

This is the Discworld, which travels through space on the back of four elephants which themselves stand on the shell of Great A'Tuin, the sky turtle.

Once upon a time such a universe was considered unusual and, possibly, impossible.

But then . . . it used to be so simple, once upon a time.

Because the universe was full of ignorance all around and the scientist panned through it like a prospector crouched over a mountain stream, looking for the gold of knowledge among the gravel of unreason, the sand of uncertainty and the little whiskery eight-legged swimming things of superstition.

Occasionally he would straighten up and say things like 'Hurrah, I've discovered Boyle's Third Law.' And everyone knew where they stood. But the trouble was that ignorance became more interesting, especially big fascinating ignorance about huge and important things like matter and creation, and people stopped patiently building their little houses of rational sticks in the chaos of the universe and started getting interested in the chaos itself – partly

because it was a lot easier to be an expert on chaos, but mostly because it made really good patterns that you could put on a t-shirt.

And instead of getting on with proper science* scientists suddenly went around saying how impossible it was to know anything, and that there wasn't really anything you could call reality to know anything about, and how all this was tremendously exciting, and incidentally did you know there were possibly all these little universes all over the place but no one can see them because they are all curved in on themselves? Incidentally, don't you think this is a rather good t-shirt?

Compared to all this, a large turtle with a world on its back is practically mundane. At least it doesn't pretend it doesn't exist, and no one on the Discworld ever tried to *prove* it didn't exist in case they turned out to be right and found themselves suddenly floating in empty space. This is because the Discworld exists right on the edge of reality. The least little things can break through to the other side. So, on the Discworld, people take things seriously.

Like stories.

Because stories are important.

People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around.

Stories exist independently of their players. If you know that, the knowledge is power.

*Like finding that bloody butterfly whose flapping wings cause all these storms we've been having lately and getting it to stop.

Stories, great flapping ribbons of shaped space-time, have been blowing and uncoiling around the universe since the beginning of time. And they have evolved. The weakest have died and the strongest have survived and they have grown fat on the re-telling . . . stories, twisting and blowing through the darkness.

And their very existence overlays a faint but insistent pattern on the chaos that is history. Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper.

This is called the theory of narrative causality and it means that a story, once started, *takes a shape*. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been.

This is why history keeps on repeating all the time.

So a thousand heroes have stolen fire from the gods. A thousand wolves have eaten grandmother, a thousand princesses have been kissed. A million unknowing actors have moved, unknowing, through the pathways of story.

It is now *impossible* for the third and youngest son of any king, if he should embark on a quest which has so far claimed his older brothers, *not* to succeed.

Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats. Or, if you prefer to think of it like this:

stories are a parasitical life form, warping lives in the service only of the story itself.*

It takes a special kind of person to fight back, and become the bicarbonate of history.

Once upon a time . . .

Grey hands gripped the hammer and swung it, striking the post so hard that it sank a foot into the soft earth.

Two more blows and it was fixed immovably.

From the trees around the clearing the snakes and birds watched silently. In the swamp the alligators drifted like patches of bad-assed water.

Grey hands took up the crosspiece and fixed it in place, tying it with creepers, pulling them so tight that they creaked.

She watched him. And then she took up a fragment of mirror and tied it to the top of the post.

‘The coat,’ she said.

He took up the coat and fitted it over the crosspiece.

*And people are wrong about urban myths. Logic and reason say that these are fictional creations, retold again and again by people who are hungry for evidence of weird coincidence, natural justice and so on. They aren't. *They keep on happening all the time, everywhere*, as the stories bounce back and forth across the universe. At any one time hundreds of dead grandmothers are being whisked away on the roof-racks of stolen cars and loyal alsatians are choking on the fingers of midnight burglars. And they're not confined to any one world. Hundreds of female Mercurian *jivpts* turn four tiny eyes on their rescuers and say, ‘My brood-husband will be livid – it was *his* travel module.’ Urban myths are alive.

The pole wasn't long enough, so that the last few inches of sleeve draped empty.

'And the hat,' she said.

It was tall, and round, and black. It glistened.

The piece of mirror gleamed between the darkness of the hat and the coat.

'Will it work?' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'Even mirrors have their reflection. We got to fight mirrors with mirrors.' She glared up through the trees to a slim white tower in the distance. 'We've got to find *her* reflection.'

'It'll have to reach out a long way, then.'

'Yes. We need all the help we can get.'

She looked around the clearing.

She had called upon Mister Safe Way, Lady Bon Anna, Hotaloga Andrews and Stride Wide Man. They probably weren't very good gods.

But they were the best she'd been able to make.

This is a story about stories.

Or what it really means to be a fairy godmother.

But it's also, particularly, about reflections and mirrors.

All across the multiverse there are backward tribes* who distrust mirrors and images because, they say, they steal a bit of a person's soul and there's only so much of a person to go around. And the

*Considered backward, that is, by people who wear more clothes than they do.

people who wear more clothes say this is just superstition, despite the fact that other people who spend their lives appearing in images of one sort or another seem to develop a *thin* quality. It's put down to over-work and, tellingly, *over-exposure* instead.

Just superstition. But a superstition doesn't have to be wrong.

A mirror can suck up a piece of soul. A mirror can contain the reflection of the whole universe, a whole skyful of stars in a piece of silvered glass no thicker than a breath.

Know about mirrors and you nearly know everything.

Look into the mirror . . .

. . . further . . .

. . . to an orange light on a cold mountaintop, thousands of miles from the vegetable warmth of that swamp . . .

Local people called it the Bear Mountain. This was because it was a *bare* mountain, not because it had a lot of bears on it. This caused a certain amount of profitable confusion, though; people often strode into the nearest village with heavy duty crossbows, traps and nets and called haughtily for native guides to lead them to the bears. Since everyone locally was making quite a good living out of this, what with the sale of guide books, maps of bear caves, ornamental cuckoo-clocks with bears on them, bear walking-sticks and cakes baked in the shape of a

bear, somehow no one had time to go and correct the spelling.*

It was about as bare as a mountain could be.

Most of the trees gave out about halfway to the top, only a few pines hanging on to give an effect very similar to the couple of pathetic strands teased across his scalp by a baldie who won't own up.

It was a place where witches met.

Tonight a fire gleamed on the very crest of the hill. Dark figures moved in the flickering light.

The moon coasted across a lacework of clouds.

Finally, a tall, pointy-hatted figure said, 'You mean *everyone* brought potato salad?'

There was one Ramtop witch who was not attending the sabbat. Witches like a night out as much as anyone else but, in this case, she had a more pressing appointment. And it wasn't the kind of appointment you can put off easily.

Desiderata Hollow was making her will.

When Desiderata Hollow was a girl, her grandmother had given her four important pieces of advice to guide her young footsteps on the unexpectedly twisting pathway of life.

*Bad spelling can be lethal. For example, the greedy Seriph of Al-Ybi was once cursed by a badly-educated deity and for some days everything he touched turned to Glod, which happened to be the name of a small dwarf from a mountain community hundreds of miles away who found himself magically dragged to the kingdom and relentlessly duplicated. Some two thousand Glods later the spell wore off. These days, the people of Al-Ybi are renowned for being unusually short and bad-tempered.

They were:

Never trust a dog with orange eyebrows,
Always get the young man's name and address,
Never get between two mirrors,

And always wear completely clean underwear every day because you never knew when you were going to be knocked down and killed by a runaway horse and if people found you had unsatisfactory underwear on, you'd die of shame.

And then Desiderata grew up to become a witch. And one of the minor benefits of being a witch is that you know exactly when you're going to die and can wear what underwear you like.*

That had been eighty years earlier, when the idea of knowing exactly when you were going to die had seemed quite attractive because secretly, of course, you knew you were going to live forever.

That was then.

And this was now.

Forever didn't seem to last as long these days as once it did.

Another log crumbled to ash in the fireplace. Desiderata hadn't bothered to order any fuel for the winter. Not much point, really.

And then, of course, there was this other thing . . .

She'd wrapped it up carefully into a long, slim package. Now she folded up the letter, addressed it, and pushed it under the string. Job done.

She looked up. Desiderata had been blind for thirty years, but this hadn't been a problem. She'd

*Which explains a lot about witches.

always been blessed, if that was the word, with second sight. So when the ordinary eyes gave out you just trained yourself to see into the present, which anyway was easier than the future. And since the eyeball of the occult didn't depend on light, you saved on candles. There was always a silver lining, if you knew where to look. In a manner of speaking.

There was a mirror on the wall in front of her.

The face in it was not her own, which was round and pink.

It was the face of a woman who was used to giving orders. Desiderata wasn't the sort to give orders. Quite the reverse, in fact.

The woman said, 'You are dying, Desiderata.'

'I am that, too.'

'You've grown old. Your sort always do. Your power is nearly gone.'

'That's a fact, Lilith,' said Desiderata mildly.

'So your protection is withdrawing from her.'

'Fraid so,' said Desiderata.

'So now it's just me and the evil swamp woman. And I will win.'

'That's how it seems, I'm afraid.'

'You should have found a successor.'

'Never had the time. I'm not the planning sort, you know.'

The face in the mirror got closer, as if the figure had moved a little nearer to its side of the mirror.

'You've *lost*, Desiderata Hollow.'

'So it goes.' Desiderata got to her feet, a little unsteadily, and picked up a cloth.

The figure seemed to be getting angry. It clearly

felt that people who had lost ought to look downcast, and not as if they were enjoying a joke at your expense.

‘Don’t you understand what losing *means*?’

‘Some people are very clear about that,’ said Desiderata. ‘Goodbye, m’lady.’ She hung the cloth over the mirror.

There was an angry intake of breath, and then silence.

Desiderata stood as if lost in thought.

Then she raised her head, and said: ‘Kettle boiled just now. Would you like a cup of tea?’

NO, THANK YOU, said a voice right behind her.

‘How long have you been waiting?’

FOREVER.

‘Not keeping you, am I?’

IT’S A QUIET NIGHT.

‘I’m making a cup of tea. I think there’s one biscuit left.’

NO, THANK YOU.

‘If you feel peckish, it’s in the jar on the mantelpiece. That’s genuine Klatchian pottery, you know. Made by a genuine Klatchian craftsman. From Klatch,’ she added.

INDEED?

‘I used to get about a lot in my younger days.’

YES?

‘Great times.’ Desiderata poked the fire. ‘It was the job, you see. Of course, I expect it’s very much the same for you.’

YES.

‘I never knew when I was going to be called out.

Well, of course you'd know about that, wouldn't you. Kitchens, mainly. It always seemed to be kitchens. Balls sometimes, but generally it was kitchens.' She picked up the kettle and poured the boiling water into the teapot on the hearth.

INDEED.

'I used to grant their wishes.'

Death looked puzzled.

WHAT? YOU MEAN LIKE . . . FITTED CUPBOARDS? NEW SINKS? THAT KIND OF THING?

'No, no. The *people*.' Desiderata sighed. 'It's a big responsibility, fairy godmothering. Knowing when to stop, I mean. People whose wishes get granted often don't turn out to be very nice people. So should you give them what they want – or what they *need*?'

Death nodded politely. From his point of view, people got what they were given.

'Like this Genua thing—' Desiderata began.

Death looked up sharply.

GENUA?

'You know it? Well, of course you would.'

I . . . KNOW EVERYWHERE, OF COURSE.

Desiderata's expression softened. Her inner eyes were looking elsewhere.

'There were two of us. Godmothers go in twos, you know. Me and Lady Lilith? There's a lot of power in godmothering. It's like being part of history. Anyway, the girl was born, out of wedlock but none the worse for that, it wasn't as if they couldn't have married, they just never got round to it . . . and Lilith wished for her to have beauty and power and marry a prince. Hah! And she's been

working on that ever since. What could I do? You can't argue with wishes like that. Lilith knows the power of a story. I've done the best I could, but Lilith's got the power. I hear she runs the city now. Changing a whole country just to make a story work! And now it's too late anyway. For me. So I'm handing on the responsibility. That's how it goes, with fairy godmothering. No one ever *wants* to be a fairy godmother. Except Lilith, of course. Got a bee in her bonnet about it. So I'm sending someone else. I may have left things too late.'

Desiderata was a kindly soul. Fairy godmothers develop a very deep understanding about human nature, which makes the good ones kind and the bad ones powerful. She was not someone to use extreme language, but it was possible to be sure that when she deployed a mild term like 'a bee in her bonnet' she was using it to define someone whom she believed to be several miles over the madness horizon and accelerating.

She poured out the tea.

'That's the trouble with second sight,' she said. 'You can *see* what's happenin', but you don't know what it *means*. I've seen the future. There's a coach made out of a pumpkin. And that's impossible. And there's coachmen made out of mice, which is unlikely. And there's a clock striking midnight, and something about a glass slipper. And it's all going to happen. Because that's how stories have to work. And then I thought: I knows some people who make stories work *their* way.'

She sighed again. 'Wish *I* was going to Genua,'

she said. 'I could do with the warmth. And it's Fat Tuesday coming up. Always went to Genua for Fat Tuesday in the old days.'

There was an expectant silence.

Then Death said, YOU SURELY ARE NOT ASKING ME TO GRANT A WISH?

'Hah! *No one* grants a fairy godmother's wishes.' Desiderata had that inward look again, her voice talking to herself. 'See? I got to get the three of them to Genua. Got to get 'em there because I've *seen* 'em there. Got to be all three. And that ain't easy, with people like them. Got to use headology. Got to make 'em send 'emselves. Tell Esme Weatherwax she's got to go somewhere and she won't go out of contrariness, so tell her she's not to go and she'll run there over broken glass. That's the thing about the Weatherwaxes, see. They don't know how to be beaten.'

Something seemed to strike her as funny.

'But *one* of 'em's going to have to *learn*.'

Death said nothing. From where he sat, Desiderata reflected, losing was something that everyone learned.

She drained her tea. Then she stood up, put on her pointy hat with a certain amount of ceremony, and hobbled out of the back door.

There was a deep trench dug under the trees a little way from the house, down into which someone had thoughtfully put a short ladder. She climbed in and, with some difficulty, heaved the ladder on to the leaves. Then she lay down. She sat up.

'Mr Chert the troll down at the sawmill does

a very good deal on coffins, if you don't mind pine.'

I SHALL DEFINITELY BEAR IT IN MIND.

'I got Hurker the poacher to dig the hole out for me,' she said conversationally, 'and he's goin' to come along and fill it in on his way home. I believe in being neat. Take it away, maestro.'

WHAT? OH. A FIGURE OF SPEECH.

He raised his scythe.

Desiderata Hollow went to her rest.

'Well,' she said, 'that was easy. What happens now?'

And this *is* Genua. The magical kingdom. The diamond city. The fortunate country.

In the centre of the city a woman stood between two mirrors, watching herself reflected all the way to infinity.

The mirrors were themselves in the centre of an octagon of mirrors, open to the sky on the highest tower of the palace. There were so many reflections, in fact, that it was only with extreme difficulty that you could tell where the mirrors ended and the real person began.

Her name was Lady Lilith de Tempscire, although she had answered to many others in the course of a long and eventful life. And that was something you learned to do early on, she'd found. If you wanted to get anywhere in this world – and she'd decided, right at the start, that she wanted to get as far as it was possible to go – you wore names lightly, and you took power anywhere you found it. She had

buried three husbands, and at least two of them had been already dead.

And you moved around a lot. Because most people *didn't* move around much. Change countries and your name and, if you had the right manner, the world was your mollusc. For example, she'd had to go a mere hundred miles to become a Lady.

She'd go to any lengths now . . .

The two main mirrors were set almost, but not quite, facing one another, so that Lilith could see over her shoulder and watch her images curve away around the universe inside the mirror.

She could feel *herself* pouring into *herself*, multiplying itself via the endless reflections.

When Lilith sighed and strode out from the space between the mirrors the effect was startling. Images of Lilith hung in the air behind her for a moment, like three-dimensional shadows, before fading.

So . . . Desiderata was dying. Interfering old baggage. She deserved death. She'd never understood the kind of power she'd had. She was one of those people afraid to do good for fear of doing harm, who took it all so seriously that they'd constipate themselves with moral anguish before granting the wish of a single ant.

Lilith looked down and out over the city. Well, there were no barriers now. The stupid voodoo woman in the swamp was a mere distraction, with no understanding.

Nothing stood in the way of what Lilith liked more than anything else.

A happy ending.

* * *

Up on the mountain, the sabbat had settled down a bit. Artists and writers have always had a rather exaggerated idea about what goes on at a witches' sabbat. This comes from spending too much time in small rooms with the curtains drawn, instead of getting out in the healthy fresh air.

For example, there's the dancing around naked. In the average temperate climate there are very few nights when anyone would dance around at midnight with no clothes on, quite apart from the question of stones, thistles, and sudden hedgehogs.

Then there's all that business with goat-headed gods. Most witches don't believe in gods. They know that the gods exist, of course. They even deal with them occasionally. But they don't believe in them. They know them too well. It would be like believing in the postman.

And there's the food and drink – the bits of reptile and so on. In fact, witches don't go for that sort of thing. The worst you can say about the eating habits of the older type of witch is that they tend to like ginger biscuits dipped in tea with so much sugar in it that the spoon won't move *and* will drink it out of the saucer if they think it's too hot. And do so with appreciative noises more generally associated with the cheaper type of plumbing system. Legs of toad and so on might be better than this.

Then there's the mystic ointments. By sheer luck, the artists and writers are on firmer ground here. Most witches are elderly, which is when ointments start to have an attraction, and at least two of those

present tonight were wearing Granny Weatherwax's famous goose-grease-and-sage chest liniment. This didn't make you fly and see visions, but it *did* prevent colds, if only because the distressing smell that developed around about the second week kept everyone else so far away you couldn't catch anything from them.

And finally there's sabbats themselves. Your average witch is not, by nature, a social animal as far as other witches are concerned. There's a conflict of dominant personalities. There's a group of ring-leaders without a ring. There's the basic unwritten rule of witchcraft, which is 'Don't do what you will, do what I say.' The natural size of a coven is one. Witches only get together when they can't avoid it.

Like now.

The conversation, given Desiderata's absence, had naturally turned to the increasing shortage of witches.*

'What, no one?' said Granny Weatherwax.

'No one,' said Gammer Brevis.

'I call that terrible,' said Granny. 'That's disgusting.'

'Eh?' said Old Mother Dismass.

'She calls it disgusting!' shouted Gammer Brevis.

'Eh?'

'There's no girl to put forward! To take Desiderata's place!'

*Desiderata had sent a note via Old Mother Dismass asking to be excused on account of being dead. Second sight enables you to keep a very tight rein on your social engagements.

‘Oh.’

The implications of this sank in.

‘If anyone doesn’t want their crusts I’ll ’ave ’em,’ said Nanny Ogg.

‘We never had this sort of thing in my young days,’ said Granny. ‘There was a dozen witches this side of the mountain alone. Of course, that was before all this’ – she made a face – ‘making your own entertainment. There’s far too much of this making your own entertainment these days. We never made our own entertainment when I was a girl. We never had time.’

‘Tempers fuggit,’ said Nanny Ogg.

‘What?’

‘Tempers fuggit. Means that was then and this is now,’ said Nanny.

‘I don’t need no one to tell me that, Gytha Ogg. I know when now is.’

‘You got to move with the times.’

‘I don’t see why. Don’t see why we—’

‘So I reckon we got to shift the boundaries again,’ said Gammer Brevis.

‘Can’t do that,’ said Granny Weatherwax promptly. ‘I’m doing four villages already. The broomstick hardly has time to cool down.’

‘Well, with Mother Hollow passing on, we’re definitely short handed,’ said Gammer Brevis. ‘I know she didn’t do a lot, what with her other work, but she was there. That’s what it’s all about. Being there. There’s got to be a local witch.’

The four witches stared gloomily at the fire. Well, three of them did. Nanny Ogg, who tended to look on the cheerful side, made toast.

‘They’ve got a wizard in, down in Creel Springs,’ said Gammer Brevis. ‘There wasn’t anyone to take over when old Granny Hopliss passed on, so they sent off to Ankh-Morpork for a wizard. An actual wizard. With a staff. He’s got a shop there and everything, with a brass sign on the door. It says “Wizard”.’

The witches sighed.

‘Mrs Singe passed on,’ said Gammer Brevis. ‘And Gammer Peavey passed on.’

‘Did she? Old Mabel Peavey?’ said Nanny Ogg, through a shower of crumbs. ‘How old was she?’

‘One hundred and nineteen,’ said Gammer Brevis. ‘I said to her, “You don’t want to go climbing mountains at your age” but she wouldn’t listen.’

‘Some people are like that,’ said Granny. ‘Stubborn as mules. Tell them they mustn’t do something and they won’t stop till they’ve tried it.’

‘I actually heard her very last words,’ said Gammer.

‘What did she say?’ said Granny.

‘As I recall, “oh bugger”,’ said Gammer.

‘It’s the way she would have wanted to go,’ said Nanny Ogg. The other witches nodded.

‘You know . . . we could be looking at the end of witchcraft in these parts,’ said Gammer Brevis.

They stared at the fire again.

‘I don’t ’spect anyone’s brought any marsh-mallows?’ said Nanny Ogg, hopefully.

Granny Weatherwax looked at her sister witches. Gammer Brevis she couldn’t stand; the old woman taught school on the other side of the mountain, and

had a nasty habit of being reasonable when provoked. And Old Mother Dismass was possibly the most useless sibyl in the history of oracular revelation. And Granny really couldn't be having at all with Nanny Ogg, who was her best friend.

'What about young Magrat?' said Old Mother Dismass innocently. 'Her patch runs right alongside Desiderata's. Maybe she could take on a bit extra?'

Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg exchanged glances.

'She's gone funny in the head,' said Granny.

'Now, come on, Esme,' said Nanny Ogg.

'Well, *I* call it funny,' said Granny. 'You can't tell me that saying all that stuff about relatives isn't going funny in the head.'

'She didn't say that,' said Nanny. 'She said she wanted to relate to herself.'

'That's what I said,' said Granny Weatherwax. 'I told her: Simplicity Garlick was your mother, Araminta Garlick was your granny. Yolande Garlick is your aunt and you're your . . . you're your *me*.'

She sat back with the satisfied look of someone who has solved everything anyone could ever want to know about a personal identity crisis.

'She wouldn't listen,' she added.

Gammer Brevis wrinkled her forehead.

'Magrat?' she said. She tried to get a mental picture of the Ramtops' youngest witch and recalled – well, not a face, just a slightly watery-eyed expression of hopeless goodwill wedged between a body like a maypole and hair like a haystack after a gale. A relentless doer of good works. A worrier. The kind

of person who rescued small lost baby birds and cried when they died, which is the function kind old Mother Nature usually reserves for small lost baby birds.

‘Doesn’t sound like her,’ she said.

‘And she said she wanted to be more self-assertive,’ said Granny.

‘Nothing wrong with being self-assertive,’ said Nanny. ‘Self-asserting’s what witching’s all about.’

‘I never said there was anything wrong with it,’ said Granny. ‘I told her there was nothing wrong with it. You can be as self-assertive as you like, I said, just so long as you do what you’re told.’

‘Rub this on and it’ll clear up in a week or two,’ said Old Mother Dismass.

The other three witches watched her expectantly, in case there was going to be anything else. It became clear that there wasn’t.

‘And she’s running – what’s that she’s running, Gytha?’ said Granny.

‘Self-defence classes,’ said Nanny.

‘But she’s a witch,’ Gammer Brevis pointed out.

‘I told her that,’ said Granny Weatherwax, who had walked nightly without fear in the bandit-haunted forests of the mountains all her life in the certain knowledge that the darkness held nothing more terrible than she was. ‘She said that wasn’t the point. *Wasn’t the point*. That’s what she said.’

‘No one goes to them, anyway,’ said Nanny Ogg.

‘I thought she was going to get married to the king,’ said Gammer Brevis.

‘Everyone did,’ said Nanny. ‘But you know Magrat. She tends to be open to Ideas. Now she says she refuses to be a sex object.’

They all thought about this. Finally Gammer Brevis said, slowly, in the manner of one surfacing from the depths of fascinated cogitation, ‘But she’s never *been* a sex object.’

‘I’m pleased to say I don’t even know what a sex object *is*,’ said Granny Weatherwax firmly.

‘I do,’ said Nanny Ogg.

They looked at her.

‘Our Shane brought one home from foreign parts once.’

They carried on looking at her.

‘It was brown and fat and had beads on and a face and two holes for the string.’

This didn’t seem to avert their gaze.

‘Well, that’s what he said it was,’ said Nanny.

‘I think you’re talking about a fertility idol,’ said Gammer Brevis helpfully.

Granny shook her head.

‘Doesn’t sound much like Magrat to me—’ she began.

‘You can’t tell me that’s worth tuppence,’ said Old Mother Dismass, from whatever moment of time she was currently occupying.

No one was ever quite sure which it was.

It was an occupational hazard for those gifted with second sight. The human mind isn’t really designed to be sent rocketing backwards and forwards along the great freeway of time and can become, as it were, detached from its anchorage, seeing randomly into

the past and the future and only occasionally into the present. Old Mother Dismass was temporally unfocused. This meant that if you spoke to her in August she was probably listening to you in March. It was best just to say something now and hope she'd pick it up next time her mind was passing through.

Granny waved her hands experimentally in front of Old Mother Dismass's unseeing eyes.

'She's gone again,' she said.

'Well, if Magrat can't take it on there's Millie Hopgood from over Slice way,' said Gammer Brevis. 'She's a hardworking girl. Mind you, she's got a worse squint than Magrat.'

'Nothing wrong with that. A squint looks good on a witch,' said Granny Weatherwax.

'But you have to know how to use it,' said Nanny Ogg. 'Old Gertie Simmons used to have a squint and she was always putting the evil influence on the end of her own nose. We can't have people thinkin' that if you upsets a witch she curses and mutters and then her own nose drops off.'

They all stared at the fire again.

'I suppose Desiderata wouldn't have chosen her own successor?' said Gammer Brevis.

'Can't go doin' that,' said Granny Weatherwax. 'That's not how we do things in these parts.'

'Yes, but Desiderata didn't spend much time in these parts. It was the job. She was always going off to foreign parts.'

'I can't be having with foreign parts,' said Granny Weatherwax.

'You've been to Ankh-Morpork,' said Nanny mildly. 'That's foreign.'

'No it's not. It's just a long way off. That's not the same as foreign. Foreign's where they gabble at you in heathen lingo and eat foreign muck and worship, you know, *objects*,' said Granny Weatherwax, goodwill diplomat. 'Foreign can be quite close to, if you're not careful. Huh,' she added witheringly. 'Yes, she could bring back just about anything from foreign parts.'

'She brought me back a nice blue and white plate once,' said Nanny Ogg.

'That's a point,' said Gammer Brevis. 'Someone'd better go and see to her cottage. She had quite a lot of good stuff there. It'd be dreadful to think of some thief getting in there and having a rummage.'

'Can't imagine any thief'd want to break into a witch's—' Granny began, and then stopped abruptly.

'Yes,' she said meekly. 'Good idea. I'll see to it directly.'

'No, I'll see to it,' said Nanny Ogg, who'd also had time to work something out. 'It's right on my way home. No problem.'

'No, you'll be wanting to get home early,' said Granny. 'Don't you bother yourself. It'd be no trouble.'

'Oh, it won't be any trouble at all,' said Nanny.

'You don't want to go tiring yourself out at your age,' said Granny Weatherwax.

They glared at one another.

'I really don't see that it matters,' said Gammer Brevis. 'You might as well go together rather than fight about it.'

'I'm a bit busy tomorrow,' said Granny. 'How about after lunch?'

'Right,' said Nanny Ogg. 'We'll meet at her cottage. Right after lunch.'

'We had one once but the bit you unscrew fell off and got lost,' said Old Mother Dismass.

Hurker the poacher shovelled the last of the earth into the hole. He felt he ought to say a few words.

'Well, that's about it, then,' he said.

She'd definitely been one of the better witches, he thought, as he wandered back to the cottage in the pre-dawn gloom. Some of the other ones – while of course being wonderful human beings, he added to himself hurriedly, as fine a bunch of women as you could ever hope to avoid – were just a bit overpowering. Mistress Hollow had been a listening kind of person.

On the kitchen table was a long package, a small pile of coins, and an envelope.

He opened the envelope, although it was not addressed to him.

Inside was a smaller envelope, and a note.

The note said: I'm watching you, Albert Hurker. Deliver the package and the envelope and if you dare take a peek inside something dreadful will happen to you. As a professional Good Fairy Godmother I ain't allowed to curse anyone but I Predict it would probably involve being bitten by an enraged wolf and your leg going green and runny and dropping off, don't ask me how I know anyway you can't because, I am dead. All the best, Desiderata.

He picked up the package with his eyes shut.

Light travels slowly in the Discworld's vast magical field, which means that time does too. As Nanny Ogg would put it, when it's teatime in Genua it's Tuesday over here . . .

In fact it was dawn in Genua. Lilith sat in her tower, using a mirror, sending her own image out to scan the world. She was searching.

Wherever there was a sparkle on a wave crest, wherever there was a sheet of ice, wherever there was a mirror or a reflection then Lilith knew she could see out. You didn't need a magic mirror. Any mirror would do, if you knew how to use it. And Lilith, crackling with the power of a million images, knew that very well.

There was just a nagging doubt. Presumably Desiderata would have got rid of *it*. Her sort were like that. Conscientious. And presumably it would be to that stupid girl with the watery eyes who sometimes visited the cottage, the one with all the cheap jewellery and the bad taste in clothes. She looked just the type.

But Lilith wanted to be sure. She hadn't got where she was today without being sure.

In puddles and windows all over Lancre, the face of Lilith appeared momentarily and then moved on . . .

And now it was dawn in Lancre. Autumn mists rolled through the forest.

Granny Weatherwax pushed open the cottage