet and the oh god hurried down the stairs.
'Do you know how to get back?' said Violet.
'Don't you?'
'I think there's a... a kind of soft place. If you walk at it knowing it's there
you go through.'
'You know where it is?'
'No! I've never been here before! They had a bag on my head when we
came! All I
ever did was take the teeth from under the pillows!' Violet started to sob.
'You
just get this list and about five minutes' training and they even dock you
ten
pence a week for the ladder and I know I made that mistake with little
William
Rubin but they should of said, you're supposed to take any teeth you---'
'Er... mistake?' said Bilious, trying to get her to hurry.

only sound
good after a lot of alcohol. Someone else may have drunk the drinks,
but he

managed to snag the idea.

'I'm actually self-employed,' he said, as brightly as he could manage.

'How can you be a self-employed god?'

'Ah, well, you see, if any other god wants, perhaps, you know, a holiday
or

something, I cover for them. Yes. That's what I do.'

Unwisely, in the circumstances, he let his inventiveness impress him.

'Oh, yes. I'm very busy. Rushed off my feet. They're always employing
me. You've

no idea. They don't think twice about pushing off for a month as a big
white

bull or a swan or something and it's always, "Oh, Bilius, old chap, just
take

care of things while I'm away, will you? Answer the prayers and so on." I
hardly

get a minute to myself but of course you can't turn down work these
days.'

Violet was round-eyed with fascination.

'And are you covering for anyone right now?' she asked.

'Um, yes... the God of Hangovers, actually... 'A God of Hangovers? How
awful!'

Bilius looked down at his stained and wretched toga.

'I suppose it is...' he mumbled.

'You're not very good at it.'

'You don't have to tell me.'

'You're more cut out to be one of the important gods,' said Violet,
admiringly.

'I can just see you as Io or Fate or one of those.'

Bilius stared at her with his mouth open.

Bilious tried to swallow again.

'Oh, bit o' this, bit o' that,' he mumbled.

'Cor,' said Chickenwire. 'Well, I'm impressed. I can see I'm going to have to be

dead careful here, eh? Don't want you smiting me with thunderbolts, do I? Puts a

crimp in the day, that sort of thing-----'

Bilious didn't dare move his head. But out of the corner of his eye he was sure

he could see shadows moving very fast across the walls.

'Dear me, out of thunderbolts, are we?' Chickenwire sneered. 'Well, y'know, I've

never---

There was a creak.

Chickenwire's face was a few inches from Bilious. The oh god saw his expression

change.

The man's eyes rolled. His lips said nur...'

Bilious risked stepping back. Chickenwire's sword didn't move. He stood there,

trembling slightly, like a man who wants to turn round to see what's behind him

but doesn't dare to in case he does.

As far as Bilious was concerned, it had just been a creak.

He looked up at the thing on the landing above.

'Who put that there?' said Violet.

It was just a wardrobe. Dark oak, a bit of fancy woodwork glued on in an effort

to disguise the undisguisable fact that it was just an upright box. It was a wardrobe.

'You didn't, you know, try to cast a thunderbolt and go on a few letters too

many?' she went on.

have had a party in it, so maybe I'll stop this thought right here.
But the major part of his brain thought: why's this man making little bubbling noises? It's just a wardrobe, for my sake!
'No, no,' mumbled Chickenwire. 'I don't wanna!'
The sword clanged on the floor.
He took a step backwards up the stairs, but very slowly, as if he was doing it despite every effort his muscles could muster.
'Don't want to what?' said Violet.
Chickenwire spun round. Bilious had never seen that happen before.
People turned round quickly, yes, but Chickenwire just revolved as if some giant hand had been placed on his head and twisted a hundred and eighty degrees.
'No. No. No,' Chickenwire whined. 'No.'
He tottered up the steps.
'You got to help me,' he whispered.
'What's the matter?' said Bilious. 'It's just a wardrobe, isn't it? It's for putting all your old clothes in so that there's no room for your new clothes.'
The doors of the wardrobe swung open.
Chickenwire managed to thrust out his arms and grab the sides and, for a moment, he stood quite still.
Then he was pulled into the wardrobe in one sudden movement and the doors slammed shut.
The little brass key turned in the lock with a click.
'We ought to get him out,' said the oh god, running up the steps.
'Why?' Violet demanded. 'They are not very nice people! I know that one. When he brought me food he made... suggestive comments.'

The words 'Dratley and Sons, Fiedre Road, Ankn-Morpork' were stamped in one corner in faded ink.
'Is it magic?' said Violet nervously.
'I don't know if something magic has the maker's name on it,' said Bilious.

'There are magic wardrobes,' said Violet nervously. 'If you go into them, you come out in a magic land.'
Bilious looked at the boots again.
'Um... yes,' he said.

I THINK I MUST TELL YOU SOMETHING, said Death. 'Yes, I think you should,' said Ridcully. 'I've got little devils running round the place eating socks and pencils, earlier tonight we sobered up someone who thinks he's a God of

Hangovers and half my wizards are trying to cheer up the Cheerful Fairy. We thought something must've happened to the Hogfather. We were right, right?'

'Hex was right, Archchancellor,' Ponder corrected him.
HEX? WHAT IS HEX?
'Er... Hex thinks - that is, calculates - that there's been a big change in the nature of belief today,' said Ponder. He felt, he did not know why, that Death

was probably not in favour of unliving things that thought.
MR HEX WAS REMARKABLY ASTUTE. THE HOGFATHER HAS BEEN... Death paused. THERE IS NO SENSIBLE HUMAN WORD. DEAD, IN A WAY, BUT NOT EXACTLY... A GOD CANNOT BE KILLED. NEVER COMPLETELY KILLED. HE HAS BEEN, SHALL WE SAY, SEVERELY REDUCED.

EVER HEARD OF THE AUDITORS?

'I suppose the Bursar may have done-'

NOT AUDITORS OF MONEY. AUDITORS OF REALITY. THEY THINK OF LIFE AS A STAIN ON THE

UNIVERSE. A PESTILENCE. MESSY. GETTING IN THE WAY.

'In the way of what?'

THE EFFICIENT RUNNING OF THE UNIVERSE.

'I thought it was run for us... Well, for the Professor of Applied Anthropics,

actually, but we're allowed to tag along,' said Ridcully. He scratched his chin.

'And I could certainly run a marvellous university here if only we didn't have

to have these damn students underfoot all the time.'

QUITE SO.

'They want to get rid of us?'

THEY WANT YOU TO BE... LESS... DAMN, I'VE FORGOTTEN THE WORD. UNTRUTHFUL? THE

HOGFATHER IS A SYMBOL OF THIS... Death snapped his fingers, causing echoes to

bounce off the walls, and added, WISTFUL LYING?

'Untruthful?' said Ridcully. 'Me? I'm as honest as the day is long! Yes, what is

it this time?'

Ponder had tugged at his robe and now he whispered something in his ear.

Ridcully cleared his throat.

'I am reminded that this is in fact the shortest day of the year,' he said.

'However, this does not undermine the point that I just made, although I thank

my colleague for his invaluable support and constant readiness to correct minor

if not downright trivial errors. I am a remarkably truthful man, sir. Things

I SELDOM JOKE, said Death.

At which point there was a scream of horror.

'That sounded like the Bursar,' said Ridcully. 'And he's been doing so well up to now.'

The reason for the Bursar's scream lay on the floor of his bedroom.

It was a man. He was dead. No one alive had that kind of expression.

Some of the other wizards had got there first. Ridcully pushed his way through the crowd.

'Ye gods,' he said. 'What a face! He looks as though he died of fright! What happened?'

'Well,' said the Dean, 'as far as I can tell, the Bursar opened his wardrobe and found the man inside.'

'Really? I wouldn't have said the poor old Bursar was all that frightening.'

'No, Archchancellor. The corpse fell out on him.'

The Bursar was standing in the corner, wearing his old familiar expression of good-humoured concussion.

'You all right, old fellow?' said Ridcully. 'What's eleven per cent of 1,276?'

'One hundred and forty point three six,' said the Bursar promptly.

'Ah, right as rain,' said Ridcully cheerfully.

'I don't see why,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. 'Just because he can do things with numbers doesn't mean everything else is fine.'

'Doesn't need to be,' said Ridcully. 'Numbers is what he has to do. The poor chap might be slightly yoyo, but I've been reading about it. He's one of these

We all warned Buckleby that the lock was too stiff, said the Dean.

'Just out of interest, why was the Bursar fiddling with his wardrobe at this

time of night?' said Ridcully.

The wizards looked sheepish.

'We were... playing Sardines, Archchancellor,' said the Dean.

'What's that?'

'It's like Hide and Seek, but when you find someone you have to squeeze in with

them,' said the Dean.

'I just want to be clear about this,' said Ridcully. 'My senior wizards have spent the evening playing Hide and Seek?'

'Oh, not the whole evening,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. 'We played

Grandmother's Footsteps and I Spy for quite a while until the Senior Wrangler

made a scene just because we wouldn't let him spell chandelier with an S.'

'Party games? You fellows?'

The Dean sidled closer.

'It's Miss Smith,' he mumbled. 'When we don't join in she bursts into tears.'

'Who's Miss Smith?'

'The Cheerful Fairy,' said the Lecturer in Recent Runes glumly. 'If you don't

say yes to everything her lip wobbles like a plate of jelly. It's unbearable.'

'We just joined in to stop her weeping,' said the Dean. 'It's amazing how one

woman can be so soggy.'

'If we're not cheerful she bursts into tears,' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. 'The Senior Wrangler's doing some juggling for her at the moment.'

then

sleeves.'

Ridcully looked at the corpse again.

'Anyone know who he is? Looks a bit of a ruffian to me. And where's his boots,

may I ask?'

The Dean took a small glass cube from his pocket and ran it over the corpse.

'Quite a large thaumic reading, gentlemen,' he said. 'I think he got here by

magic.'

He rummaged in the man's pockets and pulled out a handful of small white things.

'Ugh,' he said.

'Teeth?' said Ridcully. 'Who goes around with a pocket full of teeth?'

'A very bad fighter?' said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. 'I'll go and get Modo to take the poor fellow away, shall W

'If we can get a reading off the thaumameter, perhaps Hex-' Ridcully began.

'Now, Ridcully,' said the Dean, 'I really think there must be some problems that

can be resolved without having to deal with that damn thinking mill.'

Death looked up at Hex.

A MACHINE FOR THINKING?

'Er... yes, sir,' said Ponder Stibbons. 'You see, when you said... well, you

see, Hex believes everything... but, look, the sun really will come up, won't

it? That's its job.'

LEAVE US.

Ponder backed away, and then scurried out of the room.

The ants flowed along their tubes. Cogwheels spun. The big wheel with the sheep

bounced.

aimlessly for a while, and then jerked back up again.

Hex wrote: +++ The Sun Will Not Come Up +++

CORRECT. HOW MAY THIS BE PREVENTED? ANSWER.

+++ Regular and Consistent Belief +++

GOOD. I HAVE A TASK FOR YOU, THINKING ENGINE.

+++ Yes. I Am Preparing An Area Of WriteOnly Memory +++

WHAT IS THAT?

+++ You Would Say: To Know In Your Bones +++

GOOD. HERE IS YOUR INSTRUCTION. BELIEVE IN
THE HOGFATHER.

+++ Yes +++

DO YOU BELIEVE? ANSWER.

+++ Yes +++

DO... YOU... BELIEVE? ANSWER.

+++ YES +++

There was a change in the ill-assembled heap of pipes and tubes that
was Hex.

The big wheel creaked into a new position. From the other side of the
wall came

the hum of busy bees.

GOOD.

Death turned to leave the room, but stopped when Hex began to write
furiously.

He went back and looked at the emerging paper.

+++ Dear Hogfather, For Hogswatch I Want

OH, NO. YOU CAN'T WRITE LETT--- Death paused,

and then said, YOU CAN, CAN'T YOU.

+++ Yes. I Am Entitled +++

Death waited until the pen had stopped, and picked up the paper.

BUT YOU ARE A MACHINE. THINGS HAVE NO DESIRES. A
DOORKNOB WANTS NOTHING, EVEN
THOUGH IT IS A COMPLEX MACHINE.

ARE YOU?

Susan crept up the stairs, one hand on the hilt of the sword.

Ponder Stibbons had been worried to find himself, as a wizard, awaiting the

arrival of the Hogfather. It's amazing how people define roles for themselves

and put handcuffs on their experience and are constantly surprised by the things

a roulette universe spins at them. Here am I, they say, a mere wholesale

fishmonger, at the controls of a giant airliner because as it turns out all the

crew had the Coronation Chicken. Who'd

have thought it? Here am I, a housewife who merely went out this morning to bank

the proceeds of the Playgroup Association's Car Boot Sale, on the run with one

million in stolen cash and a rather handsome man from the Battery Chickens'

Liberation Organization. Amazing! Here am I, a perfectly ordinary hockey player,

suddenly realizing I'm the Son of God with five hundred devoted followers in a

nice little commune in Empowerment, Southern California. Who'd have thought it?

Here am I, thought Susan, a very practically minded governess who can add up

faster upside down than most people can the right way up, climbing up a toothshaped tower belonging to the Tooth Fairy and armed with a sword belonging

to Death...

Again! I wish one month, just one damn month, could go by without something like

to indicate
that a lot of the fat under their shapeless clothes is muscle. The other
'Hello,' said a cheerful voice by her ear. 'What's your name?'
She made herself turn her head slowly.
First she saw the grey, glinting eye. Then the yellowwhite one with the
tiny dot
of a pupil came into view.
Around them was a friendly pink and white face topped by curly hair. It
was
actually quite pretty, in a boyish sort of way, except that those
mismatched
eyes staring out of it suggested that it had been stolen from someone
else.
She started to move her hand but the boy was there first, dragging the
sword
scabbard out of her belt.
'Ah, ah!' he chided, turning and fending her off as she tried to grab it.
'Wen,
well, well. My word. White bone handle, rather tasteless skull and bone
decoration... Death himself's second favourite weapon, am I right? Oh,
my! This
must be Hogswatch! And this must mean that you are Susan Sto-Helit.
Nobility.
I'd bow,' he added, dancing back, 'but I'm afraid you'd do something
dreadful-----'
There was a click, and a little gasp of excitement from the wizard
working on
the door.
'Yes! Yes! Left-handed using a wooden pick! That's simple!'
He saw that even Susan was looking at him, and coughed nervously.
'Er, I've got the fifth lock open, Mister Teatime! Not a problem! They're
just
based on Woddeley's

On, easy,' said Teatime. Twirp's Peelage. Family motto Non temetis messor. We

have to read it, you know, in class. Hah, old Mericet calls it the Guide to the

Turf. No one laughs except him, of course. Oh yes, I know about you. Quite a

lot. Your father was well known. Went a long way very fast. As for your grandfather... honestly, that motto. Is that good taste? Of course, you don't

need to fear him, do you? Or do you?'

Susan tried to fade. It didn't work. She could feel herself staying embarrassingly solid.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said. 'Who are you, anyway?'

'I beg your pardon. My name is Teatime, Jonathan Teatime. At your service.'

Susan lined up the syllables in her head.

'You mean... like around four o'clock in the afternoon?' she said.

'No. I did say Teh-ah-tim-eh,' said Teatime. 'I spoke very clearly. Please don't

try to break my concentration by annoying me. I only get annoyed at important

things. How are you getting on, Mr Sideney? If it's just according to Woddeley's

sequence, number six should be copper and blue-green light. Unless, of course,

there are any subtleties...'

'Er, doing it right now, Mister Teatime-'

'Do you think your grandfather will try to rescue you? Do you think he will? But

now I have his sword, you see. I wonder--'

There was another click.

'Sixth lock, Mister Teatime!'

trying
to run faster than the sound.
'Is that all you're here for?' she said. 'A robbery?' He was dressed like
an
Assassin, after all, and there was always one way to annoy an
Assassin. 'Like a
thief?'
Teatime danced excitedly. 'A thief? Me? I'm
not a thief, madam. But if I were, I would be the kind that steals fire from
the
gods.'
'We've already got fire.'
'There must be an upgrade by now. No, these gentlemen are thieves.
Common
robbers. Decent types, although you wouldn't necessarily want to watch
them eat,
for example. That's Medium Dave and exhibit B is Banjo. He can talk.'
Medium Dave nodded at Susan. She saw the look in his eyes. Maybe
there was
something she could use...
She'd need something. Even her hair was a mess. She couldn't step
behind time,
she couldn't fade into the background, and now even her hair had let
her down.
She was normal. Here, she was what she'd always wanted to be.
Bloody, bloody damn.
Sideney prayed as he ran down the stairs. He didn't believe in any gods,
since
most wizards seldom like to encourage them, but he prayed anyway the
fervent
prayers of an atheist who hopes to be wrong.
But no one called him back. And no one ran after him.

was in the
yard of Gammer Wimblesone's dame school. His mother wanted him to
learn his

letters and be a wizard, but she also thought that long curls on a five-
year-old

boy looked very smart.

This was the hunting ground of Ronnie Jenks.

Adult memory and understanding said that Ronnie was just an
unintelligent

bullet-headed seven-year-old bully with muscles where his brain should
have

been. The eye of childhood, rather more accurately, dreaded him as a
force like

a personalized earthquake with one nostril bunged up with bogies, both
knees

scabbed, both fists balled and all five brain cells concentrated in a kind
of

cerebral grunt.

Oh, gods. There was the tree Ronnie used to hide behind. It looked as
big and

menacing as he remembered it.

But... if somehow he'd ended up back there, gods knew how, well, he
might be a

bit on the skinny side but he was a damn sight bigger than Ronnie
Jenks now.

Gods, yes, he'd kick those evil little trousers all the--

And then, as a shadow blotted out the sun, he realized he was wearing
curls.

Teatime looked thoughtfully at the door.

'I suppose I should open it,' he said, 'after coming all this way...'

'You're controlling children by their teeth,' said Susan.

'It does sound odd, doesn't it, when you put it like that,' said Teatime.

'But

Teatime
could read it in her eyes.
'I don't think he'll try,' she said. 'He's not as clever as you, Mister
Teatime.'
'Teh-ah-tim-eh,' said Teatime, automatically. 'That's a shame.'
'Do you think You're going to get away with this?'
'Oh, dear. Do people really say that?' And
suddenly Teatime was much closer. 'I've got away with it. No more
Hogfather. And
that's only the start. We'll keep the teeth coming in, of course. The
possibilities---'
There was a rumble like an avalanche, a long way off. The dormant
Banjo had
awakened, causing tremors on his lower slopes. His enormous hands,
which had
been resting on his knees, started to bunch.
'What's dis?' he said.
Teatime stopped and, for a moment, looked puzzled.
'What's this what?'
'You said no more Hogfather,' said Banjo. He stood up, like a mountain
range
rising gently in the squeeze between colliding continents. His hands still
stayed in the vicinity of his knees.
Teatime stared at him and then glanced at Medium Dave.
'He does know what we've been doing, does he?' he said. 'You did tell
him?'
Medium Dave shrugged.
'Dere's got to be a Hogfather,' said Banjo. 'Dere's always a Hogfather.'
Susan looked down. Grey blotches were speeding across the white
marble. She was
standing in a pool of grey. So was Banjo. And around Teatime the dots
bounced

Didn't!

'Did!'

Banjo's big bald head turned towards her.

'What's dis about the Hogfather?' he said.

'I don't think he's dead,' said Susan. 'But Teatime has made him very ill--

.'

'Who cares?' said Teatime, dancing away. 'When this is over, Banjo, you'll have

as many presents as you want. Trust me!

'Dere's got to be a Hogfather,' Banjo rumbled. 'Else dere's no Hogswatch.'

'It's just another solar festival,' said Teatime. 'It-'

Medium Dave stood up. He had his hand on his sword.

'We're going, Teatime,' he said. 'Me and Banjo are going. I don't like any of

this. I don't mind robbing, I don't mind thieving, but this isn't honest. Banjo?

You come with me right now!

'What's dis about no more Hogfather?' said Banjo.

Teatime pointed to Susan.

'You grab her, Banjo. It's all her fault!'

Banjo lumbered a few steps in Susan's direction, and then stopped.

'Our mam said no hittin' girls,' he rumbled. 'No pullin' m hair...'

Teatime rolled his one good eye. Around his feet the greyness seemed to be

boiling in the stone, following his feet as they moved. And it was around Banjo,

too.

Searching, Susan thought. It's looking for a way in.

'I think I know you, Teatime,' she said, as sweetly as she could for Banjo's

sake. 'You're the mad kid they're all scared of, right?'

'Banjo?' snapped Teatime. 'I said grab her-'

words for it-

'I said shut up! Get her, Banjo!'

That was it. She could hear it in Teatime's voice. There was a touch of vibrato

that hadn't been there before.

'The kind of little boy,' she said, watching his face, 'who looks up dolls' dresses...'

'I didn't!'

Banjo looked worried.

'Our mam said-'

'Oh, to blazes with your mam!' snapped Teatime.

There was a whisper of steel as Medium Dave drew his sword.

'What'd you say about our mam?' he whispered.

Now he's having to concentrate on three people, Susan thought.

'I bet no one ever played with you,' she said. 'I bet there were things people

had to hush up, eh?'

'Banjo! You do what I tell you!' Teatime screamed.

The monstrous man was beside her now. She could see his face twisted in an agony

of indecision. His enormous fists clenched and unclenched and his lips moved as

some kind of horrible debate raged in his head.

'Our... our mam... our mam said . . .

The grey marks flowed across the floor and formed a pool of shadow which grew

darker and higher with astonishing speed. It towered over the three men, and

grew a shape.

'Have you been a bad boy, you little perisher?'

The huge woman towered over all three men. In one meaty hand it was holding a

bundle of birch twigs as thick as a man's arm.

medium Dave started to cry.

'No Mum no Mum no Mum nooooo Mum----'

He gave a gurgle and collapsed, clutching his chest. And vanished.

Teatime started to laugh.

Susan tapped him on the shoulder and ' as he looked round, hit him as hard as

she could across the face.

That was the plan, at least. His hand moved faster and caught her wrist.

It was

like striking an iron bar.

'Oh, no,' he said. 'I don't think so.'

Out of the corner of her eye Susan saw Banjo crawling across the floor to where

his brother had been. Ma Lilywhite had vanished.

'This place gets into your head, doesn't it?' Teatime said. 'It pokes around to

find out how to deal with you. Well, I'm in touch with my inner child.'

He reached out with his other hand and grabbed her hair, pulling her head down.

Susan screamed.

'And it's much more fun,' he whispered.

Susan felt his grip lessen. There was a wet thump like a piece of steak hitting

a slab and Teatime went past her, on his back.

'No pullin' girls' hair,' rumbled Banjo. 'That's bad.'

Teatime bounced, up like an acrobat and steadied himself on the railing of the

stairwell.

Then he drew the sword.

The blade was invisible in the bright light of the tower.

'It's true what the stories say, then,' he said. 'So thin you can't see it. I'm going to have such fun with it.' He waved it at them. 'So light.'

it in astonishment. The blade doesn't exist here. There's no Death here!
She slapped him across the face.
'Hi!' she said brightly. 'I'm the inner babysitter!'
She didn't punch. She just thrust out an arm, palm first, catching him under the
chin and lifting him backwards over the rail.
He somersaulted. She never knew how. He somehow managed to gain purchase on
clear air.
His free arm grabbed at hers, her feet came off the ground, and she was over the
rail. She caught it with her other hand - although later she wondered if the
rail hadn't managed to catch her instead.
Teatime swung from her arm, staring upwards with a thoughtful expression. She
saw him grip the sword hilt in his teeth and reach down to his belt
The question 'Is this person mad enough to try to kill someone holding him?' was
asked and answered very, very fast... She kicked down and hit him on the ear.
The cloth of her sleeve began to tear. Teatime tried to get another grip. She
kicked again and the dress ripped. For an instant he held on to nothing and
then, still wearing the expression of someone trying to solve a complex problem,
he fell away, spinning, getting smaller...
He hit the pile of teeth, sending them splashing across the marble. He jerked
for a moment...
And vanished.
A hand like a bunch of bananas pulled Susan back over the rail.

Somewhere nice?' said the huge man hesitantly.

Susan grasped with relief the opportunity to tell the truth, or at least not definitely lie.

'It could be,' she said.

'Better'n here?'

'You never know. Some people would say the odds are in favour.'

Banjo turned his pink piggy eyes on her. For a moment a thirty-five-year-old man

looked out through the pink clouds of a five-year-old face.

'That's good,' he said. 'He'll be able to see our mam again.'

This much conversation seemed to exhaust him. He sagged.

'I wanna go home,' he said.

She stared at his big, stained face, shrugged hopelessly, pulled a handkerchief

out of her pocket and held it up to his mouth.

'Spit,' she commanded. He obeyed.

She dabbed the handkerchief over the worst parts and then tucked it into his

hand.

'Have a good blow,' she suggested, and then carefully leaned out of range until

the echoes of the blast had died away.

'You can keep the hanky. Please,' she added, meaning it wholeheartedly. 'Now

tuck your shirt in.'

'Yes, miss.'

'Now, go downstairs and sweep all the teeth out of the circle. Can you do that?'

Banjo nodded.

'What can you do?' Susan prompted.

Banjo concentrated. 'Sweep all the teeth out of the circle, miss.'

'Good. Off you go.'

The old woman turned her head and smiled at Susan.

'Hello, my dear.'

Susan couldn't remember a grandmother. Her father's mother had died when she was young and the other side of the family... well, she'd never had a grandmother.

But this was the sort she'd have wanted.

The kind, the nasty realistic side of her mind said, that hardly ever existed.

Susan thought she heard a child laugh. And another one. Somewhere almost out of

hearing, children were at play. It was always a pleasant, lulling sound.

Always provided, of course, you couldn't hear the actual words.

'No,' said Susan.

'Sorry, dear?' said the old lady.

'You're not the Tooth Fairy.' Oh, no... there was even a damn patchwork quilt...

'Oh, I am, dear.'

'Oh, Grandma, what big teeth you have... Good grief, you've even got a shawl, oh

dear.'

'I don't understand, lovey---'

'You forgot the rocking chair,' said Susan. 'I always thought there'd be a rocking chair...'

There was a pop behind her, and then a dying creakcreak. She didn't even turn round.

'If you've included a kitten playing with a ball

of wool it'll go very hard with you,' she said sternly, and picked up the candlestick by the bed. It seemed heavy enough.

'I don't think you're real,' she said levelly. 'There's not a little old woman in a shawl running this place. You're out of my head. That's how you defend

worry me. Dogs? No. Rats are fine, I like rats. Sorry, is anyone frightened of that?'

She grabbed at the thing and this time the shape stayed. It looked like a small,

wizen monkey, but with big deep eyes under a brow overhanging like a balcony.

Its hair was grey and lank. It struggled weakly in her grasp, and wheezed.

'I don't frighten easily,' said Susan, 'but you'd be amazed at how angry I can

become.'

The creature hung limp.

'I... I...' it muttered.

She let it down again.

'You're a bogeyman, aren't you?' she said.

It collapsed in a heap when she took her hand away.

'... Not a... The...' it said.

'What do you mean, the?' said Susan.

'The bogeyman,' said the bogeyman. And she saw how rangy it was, how white and

grey streaked its hair, how the skin was stretched over the bones...

'The first bogeyman?'

'I... there were... I do remember when the land was different. Ice. Many times

of... ice. And the... what do you call them?' The creature wheezed. '...

The

lands, the big lands... all different...'

Susan sat down on the bed.

'You mean continents?'

'... all different.' The black sunken eyes glistened at her and suddenly the thing

you
had seen me...
in the old days... when they came down into the deep caves to draw
their hunting
pictures... I could roar in their heads... so that their stomachs dropped
out of
their bottoms...'
'All the old skills are dying out,' said Susan gravely.
'... Oh, others came later... They never knew that first fine terror. All they
knew,' even whispering, the bogeyman managed to get a sneer in its
voice, 'was
dark corners. I had been the dark! I was the... first! And now I was no
better
than them... frightening maids, curdling cream... hiding in shadows at
the stub
of the year... and then one night, I thought... why?'
Susan nodded. Bogeymen weren't bright. The moment of existential
uncertainty
probably took a lot longer in heads where the brain cells bounced so
very slowly
from one side of the skull to the other. But--- . . Granddad had thought
like
that. You hung around with humans long enough and you stopped being
what they
imagined you to be and wanted to become something of your own.
Umbrellas and
silver hairbrushes...
'You thought: what was the point of it all?' she said.
'... frightening children... lurking... and then I started to watch them.
Didn't
really used to be children back in the ice times... just big humans, little
humans, not children... and... and there was a different world in their
heads...

and, and, and sometimes I just sit here listening to them . . .
It mumbled on. Susan listened in embarrassed amazement, not knowing whether to

take pity on the thing or, and this was a developing option, to tread on it.

'... and the teeth... they remember . .

It started to shake.

'The money?' Susan prompted. 'I don't see many rich bogeymen around.'

' - . . . money everywhere... buried in holes... old treasure... back of sofas...

it adds up... investments... money for the tooth, very important, part of the

magic, makes it safe, makes it proper, otherwise it's thieving... and I labelled

'em all, and kept 'em safe, and... and then I was old, but I found people...'

The Tooth Fairy sniggered, and for a moment Susan felt sorry for the men in the

ancient caves. 'They don't ask questions, do they?' it bubbled. '... You give

'em money and they all do their jobs and they don't ask questions...'

'It's more than their job's worth,' said Susan.

I... and then they came... stealing...'

Susan gave in. Old gods do new jobs.

'You look terrible.'

... thank you very much . .

'I mean ill.'

'...very old... all those men, too much effort

The bogeyman groaned.

'... you... don't die here,' it panted. 'Just get old, listening to the laughter...'

Susan nodded. It was in the air. She couldn't hear words, just a distant chatter, as if it was at the other end of a long corridor.

surprising initiative, the man was carefully washing the chalk away.

'Banjo?'

'Yes, miss.'

'You like it here?'

'There's trees, miss.'

That probably counts as a 'yes', Susan decided. 'The sky doesn't worry you?'

He looked at her in puzzlement.

'No, miss?'

'Can you count, Banjo?'

He looked smug.

'Yes, miss. On m'fingers, miss.'

'So you can count up to... ?' Susan prompted. 'Thirteen, miss,' said Banjo

proudly.

She looked at his big hands.

'Good grief.'

Well, she thought, and why not? He's big and trustworthy and what other kind of

life has he got?

'I think it would be a good idea if you did the Tooth Fairy's job, Banjo.'

'Will that be all right, miss? Won't the Tooth Fairy mind?'

'You... do it until she comes back.'

'All right, miss.'

'I'll... er... get people to keep an eye on you, until you get settled in. I think food comes in on the cart. You're not to let people cheat you.' She looked

at his hands and then up and up the lower slopes until she saw the peak of Mount

Banjo, and added, 'Not that I think they'll try, mind you.'

'Yes, miss. I will keep things tidy, miss. Er.

The big pink face looked at her.

'Yes, Banjo?'

She looked back up the tower. Death's land might be dark, but when you were there you never thought anything bad was going to happen to you. You were beyond the places where it could. But here-- When you were grown up you only feared, well, logical things. Poverty. Illness.

Being found out. At least you weren't mad with terror because of something under the stairs. The world wasn't full of arbitrary light and shade. The wonderful world of childhood? Well, it wasn't a cut-down version of the adult one, that was certain. It was more like the adult one written in big heavy letters. Everything was... more. More everything.

She left Banjo to his sweeping and stepped out into the perpetually sunlit world.

Bilious and Violet hurried towards her. Bilious was waving a branch like a club.

'You don't need that,' said Susan. She wanted some sleep.

'We talked about it and we thought we ought to come back and help,' said

Bilious.

'Ah. Democratic courage,' said Susan. 'Well, they're all gone. To wherever they go.'

Bilious lowered the branch thankfully.

'It wasn't that-' he began.

'Look, you two can make yourselves useful,' said Susan. 'There's a mess in

there. Go and help Banjo.'

'Banjo?'

working
as a holiday relief for the other gods.' He gave her a pleading look.
'Really?' Susan looked at Violet. Oh, well, maybe if she believes in him,
at
least... It might work. You never know.
'Good,' she said. 'Have fun. Now I'm going home. This is a hell of a way
to
spend Hogswatch.'
She found Binky waiting by the stream.
The Auditors fluttered anxiously. And, as always happens in their
species when
something goes
radically wrong and needs fixing instantly, they settled down to try to
work out
who to blame.
One said, It was...
And then it stopped. The Auditors lived by consensus, which made
picking
scapegoats a little problematical. It brightened up. After all, if everyone
was
to blame, then it was no one's actual fault. That's what collective
responsibility meant, after all. It was more like bad luck, or something.
Another said, Unfortunately, people might get the wrong idea. We may
be asked
questions.
One said, What about Death? He interfered, after all.
One said, Er... not exactly.
One said, Oh, come on. He got the girl involved.
One said, Er... no. She got herself involved.
One said, Yes, but he told her...
One said, No. He didn't. In fact he specifically did not tell--
It paused, and then said, Damn!

They hovered for a while, unspeaking.

Eventually one said, We may have to take... It paused, loath even to think the

word, but managed to continue... a risk.

Bed, thought Susan, as the mists rolled past her. And in the morning, decent

human things like coffee and porridge. And bed. Real things-

Binky stopped. She stared at his ears for a moment, and then urged him forward.

He whinnied, and didn't budge.

A skeletal hand had grabbed his bridle. Death materialized.

IT IS NOT OVER. MORE MUST BE DONE. THEY TORMENT HIM STILL.

Susan sagged. 'What is? Who are?'

MOVE FORWARD. I WILL STEER. Death climbed into the saddle and reached around her

for the reins.

'Look, I went-' Susan began.

YES. I KNOW. THE CONTROL OF BELIEF, said Death, as the horse moved forward

again. ONLY A VERY SIMPLE MIND COULD THINK OF THAT. MAGIC SO OLD IT'S HARDLY

MAGIC. WHAT A SIMPLE WAY TO MAKE MILLIONS OF CHILDREN CEASE TO BELIEVE IN THE

HOGFATHER.

'And what were you doing?' Susan demanded.

I TOO HAVE DONE WHAT I SET OUT TO DO. I HAVE KEPT A SPACE. A MILLION CARPETS

WITH SOOTY BOOTMARKS, MILLIONS OF FILLED STOCKINGS, ALL THOSE ROOFS WITH RUNNER

MARKS ON THEM... DISBELIEF WILL FIND IT HARD GOING IN THE FACE

NO. SO THAT THE SUN WILL RISE.

'What has astronomy got to do with the Hogfather?'

OLD GODS DO NEW JOBS.

The Senior Wrangler wasn't attending the Feast. He got one of the maids to bring

a tray up to his rooms, where he was Entertaining and doing all those things a

man does when he finds himself unexpectedly tête-à-tête with the opposite sex,

like trying to shine his boots on his trousers and clean his fingernails with

his other fingernails.

'A little more wine, Gwendoline? It's hardly alcoholic,' he said, leaning over

her.

'I don't mind if I do, Mr Wrangler.'

'Oh, call me Horace, please. And perhaps a little something for your chic-ken?'

'I'm afraid she seems to have wandered off somewhere,' said the Cheerful Fairy.

'I'm afraid I'm, I'm I'm rather dull company...' She blew her nose noisily.

'Oh, I certainly wouldn't say that,' said the Senior Wrangler. He wished he'd

had time to tidy up his rooms a bit, or at least get some of the more

embarrassing bits of laundry off the stuffed rhinoceros.

'Everyone's been so kind,' said the Cheerful Fairy, dabbing at her streaming

eyes. 'Who was the skinny one that kept making the funny faces for me?'

'That was the Bursar. Why don't you-'

'He seemed very cheerful, anyway.'

'It's the dried frog pills, he eats them by the handful,' said the Senior Wrangler dismissively. 'I say, why don't--'

up, do
you think?'
'Oh, it would, it would,' said the Senior Wrangler. 'Definitely! Good! So
I'll,
er, I'll just go and... just go and... I'll... ' He pointed vaguely in the
direction of his dressing room, while hopping from one foot to the other.
'I'll
just go and, er... go... just...'
He fled into the dressing room and slammed
the door behind him. His wild eyes scanned the shelves and hangers.
'Clean robe,' he mumbled. 'Comb face, wash socks, fresh hair, where's
that
Insteadofshave lotion---'
From the other side of the door came the adorable sound of the
Cheerful Fairy
blowing her nose. From this side came the sound of the Senior
Wrangler's muffled
scream as, made careless by haste and a very poor sense of smell, he
mistakenly
splashed his face with the turpentine he used for treating his feet.
Somewhere overhead a very small plump child with a bow and arrow
and
ridiculously unaerodynamic wings buzzed ineffectually against a shut
window on
which the frost was tracing the outline of a rather handsome Aurlental
lady. The
other window already had an icy picture of a vase of sunflowers.
In the Great Hall one of the tables had already collapsed. It was one of
the
customs of the Feast that although there were many courses each
wizard went at
his own speed, a tradition instituted to prevent the slow ones holding
everyone

over a small box. It rattled. 'You can open it now if you like.'

'Oh, well, how nice---'

'It's from me,' said the Dean.

'What a lovely--'

'I bought it with my own money, you know,' said the Dean, waving a turkey leg

airily.

'The wrapping paper is a very nice---'

'More than a dollar, I might add.'

'My goodness-'

The Bursar pulled off the last of the wrapping paper.

'It's a box for keeping dried frog pills in. See? It's got "Dried Frog Pills"

on

it, see?'

The Bursar shook it. 'Oh, how nice,' he said weakly. 'It's got some pills in

it

already. How thoughtful. They will come in handy.'

'Yes,' said the Dean. 'I took them off your dressing table. After all, I was down a dollar as it was.'

The Bursar nodded gratefully and put the little box neatly beside his plate.

They'd actually allowed him knives this evening. They'd actually allowed him to

eat other things than those things that could only be scraped up with a wooden

spoon.

He eyed the nearest roast pig with nervous

anticipation, and tucked his napkin firmly under his chin.

'Er, excuse me, Mr Stibbons,' he quavered. 'Would you be so good as to pass me

the apple sauce tankard-'

There was a sound like coarse fabric ripping, somewhere in the air in front of

The just fell out of the air!

'Is he an Assassin? Not one of their student pranks, is it?'

'Why's he holding a sword without a sharp bit?'

'Is he dead?'

'I think so!'

'I didn't even have any of that salmon mousse! Will you look at it? His foot's

in it! It's all over the place! Do you want yours?'

Ponder Stibbons fought his way through the throng. He knew his more senior

fellows when they were feeling helpful. They were like a glass of water to a

drowning man.

'Give him air!' he protested.

'How do we know if he needs any?' said the Dean.

Ponder put his ear to the fallen youth's chest.

'He's not breathing!'

'Breathing spell, breathing spell,' muttered the Chair of Indefinite Studies.

'Er... Spolt's Forthright Respirator, perhaps? I think I've got it written down

somewhere-'

Ridcully reached through the wizards and pulled out the black-clad man by a leg.

He held him upside down in his big hand and thumped him heavily on the back.

He met their astonished gaze. 'Used to do this on the farm,' he said. 'Works a

treat on baby goats.'

'Oh, now, really,' said the Dean, 'I don't-'

The corpse made a noise somewhere between a choke and a cough.

'Make some space, you fellows!' the Archchancellor bellowed, clearing an area of

very close-up view of Ridcully's nose, which filled the immediate universe like
a big pink planet.
'Excuse me, excuse me,' said Ponder, leaning over with his notebook open, 'but
this is vitally important for the advancement of natural philosophy. Did you see
any bright lights? Was there a shining tunnel? Did any deceased relatives
attempt to speak to you? What word most describes the-'
Ridcully pulled him away.
'What's all this, Mr Stibbons?'
'I really should talk to him, sir. He's had a near-death experience!'
'We all have. It's called "living",' said the Archchancellor shortly. 'Pour
the
poor lad a glass of spirits and put that damn pencil away.
'Uh... This must be Unseen University?' said Teatime. 'And you are all wizards?'
'Now, just you lie still,' said Ridcully. But Teatime had already risen on his
elbows.
'There was a sword,' he muttered.
'Oh, it's fallen on the floor,' said the Dean, reaching down. 'But it looks
as
though it's- Did I do that?'
The wizards looked at the large curved slice of table falling away. Something
had cut through everything wood, cloth, plates, cutlery, food. The Dean swore
that a candle flame that had been in the path of the unseen blade was only half
a flame for a moment, until the wick realized that this was no way to behave.

and
then turned his attention to the remains of the Feast. 'Anyway, at least
this

joint's been nicely carved
'Bu-bu-bu---'

They all turned. The Bursar was holding his hand in front of him. The cut
surface of a fork gleamed at the wizards.

'Nice to know his new present will come in handy,' said the Dean. 'It's
the
thought that counts.'

Under the table the Blue Hen of Happiness relieved itself on the
Bursar's foot.

THERE ARE... ENEMIES, said Death, as Binky galloped through icy
mountains.

'They're all dead-'

OTHER ENEMIES. YOU MAY AS WELL KNOW THIS. DOWN IN THE
DEEPEST KINGDOMS OF THE

SEA, WHERE THERE IS NO LIGHT, THERE LIVES A TYPE OF
CREATURE WITH NO BRAIN AND

NO EYES AND NO MOUTH. IT DOES NOTHING BUT LIVE AND PUT
FORTH PETALS OF PERFECT

CRIMSON WHERE NONE ARE THERE TO SEE. IT IS NOTHING
EXCEPT A TINY YES IN THE

NIGHT. AND YET... AND YET... IT HAS ENEMIES THAT BEAR ON IT
A VICIOUS, UNBENDING

MALICE, WHO WISH NOT ONLY FOR ITS TINY LIFE TO BE OVER
BUT ALSO THAT IT HAD

NEVER EXISTED. ARE YOU WITH ME SO FAR?

'Well, yes, but-'

GOOD. NOW, IMAGINE WHAT THEY THINK OF HUMANITY.

Susan was shocked. She had never heard her grandfather speak in
anything other

than calm tones. Now there was a cutting edge in his words.

THE UNIVERSE. THEY SEE TO IT
THAT GRAVITY WORKS AND THE ATOMS SPIN, OR WHATEVER IT
IS ATOMS DO. AND THEY HATE
LIFE.

'Why?'

IT IS... IRREGULAR. IT WAS NEVER SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN. THEY
LIKE STONES, MOVING IN

CURVES. AND THEY HATE HUMANS MOST OF ALL. Death sighed.
IN MANY WAYS, THEY LACK

A SENSE
OF HUMOUR.

'Why the Hog-'

IT IS THE THINGS YOU BELIEVE WHICH MAKE YOU HUMAN.
GOOD THINGS AND BAD THINGS,
IT'S ALL THE SAME.

The mists parted. Sharp peaks were around them, lit by the glow off the
snow.

'These look like the mountains where the Castle of Bones was,' she
said.

THEY ARE, said Death. IN A SENSE. HE HAS GONE
BACK TO A PLACE HE KNOWS. AN EARLY PLACE...

Binky cantered low over the snow.

'And what are we looking for?' said Susan.

YOU WILL KNOW WHEN YOU SEE IT.

'Snow? Trees? I mean, could I have a clue? What are we here for?'

I TOLD YOU. TO ENSURE THAT THE SUN COMES UP.

'Of course the sun will come up!'

NO.

'There's no magic that'll stop the sun coming up!'

I WISH I WAS AS CLEVER AS YOU.

Susan stared down out of sheer annoyance, and saw something below.

Small dark shapes moved across the whiteness, running as if they were
in pursuit

Now they were lower she could see the hunters clearly. They were large dogs.

Their quarry was indistinct, dodging among snowdrifts, keeping to the cover of

snow-laden bushes

A drift exploded. Something big and long and blue-black rose through the flying

snow like a sounding whale.

'It's a pig!'

A BOAR. THEY DRIVE IT TOWARDS THE CLIFF. THEY'RE DESPERATE NOW.

She could hear the panting of the creature. The dogs made no sound at all.

Blood streamed onto the snow from the wounds they had already managed to

inflict.

'This... boar,' said Susan. It's . .

YES.

'They want to kill the Hogf---'

NOT KILL. HE KNOWS HOW TO DIE. OH, YES... IN THIS SHAPE, HE KNOWS HOW TO DIE.

HE'S HAD A LOT OF EXPERIENCE. NO, THEY WANT TO TAKE AWAY HIS REAL LIFE, TAKE

AWAY HIS SOUL, TAKE AWAY EVERYTHING. THEY MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO BRING HIM DOWN.

'Well, stop them!'

YOU MUST. THIS IS A HUMAN THING.

The dogs moved oddly. They weren't running but flowing, crossing the snow faster

than the mere movement of their legs would suggest.

'They don't look like real dogs . .

NO.

'What can I do?'

REACHES THE EDGE
THERE HE WILL STAND AT BAY. HE MUST NOT. UNDERSTAND?
THESE ARE NOT REAL DOGS. IF

THEY CATCH HIM HE WON'T JUST DIE, HE WILL... NEVER BE...

Susan leapt. For a moment she floated through the air, dress streaming behind

her, arms outstretched...

Landing on the animal's back was like hitting a very, very firm chair. It stumbled for a moment and then righted itself.

Susan's arms clung to its neck and her face was buried in its sharp bristles.

She could feel the heat under her. It was like riding a furnace.

And it stank of sweat, and blood, and pig. A lot of pig.

There was a lack of landscape in front of her.

The boar ploughed into the snow on the edge of the drop, almost flinging her

off, and turned to face the hounds.

There were a lot of them. Susan was familiar with dogs. They'd had them at home

like other houses had rugs. And these weren't that big floppy sort.

She rammed her heels in and grabbed a pig's ear in each hand. It was like

holding a pair of hairy shovels.

'Turn left!' she screamed, and hauled.

She put everything into the command. It promised tears before bedtime if

disobeyed.

To her amazement the boar grunted, pranced on the lip of the precipice and

scrambled away, the hounds floundering as they turned to follow.

This was a plateau. From here it seemed to be all edge, with no way down except

the very simple and terminal one.

The boar reached the edge and hesitated. Susan put her head down
and dug her
heels in again.
Snout down, legs moving like pistons, the beast plunged out onto the
ridge. Snow
sprayed up as its trotters sought for purchase. It made up for lack of
grace by
sheer manic effort, legs moving like a tap dancer climbing a moving
staircase
that was heading down.
'That's right, that's right, that's-'
A trotter slipped. For a moment the boar seemed to stand on two, the
others
scrabbling at icy rock. Susan flung herself the other way, clinging to the
neck,
and felt the dragging abyss under her feet.
There was nothing there.
She told herself, He'll catch me if I fall he'll catch me if I fall, he'll catch
me if I fall...
Powdered ice made her eyes sting. A flailing trotter almost slammed
against her
head.
An older voice said, No, he won't. If I fall now I don't deserve to be
caught.
The creature's eye was inches away. And then she knew...
... Out of the depths of eyes of all but the most unusual of animals
comes an
echo. Out of the dark eye in front of her, someone looked back...
A foot caught the rock and she concentrated her whole being on it,
kicking
herself upward in one last effort. Pig and woman rocked for a moment
and then a
trotter caught a footing and the boar plunged forward along the ridge.

Susan was thrown on when the creature landed, and tumbled into deep snow. She

flailed around madly, expecting at any minute to begin sliding.

Instead her hand found a snow-encrusted branch. A few feet away the boar lay on

its side, steaming and panting.

She pulled herself upright. The spur here had widened out into a hill, with a

few frosted trees on it.

The dogs had reached the gap and were milling round, struggling to prevent

themselves slipping.

They could easily clear the distance, she could see. Even the boar had managed

it with her on its back. She put both hands around the branch and heaved; it

came away with a crack, like a broken icicle, and she waved it like a club.

'Come on,' she said. 'Jump! Just you try it! Come on!'

One did. The branch caught it as it landed, and then Susan spun and brought the

branch around on the upswing, lifted the dazed animal off its feet and out over

the edge.

For a moment the shape wavered and then, howling, it dropped out of sight.

She danced a few steps of rage and triumph.

'Yes! Yes! Who wants some? Anyone else?'

The other dogs looked her in the eye, decided that no one did, and that there

wasn't. Finally, after one or two nervous attempts, they managed to turn, still

sliding, and tried to make it back to the plateau.

A Raven wearing a damp piece of red paper landed on one arm.
'Bob bob bob?' it suggested. 'Merry Solstice? Tweetie tweet? What are

you

waiting for? Hogswatch?'

The dogs backed away.

The snow broke off the snowman in chunks, revealing a gaunt figure in
a flapping

black robe.

Death spat out the carrot.

HO. HO. HO.

The grey bodies smeared and rippled as the hounds sought desperately
to change

their shape.

YOU COULDN'T RESIST IT? IN THE END? A MISTAKE, I FANCY.

He touched the scythe. There was a click as the blade flashed into life.

IT GETS UNDER YOUR SKIN, LIFE, said Death, stepping forward.

SPEAKING

METAPHORICALLY, OF COURSE. IT'S A HABIT THAT'S HARD TO
GIVE UP. ONE PUFF OF

BREATH IS NEVER ENOUGH. YOU'LL FIND YOU WANT TO TAKE
ANOTHER.

A dog started to slip on the snow and scabbled desperately to save
itself from

the long, cold drop.

AND, YOU SEE, THE MORE YOU STRUGGLE FOR EVERY
MOMENT, THE MORE ALIVE YOU STAY...

WHICH IS WHERE I COME IN, AS A MATTER OF FACT.

The leading dog managed, for a moment, to become a grey led figure
before being

dragged back into shape.

FEAR, TOO, IS AN ANCHOR, said Death. ALL THOSE SENSES,
WIDE OPEN TO EVERY

looked thoughtful.

AND NOW THERE REMAINS ONLY ONE FINAL QUESTION, he said.

He raised his hands, and seemed to grow. Light flared in his eye sockets. When

he spoke next, avalanches fell in the mountains.

HAVE YOU BEEN NAUGHTY... OR NICE?

HO. HO. HO.

Susan heard the wails die away.

The boar lay in white snow that was now red with blood. She knelt down and tried

to lift its head.

It was dead. One eye stared at nothing. The tongue lolled.

Sobs welled up inside her. The tiny part of Susan that watched, the inner

baby-sitter, said it was just exhaustion and excitement and the backwash of

adrenalin. She couldn't be crying over a dead pig.

The rest of her drummed on its flank with both fists.

'No, you can't! We saved you! Dying isn't how it's supposed to go!'

A breeze blew up.

Something stirred in the landscape, something under the snow. The branches on

the ancient trees shook gently, dislodging little needles of ice.

The sun rose.

The light streamed over Susan like a silent gale. It was dazzling. She crouched

back, raising her forearm to cover her eyes. The great red ball turned frost to

fire along the winter branches.

Cold light slammed into the mountain peaks,

making every one a blinding, silent volcano. It rolled onward, gushing into the

valleys and thundering up the slopes, unstoppable...

more

unpleasant wounds.

Capability, said the small part of her mind. A rational head in emergencies.

Rational something, anyway.

It's probably some kind of character flaw.

The man was tattooed. Blue whorls and spirals haunted his skin, under the blood.

He opened his eyes and stared at the sky.

'Can you get up?'

His gaze flicked to her. He tried moving and then fell back.

Eventually she managed to pull the man up into a sitting position. He swayed as

she put one of his arms across her shoulders and then heaved him to his feet.

She did her best to ignore the sting, which had an almost physical force.

Downhill seemed the best option. Even if his brain wasn't working yet, his feet

seemed to get the idea.

They lurched down through the freezing woods, the snow glowing orange in the

risen sun. Cold blue gloom lurked in hollows like little cups of winter.

Beside her, the tattooed man made a gurgling sound. He slipped out of her grasp

and landed on his knees in the snow, clutching at his throat and choking. His

breath sounded like a saw.

'What now? What's the matter? What's the matter?'

He rolled his eyes at her and pawed at his throat again.

'Something stuck?' She slapped him as hard as she could on the back, but now he

was on his hands and knees, fighting for breath.

A bird thirled, high on a branch. She looked up. A wren bobbed at her and fluttered to another twig.

When she looked back, the man was different. He had clothes now, heavy furs,

with a fur hood and fur boots. He was supporting himself on a stone-tipped

spear, and looked a lot stronger.

Something hurried through the wood, barely visible except by its shadow. For a

moment she glimpsed a white hare before it sprang away on a new path.

She looked back. Now the furs had gone and the man looked older, although he had

the same eyes. He was wearing thick white robes, and looked very much like a

priest.

When a bird called again she didn't look away. And she realized that she'd been

mistaken in thinking that the man changed like the turning of pages. All the

images were there at once, and many others too. What you saw depended on how you

looked.

Yes. It's a good job I'm cool and totally used to this sort of thing, she thought. Otherwise I'd be rather worried...

Now they were at the edge of the forest.

A little way off, four huge boars stood and steamed, in front of a sledge that

looked as if it had been put together out of crudely trimmed trees. There were

faces in the blackened wood, possibly carved by stone, possibly carved by rain

The Hogfather nodded at Death, as one craftsman to another, and then at Susan.

She wasn't sure if she was being thanked - it was more a gesture of recognition,

of acknowledgement that something that needed doing had indeed been done. But it

wasn't thanks.

Then he shook the reins and clicked his teeth and the sledge slid away.

They watched it go.

'I remember hearing,' said Susan distantly, 'that the idea of the Hogfather

wearing a red and white outfit was invented quite recently.'

NO. IT WAS REMEMBERED.

Now the Hogfather was a red dot on the other side of the valley.

'Well, that about wraps it up for this dress,' said Susan. 'I'd just like to ask, just out of academic interest... you were sure I was going to survive, were

you?'

I WAS QUITE CONFIDENT.

'Oh, good.'

I WILL GIVE YOU A LIFT BACK, said Death, after a while.

'Thank you. Now... tell me . .

WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF YOU HADN'T SAVED HIM?

'Yes! The sun would have risen just the same, yes?'

NO.

'Oh, come on. You can't expect me to believe that. It's an astronomical fact.'

THE SUN WOULD NOT HAVE RISEN.

She turned on him.

'It's been a long night, Grandfather! I'm tired and I need a bath! I don't need

silliness!'

THE SUN WOULD NOT HAVE RISEN.

to make me bearable.

REALLY? AS IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS
NEED FANTASY TO BE

HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS
THE RISING APE.

'Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little-'

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO
BELIEVE THE LITTLE LIES.

'So we can believe the big ones?'

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

'They're not the same at all!'

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN
TO THE FINEST POWDER AND

SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE
ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE

MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET-- Death waved a hand. AND YET
YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS

SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...
SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE

UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

'Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what's the point---'

MY POINT EXACTLY.

She tried to assemble her thoughts.

THERE IS A PLACE WHERE TWO GALAXIES HAVE BEEN
COLLIDING FOR A MILLION YEARS,

said Death, apropos of nothing. DON'T TRY TO TELL ME

THAT'S RIGHT.

'Yes, but people don't think about that,' said Susan. Somewhere there
was a

bed...

CORRECT. STARS EXPLODE, WORLDS COLLIDE, THERE'S
HARDLY ANYWHERE IN THE UNIVERSE

said Death, helping her up on to Binky.

'These mountains,' said Susan, as the horse rose. 'Are they real mountains, or

some sort of shadows?'

YES.

Susan knew that was all she was going to get.

'Er... I lost the sword. It's somewhere in the Tooth Fairy's country.'

Death shrugged. I CAN MAKE ANOTHER.

'Can you?'

OH, YES. IT WILL GIVE ME SOMETHING TO DO. DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT.

The Senior Wrangler hummed cheerfully to himself as he ran a comb through his

beard for the second time and liberally sprinkled it with what would turn out to

be a preparation of weasel extract for demon removal rather than, as he had

assumed, a pleasant masculine Scent.[23] Then he stepped out into his study.

'Sorry for the delay, but-' he began.

There was no one there. Only, very far off, the sound of someone blowing their

nose mingling with the glingleglinglegling of fading magic.

The fight was already gilding the top of the Tower of Art when Binky trotted to

a standstill on the air beside the nursery balcony. Susan climbed down onto the

fresh snow and stood uncertainly for a moment. When someone has gone out of

their way to drop you home it's only courteous to ask them in. On the other

hand...

SOMEONE SHOULD.

'Er... would you like a drink before you go?' said Susan, giving in.

A CUP OF COCOA WOULD BE APPROPRIATE IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

'Right. There's biscuits in the tin on the mantelpiece.'

Susan headed with relief into the tiny kitchen.

Death sat down in the creaking wicker chair, buried his feet in the rug and

looked around with interest. He heard the clatter of cups, and then a sound like

indrawn breath, and then silence.

Death helped himself to a biscuit from the tin. There were two full stockings

hanging from the mantelpiece. He prodded them with professional satisfaction,

and then sat down again and

observed the nursery wallpaper. It seemed to be pictures of rabbits in waistcoats, among other fauna. He was not surprised. Death occasionally turned

up in person even for rabbits, simply to see that the whole process was working

properly. He'd never seen one wearing a waistcoat. He

wouldn't have expected waistcoats. At least,

ould

he wouldn't have expected waistcoats if he hadn't had some experience of the way

humans portrayed the universe. As it was, it was only a blessing they hadn't

been given gold watches and top hats as well.

Humans liked dancing pigs, too. And lambs in hats. As far as Death was aware,

the sole reason for any human association with pigs and lambs was as a prelude

when he saw it.

Dullness. Only humans could have invented it. What imaginations they had.

The door opened.

To his horror, Death saw a small child of unidentifiable sex come out of the

bedroom,
amble sleepily across the floor and unhook the stockings from the mantelpiece.

It was halfway back before it noticed him and then it simply stopped and regarded him thoughtfully.

He knew that young children could see him because they hadn't yet developed that

convenient and selective blindness that comes with the intimation of personal

mortality. He felt a little embarrassed.

'Susan's gotta poker, you know,' it said, as if anxious to be helpful.

WELL, WELL. INDEED. MY GOODNESS ME.

'I fort - thought all of you knew that now. Larst - last week she picked a bogey

up by its nose.'

Death tried to imagine this. He felt sure he'd heard the sentence wrong but it

didn't sound a whole lot better however he rearranged the words.

'I'll give Gawain his stocking and then I'll come an' watch,' said the child.

It

padded out.

ER... SUSAN? Death said, calling in reinforcements.

Susan backed out of the kitchen, a black kettle in her hand.

There was a figure behind her. In the half-light the sword gleamed blue along

its blade. Its glitter reflected off one glass eye.

your vulnerability but I'm pretty certain that Susan here would quite definitely die,

so I'd rather you didn't try any last-minute stuff.'

I AM LAST-MINUTE STUFF, said Death, standing up.

Teatime circled around carefully, the sword's tip making little curves in the

air.

From the next room came the sound of someone trying to blow a whistle quietly.

Susan glanced at her grandfather.

'I don't remember them asking for anything that made a noise,' she said.

OH, THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING IN THE STOCKING THAT MAKES A NOISE, said Death.

OTHERWISE WHAT is 4.30 A.M. FOR?

'There are children?' said Teatime. 'Oh yes, of course. Call them.'

'Certainly not!'

'It will be instructive,' said Teatime. 'Educational. And when your adversary is

Death, you cannot help but be the good guy.'

He pointed the sword at Susan.

'I said call them.'

Susan glanced hopefully at her grandfather. He nodded. For a moment she thought

she saw the glow in one eye socket flicker off and on, Death's equivalent of a

wink. He's got a plan. He can stop time. He can do anything. He's got a plan.

'Gawain? Twyla?'

The muffled noises stopped in the next room. There was a padding of feet and two

solemn faces appeared round the door.

'Ah, come in, come in, curly-haired tots,' said Teatime genially.

There was a very faint pop as Twyla took her thumb out of her mouth.

'He's eating a bittit,' she said.

'Biscuit,' Susan corrected automatically. She started to swing the kettle in an absent-minded way.

'A creepy bony man in a black robe!' said Teatime, aware that things weren't going in quite the right direction.

He spun round to face Susan. 'You're fidgeting with that kettle,' he said. 'So I

expect you're thinking of doing something creative. Put it down, please.

Slowly.'

Susan knelt down gently and put the kettle on the hearth.

'Huh, that's not very creepy, it's just bones,' said Gawain dismissively.

'And

anyway Willie the groom down at the stables has promised me a real horse skull.

And anyway I'm going to make a hat out of it like General Tacticus had when he

wanted to frighten people. And anyway it's just standing there. It's not even

making woo-woo noises. And anyway you're creepy. Your eye's weird.'

'Really? Then let's see how creepy I can be,' said Teatime. Blue fire crackled

along the sword as he raised it.

Susan closed her hand over the poker.

Teatime saw her start to turn. He stepped behind Death, sword raised...

Susan threw the poker overarm. It made a ripping noise as it shot through the

air, and trailed sparks.

It hit Death's robe and vanished.

He blinked.

Teatime smiled at Susan.

Stop time now, commanded Susan.

Death snapped his fingers. The room took on the greyish purple of stationary

time. The clock paused its ticking.

'You winked at me! I thought you had a plan!'

INDEED. OH, YES. I PLANNED TO SEE WHAT YOU WOULD DO.

'Just that?'

YOU ARE VERY RESOURCEFUL. AND OF COURSE YOU HAVE HAD AN EDUCATION.

'What?'

I DID ADD THE SPARKLY STARS AND THE NOISE, THOUGH. I THOUGHT THEY WOULD BE

APPROPRIATE.

'And if I hadn't done anything?'

I DARESAY I WOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF SOMETHING. AT THE LAST MINUTE.

'That was the last minute!'

THERE IS ALWAYS TIME FOR ANOTHER LAST MINUTE.

'The children had to watch that!'

EDUCATIONAL. THE WORLD WILL TEACH THEM ABOUT MONSTERS SOON ENOUGH. LET THEM

REMEMBER THERE'S ALWAYS THE POKER.

'But they saw he's human--'

I THINK THEY HAD A VERY GOOD IDEA OF WHAT HE WAS.

Death prodded the fallen Teatime with his foot.

STOP PLAYING DEAD, MISTER TEH-AH-TIM-EH.

The ghost of the Assassin sprang up like a jack-in-thebox, all slightly crazed

smiles.

'You got it right!'

OF COURSE.

Teatime began to fade.

Susan realized she was shakng.

'Of course. In this room it's pretty powerful.'

YOU WERE NEVER IN ANY DOUBT?

Susan hesitated, and then smiled.

'I was quite confident,' she said.

All. Her grandfather stared at her for a moment and she thought she detected

just the tiniest flicker of uncertainty. OF COURSE. OF COURSE. TELL ME, ARE YOU

LIKELY TO TAKE UP TEACHING ON A LARGER SCALE?

'I hadn't planned to.'

Death turned towards the balcony, and then seemed to remember something else. He

fumbled inside his robe.

I HAVE MADE THIS FOR YOU.

She reached out and took a square of damp cardboard. Water dripped off the

bottom. Somewhere in the middle, a few brown feathers seemed to have been glued

on.

'Thank you. Er... what is it?'

ALBERT SAID THERE OUGHT TO BE SNOW ON IT, BUT IT APPEARS TO HAVE MELTED, said

Death. IT

IS, OF COURSE, A HOGSWATCH CARD.

'Oh...'

THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN A ROBIN ON IT AS WELL, BUT I HAD CONSIDERABLE DIFFICULTY

IN GETTING IT TO STAY ON.

'Ah...'

IT WAS NOT AT ALL CO-OPERATIVE.

'Really... ?'

IT DID NOT SEEM TO GET INTO THE HOGSWATCH

On.

WELL THEN... HAPPY HOGSWATCH.

'Yes. Happy Hogswatch.'

Death paused again, at the window.

AND GOOD NIGHT, CHILDREN... EVERYWHERE.

The raven fluttered down onto a log covered in snow. Its prosthetic red breast

had been torn and fluttered uselessly behind it.

'Not so much as a lift home,' it muttered. 'Look at this, willya? Snow and frozen wastes, everywhere. I couldn't fly another damn inch. I could starve to

death here, you know? Hah! People're going on about recycling the whole time,

but you just try a bit of practical ecology and they just... don't... want... to... know. Hah! I bet a robin'd have a lift home. Oh yes.'

SQUEAK, said the Death of Rats sympathetically, and sniffed.

The raven watched the small hooded figure scabble at the snow.

'So I'll just freeze to death here, shall I?' it said gloomily. 'A pathetic bundle of feathers with my little feet curled up with the cold. It's not even as

if I'm gonna make anyone a good meal, and let me tell you it's a disgrace to die

thin in my spec-'

It became aware that under the snow was a rather grubbier whiteness.

Further

scraping by the rat exposed something that could very possibly have been an ear.

The raven stared. 'It's a sheep!' it said.

The Death of Rats nodded.

'A whole sheep!'[24]

SQUEAK.

'Oh, wow!' said the raven, hopping forward with its eyes spinning. 'Hey, it's

rimmed
spectacles. He hadn't heard the bell, and this was worrying him. 'But I'm afraid
that's just for show, that is a special order for Lord-'
NO. I WILL BUY IT.
'No, because, you see---'
THERE ARE OTHER TOYS?
'Yes, indeed, but-'
THEN I WILL TAKE THE HORSE. HOW MUCH WOULD THIS LORDSHIP HAVE PAID YOU?
'Er, we'd agreed twelve dollars but--'
I WILL GIVE YOU FIFTY, said the customer.
The little shopkeeper stopped in midremonstrate and started up in mid-greed.
There were other toys, he told himself quickly. And this customer, he thought
with considerable prescience, looked like someone who did not take no for an
answer and seldom even bothered to
ask the question. Lord Selachii would be angry, but Lord Selachii wasn't here.
The stranger, on the other hand, was here. Incredibly here.
'Er... well, in the circumstances... er... shall I wrap it up for you?'
NO. I WILL TAKE IT AS IT IS. THANK YOU. I WILL LEAVE VIA THE BACK WAY, IF IT'S
ALL THE SAME TO YOU.
'Er... how did you get in?' said the shopkeeper, pulling the horse out of the
window.
THROUGH THE WALL. SO MUCH MORE CONVENIENT THAN CHIMNEYS, DON'T YOU THINK?

Death walked out to where Binky was waiting in the snow and tied the toy horse behind the saddle.

ALBERT WILL BE VERY PLEASED. I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE HIS FACE.
HO. HO. HO.

As the light of Hogswatch slid down the towers of Unseen University, the

Librarian slipped into the Great Hall with some sheet music clenched firmly in his feet.

As the light of Hogswatch lit the towers of Unseen University, the Archchancellor sat down with a sigh in his study and pulled off his boots. It had been a damn long night, no doubt about it. Lots of strange things.

First time he'd ever seen the Senior Wrangler burst into tears, for one thing. Ridcully glanced at the door to the new bathroom. Well, he'd sorted out the

teething troubles, and a nice warm shower would be very refreshing. And then he

could go along to the organ recital all nice and clean. He removed his hat, and someone fell out of it with a tinkling sound. A small

gnome rolled across the floor. 'Oh, another one. I thought we'd got rid of you fellows,' said Ridcully.

'And what are you?' The gnome looked at him nervously.

'Er... you know whenever there was another magical appearance you heard the sound of, er, bells?' it said. Its expression suggested it was owning up to something it just knew was going to get it a smack.

.'Yes?'

Ridcully scored a direct hit with the rubber duck, and the gnome escaped through the bath overflow. Cursing and spontaneous handbell ringing echoed away down the pipes.

In perfect peace at last, the Archchancellor pulled off his robe.

The organ's storage tanks were wheezing at the rivets by the time the Librarian

had finished pumping. Satisfied, he knuckled his way up to the seat and paused

to survey, with great satisfaction, the keyboards in front of him.

Bloody Stupid Johnson's approach to music was similar to his approach in every

field that was caressed by his genius in the same way that a potato field is

touched by a late frost. Make it loud, he said. Make it wide. Make it allembicing. And thus the Great Organ of Unseen University was the only one in

the world where you could play an entire symphony scored for thunderstorm and

squashed toad noises.

Warm water cascaded off Mustrum Ridcully's pointy bathing cap.

Mr Johnson had, surely not on purpose, designed a perfect bathroom - at least,

perfect for singing in. Echoes and resonating pipeways smoothed out all those

little imperfections and gave even the weediest singer a rolling, dark brown

voice.

And so Ridcully sang.

' -as I walked out one dadadadada for to something or other and to take the

dadada, I did espy a fair pretty may-ay-den I think it was, and I---'

it was so
much easier and quicker to find out by pulling it, did so. But instead of
the

music he was expecting he was rewarded simply with several large
panels sliding

silently aside, revealing row upon row of brass nozzles.

The Librarian was lost now, dreaming on the
wings of music. His hands and feet danced over the keyboards, picking
their way

towards the crescendo which ended the first movement of Bubble's
Catastrophe

Suite.

One foot kicked the 'Afterburner' lever and the other spun the valve of
the

nitrous oxide cylinder.

Ridcully tapped the nozzles.

Nothing happened. He looked at the controls again, and realized that
he'd never

pulled the little brass lever marked 'Organ Interlock`.

He did so. This did not cause a torrent of pleasant bathtime
accompaniment,

however. There was merely a thud and a distant gurgling which grew in
volume.

He gave up, and went back to soaping his chest.

'----running of the deer, the playing of... huh? What--'

Later that day he had the bathroom nailed up again and a notice placed
on the

door, on which was written:

'Not to be used in any circumstances. This is IMPORTANT.'

However, when Modo nailed the door up he didn't hammer the nails in
all the way

but left just a bit sticking up so that his pliers would grip later on, when
he

Things immediately began to whirl. The ants started to trot again. The mouse squeaked. They'd tried this three times. Ponder looked again at the single sentence Hex had written. +++ Mine! Waaaah +++ 'I don't actually think,' he said, gloomily, 'that I want to tell the Archchancellor that this machine stops working if we take its fluffy teddy bear away. I just don't think I want to live in that kind of world.' 'Er,' said Mad Drongo, 'you could always, you know, sort of say it needs to work with the FTB enabled...' 'You think that's better?' said Ponder, reluctantly. It wasn't as if it was even a very realistic interpretation of a bear. 'You mean, better than "fluffy teddy bear"?' Ponder nodded. 'It's better,' he said. Of all the presents he got from the Hogfather, Gawain told Susan, the best of all was the marble. And she'd said, what marble? And he'd said, the glass marble I found in the fireplace. It wins all the games. It seems to move in a different way. The beggars walked their erratic and occasionally backward walk along the city streets, while fresh morning snow began to fall. Occasionally one of them belched happily. They all wore paper hats, except for Foul Ole Ron, who'd eaten his. A tin can was passed from hand to hand. It contained a mixture of fine wines and

At, the world of haute cuisine, said the Duck Man happily.

They reached, by fits and starts, the back door

of their favourite restaurant. The Duck Man looked at it dreamily, eyes

filmy

with recollection.

'I used to dine here almost every night,' he said.

'Why'd you stop?' said Coffin Henry.

'I... I don't really know,' said the Duck Man. 'It's... rather a blur, I'm afraid. Back in the days when I... think I was someone else. But still,' he said, patting Arnold's head, 'as they say, "Better a meal of old boots

where

friendship is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith." Forward, please,

Ron.'

They positioned Foul Ole Ron in front of the back door and then knocked on it.

When a waiter opened it Foul Ole Ron grinned at him, exposing what remained of

his teeth and his famous halitosis, which was still all there.

'Millennium hand and shrimp!' he said, touching his forelock.

' "Compliments of the season",' the Duck Man translated.

The man went to shut the door but Arnold Sideways was ready for him and had

wedged his boot in the crack.[25]

'We thought you might like us to come round at lunchtime and sing a merry

Hogswatch glee for your customers,' said the Duck Man. Beside him, Coffin Henry

began one of his volcanic bouts of coughing, which even sounded green. ' No

charge, of course.'

'It being Hogswatch,' said Arnold.

The beggars, despite being too disreputable even to belong to the Beggars'

trolley through the slush and dirt.

'Tastes... sort of familiar,' he said.

'Familiar like what?'

'Like mud and old boots.'

'Cam! That's posh grub, that is.'

'Yeah, yeah... ' Arnold chewed for a while. 'You don't think we've become posh

all of a sudden?'

'Dunno. You posh, Ron?'

'Buggrit.'

'Yep. Sounds posh to me.'

The snow began to settle gently on the River Ankh.

'Still... Happy New Year, Arnold.'

'Happy New Year, Duck Man. And your duck.'

'What duck?'

'Happy New Year, Henry.'

'Happy New Year, Ron.'

'Buggrem!'

'And god bless us, every one,' said Arnold Sideways.

The curtain of snow hid them from view.

'Which god?'

'Dunno. What've you got?'

'Duck Man?'

'Yes, Henry?'

'You know that stalled ox you mentioned?'

'Yes, Henry?'

'How come it'd stalled? Run out of grass, or something?'

'Ah... it was more a figure of speech, Henry.'

'Not an ox?'

'Not exactly. What I meant was-'

And then there was only the snow.

After a while, it began to melt in the sun.

THE END

[3] It's a sad and terrible thing that high-born folk really have thought that

the servants would be totally fooled if spirits were put into decanters that were cunningly labelled backwards. And also throughout history the more

politically conscious butler has taken it on trust, and with rather more justification, that his employers will not notice if the whisky is topped up with eniru.

[4] Peachy was not someone you generally asked questions of, except the sort

that go like: If-if-if-if I give you all my money could you possibly not break

the other leg, thank you so much?'

[5] Chickenwire had got his name from his own individual contribution to the

science of this very specialized 'concrete overshoe' form of waste disposal. An

unfortunate drawback of the process was the tendency for bits of the client to

eventually detach and float to the surface, causing much comment in the general

population. Enough chickenwire, he'd pointed out, would solve that, while also

allowing the ingress of crabs and fish going about their vital recycling activities.

[6] Ankh-Morpork's underworld, which was so big that the overworld floated

around on top of it like a very small hen trying to mother a nest of ostrich chicks, already had Big Dave, Fat Dave, Mad Dave, Wee Davey, and Lanky Dai.

Everyone had to find their niche.

[7] This is very similar to the suggestion put forward by the Quirmian

colour combination for paperchains, and no hogswatch fairy doll should
be nailed
up by its head
[9] Such as the Electric Drill Chuck Key Fairy.
[10] Who was (according to Sideney's mother) a bit of a catch since her
father
owned a half-share in an eel pie shop in Gleam Street, you must know
her, got
all her own teeth and a wooden leg you'd hardly notice, got a sister
called
Continance, lovely girl, why didn't she invite her along for tea next time
he
was over, not that she hardly saw her son the big wizard at all these
days, but
you never knew and if the magic thing didn't work out then a quarter-
share in a
thriving eel pie business was not to be sneezed at ...
[11] Not, that is, things that he wanted to do, or wanted done to him.
Just
things that he dreamed of, in the armpit of a bad night.
[12] In fact, when she was eight she'd found a collection of animal skulls
in an
attic, relict of some former duke of an enquiring turn of mind. Her father
had
been a bit preoccupied with affairs of state and she'd made twenty-
seven dollars
before being found out. The hippopotamus molar had, with hindsight,
been a
mistake.
Skulls never frightened her, even then.
[13] The CEH was always ready to fight for the rights of the differently
tall,

to people that they hadn't got enough rights that they barely had any time left to fight for them.

[14] Often they lived to a timescale to suit themselves. Many of the senior

ones, of course, lived entirely in the past, but several were like the Professor

of Anthropics, who had invented an entire temporal system based on the belief

that all the other ones were a mere illusion.

Many people are aware of the Weak and Strong Anthropic Principles. The Weak One

says, basically, that it was jolly amazing of the universe to be constructed in

such a way that humans could evolve to a point where they make a living in, for

example, universities, while the Strong One says that, on the contrary, the

whole point of the universe was that humans should not only work in universities

but also write for huge sums books with words like 'Cosmic' and 'Chaos' in the

titles. *) The UU Professor of Anthropics had developed the Special and Inevitable Anthropic Principle, which was that the entire reason for the existence of the universe was the eventual evolution of the UU Professor of

Anthropics. But this was only a formal statement of the theory which absolutely

everyone, with only some minor details of a 'Fill in name here' nature, secretly

believes to be true.

*)And they are correct. The universe dearly operates for the benefit of

of the seventy almost identical-looking species of the purple sea snake are the deadly ones, how to treat the poisonous pith of the Sagosago tree to make a nourishing gruel, how to foretell the weather by the movements of the tree-climbing Burglar Crab, how to navigate across a thousand miles of featureless ocean by means of a piece of string and a small clay model of your grandfather, how to get essential vitamins from the liver of the ferocious Ice Bear, and other such trivial matters. It's a strange thing that when everyone becomes educated, everyone knows about the pronoun but no one knows about the

Sago-sago.

[17] Credulous: having views about the world, the universe and humanity's place

in it that are shared only by very unsophisticated people and the most intelligent and advanced mathematicians and physicists.

[18] It's amazing how good governments are, given their track record in almost

every other field, at hushing up things like alien encounters.

One reason may be that the aliens themselves are too embarrassed to talk about it.

It's not known why most of the space-going races of the universe want to

undertake rummaging in Earthling underwear as a prelude to formal contact. But

representatives of several hundred races have taken to hanging out, unsuspected

by one another, in rural corners of the planet and, as a result of this, keep on

The truth may be out there, but lies are inside your head.

[19] The red rosy hen greets the dawn of the day'. In fact the hen is not the

bird traditionally associated with heralding a new sunrise, but Mrs Huggs, while

collecting many old folk songs for posterity, has taken care to rewrite them

where necessary to avoid, as she put it, 'offending those of a refined disposition with unwarranted coarseness'. Much to her surprise, people often

couldn't spot the unwarranted coarseness until it had been pointed out to them.

Sometimes a chicken is nothing but a bird.

[20] He'd have to admit that the answer would be 'five and a bit', but at least

he could come up with it.

[21] It had been Ma Lilywhite's dying wish, although she hadn't known it at the

time. Her last words to her son were 'You try and get to the horses, I'll try to

hold 'em off on the stairs, and if anything happens to me, take care of the

dummy!'

[22] They generally know in time to have their best robe cleaned, do some

serious damage to the wine cellar and have a really good last meal. It's a nicer

version of Death Row, with the bonus of no lawyers.

[23] It was, in fact, a pleasant masculine scent. But only to female weasels.

[24] Which had died in its sleep. Of natural causes. At a great age. After a

