

The wind howled. Lightning stabbed at the earth erratically, like an inefficient assassin. Thunder rolled back and forth across the dark, rain-lashed hills.

The night was as black as the inside of a cat. It was the kind of night, you could believe, on which gods moved men as though they were pawns on the chessboard of fate. In the middle of this elemental storm a fire gleamed among the dripping furze bushes like the madness in a weasel's eye. It illuminated three hunched figures. As the cauldron bubbled an eldritch voice shrieked: 'When shall we three meet again?'

There was a pause.

Finally another voice said, in far more ordinary tones: 'Well, I can do next Tuesday.'

Through the fathomless deeps of space swims the star turtle Great A'Tuin, bearing on its back the four giant elephants who carry on their shoulders the mass of the Discworld. A tiny sun and moon spin around them, on a complicated orbit to induce seasons, so probably nowhere else in the multiverse is it sometimes necessary for an elephant to cock a leg to allow the sun to go past.

Exactly why this should be may never be known. Possibly the Creator of the universe got bored with all the usual business of axial inclination, albedos and rotational velocities, and decided to have a bit of fun for once.

It would be a pretty good bet that the gods of a world like this probably do not play chess and indeed this is the case. In fact no gods anywhere play chess. They haven't got the

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imagination. Gods prefer simple, vicious games, where you Do Not Achieve Transcendence but Go Straight To Oblivion; a key to the understanding of all religion is that a god's idea of amusement is Snakes and Ladders with greased rungs.

Magic glues the Discworld together – magic generated by the turning of the world itself, magic wound like silk out of the underlying structure of existence to suture the wounds of reality.

A lot of it ends up in the Ramtop Mountains, which stretch from the frozen lands near the Hub all the way, via a lengthy archipelago, to the warm seas which flow endlessly into space over the Rim.

Raw magic crackles invisibly from peak to peak and earths itself in the mountains. It is the Ramtops that supply the world with most of its witches and wizards. In the Ramtops the leaves on the trees move even when there is no breeze. Rocks go for a stroll of an evening.

Even the land, at times, seems alive ...

At times, so does the sky.

The storm was really giving it everything it had. This was its big chance. It had spent years hanging around the provinces, putting in some useful work as a squall, building up experience, making contacts, occasionally leaping out on unsuspecting shepherds or blasting quite small oak trees. Now an opening in the weather had given it an opportunity to strut its hour, and it was building up its role in the hope of being spotted by one of the big climates.

It was a *good* storm. There was quite effective projection and passion there, and critics agreed that if it would only learn to control its thunder it would be, in years to come, a storm to watch.

The woods roared their applause and were full of mists and flying leaves.

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On nights such as these the gods, as has already been pointed out, play games other than chess with the fates of mortals and the thrones of kings. It is important to remember that they always cheat, right up to the end ...

And a coach came hurtling along the rough forest track, jerking violently as the wheels bounced off tree roots. The driver lashed at the team, the desperate crack of his whip providing a rather neat counterpoint to the crash of the tempest overhead.

Behind – only a little way behind, and getting closer – were three hooded riders.

On nights such as this, evil deeds are done. And good deeds, of course. But mostly evil, on the whole.

On nights such as this, witches are abroad.

Well, not actually *abroad*. They don't like the food and you can't trust the water and the shamans always hog the deckchairs. But there was a full moon breasting the ragged clouds and the rushing air was full of whispers and the very broad hint of magic.

In their clearing above the forest the witches spoke thus:

'I'm babysitting on Tuesday,' said the one with no hat but a thatch of white curls so thick she might have been wearing a helmet. 'For our Jason's youngest. I can manage Friday. Hurry up with the tea, luv. I'm that parched.'

The junior member of the trio gave a sigh, and ladled some boiling water out of the cauldron into the teapot.

The third witch patted her hand in a kindly fashion.

'You said it quite well,' she said. 'Just a bit more work on the screeching. Ain't that right, Nanny Ogg?'

'Very useful screeching, I thought,' said Nanny Ogg hurriedly. 'And I can see Goodie Whemper, maysherestinpeace, gave you a lot of help with the squint.'

'It's a good squint,' said Granny Weatherwax.

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The junior witch, whose name was Magrat Garlick, relaxed considerably. She held Granny Weatherwax in awe. It was known throughout the Ramtop Mountains that Mss Weatherwax did not approve of anything very much. If she said it was a good squint, then Magrat's eyes were probably staring up her own nostrils.

Unlike wizards, who like nothing better than a complicated hierarchy, witches don't go in much for the structured approach to career progression. It's up to each individual witch to take on a girl to hand the area over to when she dies. Witches are not by nature gregarious, at least with other witches, and they certainly don't have leaders.

Granny Weatherwax was the most highly-regarded of the leaders they didn't have.

Magrat's hands shook slightly as they made the tea. Of course, it was all very gratifying, but it was a bit nerve-racking to start one's working life as village witch between Granny and, on the other side of the forest, Nanny Ogg. It'd been her idea to form a local coven. She felt it was more, well, occult. To her amazement the other two had agreed or, at least, hadn't disagreed much.

'An oven?' Nanny Ogg had said. 'What'd we want to join an oven for?'

'She means a coven, Gytha,' Granny Weatherwax had explained. 'You know, like in the old days. A meeting.'

'A knees up?' said Nanny Ogg hopefully.

'No dancing,' Granny had warned. 'I don't hold with dancing. Or singing or getting over-excited or all that messing about with ointments and similar.'

'Does you good to get out,' said Nanny happily.

Magrat had been disappointed about the dancing, and was relieved that she hadn't ventured one or two other ideas that had been on her mind. She fumbled in the packet she

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had brought with her. It was her first sabbat, and she was determined to do it right.

‘Would anyone care for a scone?’ she said.

Granny looked hard at hers before she bit. Magrat had baked bat designs on it. They had little eyes made of currants.

The coach crashed through the trees at the forest edge, ran on two wheels for a few seconds as it hit a stone, righted itself against all the laws of balance, and rumbled on. But it was going slower now. The slope was dragging at it.

The coachman, standing upright in the manner of a charioteer, pushed his hair out of his eyes and peered through the murk. No-one lived up here, in the lap of the Ramtops themselves, but there was a light ahead. By all that was merciful, there was a light there.

An arrow buried itself in the coach roof behind him.

Meanwhile King Verence, monarch of Lancre, was making a discovery.

Like most people – most people, at any rate, below the age of sixty or so – Verence hadn’t exercised his mind much about what happened to you when you died. Like most people since the dawn of time, he assumed it all somehow worked out all right in the end.

And, like most people since the dawn of time, he was now dead.

He was in fact lying at the bottom of one of his own stairways in Lancre Castle, with a dagger in his back.

He sat up, and was surprised to find that while someone he was certainly inclined to think of as himself was sitting up, something very much like his body remained lying on the floor.

It was a pretty good body, incidentally, now he came to see it from outside for the first time. He had always been

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quite attached to it although, he had to admit, this did not now seem to be the case.

It was big and well-muscled. He'd looked after it. He'd allowed it a moustache and long-flowing locks. He'd seen it got plenty of healthy outdoor exercise and lots of red meat. Now, just when a body would have been useful, it had let him down. Or out.

On top of that, he had to come to terms with the tall, thin figure standing beside him. Most of it was hidden in a hooded black robe, but the one arm which extended from the folds to grip a large scythe was made of bone.

When one is dead, there are things one instinctively recognizes.

HALLO.

Verence drew himself up to his full height, or what would have been his full height if that part of him to which the word 'height' could have been applied was not lying stiff on the floor and facing a future in which only the word 'depth' could be appropriate.

'*I am* a king, mark you,' he said.

WAS, YOUR MAJESTY.

'What?' Verence barked.

I SAID WAS. IT'S CALLED THE PAST TENSE. YOU'LL SOON GET USED TO IT.

The tall figure tapped its calcareous fingers on the scythe's handle. It was obviously upset about something.

If it came to that, Verence thought, so am I. But the various broad hints available in his present circumstances were breaking through even the mad brain stupidity that made up most of his character, and it was dawning on him that whatever kingdom he might currently be in, he wasn't king of it.

'Are you Death, fellow?' he ventured.

I HAVE MANY NAMES.

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‘Which one are you using at present?’ said Verence, with a shade more deference. There were people milling around them; in fact, quite a few people were milling *through* them, like ghosts.

‘Oh, so it was Felmet,’ the king added vaguely, looking at the figure lurking with obscene delight at the top of the stairs. ‘My father said I should never let him get behind me. Why don’t I feel angry?’

GLANDS, said Death shortly. ADRENALIN AND SO FORTH. AND EMOTIONS. YOU DON’T HAVE THEM. ALL YOU HAVE NOW IS THOUGHT.

The tall figure appeared to reach a decision.

THIS IS VERY IRREGULAR, he went on, apparently to himself. HOWEVER, WHO AM I TO ARGUE?

‘Who indeed.’

WHAT?

‘I said, who indeed.’

SHUT UP.

Death stood with his skull on one side, as though listening to some inner voice. As his hood fell away the late king noticed that Death resembled a polished skeleton in every way but one. His eye sockets glowed sky blue. Verence wasn’t frightened, however; not simply because it is difficult to be in fear of anything when the bits you need to be frightened *with* are curdling several yards away, but because he had never really been frightened of anything in his life, and wasn’t going to start now. This was partly because he didn’t have the imagination, but he was also one of those rare individuals who are totally focused in time.

Most people aren’t. They live their lives as a sort of temporal blur around the point where their body actually is – anticipating the future, or holding on to the past. They’re usually so busy thinking about what happens next that the only time they ever find out what is happening now is when

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they come to look back on it. Most people are like this. They learn how to fear because they can actually tell, down at the subconscious level, what is going to happen next. It's already happening to them.

But Verence had always lived only for the present. Until now, anyway.

Death sighed.

I SUPPOSE NO-ONE MENTIONED ANYTHING TO YOU? he hazarded.

'Say again?'

NO PREMONITIONS? STRANGE DREAMS? MAD OLD SOOTH-SAYERS SHOUTING THINGS AT YOU IN THE STREET?

'About what? Dying?'

NO, I SUPPOSE NOT. IT WOULD BE TOO MUCH TO EXPECT, said Death sourly. THEY LEAVE IT ALL TO ME.

'Who do?' said Verence, mystified.

FATE. DESTINY. ALL THE REST OF THEM. Death laid a hand on the king's shoulder. THE FACT IS, I'M AFRAID, YOU'RE DUE TO BECOME A GHOST.

'Oh.' He looked down at his ... body, which seemed solid enough. Then someone walked through him.

DON'T LET IT UPSET YOU.

Verence watched his own stiff corpse being carried reverentially from the hall.

'I'll try,' he said.

GOOD MAN.

'I don't think I will be up to all that business with the white sheets and the chains, though,' he said. 'Do I have to walk around moaning and screaming?'

Death shrugged. DO YOU WANT TO? he said.

'No.'

THEN I SHOULDN'T BOTHER, IF I WERE YOU. Death pulled an hour-glass from the recesses of his dark robe and inspected it closely.



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AND NOW I REALLY MUST BE GOING, he said. He turned on his heel, put his scythe over his shoulder and started to walk out of the hall through the wall.

'I say? Just hold on there!' shouted Verence, running after him.

Death didn't look back. Verence followed him through the wall; it was like walking through fog.

'Is that all?' he demanded. 'I mean, how long will I be a ghost? *Why* am I a ghost? You can't just leave me like this.' He halted and raised an imperious, slightly transparent finger. 'Stop! I command you!'

Death shook his head gloomily, and stepped through the next wall. The king hurried after him with as much dignity as he could still muster, and found Death fiddling with the girths of a large white horse standing on the battlements. It was wearing a nosebag.

'You can't leave me like this!' he repeated, in the face of the evidence.

Death turned to him.

I CAN, he said. YOU'RE UNDEAD, YOU SEE. GHOSTS INHABIT A WORLD BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD. IT'S NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY. He patted the king on the shoulder. DON'T WORRY, he said, IT WON'T BE FOR EVER.

'Good.'

IT MAY *SEEM* LIKE FOR EVER.

'How long will it really be?'

UNTIL YOU HAVE FULFILLED YOUR DESTINY, I ASSUME.

'And how will I know what my destiny is?' said the king, desperately.

CAN'T HELP THERE. I'M SORRY.

'Well, how can I find out?'

THESE THINGS GENERALLY BECOME APPARENT, I UNDERSTAND, said Death, and swung himself into the saddle.

'And until then I have to haunt this place.' King Verence

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stared around at the draughty battlements. 'All alone, I suppose. Won't anyone be able to see me?'

OH, THE PSYCHICALLY INCLINED. CLOSE RELATIVES. AND CATS, OF COURSE.

'I hate cats.'

Death's face became a little stiffer, if that were possible. The blue glow in his eye sockets flickered red for an instant.

I SEE, he said. The tone suggested that death was too good for cat-haters. YOU LIKE GREAT BIG DOGS, I IMAGINE.

'As a matter of fact, I do.' The king stared gloomily at the dawn. His dogs. He'd really miss his dogs. And it looked like such a good hunting day.

He wondered if ghosts hunted. Almost certainly not, he imagined. Or ate, or drank either for that matter, and that was really depressing. He liked a big noisy banquet and had quaffed\* many a pint of good ale. And bad ale, come to that. He'd never been able to tell the difference till the following morning, usually.

He kicked despondently at a stone, and noted gloomily that his foot went right through it. No hunting, drinking, carousing, no wassailing, no hawking ... It was dawning on him that the pleasures of the flesh were pretty sparse without the flesh. Suddenly life wasn't worth living. The fact that he wasn't living it didn't cheer him up at all.

SOME PEOPLE *LIKE* TO BE GHOSTS, said Death.

'Hmm?' said Verence, gloomily.

IT'S NOT SUCH A WRENCH, I ASSUME. THEY CAN SEE HOW THEIR DESCENDANTS GET ON. SORRY? IS SOMETHING THE MATTER?

But Verence had vanished into the wall.

DON'T MIND ME, WILL YOU, said Death, peevishly. He looked around him with a gaze that could see through time

\* Quaffing is like drinking, but you spill more.

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and space and the souls of men, and noted a landslide in distant Klatch, a hurricane in Howandaland, a plague in Hergen.

BUSY, BUSY, he muttered, and spurred his horse into the sky.

Verence ran through the walls of his own castle. His feet barely touched the ground – in fact, the unevenness of the floor meant that at times they didn't touch the ground at all.

As a king he was used to treating servants as if they were not there, and running through them as a ghost was almost the same. The only difference was that they didn't stand aside.

Verence reached the nursery, saw the broken door, the trailed sheets ...

Heard the hoofbeats. He reached the window, saw his own horse go full tilt through the open gateway in the shafts of the coach. A few seconds later three horsemen followed it. The sound of hooves echoed for a moment on the cobbles and died away.

The king thumped the sill, his fist going several inches into the stone.

Then he pushed his way out into the air, disdaining to notice the drop, and half flew, half ran down across the courtyard and into the stables.

It took him a mere twenty seconds to learn that, to the great many things a ghost cannot do, should be added the mounting of a horse. He did succeed in getting into the saddle, or at least in straddling the air just above it, but when the horse finally bolted, terrified beyond belief by the mysterious things happening behind its ears, Verence was left sitting astride five feet of fresh air.

He tried to run, and got about as far as the gateway before the air around him thickened to the consistency of tar.

'You can't,' said a sad, old voice behind him. 'You have

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to stay where you were killed. That's what haunting means. Take it from me. I know.'

Granny Weatherwax paused with a second scone halfway to her mouth.

'Something comes,' she said.

'Can you tell by the pricking of your thumbs?' said Magrat earnestly. Magrat had learned a lot about witchcraft from books.

'The pricking of my ears,' said Granny. She raised her eyebrows at Nanny Ogg. Old Goodie Whemper had been an excellent witch in her way, but far too *fanciful*. Too many flowers and romantic notions and such.

The occasional flash of lightning showed the moorland stretching down to the forest, but the rain on the warm summer earth had filled the air with mist wraiths.

'Hoofbeats?' said Nanny Ogg. 'No-one would come up here this time of night.'

Magrat peered around timidly. Here and there on the moor were huge standing stones, their origins lost in time, which were said to lead mobile and private lives of their own. She shivered.

'What's to be afraid of?' she managed.

'Us,' said Granny Weatherwax, smugly.

The hoofbeats neared, slowed. And then the coach rattled between the furze bushes, its horses hanging in their harnesses. The driver leapt down, ran around to the door, pulled a large bundle from inside and dashed towards the trio.

He was halfway across the damp peat when he stopped and stared at Granny Weatherwax with a look of horror.

'It's all right,' she whispered, and the whisper cut through the grumbling of the storm as clearly as a bell.

She took a few steps forward and a convenient lightning flash allowed her to look directly into the man's eyes. They

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had the peculiarity of focus that told those who had the Know that he was no longer looking at anything in this world.

With a final jerking movement he thrust the bundle into Granny's arms and toppled forward, the feathers of a crossbow bolt sticking out of his back.

Three figures moved into the firelight. Granny looked up into another pair of eyes, which were as chilly as the slopes of Hell.

Their owner threw his crossbow aside. There was a glimpse of chain mail under his sodden cloak as he drew his sword.

He didn't flourish it. The eyes that didn't leave Granny's face weren't the eyes of one who bothers about flourishing things. They were the eyes of one who knows exactly what swords are for. He reached out his hand.

'You will give it to me,' he said.

Granny twitched aside the blanket in her arms and looked down at a small face, wrapped in sleep.

She looked up.

'No,' she said, on general principles.

The soldier glanced from her to Magrat and Nanny Ogg, who were as still as the standing stones of the moor.

'You are witches?' he said.

Granny nodded. Lightning skewered down from the sky and a bush a hundred yards away blossomed into fire. The two soldiers behind the man muttered something, but he smiled and raised a mailed hand.

'Does the skin of witches turn aside steel?' he said.

'Not that I'm aware,' said Granny, levelly. 'You could give it a try.'

One of the soldiers stepped forward and touched the man's arm gingerly.

'Sir, with respect, sir, it's not a good idea—'

'Be silent.'

'But it's terrible bad luck to—'

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‘Must I ask you again?’

‘Sir,’ said the man. His eyes caught Granny’s for a moment, and reflected hopeless terror.

The leader grinned at Granny, who hadn’t moved a muscle.

‘Your peasant magic is for fools, mother of the night. I can strike you down where you stand.’

‘Then strike, man,’ said Granny, looking over his shoulder. ‘If your heart tells you, strike as hard as you dare.’

The man raised his sword. Lightning speared down again and split a stone a few yards away, filling the air with smoke and the stink of burnt silicon.

‘Missed,’ he said smugly, and Granny saw his muscles tense as he prepared to bring the sword down.

A look of extreme puzzlement crossed his face. He tilted his head sideways and opened his mouth, as if trying to come to terms with a new idea. His sword dropped out of his hand and landed point downwards in the peat. Then he gave a sigh and folded up, very gently, collapsing in a heap at Granny’s feet.

She gave him a gentle prod with her toe. ‘Perhaps you weren’t aware of what I was aiming at,’ she whispered. ‘Mother of the night, indeed!’

The soldier who had tried to restrain the man stared in horror at the bloody dagger in his hand, and backed away.

‘I-I-I couldn’t let. He shouldn’t of. It’s – it’s not right to,’ he stuttered.

‘Are you from around these parts, young man?’ said Granny.

He dropped to his knees. ‘Mad Wolf, ma’am,’ he said. He stared back at the fallen captain. ‘They’ll kill me now!’ he wailed.

‘But you did what you thought was right,’ said Granny.

‘I didn’t become a soldier for this. Not to go round killing people.’

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‘Exactly right. If I was you, I’d become a sailor,’ said Granny thoughtfully. ‘Yes, a nautical career. I should start as soon as possible. Now, in fact. Run off, man. Run off to sea where there are no tracks. You will have a long and successful life, I promise.’ She looked thoughtful for a moment, and added, ‘At least, longer than it’s likely to be if you hang around here.’

He pulled himself upward, gave her a look compounded of gratitude and awe, and ran off into the mist.

‘And now perhaps someone will tell us what this is all about?’ said Granny, turning to the third man.

To where the third man had been.

There was the distant drumming of hooves on the turf, and then silence.

Nanny Ogg hobbled forward.

‘I could catch him,’ she said. ‘What do you think?’

Granny shook her head. She sat down on a rock and looked at the child in her arms. It was a boy, no more than two years old, and quite naked under the blanket. She rocked him vaguely and stared at nothing.

Nanny Ogg examined the two corpses with the air of one for whom laying-out holds no fears.

‘Perhaps they were bandits,’ said Magrat tremulously.

Nanny shook her head.

‘A strange thing,’ she said. ‘They both wear this same badge. Two bears on a black and gold shield. Anyone know what that means?’

‘It’s the badge of King Verence,’ said Magrat.

‘Who’s he?’ said Granny Weatherwax.

‘He rules this country,’ said Magrat.

‘Oh. That king,’ said Granny, as if the matter was hardly worth noting.

‘Soldiers fighting one another. Doesn’t make sense,’ said Nanny Ogg. ‘Magrat, you have a look in the coach.’