Summary

It starts with a crime, but so do many things in Ankh-Morpork. What’s different is how deep it goes – and how far. Of course the Watch becomes involved, of course the stakes are high and, of course, it all goes pear-shaped. On the plus side, Sam, Sybil and Angua travel to new places and cause new problems. Cheery gets to run the Watch and as for what happens to Fred, Nobby and the Patrician ...
A Crime

All is darkness. Not the sort of darkness that precedes the light, but the deep darkness that precedes the concept of light.

Time passes. Come closer now.

Then, like the old woman emerging out of the picture puzzle, the turtle is there. Flippers the size of continents, eyes as big as moons, gazing ahead with Chelonian intent. Much human thought and debate has been devoted to what the turtle is pondering but as this has largely been done by people who don't get out much they still have a long way to go. Riding on the back of the turtle sit four elephants and on their backs rests the Discworld.

Even more debate has gone into why the universe chose to manifest itself in this way, and the only theory that has stood the test of time is the ultimate Because.

And perhaps, just perhaps, when someday someone breaks the universe down into its most fundamental particles, and there will always be someone who feels it's necessary to do this, they may find that humour underpins everything.

Time passes. Come closer now.

Below sprawls the glow of Ankh-Morpork - fetid, vibrant heart of the Discworld. A metropolis that defines the word teeming in the same way that off-milk defines rancid. A city that never sleeps, though this maybe to make sure your gold is still there in the morning.

Time passes. Come closer now.

There. In a dark alley in the darkest part of this city, The Shades, an area that appreciates and nurtures all the manifestations of darkness, staggers Jeremy Smyth-Browne. How he came to be here, drunk as a lord and lost as a promise, is beyond him. It was never his intent, but it was certainly the intent of others.

It is probably wise not to get too attached to him. He is about to die. This was also their intent.

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'Oh, that feels so much better,' said Jeremy, shaking his suddenly clear head. Down the alleyway he sees a figure sidle into the deeper darkness. One of the benefits of a private school upbringing is to see the world through much better vocabulary, and Jeremy noted that the individual must have nefarious intent. If someone sidles then, by all literary conventions, they must be a nasty piece of work.

A TOTALLY CLEAR HEAD IS ONE POSITIVE SIDE EFFECT OF YOUR RECENT EXPERIENCE, said a hollow voice beside Jeremy. I'M A GLASS HALF FULL PERSON MYSELF, it adds.

Jeremy turns to see a tall figure whose dress sense brought a whole new meaning to the word austere. Jeremy had heard about the term 'new black'. This was old black and it would eat new black for breakfast.

'I'm sorry,' Jeremy replied with a frown, 'am I missing something?'
THAT IS A REMARKABLY ACCURATE OBSERVATION, the figure answered. WHEN YOU
NOTICED THAT CHARACTER MUST HAVE NEFARIOUS INTENT, IT'S BETTER TO
THINK OF THAT STATEMENT IN THE PAST TENSE.

AND ALSO TO LOOK DOWN.

'Oh,' said Jeremy numbly after a few moments, 'I guess that's me down there?'

Death didn't even bother to answer. Most questions Death had heard over the years were rhetorical
by nature. Even the 'Why me?' question fitted that category nine times out of ten. Most people had
a fair idea of ‘why them’.

'But all I wanted to do was shine the light of truth on things,' said Jeremy.

YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW MANY TIMES THE LISTED CAUSE OF DEATH IS THE
LIGHT OF TRUTH. KNIVES AND SWORDS AND POISONS ARE JUST THE MEANS.

AND DON'T THINK HAVING RIGHT ON YOUR SIDE HELPS ALL THAT MUCH. HAVING
WRONG SEEMS TO WORK JUST AS WELL.

'That all seems a little unfair, in the scheme of things,' said Jeremy.

IT CONTINUES TO ASTOUND ME THAT, DESPITE ALL EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY,
YOU HUMANS STILL BELIEVE IN FAIRNESS AND EVEN A 'SCHEME'.

'You make it sound like a failing.'

SORRY. IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME. I JUST CAN'T SEEM TO GET THE TONE RIGHT. I
ALWAYS SOUND TOO SERIOUS. I'M THINKING OF TAKING ELOCUTION CLASSES.

Jeremy would have to admit he hadn't given the afterlife much thought up until now, but if he had
he doubted it would ever have featured a conversation like this one.

I ACTUALLY THINK YOUR BELIEFS ARE FASCINATING AND ADMIRABLE, EVEN IF
MISGUIDED.

'So, what do you believe in?'

NOTHING. I DON'T BELIEVE IN ANYTHING. I DON'T HAVE TO. REALITY IS MORE
THAN ENOUGH.

'Is there anything more than that?'

NOW THAT IS AN INTERESTING QUESTION. PERHAPS WE SHOULD WALK AND
TALK. I UNDERSTAND WALKING DOES WONDERS FOR THE HEALTH.

And with that the newly dead and truly dead strolled down the alleyway and out of the world of
men, and women.

A re-animated voice drifted back on the cool night air.

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF THE SAYING WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND?

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There are small crimes and there are big crimes. And the nature of the world is such that the
perpetrators of big crimes can, so to speak, get away with murder. This is not because big crimes are any more complex than small crimes - it's simply that a lot more people are involved. Sometimes whole economic systems and entire governments.

But sometimes a small crime, like murder, can open the door, just a crack, onto a big crime.

It takes a certain type of person to wrench that door open.

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Sam Vimes gazed out his window on a city where somewhere there was always a crime unfolding. Vimes was a man of quite specific faiths, and his faith in the darker side of human nature was yet to let him down.

His eyes travelled out towards the edge of Ankh-Morpork, though this was getting harder to do these days, what with all the development occurring. The edge seemed to be moving hourly towards the horizon. You could say this about hustle and bustle - it was contagious. The city was a hive of construction activity but people forget that though hives may provide honey, they also bite back. He was opposed to all the development. He wasn't sure if this was because he was fundamentally against rampant growth or because he was fundamentally Sam Vimes, who was always suspicious of the opportunities that great opportunities provided.

Whoever coined the phrase crime doesn't pay was clearly not a copper and in Sam Vimes's book probably didn't live in the real world. In fact, when he gave into cynical thoughts, which was largely every moment of the working day (and he had a broad definition of working day), he suspected this was a saying created by criminals to keep the general community in the dark and competition down.

Behind him the stairs to his office squeaked and groaned. It has taken him some time to perfect their tune and now he could even recognise each individual walk. The emperors of the Agatean Empire had their nightingale floors. Vimes had nightingale stairs. And particularly thin walls.

'Come in Fred,' he called. 'Who's done what to whom, this time?'

He quietly cursed himself. Not so long ago, when he was still plain unknighted Sam Vimes, it would have been 'what to who.' His grammatical correctness felt like a class betrayal. Fred Colon, poster-child for Carbohydrates Monthly and a food pyramid in his own right, opened the door and entered. Fred was a career sergeant and, in a particular Colonesque way that combined luck and broadly good intentions with a rich vein of ignorance and narrow-mindedness, he was good at what he did. Sometimes Vimes could over-think things. Fred never suffered from this problem.

He had once, and only once, spent a sphincter-clenchingly short time acting as the commander. On those rare occasions when the suppressed memory of this rose to consciousness he would need to have a cup of tea and a good lie down.

'Morning Commander,' he said entering, 'how did the fancy dinner go last night?'

Vimes turned away from the window and sighed. 'You know, Fred, I think the hardest part of being a Duke in this city is attending those damned civic functions. Please give me a crime to clear my head and take away the taste in my mouth.'

He and Sybil had gone to the launch of the release of land downstream from the city. Everybody who was anybody had been there, though he preferred to think of it as Anybody Who Was a Total Knob was there. Besides, did that mean that those who weren't invited were nobodies? He
preferred and trusted the company of nobodies every day of the week. Oh sure, some of the nobodies would rob you blind, but at least they were upfront about it. You could trust upfront criminals. You knew where you stood. It was the crocodiles that wore suits that you had to watch out for.

The new parcel of land released was called Ankh Heights in some sort of attempt at marketing what was previously swamp land with a small hill in the middle to justify the name. Still he thought, if you're living near the Ankh River after it's been through the alimentary system of all the city's residents the term High was hard to argue with.

Colon nodded in sympathy, though he wouldn't have minded being there himself and having that taste still in his mouth. Mrs Colon would have liked to be there with him too. She'd been telling him she wanted to move up in the world for some time now and there seemed to be a lot more opportunities to be somebody nowadays. Besides they usually had those canapee things at nights like that. They maybe small but it was amazing how many you could fit in your mouth at one time. He'd been invited to the occasional function when the guest list hadn't been carefully vetted and knew the prime place to be was near the kitchen doors when the plates came out. You only had to move to find a fresh drink.

'Nothing much to report,' he said. 'The usual licenced and unlicensed theft, and some poor sod got himself killed in the Shades last night. He was wandering there drunk and alone.'

Vimes smiled grimly. When it came to the top ways to commit suicide in Ankh Morpork wandering the Shades drunk and alone was right up there.

'Any idea who he was?' he asked.

Figuring out who was a corpse was never that easy in the Shades. Half the time the victim was penniless to begin with and certainly would become so if they lay in the Shades long enough. Even teeth, good ones at least, had a habit of leaving the body sometime after the last breath had.

'I asked around and it seems that a coach had been seen pulling up in Shamlegger Street and the Soon-to-be-Deceased was, according to witnesses, shoved out.'

'Any ID on the coach?'

'Well,' answered Colon, 'everyone said it was conspicuously unmarked and very black.' He then gave what he would have called a conspiratorial wink. Subtlety was not a word Colon understood and certainly couldn't spell and his wink looked more like the onset of a stroke. It didn't help that he persisted in blinking just to make sure his message had got across.

'The Mob in Black,' Vimes groaned. 'Great. So, this isn't a crime, it's a Crime.'

The Mob In Black had emerged on the scene in recent months. It had taken him a while to piece together a series of criminal acts that showed that there was another player in town, other than the Thieves' Guild and the Guild of Assassins. And then he'd starting hearing rumours about the Mob in Black. He hadn't figured out whether the MIB were a law unto themselves (a phrase he hated with a passion) or if they were working for some other group.

There were certainly some very unhappy guilds and some very dead people thanks to their arrival. Presumably some very happy people too, and they were the ones he was interested in 'speaking' to.

'Anything more about the victim that might help us narrow them down from the general group of the previously alive? Any distinguishing tattoos?'
Vimes was totally in favour of tattoo parlours and those hairdressers that made you look like a beaver had set up residence on your head and then died. It made his job so much easier.

'He's down in the morgue if you want to have a look', replied the Sergeant. 'The only thing that stood out for me was that he didn't smell half bad.'

That was notable. Anyone who wandered through the Shades and then chose to die there was likely to have acquired an ironclad aroma. Eau de cologne then, and a good one at that - and that meant money.

This case was starting to smell.

'Get Captain Angua to meet me there, and you'd better see who else is available, especially Cheery. The sillybuggers game is afoot.'

Somewhere in the dark and decidedly rich depths of the city a conversation was unfolding.

'It's done then?'

A nod from the shadows.

'Vimes?'

'He will be suitably distracted, unless a more permanent solution is required.'

'And payment?'

'A seat at the table, as agreed.'

Beware of those who seek power over gold. Only the most foolish of crocodiles swim with them. And not for that long. Accessories before the fact can easily be turned into accessories afterwards. Crocodile skin is quite versatile.

'Cause of death?' Vimes asked 'Mossy' Lawn as he entered the morgue.

'Being there in the first place,' the doctor replied, 'though if you're wanting specifics blunt weapon trauma to the head would have done the trick. Very definitely. This wasn't a robbery with over-exuberant force. Someone wanted him very very dead.'

Angua and Cherry Littlebottom entered the room. Cheery, the Watch's forensics expert, made her way to the corpse with a perfunctory nod in the Captain's direction. You could say this for dwarfs, give them a job and they worked at it like ... well ... dwarfs. Give them a beer and an axe, on the other hand, and they might break into songs about gold and then try to remove random limbs in a light-hearted fashion, so it was important to keep their priorities right. Not that Vimes had any concerns with Cheery. He'd never seen her drunk and being openly female in dwarfish company meant you didn't get invited to many beer-drinking sessions.

'Look at his hands,' said Lawn as she approached. 'What do they tell you?'

'I thought Carrot might have come along too,' Vimes said to Angua as they watched Lawn and Cheery try to unpuzzle the corpse.
'He's not here,' she replied. 'He's gone to visit his parents. Remember the leave application forms you signed? And the report on outstanding administrative tasks you agreed to address?'

Angua was watching Vimes’s face as she said this - and there it was. Just for a split second. Complete unadulterated guilt. Vimes could stare down a werewolf and take on an army but everyone in the Watch knew of his mortal dread of administration. Prior to the arrival of Carrot his approach to paperwork primarily involved seeing how long it took to compost. Besides anything important may start off as writing but would eventually end up as shouting. This was the Vimes Theory of Administrative Importance. Since he had joined the force the paperwork had begun to flow Carrot's way first, and then he'd bring the important ones to Commander Vimes. Carrot had never called it a Theory because he didn't need to. It just worked.

'Yes, of course,' he mumbled. 'Came round quickly didn't it?'

Bugger, he thought.

For most of his life the world had beaten into Vimes (usually in a very real sense) a rock-solid self-reliance. It had also driven him to drink and loneliness, so that while he may have been protecting himself, there wasn't much left there to protect. And certainly nothing to respect. But now everything was different. He was surrounded by a competent Watch team (and Fred and Nobby), had a wife who loved him and a child that waited for him to come home each night. They needed him, and he'd found that, little by little, he'd grown to need all of them.

'How long was it for again?' he said in quiet desperation. 'The detail seems to have slipped my mind.'

'Two weeks,' Angua replied.

Double bugger. That was a lot of time for the Wagon of Administration to plunge over the Cliff of Accountability and onto the Rocks of Explanation. Possibly then even, gods-help-us, rolling into the River of Audit. He shuddered.

'He's not a labourer, that's for sure,' said Cheery, breaking Vimes's mortifying train of thought. 'Hands way too smooth. But there's ink there on the fingertips, and callouses on the fingers of the right hand. There's also some numbers written on his wrist. Just random figures as far as I can tell.'

'Which means ....?' asked Lawn.

'He was a writer of sorts, but a well-fed one. He wasn't short of gold.'

'Angua, can you add some more colour?' Vimes asked.

Angua strode forward. Having a werewolf on the Watch may have its challenges but superhuman strength and an ability to track a fart through a bean factory were considerable compensations. She bent down and sniffed to corpse from top to toe, lingering in patches, and then she raised her head.

'That's quality ink on his fingers and the perfume could only come from Maison d'Ankh,' she said.

'Wonderful. Now we don't just have a Crime we've got a Someone,' said Vimes to the uncaring world in general.
Arifmatic

Cut-My-Own-Throat Dibbler was on a sure thing. This was a different sure thing to his lifetime of previous countless 'sure things' that had failed to deliver anything other than an ability to remove himself from the fallout of his 'sure things' faster than it takes a politician to break a promise. But this idea was going to bring home the bacon, and any other pork-related products. Despite being to failure what Leonardo da Quirm was to invention, Dibbler did have the uncanny ability to smell money being made, which was why he was standing at the edge of the new sub-division with $ signs for pupils.

xxxx

Some might say Maison d'Ankh was exclusive, but this would be hotly disputed by the owner, Chantilly Lace. When it came to wealthy customers Maison d'Ankh was incredibly inclusive. It was the sort of shop where price tags were considered tasteless and, frankly, pointless. If you had to know the price you couldn't afford it. It was the sort of shop that could dedicate an entire wall to one single bottle on a stylised display stand. It was the sort of shop that was not the Watch's sort of shop.

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The doorbell chimed and bought Chantilly back from her solid gold day dream of solid gold with what turned out to be a thud.

'Captain Angua,' said the leader of the group as she crossed the floor. 'We'd like to ask you a few questions.'

Perfume shops are sledgehammer experiences for a werewolf and in other circumstances Chantilly might have been struck by the way the officer's nose appeared to be trying to run away from her face were it not for the other two figures that had followed the captain in.

Chantilly had heard about powerful magicians who, using the darkest of arts, could create their own misshapen familiar. The homunculus. She'd never believed it until now. There was one of them standing or, more accurately, hunching, in her shop - though it was hard to imagine the portly figure standing beside the creature was an all-powerful necromancer. She was pretty sure necromancers didn't scratch their buttocks with such unadulterated vigour.

'Cor, would you look at this Sarge,' said the homunculus. 'Talk about posh.'

'Not for the likes of you and me Nobby,' replied the larger one. 'Though it wouldn't half turn Mrs Colon's head if I appeared with a bottle of Eau d'Ankh.'

With that, the two figures walked over to a display of perfumes whose resale value could purchase a staggering number of guilty pleasures. Chantilly followed their passage with a deep premonition of horror.

'Excuse me,' growled the captain, dragging back the shop owner’s attention for a moment. 'I was wondering if you could help us with our investigations. We need to know who purchased a bottle of....'

Here the Captain sniffed the air in the shop for a nose-wrinkling moment and then pointed to a small, ink-black bottle. Chantilly turned to look. 'Obsession,' she said. 'But our clients’ purchasing records are confidential.'
Even as she said this her eyes were dragged back to the other two figures who had now started picking through the bottles as if they were on a shelf at a grocery store.

'Hey, Sarge, what about this one?' the homunculus was saying. 'Dark Knights. I've never used perfume before,' it continued - a statement so obvious that it slunk away in embarrassment. 'Where do you put it on?'

'Well,' replied Fred Colon, who was only very loosely acquainted with the mysteries of what he would call the boodwhar, but had never let ignorance slow him down in the past, 'the woman places a dab of perfume behind each ear.'

'Seriously? But my ears hardly smell at all,' the imp continued. 'If I was wanting to really get value for money I know exactly where I'd stick it.'

'You know,' said the captain quietly, 'if you just happened to accidentally give us a name we'd all just go away.'

Behind the captain Chantilly could see the one called Nobby demonstrating, with remarkable clarity, the best location for the perfume. Without even looking down she scrawled a name on a piece of paper and thrust it across the counter.

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'Jeremy Smyth-Browne', said Vimes. It was a name that reeked of old money. Only the wealthy could afford double-barrelled surnames, especially ones that had invested in 'y's rather than 'i's and an extra 'e'. 'A long line of bankers.' The way Vimes spat out the last word gave the strongest impression that he was using a different letter of the alphabet.

'It looks like we might have to pay a visit to Knob Hill.'

xxxx

The old banking institutions had grown fat over the years, which tends to lead to a breakout of huge sandstone pillars. And what with the land boom things were looking particularly rosy. But money brings all sorts of creatures to the waterhole.

Tom Knurkle had seen what was happening in the property market and he wanted a piece of it. What he needed now was a loan. You got that from a bank, didn't you? And the most respectable bank in town was the Royal Bank of Ankh-Morpork.

It is a strange truth that when it comes to impressing with their ability to use people's money wisely, banks have chosen to do this by demonstrating how well they can spend it on themselves. Especially when architecture is involved. The Royal Bank was grand in the sort of way that made you think there should be a grander word than grand. Possibly majestic, but that might have been considered inappropriately gauche. Whilst demonstrating your ability to acquire wealth using a mountain of stone in your marketing campaign was quite acceptable it was vital that you did so in a dignified manner. Restrained unrestraint as it were. The Royal Bank was cut from that cloth, or sandstone in this case.

The stairs leading to the bank were wide enough to sail a schooner up (as mad Lord Minsome proved in the Great Ooze during the Year of the Persistent Mouse). On either side of them stood statues of the Royal hippos, complete with looks of what the sculptor had hoped captured dignity but more strong suggested severe constipation. The regal nature of these statues was somewhat undermined by the fact that they had been designed in bronze and over the years locals had
polished certain parts of the hippo's anatomy until they glowed. Small things amuse small minds, though not, in this case, that small.

* The River Ankh doesn't flood - it couldn't if it tried, but it's damn good at oozing.

At the end of the stairs stood the bank itself. Another homage to death by sandstone. Massive slab after massive slab, stacked one of top of the other, gave the impression that the designers had looked at the pyramids of Djelibeybi and said to themselves 'Well, it's a start, but let's ditch the triangles and go for something squarer'. The roof that lay on top, large enough to be called a kingdom in the Ramtops, seemed to be a mile away. Which was handy because the builders had clearly acquired some very large columns and it least it gave the columns something to do.

Tom drew a determined breath and was just about to head up the steps when a figure lounging nearby stood up and beckoned with purpose. 'Looking to buy some land, but you don't have the money?' the stranger asked.

Tom nodded.

'And you were about to ask this bank to lend you that money at exorbitant rates?' he continued.

'Maybe,' Tom replied.

'Well, it's lucky for you that I just happened to catch you first.'

The stranger handed Tom a card which read:

Dibbler and Associates
Investment Advisors to the Welathy

'What's an investment advisor? And who are your associates?' Tom asked but by then it was too late. Dibbler had already managed to wrap an arm around his shoulder. Dibbler's arm-wrap had the same death-lock grip as the jaws of a mongoose.

'Great questions, kid. Great questions,' said Dibbler as he drew Tom down a side alley. 'You want access to quick money and my associates, a newly formed lending association that doesn't need to mess with financial red tape, have got everything you need. And you don’t even need to pay me. That’s all sorted by the associates. Everyone's a winner.'

... for a loose definition of everyone, and winning for that matter.

xxxx

All is darkness. Not the sort of darkness that precedes the light, but the deep darkness that implies that whoever is experiencing it is in some kind of bother.

It was lucky then that he was a dwarf and darkness was no stranger. There's a reason dwarfs are not noted for their sense of humour and witty repartee. When you're miles underground with the weight of the world above you in a darkness that has never seen light you tend to take most things a little more seriously. But he was in a spot of bother.

xxxx

The greatest total concentration of sandstone in Ankh Morpork, of course, sat on Knob Hill.
Mansion after mansion was built of the stuff of ancient ocean floors. And like the material they were made from, the homes told any visitor that the money they were carved from was quite definitely Old. Each one surrounded by gardens so large that they could have straddled time zones. These weren't just homes, they were homages. They certainly demanded respect and awe.

'Bugger this for a game of soldiers,' Vimes said as he ground his cigar into the raked footpath, 'let's get this over with.'

He turned to Cheery and Angua as they strode up to the entrance. 'Remember, your job is to see, hear ... and smell ... all the things that I'm not meant to. The rolled eyes behind my back, the nervous flatulence when we're discussing something, and preferably the accidental glance towards the secret passageway that leads to the victim's hidden bedroom.'

The term body language was yet to be coined in Ankh Morpork but the Watch already spoke it fluently and were the city's leading experts in it (with the possible exception of certain ladies of negotiable affection that fulfilled an important civic duty for the agreed price).

There was a large and regal knocker on the front door which demanded use. Vimes ignored it and rapped on the door with his night stick, leaving a small but satisfying dent. All over the city and throughout the years Vimes had left his imprint in different fashions. Marking his territory. Metaphorical leg cocking. It was his way of saying 'This city is mine.'

A few minutes later they were standing in a large room awaiting 'his lordship's pleasure' - whatever that implied. There was a range of options available to the nobility, some of which didn't extend the pleasure to anyone else's involvement in the activity. Vimes knew these rooms well. They were big enough to remind you that the owner was Somebody but small enough (in the scheme of the mansion) to let the visitor know they were a Nobody. The door opened on the far side of the chamber and in strode Lord Wendell Smyth-Browne.

'What the deuce do you lot want? I'm incredibly busy at the moment and this is damned inconvenient,' he blustered.

'We've come on a rather delicate matter sir,' said Vimes. 'I was wondering if Lady Smyth-Browne might wish to join us.'

Lord Wendell glared at Vimes. 'My wife left this family some years ago and I don't need you to remind me of that fact Commander.'

'Right. My apologies. Well, in that case, Lord Wendell, I need to talk to you about your son Jeremy.'

'Haven't seen that idiot for months,' snapped Wendell. 'What's he done this time?'

Vimes calmly held Lord Wendell's glare. No matter how obnoxious the person was this was always one of the worst parts of the job.

'I'm afraid, sir, that I have some very bad news concerning Jeremy.'

Vimes watched the large man collapse down to his actual size in a heartbeat when he told him of Jeremy's death. There is no grief like that of a parent. Sometime later as they were walking down the driveway again, having obtained Jeremy's last known address, Vimes asked 'So, what did you find out?'

'He really was heartbroken by the death of his son', said Cheery, 'but there was something else there. Almost a sort of relief.'
'Thought so,' nodded Vimes, 'Jeremy was obviously not the model son. Sounded like he was caught up in the wrong kind of financial dealings, whatever that means. It's hard to know what these sort of people...' here he waved an arm to encompass all of Knob Hill, 'would class as wrong, when it comes to money. Anything else?'

'Someone was watching it all,' said Angua. 'They were behind one of the panels. I could smell them.'

Vimes nodded again. 'And Wendell knew they were there didn't he?'

The box was starting to fill up with jigsaw pieces. The problem was there were no edge bits and it was all blue sky.

xxxx

Nearly the entire glorious diversity of the animal kingdom stays well away from predators, for the obvious reasons. But evolution is nothing else if not an explorer of niches. Think of the bird that picks food from the teeth of crocodile. Now think of Cut-My-Own-Throat Dibbler.

Dibbler was nearly run off his feet, and these were feet used to running. He now had a dozen clients who used his financial services, just showing how accurate the saying 'having more money than sense' was proving to be. Right now, though, what he really wanted his feet to do was turn him around and walk him out of the room he was standing in.

There is a whole school of thought in interior design based around making the visitor feel welcomed. It features warm or vibrant colours, soft lines, curves, furniture to relax in and probably pot plants. Whoever had designed this room had clearly been thrown out of that school, possibly in kindergarten. The room did have the traditional walls and ceilings, which was always a good start, but things went downhill from there. The window, which was a technical description only, was covered by a blind, the floor was bare and the walls were painted in a soul-sapping grey. There was a pot plant. A zombie fern. Evolution in the Disc had managed to achieve with this species what other worlds would have to await the invention of plastic to replicate. The room was a sanitised version of Hell.

In the middle was a desk so clean of any form of paperwork that it suggested the owner was not only on some sort of spectrum but right out at the edge where maps sometime use the term 'Here be monsters.' Behind the desk sat Mr Grey. Mr Grey had been looking down at a ledger open in front of him and then raised his eyes, windows to the abacus of his soul, and locked them onto Dibbler.

'Not the best records, Mr Dibbler,' he said. 'Not the best at all. What, for example, is this brown stain?' he continued, pointing at the ledger.

'Pie gravy, sir,' Dibbler replied promptly. 'Happened while I was giving a new client a pie.'

'And this claim for medical expenses?'

'Happened shortly after the client finished his pie, sir. Random bout of gastric .... very random. Just trying to keep the clients happy, sir.'

Mr Grey fixed Dibbler with his gaze in much the same way a collector uses pins on butterflies.

'Mr Dibbler, you are possibly the most questionable person I have ever worked with and, believe me, that is saying something.'

'But,' he continued after a pause, 'you do get results and, as you know, our masters are definitely
results-driven. Of course, should your performance slide they know how to 'drive' other things as well. And where to drive them.'

Dibbler gulped and nodded. His was a world of fine margins. Mostly about when to get in and, more importantly, when to get out. Then he felt a spark of empathy and this was such a novel experience that he blew on it out of sheer curiosity.

'Mr Grey,' he said cautiously, 'you know all these people who we're helping to get into property .... what happens to them if something goes wrong with the market?'

The man in the suit and bow tie did not even look up from the ledger. 'That would be the least of your concerns.'

And that was that. For now.

xxxx

Jeremy had lived in a modest apartment, not that Vimes knew what an immodest apartment was meant to look like. Maybe one that wears its studs on the outside. And it was probably normal in some aspects but he was pretty sure that most abodes didn't have numbers and graphs drawn all over the walls of every room.

He needed Carrot. Not that he'd have had any idea what all the drawing meant - but he'd have known the neighbours and found out more about Jeremy in ten minutes than Vimes might in a week. Carrot took an interest in people. He spent time with them. And he listened and remembered. This, quite possibly, made him unique.

'So, what have we got? Any handy clues lying around? Any messages on notepads that were written so hard you can read the imprint on the page below after it was torn out?'

Cheery shook her head. 'I'll analyse what I can but nothing stands out here. I get the impression he didn't get out much.'

Vimes nodded. He'd seen enough rooms that had the same atmosphere over the years. Gods, he'd lived in one himself for long enough. Mind you, it was a bit pointless and tasteless to tell Jeremy to get a life (though Ankh Morpork's active undead community would happily argue otherwise).

'Dat's arifmatic,' said Corporal Detritus, helpfully. 'I seen it before.'

Vimes liked having trolls in the Watch. They added grunt and it was amazing how much more persuasive he could be in extracting information when Detritus was standing beside him. He was even a sharp thinker by troll standards, but that's the thing about standards. It's what you're measuring against.

'What on the Disc caused a bachelor who liked numbers to end dead? Something doesn't add up.'

'Yes it does,' said the troll. 'Right there.' Detritus pointed to a section of the wall. 'Dere's your answer.'

Not for the last time Vimes was reminded that life is full of surprises and that standards are slippery buggers. Detritus was right. There was an equals sign, a mathematical dead giveaway. These weren't just numbers they were a formula.

'Bingley-bingley-beep.'
Vimes groaned and took this Dis-Organiser out of his pocket.

'What is it,' he said to the imp that had poked its head out from device.

'You know, manners don't cost anything,' it said*. 'I've half a mind just not to bother tell you about your appointments.'

* Unless you attend Madam Snootville's Classes in Etiquette where manners can charge like a wounded bull.

Vimes sighed. He wasn't a nasty person, except to specific individuals who got what they deserved, of course. It was just that he never had much time for calendars or technology and a device that combined both was always going to be on a hiding to nothing.

'All right,' he said, less gruffly, 'what's the appointment please, imp.'

'Thank you,' said the imp, 'happy to be of assistance. You have an appointment in 15 minutes with the Patrician.' The imp paused, and then added, 'the name's Ortant by the way.*'

* It's a little known fact that imps have a long and well-respected naming tradition. Ortant's family included his sister Ossible, his mother Lausable and his father Robable. Imps pretty much keep this to themselves.

'How did that appointment get in my calendar?' Vimes asked.

'It's a new feature. Each morning when all of us imps are making coffee in the work kitchen we swap appointments made by our owners. We call it sinking.'

'Right. Detritus come with me. Cheery, see what else you can find. I'm going to be running late.'

The Patrician was not one to look kindly on those late for appointments. As far as he was concerned the past tense of sink was definitely sunk.

xxxx

The Patrician was staring out the window when a breathless version of Sam Vimes entered his office. Even Detritus was puffing.

'Ah, Commander,' he said over his shoulder, 'I do hope I didn't cause you to run, inordinately.'

That was the thing with the Patrician. He used words that were personal and hard to nail down. Vimes was pretty sure the Patrician's understanding of what inordinately meant was different to his. Probably different to the rest of the Disc.

'Ankh Heights,' the Patrician continued. 'Where dreams and ambitions are constructed by the hour. So voracious that it draws in timber from distant forests and stone from the unsuspecting hills, like a maelstrom.

'And now they say it has swept up our economy as well. They call it a housing boom. That this is all part of the wonders of a free market. Tell me, Vimes, have you ever heard of a market that was free?'

Vimes stayed silent. The best thing to do with a rhetorical question was to stay well out of its way.

'And upriver from the city, emerging from the soil, we can see the mansions of those that profit from such a boom. It was the rich soil there that gave birth to our city, you know. Now it has given
birth to a new richness. The suburb of Pellucidar. Beneath that loam are great beds of sandstone, laid down when times moved in treacle years. A subterranean world of endless caverns. Do you think these new captains of the housing industry truly know what lies under their feet?'

'And an economy reliant on endless growth,' he continued. 'I wonder if economists have thought that one through?' There was a silence that Vimes wisely chose not to fill. After a moment the Patrician continued. 'Of course, all these developers expect the city to help them out with better roads and so on. Which we are happy to provide, for a small sum for each building. This has been received with the same level of enthusiasm as they delivered their demands. Apparently they want something for nothing so they can sell their somethings for considerable more than nothing. People are so predictable you can set your clocks by them.'

The Patrician gave a dismissive shrug and turned from the window. 'So, tell me Commander, what crime has caught your attention today?'

A real question at last. 'Investigating the death of Jeremy Smyth-Browne, sir. Murdered in the Shades.'

'A murder in the Shades is no more remarkable than the sun rising, these days. So, why is this one different?'

'Well, sir, you have to wonder what someone from Knob Hill was doing in the Shades in the first place.'

The Patrician held his gaze and the silence stretched. That was the thing about the Patrician's questions. They were very hard to satisfy. Vimes gave in. 'And when we visited his apartment there were numbers all over the wall.'

'Dey weren't just numbers either, dey were mafematics,' rumbled Detritus.

The Patrician turned to the troll and for the briefest moment Vimes thought he saw a hint of surprise on his face. Of all the emotions he suspected the Patrician didn't have, surprise would have been at the top of Vimes's tree.

'Could you elucidate on that, Corporal Detritus?' the Patrician asked.

'No, sir,' replied Detritus carefully. 'My mother would never forgive me.'

'Ah,' said the Patrician, making the necessary mental adjustment when talking to Detritus, 'she sounds like a woman of strong convictions.'

'Yes, sir, but she done her time for those.'

Vimes was struggling not to laugh, because laughing at the Patrician didn't improve the quality of one's life. 'Can you tell the Patrician more about the numbers,' he said.

'Dem? Dey're a formula to calculate somethin. Not sure what. Der was a lot of calculus involved and dat's not always my strong suit. I'm more into imaginary numbers. You need Graphite, for dat - de best mafs troll in der business.'

'Yes,' replied the Patrician, savouring the novelty of discovering something new, 'I think I would like to talk to Graphite. Have him meet me here.'

'Her, sir,' replied the troll. 'De female trolls are always the best mafematics.'
The Patrician nodded. 'Assumptions make an ass out of you and me,' he said exhibiting a rare smile.

'I fink it would be better if you went to her, sir,' said Detritus, pushing into the clinically dangerous realm of telling the Patrician what to do. It's possible that others have tried this option before, it's just there is no evidence, left.

'You see,' continued the troll exhibiting all the appreciation of conversational dynamics that come from a species whose ancestors grew from stone, 'Graphite is quite sedimentary.'

'You mean she comes from stone laid down in oceans aeons ago?' said the Patrician in a puzzled tone. Puzzlement did not come naturally to him.

'Not sure about dos Ians sir. I mean that she doesn't get out much. You know, sits around,' the troll continued patiently.

The Patrician nodded, slowly building up his mental Detritus-English dictionary.

'Capital then,' he said. 'Come back this afternoon Corporal and we'll go on an expedition. Make sure you get a copy of the numbers.'

He turned back to Vimes, who was still processing everything he'd just seen and heard.

'What's that saying of yours, Commander? Ah, yes. Follow the money. Right now there's so much of it washing around that you could almost say Ankh Morpork was a giant laundry. It might help your investigation to spend some time talking to the common man.'

'You mean Fred Colon, sir?'

'It's hard to find someone more common,' replied the Patrician. 'Thank you for your time gentlemen.'

And that was that. The Patrician used Thank You in the same way that some establishments used security guards.

Just as Vimes reached the door the Patrician spoke again. 'It seems unusual that Captain Carrot isn't accompanying you today.'

'He's on leave, visiting his parents,' Vimes answered.

'Oh, is he now?' the Patrician said softly.

The door had closed behind him before the Patrician's final words sunk in. 'Bugger,' he shouted and broke into a run.
Adding Up

Vimes burst into the Watch house and called for Angua.

'What is it Commander?' she asked as she hurried into the room.

'When did you last hear from Carrot?'

'Not since he left, Commander.'

'And that doesn't strike you as odd?' he asked.

Vimes was right, Angua realised with a chill. Carrot was an inveterate letter writer. It had been several days and nothing had arrived in the post. 'What are you saying, Commander?'

'He's in trouble. The Patrician all but told me so,' Vimes replied. 'He always knows where everyone is, and if he's not sure what Carrot's up to, you can bet he isn't where we thought he is.'

'Do you think he's up to something?'

'Not Carrot. I'd have known. No, something's up to him. Drop anything you're working on and find him.'

'Fred,' he shouted as Angua disappeared out the door.

Colon had been designed by nature, a lifetime of dietary choices and a survival habit based on not being the first to the scene of a crime, to amble, but he also knew there were times when moving quickly increased life expectancy. Many a time he'd surprised a pursuer by a turn of speed. No one expects a hippo to sprint like a gazelle. The Commander's shout was one of those times. Over the years that tone had built in him an autonomic response and he scuttled into the room while the echoes still hung on the air. 'Yes, Commander,' he wheezed. Fred could go from 0 to Wheezy inside ten yards.

'Tell me Fred,' Vimes asked, 'what are your ambitions?'

This was not the sort of question Colon had been expecting. He'd been ready for the one about why the file on that uninhibited young woman called Godiva had gone missing (and was currently in his locker) and even the one about why the missing jewellery they'd retrieved from that unlicensed burglary was now missing (currently being repurchased from Trevor the Fence after a case of poor judgement by Nobby). But this .... Besides, it wasn't like he'd ever shown any signs of ambition. The only way you'd put ambition in his personal description was if you preceded it with the words 'Distinct lack of ....'

'Got none, sir. Happy where I am,' he replied, truthfully (especially if the Commander never hears about the Godiva file and the hocked jewellery, he added silently).

Vimes nodded. 'Your total disinterest in professional advancement, and even development is well recognised, Fred, at the highest levels. I'm just wondering about your own personal goals.'

'Oh,' replied Colon with relief. 'Me and Mrs Colon have been talking about that a lot of late. She's been reading all these flyers that promise "exciting new opportunities to move up in the world and secure our financial future."'
'What does that mean, Fred?' Vimes asked, idly wondering if the world would ever be ready for Fred Colon to move up into it. Mrs Colon was a total mystery to him. It didn't surprise him that she was the driving force in the family, not with Fred as the benchmark. The only way Fred qualified for being upwardly mobile was when he reached for something on the top shelf. The fact that she had been married to Fred for decades was a feather in her cap, though Vimes wasn't sure exactly what the bird that produced those sorts of feathers would look like.

'Means, we're looking to buy some land in Ankh Heights, Commander.'

'But don't you already have a place downtown you've always liked?'

'It's not for us to move to,' said Colon. 'It's an investment property.'

Vimes raised his eyebrows and Colon continued, warming to his role of financial expert.

'It's like this, Commander. You borrow some money and buy a property and then wait for the price to go up.'

'And then you sell it?'

'Don't be crazy, Commander, why would you want to sell something that's increasing in value? No, you use the new value of the land to borrow more money and buy more property.'

'So,' said Vimes slowly, 'what you seem to be building there is, not so much houses, as debt?'

'Yes, Commander', replied Colon patiently, 'but you'll have all these valuable assets ....'

'That other people will have to borrow even more money to buy,' Vimes added.

'Spot on Commander.'

'And what happens if the value of the property goes down?'

'Can't happen, sir?'

'Why not?'

'Because of all the people buying.'

'Using money they don't have?'

'That's right. So it's failsafe.'

What had the Patrician said ... endless growth ...

'One last question, Fred. Who lends you the money?'

'The banks, Commander.'

This did nothing to dampen down Vimes's growing unease.

'And there are new ones popping up everywhere too, and they're not even worried about how much money you've got. It's so easy to get a loan. We've already set one up.'

'I lied, Fred. One more question. Who lent you the money?'

'The Really New Bank of Ankh. We've got our own agent now,' said Colon proudly. 'It's Dibbler,
Colon had seen many looks of horror over the years in his line of work but few could match the one that crossed the Commander's face just then. At least not on the living.

There's a certain type of dog that reaches into people's heart and this leads them to reach into their pockets for any stray scraps of food. The sort of dog that has big, innocent eyes, irrepressible joie de vie and a harmless roguishness.

Gaspode was not this type of dog. Not on any of those counts. What he did have was a rich genetic inheritance that earned him the label mongrel, enough diseases and parasites to warrant further study by science and an aroma that melted soap .... and a brain, and an ability to speak.

The latter two abilities made up for a few things, but they came at a price. Self-awareness, for starters. Gaspode wished he had a more impressive self to be aware of. Not that he'd admit that in public. What he lacked in canine charm he made up for in pride.*

* It's important to understand that there are two types of pride. The one where you let the world think you couldn't be happier with your lot is the pride Gaspode had. The pride where you turn your nose up at a slightly rancid sausage was the one he lacked.

But the bigger price tag was others-awareness. Once some people found out you could talk, and maybe weren't a total plonker, they began asking favours of you, but not in the way that gave you an option to refuse.

'Gaspode,' said the voice from the darkness, so close and so primal that he yelped and, in a time-honoured doggy tradition, a little bit of wee escaped in surprise. 'I need your help.'

'But it's Green Meat Wednesday at Harga's,' Gaspode whined. Harga's House of Ribs had a very loose definition of food hygiene but even Harga recognised that customers who became violently ill from a range of orifices or, in several cases, inconsiderately died, were bad for business. Once a month Harga cleared out his cellar of meat that had grown its own personality and, occasionally, legs. The canine world called it Green Meat Wednesday and front row seats at Harga's back door were highly competitive.

Angua padded out of the shadows. When moving in the dog world she had a lot more sway in wolf form. 'There's always next month.'

'That's like seven months to us dogs,' growled Gaspode, but not too loudly. One of the top ten survival tips on the Discworld was to never piss off a werewolf. 'What's the problem now?'

'Carrot's gone missing and the Commander reckons it looks suspicious.'

That changed things. There was something about Carrot. He had a way of seeing the world and making you feel an important part of it that just took a hold of you. In canine terms he was the top dog. And he always had spare food in his pocket. Besides, if the Commander was concerned it was Gaspode's concern too. Annoying Vimes was also in the top ten Discworld activities to avoid.

'I'm not sure if Carrot's still in the city,' Angua continued, 'and if anybody knows where to hide someone here, it's you.'

'What if I say no?'
'You'll have to live with yourself for the rest of your life.'

'Ha,' the dog replied. 'You're confusing me with my good twin brother. You know the one - all wrapped up in kindness, doggy good looks and a deep sense of moral obligation. Only weakness he has is a tendency to not exist. Happy to live with myself for the rest of my life.'

'And you must have confused me with a werewolf that doesn't have big sharp teeth. I never said how long that life would be.'

There it was. All he needed. Gaspode would never admit it but he did have a moral compass, even if its needle did get stuck sometimes, and saving Carrot would have been enough of a carrot. But he had his street cred to look after. Now Angua had become the stick for the entire world to see.

'Alright,' he snorted, giving his best public performance of Dog Being Forced To Do Good By A Werewolf, 'where do we begin?'

xxxx

When Detritus returned to the office the Patrician was deep in conversation with a white-haired elderly gentleman.

'Ah, Detritus, welcome,' the Patrician said, 'I've invited a friend along for our jaunt. I believe you are familiar with Leonard da Quirm.'

'Yeah,' replied to troll carefully. He had his own Detritus-English dictionary and that told him the Patrician could be asking him if a) he knew Leonard b) he was a wizard's companion animal c) Leonard and he were on rather intimate terms. He figured the Patrician meant a). He certainly hoped he wasn't referring to c).

'He's de one what the Commander says has a belfry wiv bats in it,' the troll continued.

'Yes, well,' replied the Patrician, glancing at Leonard who seemed blissfully unaware of what the troll had just said. There was no greater mind for understanding the fundamentals of how the world worked, which meant Leonard had no room left in his beehive brain for understanding how people worked. The Patrician often reflected that this, on balance, was a good thing. Leonard was dangerous enough without adding that. As it was, in the wrong hands he could already be a Weapon of Maths Destruction.

'Shall we begin?' said the Patrician rising from the chair in a fashion that told Detritus that saying no was not an option. The troll appreciated those little hints. Understanding questions was hard enough, rhetorical ones made no sense at all. 'Lead on, Corporal.'

'Anybody else comin' wid us, sir?' rumbled Detritus as they headed down the palace steps.

'I'm sure I'll be safe enough in the company of troll,' Vetinari replied. 'You are trained in hand to hand combat aren't you?'

'No, sir,' the troll replied patiently. 'I'm trained in hand to face combat. Lot more effective.'

This was going to be an interesting experience, the Patrician reflected as they wound their way through increasingly narrow streets. And interesting was fine as long as it didn't transform into surprising. The Patrician prided himself on being tolerant (up to a point, of course), but woe betide anyone one who threw him a surprise party, especially if it featured mime artists.
'Dis is it,' said Detritus stopping in front of an unassuming building. 'Graphite lives downstairs.'

Downstairs proved to be an understatement. Cut into the floor of what seemed little more than a two-up-two-down was a stairwell large enough for a troll to walk down comfortably. It was huge and strangely unnerving. Like you were walking down the gullet of a huge creature. The Patrician recalled that the people up in Nothingfjord believed in a giant serpent, Jormungandr, who wrapped itself around the Disc. The tunnel could easily be its maw.

'Dis is not a deep tunnel,' said Detritus as they wound down. 'Too close to de river. De really deep tunnels are up in de Ramtops.'

'Why do trolls dig such tunnels?' asked Leonard. 'I have never heard of such a thing.'

'All sorts of tunnels, all sorts of reasons,' he replied. 'Dis one is to find some peace and quiet. Finking space. De deep ones are because wez lookin' for de living rock.'

'The living rock?'

'Mountains have roots, and so do trolls,' said Detritus. 'We believe dat in the deep down places is the rock that all trolls came from. Der living rock. We'd like to meet it and say fank you.'

There was much more that Leonard wanted to ask about this when the journey ended at a large door and so did his chance. Derailment and distraction are so fundamental to living that it makes you wonder if there's another undiscovered force that works to try and prevent too much concentrated thinking. Of course, this would mean that it would work against its own discovery, leaving the tempting argument that the absence of any proof of this force is its own proof. It's such a complete circle of logic it's no surprise many religions have used similar models.

They entered a room large enough to be called a cavernlet, if such a word existed - which it shouldn't. In the centre of the space was a huge stone bench covered with scattered rolls of parchment and all the writing tools to be expected from someone who may understand the importance of exercise but is only really comfortable with the concept when preceded by the word 'mental'. It is, perhaps, ironic that much of our understanding on why sitting for hours is bad for your health has been done by researchers sitting for hours.

Around the walls great sheets of slate had been mounted in frames and these, in turn, had been covered with numbers, shapes and formula, written in chalk*.

* On other worlds chalkboards and chalk wouldn't appear until much later on the educational scene but they didn't have a species that is made from much the same material and has an inclination to calculate.

Bending over the table, talking to herself, was a troll in a long black robe.

'It makes no sense, without some sort of constant,' she rumbled, then stood up and walked over to one of the slates, oblivious to the party that had entered, and began scrawling more calculations.

The Patrician coughed. It was not a loud cough but it had been refined over the years to be pitched in such a way that you couldn't ignore it. Babies have a similar tactic when it comes to crying.

The troll turned around with a look of mild surprise. 'Oh, hello,' she said. 'I haven't seen you since the maths classes Detritus. Who are your friends?'

'Hi Graphite,' Detritus replied, 'dis is the Patrician, he runs Ankh Morpork, and dis is Leonard, he owns a belfry wid bats in it. Dey want to ask you about some calculations we saw on a wall.'
'Right,' she replied as though this sort of thing happened every day, 'show me was you've got.'

'Give Graphite the parchment copies please, Corporal,' said the Patrician. 'You did bring them with you didn't you?'

'Don't need parchments when you've got dis,' replied Detritus, tapping the side of his head. He walked over to a blank board and began writing.

'That's remarkable,' said Leonard, as he watched the numbers appear. 'I've always prided myself on my powers of recall, but that is something else altogether.'

'Most trolls have a fair amount of silicon between the ears, and it has amazing storing capacity,' said Graphite, wandering over to watch. 'And humans think elephants have good memory banks.'

'What are you working on?' said Leonard whose mind could change tack more times than a sailing boat looking for the breeze.

'Have you ever wondered why things fall down and not up, or even fall at all?'

'All the time,' replied Leonard, 'especially when peanut butter sandwiches are involved.'

'I'm working on a hypothesis that there is a universal force which draws things to each other. I call it severity.'

'What a strange name.'

'Have you ever seen what happens to a watermelon when you drop it from a tower as part of your research? Severity seemed pretty accurate. But right now I'm thinking there must be some sort of constant missing from my calculations.'

'Or possibly a peanut butter coefficient?'

The Patrician was not an attention seeker by nature but he was used to being the focus of attention. Sometimes a very sharp focus. He realised now he was in the company of people whose minds were so unshackled that they would never get from A to B because they'd have to invent a whole new alphabet along the way. He wondered how they could ever focus on anything. In a day full of new experiences he was about to have another.

'Dat's it,' said Detritus.

Leonard and Graphite stared at the calculation and the world held its breath, metaphorically speaking, of course.

'Oh my,' said Leonard.

'Quite,' Graphite replied.
'Right,' said Vimes, pinning Dibbler to the wall in that intimate way which implies further pinning is optional depending on how things pan out and will be considerably sharper. 'So, you're in the money lending game, Throat?'

Cut My Own Throat Dibbler gulped, or would have done if the Commander's hold was a little looser. 'No, sir,' he croaked, 'I'm not in that game. I'm a financial advisor. I help people in their wealth acquirement aspirations.'

'Which happens to involve getting them to borrow money to buy land.'

'That is one of my cornerstone strategies,' Dibbler agreed.

'I bet it's the only cornerstone. And the clients pay you for this?'

'Oh no,' replied Dibbler, 'it's a free service.'

Vimes glared at Dibbler for long rasping seconds then he growled and dropped Throat to the ground. 'Because, you get a commission,' he said slowly. 'And I bet you're not the only one out there. I bet there's an army of financial advisory popping straight out of the ground. Maybe there is a place for real financial advisors, but not this kind.

'You know Throat, there's always been an ethical gap ... well, chasm really ... between us but I've respected your persistence in the face of reality and, besides, anybody who saw your pies and still bought them got what they deserved. But this is different. Being a small predator in a large pond is one thing, but feeding other fish to the crocodiles for scraps is another. You've become a user to userers.'

'So, here's what you're going to do Throat,' said Vimes in a voice so soft that it shouted. 'You've heard of friendly advice, well I've got something even better. Unfriendly advice. First, you're going to tell me where I can find these lending institutions. And then you're going to walk away, make that run away, from financial advising. Trust me on this Dibbler,' he said so coldly that his breath steamed, 'when this hits the windmill, and it will if you think it's a good idea, you don't want to be anywhere in the fallout zone.'

xxxx

The Caviar Temptor was the sort of restaurant that didn't advertise a price list, or even a menu. Nor was there any evidence of a means to make a reservation. Patrons of the Caviar Temptor just turned up and were accommodated. This was how you knew you were part of their clientele. Naturally, it had to employ people to prevent the general population (which their patrons would probably call riffraff or hoi polloi depending on which private school they'd been to - when, and if, they ever thought of the general population in general) from entering. Decorum demanded that these staff bear the title of greeters and certainly, in one way or another, they did greet you. This deterrent worked in 99% of cases. For that ill-advised 1% there was always Frank. Frank was hardly ever seen, and certainly never by the clientele. Frank's job was to meet the terminally determined in a discrete covered alleyway beside the restaurant and encourage them to change their minds. His arguments were always very persuasive. Usually he didn't even have to get to the bit that involved screaming. Which was best for everyone and saved on cleaning expenses.

Being a greeter was, most days, a fairly easy job. Today was about to turn into one of those other
days. The first thing the two greeters, whose part in the proceedings is so short that they remained nameless, knew about the pear-shapedness of things to come was when a figure marched towards them across the road. The greeters slid smoothly from lounging to persuasive stances and one of them said 'Excuse me, sir, but this is an exclusive restaurant ....'

These proved to be the last words the greeters would utter until they regained consciousness (there were sounds, of course, quite loud ones, they just didn't qualify as words, except for possibly letgoletgoaarrrgghh). Vimes had grown up in the street and the difference between normal fighting and street fighting is that street fighting wins. And it does it by excluding rules and including every part of the body. The greeters, for example, were now intensely experiencing an encounter with the Vimes elbow and Vimes knee.

The alleyway gate creaked open. In areas where life is cheap screaming tends to deter curiosity but in this quarter, where life was far from cheap, it attracted attention.

'G'day Frank,' said Vimes casually.

'Hello Commander,' Frank replied.

Despite his size Frank was not a troll. He was not shaped or born from rock. He was made from something harder.

'Frank,' said Vimes as he walked towards the door of the Caviar Temptor, 'what would happen to the average person if they tried to enter this establishment without your approval?'

'It would take them days to find all the pieces,' Frank replied.

'And what is going to happen to me?'

Frank looked Vimes in the eye and he saw. After several long moments he slowly shook his head. 'Nothing Commander. You'd walk right in .... with my approval.'

'Thanks Frank. Thought that was the case,' said Vimes with a smile. His lungs, which hadn't been so certain, decided to start working again. The Maitre D looked up in surprise as Vimes entered. 'Evening' the Commander said, 'I believe some bankers are dining here. I'd appreciate it if you could point me in the right direction.' And then he smiled.

The Maitre D was a master of cutting politeness and knew when he was on the receiving end. But it was the smile that undid him. It reminded him of when he'd taken a holiday in Klatch and seen the creatures that lie on the riverbanks there. He could suddenly predict one future where he rapidly went from Maitre D to Maitre Z via all the letters of the alphabet. He wisely chose the other future and pointed to a set of closed doors at the back of the restaurant.

Vimes strode through the tastefully dim lighting, around tastefully designed furniture and past the startled and distastefully wealthy diners. He pushed open the velvet lined doors onto another softly lit room that was much grander than it had seemed. Along with a large table, a bar and carpet on every surface, the room also contained a group of people holding pre-dinner drinks. Whatever they'd been discussing before his arrival hung on the air. But right now he was the focal point of their attention. This suited Vimes right down to the thick rug he was standing on.

'Vimes, what the hell are you doing here? This is a private party. Get out before we have you thrown out.'

'Evening, Lord Rust, Lady Regina' Vimes replied to the rotund gentleman in a large dinner jacket, sitting in a wheelchair, his daughter standing behind him. 'I'd have been disappointed if you were
missing from this esteemed gathering.

'I wouldn't bother waiting for someone to throw me out by the way. They're a bit preoccupied at the moment. As to what I'm doing here, let's just say I wanted to get to know Ankh Morpork's biggest pack of bankers. Is that the right collective term?

Around the room Vimes could see the usual wealthy suspects he could have expected here. Wherever money was being made and spent at the expense of the rest of the population. The price tag on the tailored dinner jackets alone could have gone to feeding a ghetto population for a year. Of all the people that Vimes disliked in the world, and there were plenty in that category, a large number of them were in this room.

'I repeat, Vimes, that you have no place in this company,' growled Lord Rust.

'You're definitely right there Ronald and I plan to have a good bath when I get home, but I do need to be here, right now. You see, I'm investigating a Little Crime, a simple case of the murder of Jeremy Smyth-Browne, but I'm beginning to wonder if there is a Big Crime happening. So I thought to myself where can I find clues to people who'd be involved in Big Crimes ... and here I am.'

Vimes hadn't come here with a plan, he rarely did, operating more on a copper's gut instinct, but he was here to observe. And there it was. A ripple of discomfort at the mention of Jeremy. And who was that group of figures at the back of the room? They looked like new players on the block. In for a penny, in for a pound.

'I think I'd like to meet some of your new friends, Ronald', said Vimes and he slid through the crowd like a barracuda through a school of fish. There were four of them. Two were clearly minders, a third was a nervous looking man who gave the appearance that he'd never expected his career to lead him down its current path - and the fourth, well, he was obviously the Big Wahoonie. And he was big in every sense of the word. Here was a man who would consider starvation to be a two course meal. It is unfair to judge a person's character by their shape, but the man seated before him wore his body as a statement. Like a fine jacket. And this body said I am a man of substance and I have got this way by feeding on others.

'Commander Vimes, do join us.'

A seat appeared out of nowhere. Behind him Vimes could hear the silence of a nervous crowd. So could the large man and he gave an impatient wave that said 'bugger off back to what you were doing'. An acquiescent and uncertain hubbub began to fill the air. Vimes was impressed. People used to walking all over others without even noticing them had done this man's bidding. He was definitely someone.

'So, Commander,' the large man said in a deep, rich rumble which carried a heavy accent, 'you wish to ask me some questions I presume. After all, isn't that what policemen do?'

'Well, for starters, a name would be handy, and where you're from.'

The man nodded and gave a theatrical, seated bow. 'Alberto Hattoni at your service. I was born in a small village in Brindisi, but I moved to Ahroma as a young man and made my career there. Some may call that my home, but isn't home where the heart is?'

The man had spoken in a genial tone and was smiling at him. He also rippled with power. Vimes had heard of tigers but never seen one, up until now.
'Yes, they do say that,' he replied slowly. 'Which means that many in this room must be homeless. Lucky for them there's such a housing boom to take advantage of.'

Hattoni laughed, his whole body joining in. 'I had heard of your sense of humour Commander. It does not disappoint.'

'Oh, I can be very disappointing,' replied Vimes. 'I'm well known for that too. Just ask anyone else here.' Vimes leaned forward. 'I have a fair idea of the career you've built back in Brindisi, all wrapped up behind a squeaky clean business facade. Selling shoes, or gentleman's clothing, or whatever. And if you're here now it means you've gone into the export business. They,' he waved towards the others in the room, 'haven't got enough brains to fill an eggcup and don't have any idea who they've just let in. They probably even think they're in control.

'Maybe back there you run Ahroma, maybe the whole country, but this is Ankh Morpork. And it's not yours to have. Sure, we have corruption, but it's the normal, disorganised kind. And we have suckers born every minute, just like everywhere else. But more importantly, Ankh Morpork has got me. This is my city and you can take your shoe business and find another place to shove it.'

Hattoni smiled, or at least the muscles around his mouth stretched. 'Such anger. It must keep you warm at night.' He leaned forward until they were almost face to face. 'Vimes fights with the sword of morality and the armour of truth against the dragons of injustice. But you have bitten off more than you can chew this time. The battle is already over. You see, I know people. I know their weaknesses and how to control them. They,' he indicated to those in the room and the city in general, 'are already mine.'

Vimes held the other man's gaze for long enough to show that if this was a pissing contest he had a bladder of steel and then he shrugged and leant back. 'There's your problem right there, Alberto. You don't mind if I call you that do you? Everyone assumes I think people are fundamentally good. Horse biscuits. And you think they're fundamentally bad, which is another load of cobblers. The thing is people are just fundamentally people. You know that you can use fear to make them do bad things, but that's where your thinking ends and mine begins. Fear has more than one edge.

'And swords and armour - that's just for show. I've got elbows and knees and teeth. The thing about teeth is that when you bite off more than you can chew you just have to keep on biting and chewing. I'm good at that. Besides,' he added, flicking something invisible off his jacket, 'we've had dragons before. They're gone. We're not.'

'Ah, Sir Samuel,' Hattoni answered with a smile so dry it qualified as a localised drought, 'I am sure we could converse all night about what you believe the future of Ankh Morpork may be and I have enjoyed our little chat, but the time for talking is over. And I fear our next chance may not be so convivial. I think it would be best if you left now. After all, this is my party, not yours. And we both have so much to do.'

If living really is a series of interconnected moments, this was certainly one of those moments. Hattoni had just dismissed him. The room, as noisy rooms sometimes do, chose that instant to fall silent, possibly in the same way that the eye of a storm does.

And then Vimes laughed - and stood up. 'This is still a pissing contest isn't it, Alberto?' He grinned. 'Fine. I think I'll save mine for later. You're quite right, I do have some pressing matters to attend to. Thanks for your time, it's been quite informative.'

Hattoni nodded. 'Perhaps you could answer one last question for me? I have heard so much of your Watch and I notice that Captain Carrot is not with you. Do you know where he is? Because,' added the Brindsitian, 'we might be able help you find him if he's gone missing.'
There was that silence in the room again. Life does have a melodramatic streak. Vimes stared and all traces of a smile ran from his face. 'You have ways of looking after people, and I have mine. And Captain Carrot is a citizen of Ankh Morpork, so we'll do it my way.'

He turned and strode out of the room, leaving a behind a ripple in the conversation, in much the same way as a tsunami travels before it reaches shore.

Carrot knew exactly where he was. In a small dark room with no window, no weaknesses in stone walls and no means of escape. As to where that room was, well that was a different story. But there was nothing he could about that.

In what could potentially be seen as an argument against evolution most people under stress tend to do the worst thing possible and feed it. So he was doing what only Carrot and seasoned war veterans did, getting plenty of sleep. Everyone knows that there is always tomorrow but not that many appreciate how loosely defined in time tomorrow is and even fewer are ready when it arrives. Carrot was one of the few.

Gaspode knew exactly where he was. In a small dark room, with no window, no weaknesses in the stone walls and no means of escape. As for stress, well the widdle in the corner answered that question.

It hadn't been easy to follow the scent of Carrot after all this time, especially in a city renowned for its aroma, but between their two noses, Angua's copper's-eyes and Gaspode's street nous they'd found an alleyway where Carrot must have been jumped. This had made things easier. Now there was a faint trail of blood, not all of it Carrot's Angua was pleased to note, and that had lead them to an old warehouse. They'd managed to avoid the guards and found the entrance to the tunnel without any trouble.

It was after that that things went durian-shaped (like pear-shaped but with spikes and a pong). The tunnel had turned out to be a maze, and the maze had turned out to be full of people. And those people had turned out to be armed and disappointingly unfriendly. Angua had dealt with the first ones they'd meet in the traditional way that werewolves handle conflict, but as this did involve a some screaming on the other participant's parts they'd drawn a bit of attention. Then had been the mad rush and that fateful corner where he had gone left and Angua went right.

There's a tradition where someone lost in a cave system discovers a powerful magical item, encounters and escapes from a strange creature, nearly gets caught in a narrow gap by his waistcoat buttons and then goes on to save the world. This is not that story. This is the story where a terrified dog gets thoroughly lost being chased by thugs and ends up escaping into a small room with no other exit and a distinct lack of magical items.

'Bugga,' he whispered as another set of feet ran past. He'd picked the word up from a kelpie he'd met that had lived in Xxxxxxxxx. Since then he'd discovered how remarkably applicable it was to most things that happened to him. Even better, you could stack it in bunches just to underline the depth of the midden you were floating in.

Twice now people had checked his room out but when you’re looking for a dirty great big wolf it’s easy to miss the small dog hiding behind the door.

That was, up until now. Someone was approaching, and this someone knew what they were doing.
Chasing people at full and reckless speed is what happens in moving pictures, probably involving chariots and steep cobbled stairs, but the real hunters move slowly and are very, very thorough. The I-see-you-behind-the-door-little-doggie sort of thorough.

Bugga, bugga, bugga, bugga.

They were right outside the door now. He could hear the breathing. And then he heard another something else. A sound that could best and totally inadequately described as a stretched rubber ball bouncing back into shape whilst simultaneously being hit by a slab of raw meat.

'Bloody door handles,' Angua growled as she entered. 'You could have picked an easier spot. Thanks for the aromatic shout,' she added, pointing to the puddle in the corner, 'couldn't have missed it if I tried.'

'Yeah, that was my cunning plan,' Gaspode replied, hoping she didn't notice the very fresh 'aromatic shout' he'd created when he didn't realise it was her outside the door. 'Nuffin' to do with nervousness at all.'

'Now, let's get out of here,' Angua said, slipping back into here wolf form, while Gaspode looked away. 'I followed Carrot's trail down a tunnel that led out to the Circle Sea,' she growled. 'Then I lost it. Came back for you.'

They loped up the passage, or at least Angua did. Gaspode, being built from parts of various amorous canine species over the generations, scurried along, a dozen pawsteps to each lope. Their escape might have gone better if, near the exit, they hadn't encountered a room filled with people nurturing unfriendliness to the world in general and canines in the specific.

'When I say run - run,' said Angua in Canine, the dog Lingua Franca.

The collected disgruntled grunt were ready for a nasty but ultimately final battle with a crazed wolf. What they weren't ready for was what happened next. The human brain can only accept so much from the eyes before it questions its grip on reality. What the eyes of the men in the room saw was as follows:

A large wolf trotted into the room and then, over a few nauseating seconds involving the sort of change that, on some other worlds would have employed a team of experts in CGI to achieve, the wolf transformed into a human.

And not just any human - a stunning blonde woman - and this is the important part - who was totally naked.

The experience was like seeing your parents naked, but much, much worse. It was at this point that the collective brains in the room threw up their up their hands and decided to re-boot.

'Run,' cried Angua.

In those short disturbing moments they shot across the room, up the corridor and out onto the streets of Ankh Morpork.

Not one of the men in the room even saw the companion dog, which is hardly surprising.

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Elsewhere, deep under the city, Graphite and Leonard had reached an agreement.
'It's echo-gnomics,' said Leonardo to the universe in general. He always spoke that way, even if only in the presence of a single person. The Patrician had learned that the important thing was to be that single person.

'Brilliant work too,' added Graphite. 'It's the complete financial modelling of the pyramid selling crisis.'

Leonard nodded, and the Patrician sighed. Lord Vetinari did have the sort of complex devious mind necessary to run a city full of small-minded people, but even he had to run to keep up with Leonard. The same seemed to now apply to Graphite. He'd always been grateful that the world's unique and greatest mind was tucked away safely in his palace. Leonard was still unique, but he may have found a contender for intellect. How Vetinari was going to deal with that was a challenge for another day.

'For the sake of full clarity, could you please explain what the pyramid crisis is,' he asked.

'Oh,' Leonard replied, 'I always presume everyone has a detailed grounding in the histories of all our neighbouring countries. Silly me. There I go assuming, rather than presuming again.*

* The difference between presumption and assumption is that the former is based on some degree of evidence. Leonard has once developed a formula to achieve the best balance of evidence versus analytical effort in making presumptions that would have revolutionised decision-making the world over if he hadn't written it on a napkin he threw out the next day.

'The pyramid selling crisis happening in Djelibeybi in the Century of the Cobra. They'd been building pyramids to respect their dead for aeons, but then someone came up with the idea that you could invest in pyramids, and make money selling them to other people. This worked well to begin with and was quite profitable, so more and more people decided to invest.

'Of course, pyramids are expensive, so everyone was borrowing money, but that was OK because they had a market to sell too. And lenders were happy to give them money because the pyramids had market value. And in the crazy world of lending, it seemed like the more pyramids you had, the more money you could borrow, even though you still owed money on the first pyramids. Which meant even more investors appeared and because everyone seemed to be building the value of pyramids kept going up. It was an echo-gnomic feedback nightmare.

'And that's when the problems really began', said Graphite. 'Soon there were more pyramids being built then there were people dying. It even lead to a rather extraordinary spike in unaccountably early deaths. Nothing like having an expensive pyramid on your hands to make you question the longevity of your neighbour, especially the ones that play loud music.

'But that was never going to be enough and no one could afford the pyramids to lose value, so what did they do? Why, that built more pyramids, of course.'

'Naturally, it all collapsed in the end and dragged Djelibeybi back into the even darker ages for generations,' observed the troll. 'Echo-gnomics is built on many reasonable if naive principles, but sadly lacks the most important one. That people will always be people. Echo-gnomics, like all models, is far more valuable if left, untouched, in its original box.'

'It's a beautiful theoretical rendition, though sadly no longer necessary,' added Leonard looking at the equation. 'We've all learned from those mistakes.'

The Patrician, who had a much better understanding of how well people learned from history, and of the life expectancy of those who point out such mistakes, looked upwards.
'Quite,' he said.
An Unexpected Holiday

They say crime never sleeps. This, by association means coppers, at least the good ones, don’t either. When they arrived back at the Watch, via a quick change at Angua’s, Vimes was there at his desk, studying a large map.

'Commander,' said Angua as he looked up with bleary eyes, 'he's been taken out of the city.'

Vimes nodded. 'They'll have him in Brindisi then. Probably Ahroma.'

'What do you mean?'

By the time Vimes had explained his encounter with Hattoni and Angua had given her account of the cave system it was all much clearer.

'So, Hattoni has set up his business here,' said Vimes, 'probably welcomed in by those upper class idiots, like Rust, who have no idea the sort of wolf they've let through the door. They've never had time for Vetinari, so this is part of some power struggle. They've set up a base in the caverns.'

Vimes growled and thumped the table. 'And they've kidnapped Carrot as insurance.'

'So, what are we going to do?'

'What we always do first. Look after our own. I'm going to Brindisi to get Carrot back.'

'But ...'

'Don't say anything, Sergeant, because I've already thought it. The only thing I haven't figured out is how to get there as quickly as possible. It would take the better part of a week in the fastest boat, which is what Hattoni must have used. I don't have that much time.'

Vimes bent over the map and Angua joined him. She could see he'd already drawn lines all over it, different routes to Brindisi, and all had been crossed out. Vimes scowled.

'And when you get back that's when you'll throw the book at this Hattoni?' Gaspode asked, from under the table.

'No. First I'll throw a lot of other things - the book comes later .....'

Vimes stopped talking and looked up. The weariness and frustration had disappeared and Angua saw it replaced by a predatory gleam.

'The book, hey?' he said. 'Right. Go home. Get some sleep if you can. You're both coming with me. Two noses are better than one. Meet me back here in the morning.'

Sybil was used to Sam coming home late, or sometimes not at all, though he'd been much better since young Sam had been born. She was just about to go to bed when he came through the front door in a flurry of Vimesness.

'It's late Sam,' she said.

'Is it?'
She was also used to Sam totally losing track of time when he was on a case, which meant something was up.

'Yes. Now, how about we save ourselves the time arguing. You have some supper and tell me everything and I'll agree to say yes to wherever you have to go.'

And that's exactly how it went, up until ....

'Yes, Sam, you can go as promised. Of course we'll need some sleep before we head off.'

Sam nodded. He was too tired to register what Sybil had just said.

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'What?' shouted Sam as he watched his wife calmly pack. Despite her generous proportions Sybil was an amazingly efficient packer. With careful use of clothing matching and a roll-up approach to every item she could squeeze a variety of combinations into a comparatively small back satchel. So could Vimes, though his approach was based on a high reliance on re-use and the tolerance of other people's nostril. This was currently a work in progress for Sybil.

'Please, Sam,' she replied, 'have you ever been to Brindisi?'

'Of count not.'

'Or can you speak Brindese?'

'No,' he snapped.

'Well, I can. Studied it all through school. You'll need a translator, and I've never been to Brindisi so we'll kill two birds with one stone. I'm coming.'

Sam Vimes prided himself on never having given ground to anybody when his mind was set. This was true, but required an understanding that 'anybody' was a specific set that included everybody, except Sybil.

'Oh, Sam,' Sybil said with a sigh. 'Can you save that special glare for somebody else. We both know I'm right and we both know how this is going to turn out.'

'What about young Sam?'

'He's not that young anymore. I think we can leave him at home. He'll have a great time without us, and it means we can have our own little holiday.'

'A holiday that involves taking on a crime syndicate in their own country, and putting your life at risk?'

'And trying Brindisi food and seeing the opera house. Sounds rather exciting to me.'

Sam growled. Just because he never gave in didn't mean he wasn't familiar with defeat.

'Willikins,' he shouted.

'Yes, m'Lord?'

All butlers have a special power that enables them to appear at the instant they are called. No living soul knows their secret. The League of Gentlemen's Gentlemen makes sure of this. The primary purpose of this power is to demonstrate their dedication and preparedness. The secondary outcome, which no butler would admit even to each other, is that it tends to result in some amusing
moments of surprise. All butlers enjoy a good, if silent laugh and each one carries a grain of subversiveness.

'Aaarrgh,' cried Vimes spinning round in a satisfyingly startled pirouette, Willikins calmly grabbing the fist swung in his direction. 'Why do you have to sneak up like that?'

'Butlers do not sneak,' replied Willikins with a mild air of offence, 'we’re just well prepared.'

Vimes glared at the butler but he might as well have tried staring down a statue. Nobody, not even trolls, can be as stony-faced as a butler.

'Right,' he snapped. 'Sybil and I are going on a little holiday. It would be best if nobody knew about our absence. And I'm leaving you in charge of the household and the safety of young Sam. We're not sure how long we'll be gone.'

'Right you are, Sir. One of those holidays, I see. You can rely on me, Sir.'

There followed a farewell to young Sam, who seemed all too happy with the prospect of parental absence, a strong indicator that Willikins was going to have his hands full, and then they were off to the Watch house.

Angua and Gaspode were already there, as was the rest of the Watch.

'Now listen here, the lot of you,' Vimes said as the guards gathered round. 'There's sillybugger things happening but I plan to make sure they start happening to other people from now on. I need to go away for a few days and I'm taking Sergeant Angua with me. As Carrot's not around either, I've decided to leave Sergeant Littlebottom in charge this time. Is that alright with you Fred?'

Fred Colon who, technically, was the most senior of the Watch, nodded with visible relief. He still had nightmares from the last time he ran the place. So did the other members of the Watch who shared his sense of relief. The only person that didn't seem thrilled with the prospect was Cheery herself.

'Do I get a say Commander?' she asked.

'On many things, Sergeant, but not in this instance. Of course, it's voluntary, but it's on the proviso that refusal is not an option.

'Detritus, did you find out anything useful last night?'

'Yes sir,' the troll replied.

Vimes waited. And then waited a bit more. 'And what did you find out?' he finally said.

'Dat der fellow dat was done in was working on a mafematical model to do wit pyramid selling. I could try explaining it to you but you probably wouldn't understand it.'

'OK,' said Vimes slowly. It wasn't that Detritus was wrong about that, it just felt strange to hear Detritus saying it. Like skating for the first time. He was familiar with the idea of 'certain knowledge'. Now he was trying to come to grips with 'uncertain knowledge'. This was another piece in the puzzle. It had to be if the Patrician was interested. Unfortunately, it was the piece that the dog had chewed and didn't quite fit anywhere yet.

'Fair enough,' he replied to the general amazement of the Watch, who were less familiar with Detritus's mathematical prowess and more familiar with his spartan approach to any other form of
'Cheery, I want you to keep an eye on a new fellow in town, Alberto Hattoni. He's from Brindisi and if he's not caught up in criminal activities I'm a monkey's uncle. Angua can give you details of his headquarters. And watch the Patrician too - he's involved somehow. He's got a criminal brain if ever I saw one.'

And probably a few more floating in jars, he thought to himself.

'The last thing,' continued Vimes. 'It's vitally important that word doesn't get out that I'm not around. With luck I'll only be gone a few days so you'll all have to cover for me.'

That was it then. Angua told Cheery what she needed to know and Vimes paced around until it was done. He'd tied up all the loose ends he could think of, which just left the ones he had no idea about, floating in the wind.

Vimes was right about Vetinari. He did have a fine collection of criminal brains, which he'd allowed Leonard to study for any patterns.

He also enjoyed jigsaw puzzles but he preferred the ones that were pure and only contained sky, or snow. It made it easier to see the deeper connections. And he made sure that the dog never got anywhere near them. Now for another piece to fit into place. His guest had waited long enough.

'Have Senor Hattoni come in please,' he said.

Vimes, Sybil, Angua and Gaspode entered the Unseen University and after a brief discussion with the wizard on duty, which involved the wizard questioning their motives for entry followed by a colourful and quite descriptive explanation by Vimes of what would happen if they weren't allowed in, they were shown to the library.

'I'll have to tell the Archchancellor, you know,' said the wizard sourly.

'Good,' replied Vimes. 'And while you're at it ask him about the fire the other day at the Mended Drum. The one after the Un-Buck's Night.* witnesses tell me the flames were unusually colourful and the Dean was seen running out with his robes on fire.'

* Wizards are celibate. It's one of the fundamental conditions of being a wizard. But that doesn't mean they can't party. They'd come up with the concept of Un-Buck's Nights, which had a distinct advantage over the traditional version. You could hold them whenever someone wasn't getting married - which meant any time you felt like a drinking session. If sex was off the table, you might as well be dancing on top of it or, at worst, lying under it.

The wizard, who knew a no-win situation when he saw one fell silent and soon they were standing at the doors of the library.

'Hello,' Vimes called out into the devouring silence and as the echoes from the bookshelves faded the Librarian wandered into view. He was carrying an armful of books. One of the many advantages of being accidentally turned into an orangutan was that when it came to armfuls of anything the Librarian won hand's down, so to speak.

He put the pile down with a gentle reverence that engendered a respect for the book in others. The
fact that he possessed teeth that could bite through metal and a punch like a sledgehammer was a happy coincidence when it came to people sharing his world view. And when he sshhshed someone, they never ever complained, not even in a whisper. Libraries around the multiverse could learn a valuable lesson from this when hiring staff.

'Ook?' he said.

'Afternoon,' Vimes replied. 'I was hoping you could help us with an investigation.'

'Ook ...' answered the ape cautiously. No one is comfortable with an opening conversational line that involves a member of the constabulary and the word 'investigation'.

'Good. First of all, is it true that all libraries are connected together in some fashion?'

'Eek!'

Vimes frowned, now at the limit of his orangutan vocabulary.

'He said "Who told you that? It certainly wasn’t me and even if it is true, which it isn't, it's for Librarian's only,"' translated Gaspode, who had a natural ability when it came to human/non-human dialogue; as did an increasing number of librarians.

'He said all that?'

'It's a language rich in nuances.'

'Right. Let's just say I hear things. Is there a library in Ahroma?'

'Ook'.

'And could you take us to it?'

'Oooook?'

Vimes looked at Gaspode. 'Why should he?' the dog said.

'Well, we could make him a special constable ...'

'Ook?' said the Librarian, raising his eyebrows. This is a lot more impressive on orangutans.

'With a badge?' said Gaspode.

'Does it look like I carry around spare badges?'

'Well, actually, I do,' Sybil added. 'You're always losing them,' she said with a smile, 'so you can have one of Sam's spare badges.'

She reached into her handbag and drew out a replica of the badge on Vimes's chest, complete with the title Commander.

'Oooook' said the Librarian with reverence. Only an orangutan knows how to pin a badge onto themselves. Sybil handed it to the wide-eyed ape. There was a flurry of movement that reminded Vimes of practitioners of the pea-and-cup trick and suddenly the badge was pinned, somehow, to the Librarian's chest.

'Sooo,' said Angua, 'what happens now Commander .... Commander Vimes, I mean,' she added,
without a hint of humour in her voice. Clearly without a hint. No one else smiled or commented. The absence of anybody saying anything was palpable. Sometimes silence is the loudest form of communication.

'Good, well that's sorted,' said Vimes, ignoring the joke at his expense. He turned to the Librarian. 'We need to get to Ahroma as quickly as possible, rescue Captain Carrot and get back here again, with no time to lose.'

'Eeeek eek.'

'Why didn't you tell him Captain Carrot was in trouble in the first place?' said Gaspode. 'He'd have agreed straight away.'

'Oh,' replied Vimes. Of course. Everyone loved Carrot and would do anything for him, because the same always applied in reverse. Vimes was just about to ask for his badge when the ape slowly peeled back its lips to expose the sort of teeth tigers have nightmares about. On a human you could almost imagine it as a smile, but only someone suffering from terminal optimism would believe it on an orangutan. The 'smile' said, you can have your badge but you'll have to leave some fingers in exchange.

'Ook', said the Librarian and that was the end of the discussion that hadn't occurred. He turned and headed off into the shelves, waving the others to follow.

At first they followed the well-lit main aisle but then the Librarian turned off this and there followed a series of twists and turns. The shelves grew taller and the light grew dimmer. Gone was the comfortable welcoming library, replaced by something rawer, darker. The books no longer seemed to be placidly nestled on shelves. They'd gone back to their roots, literally literally, and the rescue party closed in on itself as the jungle that the library had become closed in on them.

Something few people, outside librarians* of course, know is that a library** is a living thing. How could it not been, when its cells are made of books, and those books are made of people and, most importantly, of imagination. The reason this is largely unknown is that the library is nocturnal. By day it sleeps comfortably, which is why they're such relaxing places to visit. But by night it is a different creature altogether, as anyone caught in a library after dark can attest. This is a defence mechanism, and it works. Ever heard of a nighttime robbery from your local library? No? There's the proof. There are biblio-thiefs, but the ones that survive have learned to only take meagre pickings by day while the library sleeps.

* There is a misguided view in some corners of the multiverse that librarians are passé and that it's now all about information specialists. This is like saying chefs are redundant because of all those cookbooks. A library by night would eat an information specialist for breakfast, possibly with a tasty garnish.
** Not an Ideas Store. Same logic as for librarians. Anybody who thinks the term library is outdated doesn't understand what a library really is.

Then the Librarian stopped at the entrance to a narrow aisle and turned.

'Ook, ook, eeeek,' he said.

'You have to do exactly what he says and follow his exact steps,' translated Gaspode. 'Otherwise it could get particularly unpleasant. You might have guessed that from the eeeek.'

All libraries are connected by a phenomena/field/force/reality known as L-Space. Those who have been trained in the deepest arts of librarianship, and who have the nerve, can travel L-Space. But
they do so at their peril. A foot wrong in L-Space means more than just a turn of phrase. The Librarian then turned back to the very narrow aisle, took a deep breath and stepped forward. And stopped. Looked, then jumped to the left. So began his strange dance between the bookshelves, followed carefully by first Vimes, then Sybil, Angua and finally Gaspode.

With one final leap the Librarian disappeared with a pop, as did all the others until it was Gaspode's turn. By now he'd arrived at a worrying realisation. The last leap was designed for legs that were considerably longer than his own. He knew that walking backwards for a run-up wasn't likely to end happily. He watched as Angua stepped from one floorboard to the next and then sprang into the void. That was his best chance - a hop, skip and a jump. He hoped the gods were watching over him.

He hopped.

He skipped.

Maybe gods do watch over little dogs with an impressive array of ailments but it's not wise to bank on it. Gods have the attention span of a hyperactive squirrel suffering from dementia. A loud fireworks display started up in the city of Quirm and every god looked the other way. Just as he leapt the unlikely occurred and the future veered off down a different path. His back paws slipped on the vestiges of an old banana skin. His spring turned into a skidding roll and then, he too, disappeared with a pop.
So, thought Cheery, keeping an eye on Hattoni and Vetinari was proving easier than planned, since right now they were in the same place. Not that this, in any way, was a good thing.

What the hell was going on? And she didn't have the Commander, Carrot or Angua to turn to.

She needed someone to get closer to the Hattoni camp but she suspected that any policeman caught undercover by Hattoni would have the life expectancy of a deep-fried snowflake. Besides, she was sure that by now the Brindisian would have details on all the local Watch. Cheery knew his type and right now he was probably figuring out exactly how to watch the Watch. Not that infiltration would be his style when corruption was always an option. Cheery wondered what the police force in Brindisi must be like, if they had one at all.

And then, suddenly, bright and shiny, the thought appeared. If undercover wasn't an option, what about overcover?

'Fred,' she called out, 'come in here, and bring Nobby with you.'

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It was definitely a library. The rows of bookshelves were a dead giveaway. They stretched up towards the ceiling with such altitudinal aspiration that a rolling ladder was in place to help access the snow-covered top shelves. This was a library in the traditional sense. It held as many books as it possibly could and it was up to the visitor to find what they were looking for. If you needed a packed lunch and climbing gear then so be it.

Vimes hadn't had the chance to take much more in before Sybil materialised behind him. One of the common mistakes of first-time teleporters is to not move away from the spot they landed in if others are following them. In some sections of society the preferred female shape has, at different times, been slim and possibly petite. The Ramkin family had no truck with such stupid ideas. They were practical and had their antecedents on the land. The preferred shape of any Ramkin, and here they definitely struck a blow for narrowing the gender gap, was practical and large. Not fat, mind you, just solid and 100% present. Sybil was 100% Ramkin. When she arrived at the same spot Sam was standing in certain laws of physics, which always like to stick their noses in and cause trouble, kicked into play and Sam shot across the room like a bowling-balled skittle.

'Hello,' said the tall robed figure he had stumbled to a halt in front of. 'Welcome to the Library of the University of Ahroma.'

The man reached down and helped Vimes to his feet. The copper in Vimes quietly noted the strong grip and rough hands. Not the kind you might traditionally find on a librarian (which is a sweeping statement that should be deplored for drawing generalisations and does not allow for the rich diversity of individuals in that profession) - though he did have to admit that the typical librarian hands in Ankh-Morpork were large, leathery and perfectly designed for brachiation (see).

'Thanks,' he said as he dusted himself off. 'Sam Vimes,' he continued, extending his hand.

'Ludovico Moratori', the man replied and shook the offered hand. No one would ever describe Vimes as a connoisseur in anything and he would be offended if they did, but he was an expert in quite a few areas and one of these was body language. Most policemen from Ankh Morpork are. At least the ones still alive (and Reg Shoe - Zombie Respect, yeah). The handshake was firm, but
not some sort of test of strength that some people believe indicates power, but mostly implies insecurity or self-delusion. Ludovico was someone to listen to and possibly learn to respect.

Unless, of course he was wrong, Vimes acknowledged. The difference between a sociopath and a good leader, when you first meet them, is that one is just pretending to be human. It's only after you've elected them that you find out exactly who you've given the front door keys to.

'I have heard much about you, Commander Vimes,' continued Ludovico, in perfect Morporkian, though not in the strict sense. The Morporkian accent had a down-to-earth quality laced with hints of criminal potential. The Brindisian accent also had those hints, but it swept you off your feet first. 'The Librarian tells me you are both a policeman and a man of honour. This is a hard thing to achieve in our country - and keep on breathing. What brings you and your friends,' he nodded to Sybil and Angua, who had just arrived, 'so far across the Disc and is so important that the Librarian permitted you in L-Space?'

'Ludovico, this is my wife, Sybil and Captain Angua,' Vimes replied and paused. When you're on a secret mission to rescue someone it's generally considered poor form to tell people who you've only just met exactly what you're up to ... and then he paused his pause ... if you couldn't trust a librarian there wasn't hope for much else.

'We believe one of our colleagues, Captain Carrot was kidnapped and recently transported to this city, probably in some sort of fast moving boat.'

Ludovico nodded. 'And you have some idea of who, don't you Commander?'

'Do you know someone called Alberto Hattoni?'

Laughter is a curious thing. It can say to the world that something is very amusing, or it can, with twist, say there is nothing funny about this at all. Ludovico laugh sat firmly in the second camp. Or, possibly, had been thrown out of that camp for being a touch too cynical.

'Commander Vimes, this is Ahroma. Every living soul here knows of Hattoni - and many of the dead ones too. You trusted me, and now I will return that trust. I have not always been a librarian, as you have already guessed. These hands worked the land, alongside my family, for many years. As did the generations before me. It was a small village, full of different-sized people. Some with small minds and others with huge hearts. I do not pretend it was perfect and the lifestyle was often hard, but mostly it felt good and mostly it felt right. But then Hattoni and his kind appeared. There has always been crime in Brindisi, as I am sure there is everywhere, but it was never truly organised or controlled until then.'

'Like the Thieves Guild,' said Angua.

'What is that?' asked Ludovico.

'The thieves have a guild that organises crime. They've got rosters, quotas and even a fee rate.'

'And they control the city?'

'Oh, no,' Angua replied. 'The Patrician does.'

'And who controls the Patrician?'

Angua shrugged. 'The Patrician?' she answered cautiously. She could see the weakness in the system right there.
'Hmmm,' said Ludovico, 'you are placing much faith there. I hope he is nothing like Hattoni. What do they say? “A twisted nerve, a ganglion gone awry, separates the sinner from the saint.”

'Anyway, in time Hattoni's crones ran the village. Young men left to work in the city for Hattoni and suddenly we had a class system. There were only two classes, of course - those who worked for Hattoni and those who didn't. And those who didn't went without, while those who did went with.

'My father had been a village elder, an honest and true man. He spoke out against the injustice and for that they punished him. In the cruelest way possible. Not by physical violence but through lies and gossip. My father was a liar. My father stole from others. My father was a drunkard and so on. Even though he had only ever acted in the best interests of others the fake news spread through the village because people can be small and mean when their leaders are morally bankrupt.

'It broke my father, it broke the family and in the end it took him from us. Lies destroyed my father. This is why I became a librarian. Because the truth is written into their job descriptions. So, yes, I do know Alberto Hattoni. And yes I will help you rescue your colleague.'

As Vimes watched Ludovico speak he realised what so few people do. That, in defiance of the stereotype, librarians are driven by burning passion* as much as any great reformer.

* This is not to be confused with the passion contained within such publications as The Naughty Librarian or Bookshelves of Desire.

'But first I must introduce you to someone who knows Hattoni better than most. Follow me.'

It was only as they headed off down the aisle that realisation dawned on Angua.

'Where's Gaspode?' she said.

xxxx

Gaspode was asking himself exactly the same question. As he skidded through the portal he'd had a brief glimpse of the path the others had gone down and then with a nasty wrench he'd been flung down an entirely different tunnel. A few sphincter-clenching moments later as he spun through a weird biblio-kaleidoscope of flashing images he saw what looked like a burst of unfettered light. General advice in these situations is 'don't go into the light', but as things seemed pretty hellish as it was Gaspode didn't feel like he had much to lose. He gave a sideways kick through the streaming world of books and rolled out into bright sunlight.

As the spinning stopped the place he had landed came crowding in. It was afternoon, but the light wasn’t right. It was brighter than when they’d left. Had they gone back in time? And he was on a bustling street, though the bustle seemed to be largely detouring around him, which was pretty much what happened to Gaspode most of the time when he thought about it.

Everything was same, same, different. This could almost have been a street in Ankh-Morpork but at the same it could never be one. The light was warmer, exotic in a way, but old and well-used. There were aromas too, just like Ankh-Morpork, but then nothing could really smell like that city. What was the saying? Smell Ankh and die, wasn't it? This city had its own pungency, but there was an alluring aroma that promised adventure, and quite probably misadventure as well.

Then there were the people. They were darker of skin and dressed in lighter clothing, in that way that tells you sunlight was a more common commodity here. And they spoke, almost without break it seemed, or maybe shouting was a better description. All done in a language that interwove
like strands of linguini. It was like watching theatre on the street. Gaspode half expected someone to burst into song, or possibly draw a knife. It was totally foreign and yet Gaspode noticed that people were still fundamentally people wherever you put them. Dogs are much better at understanding this than humans.

'Ah, another visitor,' said a voice beside him. 'It's been a while.'

Gaspode turned to see an old man watching him carefully. The man smiled and his face wrinkled up like a chocolate wrapper. 'Last time it was an orangutan. Now that was interesting. You do know they're an ape, not a monkey don't you. Antonio from down the street found that out the hard way. Of course the ape made sure he wouldn't get it wrong again and Antonio's leg is almost healed, so it's all good and we're all a bit wiser. What about you little dog, are you special too?'

'Woof,' Gaspode replied.

The man grinned. 'Quite convincing,' he said.

'Bark?' tried the dog.

The man shook his head. Gaspode gave up 'I suppose "Yap" is out of the question,' he said.

'That's more like it. Francesco Di Quatro at your service. Proud owner of Ahroma's only footpath library.'

Gaspode looked behind himself and sure enough, the footpath was crowded with books of every shape and size.

'It's a bit quiet at the moment but as the sun begins to set my customers appear,'

'So at least I ended up in the right city,' observed Gaspode. 'But the time is all wrong. Maybe even the day. P'raps it's a thousand years in the future.'

'More like a thousand years in the past,' replied Francesco wryly, 'if you come from Ankh-Morpork as I suspect. But don't worry, time tends to behave itself in L-Space. I think you'll find it's just a different time over here.'

The dog nodded and retuned his gaze to the books. 'So, who are your customers?'

Gaspode was used to seeing just about everything for sale on the streets but this was, quite accurately, novel. And it seemed to be free, which was definitely unique by Ankh-Morpork standards.

'Those who, by the roll of the dice, find their homes on the street and their beds in the parks,' replied to old man. 'Humans are very good as misconceptions. We'd win gold medals for it. And one of the larger ones is that homeless people are ignorant and don't have the same interests and passions that those with roofs over their heads do. Some of the wisest people I've met are homeless and some of the most ignorant live in mansions with a view, so they can look down on others. My clients are some of the most voracious readers I know.'

'Where do you get the books?'

'From those less ignorant. And other libraries. The orangutan left me with many fascinating works the last time he visited. They were all a bit magical, so I had to be selective. All books transform the reader, but it's best to avoid the ones that take that literally.'
Gaspode had learned over the years that the best approach to people was to adopt a position of impending disappointment, which left room for surprises like Francesco. 'Before you get too busy,' the dog said, 'could you tell me where I could find Alberto Hattoni?'

The man frowned. 'He is not someone people, or canines, seek out. If you wait long enough he will find you, but if you're in a hurry then I'd suggest starting at his house.' Francesco pointed to a large mansion that sat on a hill above the city.

'Take care, though, my friend. I would like another chance to talk further.'

'Fanks,' replied the dog as he trotted off down the street. 'The name's Gaspode by the way.'

A few minutes later, a shape emerged from an alley way and turned to follow the small dog.

xxxx

'So, have you got that, Fred?' said Cheery.

'I'm all over it,' the Sergeant replied.

Cheery smiled, but there was a noticeable lack of mirth in it. Fred did have a strong record of being all over things but mostly this happened when he tripped and then others had to clean up the pieces. But she didn't have much choice at the moment and, besides, Fred and Nobby had refined their incompetence to such a level that it seemed to go out the other side and even deliver results.

'You have to convince Hattoni that you're easily corruptible.'

'No problems there,' chipped in Nobby.

That was certainly true. How Nobby had ever found himself in the role of upholding the law was beyond Cheery. It was like appointing a weasel to watch over the chickens.

'And he has to think that you're stupid.'

'We'll do our best,' replied Fred.

Even their second best would be damn convincing she thought. Probably anything in the top 10.

'You'll keep more or less your usual routine, but I'm going to start putting you in patrol areas where Hattoni's men can cross your paths. You'll have to let them know you're open to bribery, but try not to look too obvious.'

'Subtlety will be our middle names,' replied Fred, despite a lifetime's behaviour to the contrary.

'Keep an eye out for anything that can help us and, above all, keep safe,' she said as the disappeared out the door.

She sighed. They had no idea how dangerous this could be, which may even help protect them. Fred and Nobby were not the sharpest tools in the shed, or even knew where the shed was for that matter, but they were remarkably good at surviving.

xxxx

'He could be anywhere,' explained Ludovico. 'He could still even be in L-Space if he hasn't seen a way out. With some luck he might have been caught in your slipstream and be not too far away, but who knows?'
'What now?' asked Angua.

'Ook,' said the Librarian firmly.

'The Watch never leaves a man behind,' translated Ludovico, 'or dog. I'm going back in.'

Vimes nodded. How the world had changed. He remembered a time when the most popular person to patrol with was Tangles McVeigh because everyone could outrun him and if someone was chasing you this improved your own survival rates considerably. And as for running towards a scream….

But the Librarian was right. Somewhere along the line, about the time the Watch has begun to discover dignity and self-respect (excluding Nobby and Colon, of course), they'd also learned that survival wasn't the same as living, and that living came with a responsibility for others. The Watch was far too down-to-earth to ever be musketeers and too broadly cynical to have a rallying cry, but gods-help you if you harmed anyone of us.

'Ook,' said the orangutan as he jumped back into a portal he had conjured up.

'I shall return,' translated Ludovicio.

'I bloody well hope so,' said Vimes. 'He's got my badge. Now, you were talking about someone we had to meet?'

'Follow me,' said Ludovicio, turning on his heels.

They wound out of the book shelves and then wound up the stairwell and out into the windy streets of the capital. There was a lot of winding in Ahroma. Vimes wondered if getting straight to the point might be a tad trickier than he'd hoped.

The heat of the day was prowling the streets but you could feel it thinking about curling up and lying down. The locals were stirring and a city that largely lived its life on the streets began to live up to that image. Hawkers cleared their throats, inveterate whistlers and singers did the same and everyone else seemed to be chatting loudly to someone, quite possibly about a third party who had earned the right to be a topic of conversation by being absent.


'Blanche Witherspoon?' Sam had drifting into that nodding mode that all partners have in their toolbox when their significant other is on a roll, but the name Blanche was just too much of a square peg.

'Lovely girl. Went to school with her and we both studied Brindese together. She was a natural. Always swore she had Ahroma in the blood and that she'd go to live there. And she did. I stayed in contact with her for a while but the post was never the best and then she just seemed to drop off the planet. I hope she's still here. It would be wonderful to catch up with her.'

'Yes darling, but remember this isn't a holiday and we do have to get in and out in a hurry,' Sam replied. He sighed inwardly. It wasn't just because they were in a rush that Sam hoped they didn't meet Blanche. Sybil was the most generous and tolerant person Sam had ever met, which was why he loved her (and needed to be near her, so some of it might rub off on him). It was also why she always saw the best in people and, quite remarkably, often brought the best out in them. The problem was that not everyone had a best side and it took a fair amount of either control or denial
not to thump them. The sort of person other people use an interesting combination of body parts (especially from the more private regions) to describe. Sadly, many of the 'girls' Sybil stayed in contact with from her school days belonged in the obnoxious category. Vimes liked the word obnoxious. It was flexible enough to cover every form of unpleasantness and the word had more teeth than its synonym bedfellows.

Yes, Sybil's old friends were largely obnoxious and seemed to be drawn to obnoxious husbands. They were blessed with extra helpings of arrogance, intolerance and petty nastiness. Vimes knew he was falling into his own class prejudices here and that private schools produced some remarkable people (Sybil being a perfect case in point) and it was totally wrong to group all private school graduates into the 'obnoxious' category but, whispered the Dark Vimes, who understood the difference between prejudice and actual data, they do their share of the heavy lifting.

'Of course, darling,' Sybil replied. 'It's probably a million-to-one chance we'll meet up anyway.'

Vimes shuddered. Million-to-one chances were the policeman's best friend and worse adversary. They could save your life in a random action or snatch it away with an equally random stumble. And the buggers had a habit of popping up everywhere. 'We can only hope,' said Sam, hopelessly.

'Look Sam, you can see the Whopperseum,' said Sybil, pointing to a large stadium some streets away. 'They used to hold great fights in there. Quite cruel actually, but they stopped them a while ago and became more civilised. I so hope we can go there.'

'Yes, dear,' replied Vimes slipping into that automatic mode that partners do. It's called inactive listening. It's quite useful in relationships but it does bring risks. Many a partner when asking the question 'Who thought that was a good idea?' is confronted with the fatal reply 'Why, you dear.'

As for being more civilised, Vimes bit off a cynical laugh, deftly turning it into a cough. In his experience being civilised didn't mean any less cruelty, people just got a lot more sophisticated in how they meted it out.

'Here we are,' said Ludovicio, stopping them in front of an unpresupposing building that stood in a long line of unpresupposing stone buildings. Some buildings carry an air of authority. This building was not in that family. It wasn't even a distant relative. It sported the requisite number of windows and a modestly sized wooden door, and nothing much else. Nailed above the door in a way that suggested it was about to fall down and that this was a daily occurrence was a sign that read 'Polizia'.

Ludovicio knocked and moments later a voice from behind the door, off to the side Vimes noted, as though the speaker was staying out of some imaginary line of fire, said something in Brindese

'Just me, Joseph,' the librarian replied in Ankh-Morporkian. 'Its Ludovicio.'

'No, it's not just you,' the voice countered, shifting into the same language* with the classic Brindisi accent. 'Who are the people with you?'

*Ankh-Morporkian in the lingua franca of the Disc. Which is handy because when it comes to language there’s none more frank than that city’s tongue.

Ah, yes, there it was. A small peephole in the side of the door.

'They are visitors from Ankh-Morpork and they need some assistance dealing with one of our more notable citizens,' said Ludovicio patiently. 'Please let us in Joseph.'

There was an extended thoughtful silence from the other side of the door and then the sound of
bolts being shot open. The door swung slowly inwards.

There was no immediate sign of their cautious host but Ludovicio lead them in and down the corridor, as though this was anything but unusual. Vimes, with a smile so dry you could name a cocktail after it, made sure he was the last to enter. They had just reached what looked like a small office when a voice said, 'Turn around slowly and keep your hands away from your body.'

Close behind, or rather, now in front of them, with Vimes in the lead position, stood a short, stocky man, whose most notable feature was the crossbow he was holding.

'Right,' he said, 'none of you are to move unless I say so.'

'Please Capitano,' began Ludovicio, but Vimes raised his hand and said, 'Let me take it from here.'

'But,' said the librarian, '...'"

And then Vimes dropped his hand. In the heartbeat while eyes were on Ludovicio, he also stepped forward and smacked the crossbow out the hands of its surprised holder. Things didn't get any less surprising for him as Vimes's other hand closed around his throat and pinned him to the wall.

'Now listen here, Joseph,' Vimes said in a conversational tone, 'here's a few tips for next time. Don't stand so close if you're using a crossbow. Don't hold the damned thing so loosely. Take a note of who you're going to be closest to. Chances are they're going to be the biggest problem. Never take your eyes off them. But most importantly of all, don't pick a fight with me. I've looked down the shafts of more crossbow bolts than you've had hot breakfasts, and I'm still here. And I'm not alone. I happen to be carrying a loaded werewolf and I'm not afraid to use it.'

Joseph gulped, or at least did the best impersonation he could in his current circumstances. He looked over Vimes's shoulder at the others. 'You may be wondering which one is the werewolf. I wouldn't bother. The other one is my wife, and if you figure who might be the more dangerous, let me know. I'm going to let go in a moment and you're not going to do anything stupid are you, Joseph?'

The man gave a tiny head shake. Vimes held him there for a moment longer for good measure and then let go. Joseph dropped to the ground with a relieved thud. Vimes gave him a few moments to collect himself, remember how to breathe and discretely check the trouser region in case of bladder betrayal.

'Joseph, let's cut to the chase. If Ludovicio trusts you, then so do we. Lucky for you. For some reason he thinks it would be handy for us to talk to you about Alberto Hattoni so let's start with that and see how our friendship develops?'

As it turned out the time with Joseph was well spent. Capitano Petrosini was the local expert on Hattoni. He’d watched his empire grow, slowly corrupting not just the city but the surrounding countryside. And the more powerful Hattoni had become the smaller grew the circle of people Petrosini could trust - including fellow police, and even judges. Especially them.

'So, the big man is spreading his wings,' observed Joseph when he heard what was unfolding. 'I hope those Rust people know what they're doing.'

'I think the answer to that is clear cut,' said Sybil from across the small table they were crowded around. 'They haven't got a clue.'

'It's how he operates. He has many of the police on his payroll and even judges. I think the current ruler of our city, the Patrizio, is his own man, but it can only be a matter of time.'
'You have a Patrician too?'

'Yes, this one is new and no one has seen him much. We have a long tradition of Patrizio's. I fear this one maybe the last. The previous one seemed to disappear in rather strange circumstances.'

This was the perennial problem faced by all rulers. There was always someone, probably many someones who thought they could do a better job than you and were happy to consider various harmless solutions to achieve these. Harmless from their perspectives, of course. It took a special type of person with a mind like a corkscrew to survive. Ironic to call them rulers, then, when rulers are for drawing straight lines, though Vimes.

'Any ideas where he would be keeping Captain Carrot?' asked Angua.

'Hattoni does seem to have a soft spot for cellars, like any cockroach,' replied Petrosini, 'so I'd start there.'

'Which leads to the more challenging question of how we might get in there,' said Vimes.

'Sadly, I cannot help you there. No doubt he has some sort of escape route, but I have not found it yet. As far as entering the house by any other means Señor Hattoni clearly doesn't appreciate uninvited guests. It is like a fortress. And, in defiance of the dark lord tradition, his guards are more than smart enough to find their own backsides with both hands. Definitely smart enough to make sure Hattoni has no reason to doubt their abilities.'

'Hattoni is in Ankh Morpork right now. Does that change anything?'

'It's unusual for him to be so far away from Ahroma,' Joseph acknowledged, 'but he does occasionally go on journeys, especially around his holdings in Brindisi. Then he leaves his lieutenant, Roberto, in charge. He is, as they say, a nasty piece of work.'

'His son?'

'He does like to keep it a family business, but Roberto is a nephew. Hattoni has never been able to have children of his own. Which reminds me. There is something different about this trip. His wife, Bianca, stayed at home.'

'What's she like?' asked Sybil, curious to know the sort of woman who would pledge herself to such a person as Hattoni. If Sam ever went down that path she'd be out of there like a shot. It wasn't that he didn't have a dark side, most people, especially those involved in upholding the law, did. The trick was to make sure you used your own forces of evil to do good. It was a fine line and sometime people fell off.

'I've never heard a bad word said against her, though not many people actually get to know her. She's not exactly a recluse, but you couldn't call her a socialite either. She's a bit of a mystery, to be honest. Unlike, Hattoni's mistress, Isabella. If Bianca is a closed book, Isabella is an open one, with loose leaf pages.'

'Well, there's some good news at last,' said Vimes. 'Maybe a chink in the armour. Where can we find her?'

'Isabella is a little unpredictable, but she lives in a villa on the Via Nostromo.'

'Good,' replied Vimes, 'let’s start there.'

'Actually Sam, let's start with somewhere to stay,' said Sybil.
Vimes shook his head. 'We don't have time for that.'

'You always say that Sam, but how do you know? And don't tell me that crime never sleeps, because it does. Maybe during the day, admittedly, but even it has breaks. So, let's find somewhere to stay and then you can go off chasing after that other woman.'

Sam processed what Sybil had just said, and then reprocessed it. He heard what she said, but he knew what she meant. Besides, it wasn't the words that counted it was the delivery. Vimes's modus operandi was to get his own way or go down arguing, but he’d learned that things applied differently to Sybil, especially when she used that voice.

Vimes turned to Joseph. 'Any suggestions where we can stay? Possibly close to the Via Nostromo.'

'And the opera,' added Sybil. 'I'm not coming all this way to miss out on that. And the best thing, Sam, is that you've got the perfect excuse not to come. I'm sure one of these fine gentlemen can accompany me.'
When it comes to street crime Ankh-Morpork has many candidates for the top ten streets. The Shades has its own special category. Such streets come with obvious, if somewhat clichéd warning signals. Lack of lighting, narrowness, abundant hiding places for someone to lurk discretely* and a general lack of witnesses (or at least people who didn't know how to remain quiet).

* From which they can carry out any range of indiscretions. Anyone who tells you that life isn't ironic clearly has limited experience in actual living, ironically.

Fred Colon and Nobby Nobby knew these streets well, which was why they avoided them wherever possible. Upholding the law was one thing, but it helped if you could do it while not having to eat through a straw. The streets they were currently patrolling had none of these features. They were wide and well cobbled. There were no dark corners, just tastefully lit ones and certainly no piles of garbage to hide behind. Admittedly they weren't necessarily bustling but you felt that if anything happened here someone would see it and report it, or possibly take their own action. It's not that crime didn't occur here, in fact a strong case could be made that the very worst of crimes and criminals grew up on these streets, it's just that it wasn't seemly to be observed in the act. Wealth, when it comes down to it, is a form of cosmetic. It does a remarkable job of hiding blemishes.

'You know, Nobby, I think I could get used to this undercover detecting,' said Fred.

Nobby looked around cautiously. Nobby may not have completed first class before being expelled, but he was a survivor and had received his schooling on the streets - of which he had a PhD (Pretty Handy Dash). One of the very early pavement lessons he had learned was not to inform those who may not have your best interests at heart that you're planning on double-crossing them.

'Keep it down a bit, Sarge,' he whispered ferociously. 'Remember what Cheery said about discretion.'

Fred nodded. Nobby was right. You know how limited your intellectual resources are when it turns out that Nobby Nobbs is the brains of the outfit.

One of the distinct differences between the streets of their usual beat and those they were currently perambulating was a total absence of vendor wares in stalls on the pavement. Shopping, like crime in this part of the city, was done behind closed doors. This was a significant disappointment to Fred and Nobby, who considered mumping a legitimate part of weekly earnings.

'Sarge, isn't that that posh restaurant up ahead?' said Nobby, cutting across their lamentations.

'Yeah, the Caviar something-or-other.'

'Funny, isn't it, that anybody though eating caviar was a good idea.'

'What do you mean, Nobby?' Fred Colon was not averse to spreading caviar on a thick slice of bread and eating it with visible gusto whenever he went to fancy events, just to show how sophisticated he was. It was a rare occurrence, of course, and, in light of the above image, becoming increasingly rarer.

'With them being fish eggs and all.'

'What?' Colon barked. One of the common features of belonging to the human race is the ability to
casually apply double standards. Someone who, of his own volition, had eaten Dibbler's pies, which contain more body parts than even their erstwhile owners knew they possessed, was horrified at the idea that he consumed, in great amounts, eggs laid by fish. Fred knew that the idea of caviar came from foreign places - most likely Quirm. They did and ate anything there, at least according to his neighbours back home who, to a man or woman, had never visited the place. Questions about how they knew all this about Quirm would be countered by the statement 'You'll never get me going there with all their foreign ideas.' This defence is infallible because, like wagon trains under attack, it is forms a perfect circle.

'What's the problem Fred?' asked Nobby with what would normally be called a sly grin, but on Nobby's face it was hard to tell. 'You knew that about caviar didn't you?'

Fred bit back the words of horror, laced with xenophobia, that were striving to get out. The deep-down Fred knew that his uniform only granted a certain amount of respect and that he had used it up years ago. You had to earn it now. And, if he'd had any idea what the word meant, he'd have said ignorance was the antithesis of respect.

'Course I did Nobby,' he scoffed. 'I'm a world traveller, I am.'

'It's just you looked like someone who'd swallered a hedgehog.'

That part of Fred's brain that still got some sort of exercise panicked. Were hedgehogs a delicacy as well? He'd bet people somewhere thought so, but was that because eating hedgehog was a lot more pleasant than eating dirt? When in doubt, distract.

'Looks like they've got new greeters,' said Fred in the desperate tones of the truly ignorant. 'Wonder what happened to the usual ones.'

'Your Commander did,' rumbled a voice from the alley they were passing. This part of town did, in point of fact, have alleys because even the wealthy create rubbish - especially the wealthy. But it's a polished clean rubbish and anyone attempt to lurk in one is likely to end up as a bulky but brief part of the waste disposal process.

'Hi Frank,' said Colon. 'How's things?'

'Been a bit busy if late, what with all these new-foe rich people with land finking they can just stroll into the place. Flat out putting them straight. But it could be worse.'

'Why?'

'I coulda been the ones who were straightened out.'

Nobby and Fred gave sympathetic shudders. No one even wanted to be invited into Frank's alley.

'Now lads,' said Frank with a smile that spread across his face like high-speed continental drift, 'come down here. There's someone you need to meet.'

Sometimes you can hear a pin drop. This time it was the sound of two bricks. There are less stressful weight-loss programs than sheer terror, but none quicker.

'Please come in,' said a voice from the doorway, and a hand beckoned from the shadows. Nobby and Fred were experts at not being where trouble was, so much so that there were academic research papers written on what was called the Colon-Nobbs Effect. This theory expounded that we are all born with the power of prescience but in most people it is so weak it only presents as a feeling of unease. The theory then goes on to say that some rare individuals have evolved the
ability to subconsciously avoid danger. This would be the first time either Fred or Nobby would be at the forefront of evolution and makes you wonder if the whole evolving thing is as good as it's cracked up to be.

Right now, they knew they were exactly where they shouldn't be and that there wasn't any way out. They'd had no problems with playing at corruptible policeman. It was an easy stretch and one they'd been born for, but theirs had always been low-level corruption. The sort that borders on being harmless, in the scheme of things. Now they were realising for the first time that they'd only ever swum in the shallows and that they'd just paddled out into the deeper waters where larger creatures, with teeth and a boundless appetite, waited and watched.

Behind them Frank took a step forward. It was not a large step, but it summed up the situation they were in to a tee. Fred and Nobby were caught between a rock and a hard place.

'Fred, what are we going to do?' whispered Nobby.

Colon, drew a deep breath before he replied. 'The way I see it Nobby, if we step through that door we're walking into trouble, but here's the important thing. That trouble will happen sometime in the future, but if we don't walk through the door there won't be a future to worry about.'

It was logic like this that had helped keep Colon alive for so long and why he had risen to the rank of sergeant. This is the same sort of logic that has also lead to some of the worst tragedies in history and explains, in its own way, why Colon had never risen above sergeant.

Colon and Nobby stepped forward into the darkness.

Gaspode was a survivor. It was his greatest, possibly only, skill (other than talking, of course). Sometimes he gave into moments of moral weakness and put others first but it was never a dilemma when only his survival was at stake. Like right now. He was being followed and had been since he'd left Francesco. Every now and again he’d catch the sound of claws clicking away on the pavement but whenever he turned around there was no sign of his pursuer. Oh, sure, the streets were still bustling away, but it was in a Gaspode-non-specific way.

He was pretty certain it wasn't just one tracker either. There were glimpses down alleyways and not-quite-random yaps that suggested he was far from alone in the city. Knowing that his pursuers almost certainly, at least in a broad sense, belonged to the canine family did little to ease his concerns. After all, he was a dog and he knew what they were capable of, especially in packs. At least one of his futures involved ending up as little more than a widdle on the pavement.

He turned left down a broad street then broke into a dash across the path of an oncoming cart, leaving a brief trail of startled people and one horse behind him. Before the shouts had reached his ears he scurried through a courtyard, down a narrow passageway, bursting out onto a parallel street. As a seasoned escapee Gaspode knew that time spent looking to see if you were being followed was time you were giving away. If he was the hero of some kind of novel then he'd make a remarkable escape by sheer good luck taking random directional choices that miraculously led him to some alcove he could hid in while the bad dogs ran past. Gaspode doubted he'd ever feature as the hero of any novel unless the word tragedy (or possibly black comedy) was involved. Besides, his legs were too short for leaping from rooftop to rooftop.

Of course, it didn't help that his pursuers didn't have to rely on just sight or that his own personal scent had a signature large enough to be smelt from nearby asteroids. What he needed right now was anonymity. He said a silent prayer to whatever god looked over canines. There had to be one
in a world that had more gods than tenements had cockroaches. Not that his innate cynicism left much room for faith - and was it a coincidence that dog was the reverse of god? Besides, even if there was a god watching over dogs, which side would they be supporting? Couldn't those pursuing him be praying just as fervently - maybe even more so?

Now he was genuinely lost in a foreign city. Every decision he made was based on the pure roll of the dice, metaphorically speaking, of course. Paws suck when it comes to dice-rolling, which is why you never see dogs at the craps table in casinos. Since blind chance was involved, Gaspode added a prayer to the Lady, safe in the knowledge that she was famed for never being swayed by such things. If the Lady smiled on you it was because she wanted to. And if she didn't ... well, something else might descend on you and the craps table could live up to its name.

He turned another corner and there below him lay the harbour, sparkling in the afternoon light. He paused to take his bearings and in that moment the sea breeze lifted up to greet him, bringing with it .... salvation.

Leaving his pursuers grasping at thick air* he sprang down the hill, his nose dragging him forward like Love Potion No.9. Without looking back he knew dogs were emerging from side streets to create a strange kind of dentourage**. It would be a close-run thing and Gaspode knew that most gods just liked a show. The difference between a narrow escape and a tragic miss may well come down to viewer preference on the day.

* No air remains thin once Gaspode has passed through it.
** Like entourage but with teeth.

The street levelled out and Gaspode skidded around a corner in a fashion that would have made cartoon animators on another world proud of their efforts. And there it was before him - the canine nasal equivalent of Aladdin's Cave - the seafood markets. They'd have as much chance of tracking him through there as following a fart in a tornado. Not that he planned to give them the opportunity. He scurried into the markets, where even his own personalised odour quietly skunk off in defeat.

There are two things that are important to know about seafood markets. The first is that they are not places for the faint-hearted. They are an assault on the senses. The aroma of a fish market is well documented, but any frequenter of the markets will tell you that it doesn't end there. Stall after stall confronts the customer with every possible shaped creature from under the waves - and when it comes to genetic creativity the sea delivers in spades. Quite literally, especially when it comes to shovel-nosed sharks. It doesn't follow any conventions. Tired of having no legs? Fine, evolve a mess of tentacles. Bones annoying you? Then stick them on the outside. Over being smooth skinned? Why not give spikes a go? Wish you didn't have to be on every other fish's menu? Grow some teeth. It's overwhelming.

The second thing about seafood markets is the noise. The ocean happily transmits sound over great distances - seafood market do the reverse. They condense it into a great, writhing chaos of hawkers' cries, clattered deliveries and customers more than willing to argue the outrageous price of octopi these days.

The third* thing to know about seafood markets is that dogs are not welcome. Oh sure, they're more welcome than cats, and rampaging bulls for that matter, but that doesn't mean they're greeted with open arms. Gaspode had to weave a tortuous path through the markets to avoid a kicking or capture. If he was caught he wouldn't be surprised if he turned up on one of the tables. Dogfish indeed.

* So the numbers are a little dodgy - but surely it doesn't call for a Spanish Inquisition?
Eventually he found himself on the market’s fringe, standing outside a derelict boat house. Right now what he needed most was a chance to catch his breath. It had definitely been one of those days. The door was hanging off its hinges and he trotted into the building’s enfolding darkness. Now for just a little less insanity.

Or not.

'He has come, as foretold,' said a voice from the shadows.

The apartment Joseph had found for them was more than satisfactory. It had a grand view of the Via Nostromo, two bedrooms and, most importantly, no other occupants. Though there were signs that perhaps this wasn't a traditional rental apartment. Vimes was impressed with how quickly Petrosini had found them the place.

'Looks like whoever normally lives here might have just gone off for a holiday,' said Vimes. 'I wonder how Joseph knew that?'

Sybil shrugged. 'Remember that old saying about Brindisi - "the pasta is foreign country. They do things differently there."'

'We call it Ahroma BnB,' said Joseph as he opened the windows, 'though don't expect any breakfast. It stands for BednBuggeroff. Brindisians have a rather disinterested view when it comes to paying taxes*, and this approach suits them to the ground.'

* As is the case in just about every society, which doesn't prevent residents from complaining about the state of their roads and how the government needs to spend more on them.

'Just perfect, thanks Joseph,' said Sybil with the sort of boundless energy and positivity that is generally far more effective and powerful than most people realise – too many adopt the arsehole approach to the world. Sam knew that he had an inner arsehole, but the difference between his and the other arseholes he liked to kick, was that he would use his to defend people like Sybil. The end justifies the means, as it were. Though Sam would happily disagree with that statement too. He staunchly believed, based on a lifetime of cynical experience, that cliches had a lot to answer for.

'This is where we part company, Sam,' continued Sybil. 'You can stake out your mistress, but I'm going to the opera. La Hussiata is playing and I wouldn't miss it for the world. Angua, would you like to come with me?'

Angua had many strengths but watching opera wasn't among them. Singers who hit high notes that drove dogs crazy. Singers, for that matter, who could qualify for the phrase, there's good eating on one of those. And being packed in, like sheep, with an audience who also looked like they'd never been short of a crust, or a whole loaf for that matter, was a nightmare. It bought the wolf out in her and no one wanted to see that.

Sybil watched all of this play out across Angua's face and came to the rescue, as she always did. 'Silly of me to suggest it,' she said. 'Sam will definitely need you on the stake-out, won't you Sam?'

Sam nodded. Code of the Watch. Come to the aid of an officer in need. Maybe the world would return the favour some time. He'd never understood opera. Just say the words and give me some sort of clue as to what's happening next. Don't, for the gods’ sake, sing them, especially not in a foreign language or in a voice that throws bats off their flight paths. Besides, he once had Sybil translate an opera too him and the most notable feature of the plot, was the total absence of one that
made any sense at all. Opera was one taste Sam was confident he would never acquire. He was happy enough for it to happen to other people, just not in his lounge room (which was far too small anyway. Operas needed lounge rooms the size of small kingdoms or it wasn't worth the effort).

'Will you come with me Senor Petrosini?' she asked.

'I would be happy to accompany you, Lady Sybil, and please call me Joseph, or even just plain Joe.'

'And Sybil is just fine in return, though if you try Syb you may find yourself in rocky shoals.'

Joe smiled. 'Agreed. And we're in luck. Senor Enrico Basilica is playing the role of Giorgio.'

Sybil clapped her hands in schoolgirl-like delight. 'Oh, Sam, can you believe it?', she said breathlessly.

'No,' he replied in all honesty. 'Are we talking about a building or a person here? Though I do seem to recall watching a gentleman in an opera last year that could have qualified for both.'

'That's him.'

'And just out of curiosity, what's the plot to this opera? Let me guess. Boy meets girl and they fall in love, but it's complicated. One of them is actually really sick. They end up being torn apart by circumstance, one blames the other for something and it all ends with them finding each other again, and then someone dies?'

Sybil sighed. 'You just don't get the whole experience of the opera do you? You're always looking for the plot.'

'I am a copper. Looking for plots is in the job description.'

'Yes, but opera is different,' she continued, succinctly summarising centuries of debate into just four words and threatening the livelihoods of academics and arts critics across the Disc. 'Anyway,' Sybil said, using the word like a guillotine, 'Joe and I need to hurry, and you have a mistress to pursue. I'm sure we're both in for fun-filled evenings.'
Fun has not ever been one of the words used in association with stake-outs, except when its sometime-bedfellow, irony, has dropped by. Vimes and Angua had taken up residence in a bar across the street from Isabella's apartment. It had taken the barman a while to get the message that neither of his guests actually wanted alcohol. He could have opted for being vaguely affronted, but when the woman growled at him the last time he'd tried, in a way that sent shivers down a primal spine he didn't even know he possessed, he'd taken a wiser course of action. In a city famed for its wine and revelry he was working on the first ever mocktail, which was no mean feat since Ahromians hadn't yet discovered cocktails either.

It's a misconception that the long hours involved in a stake-out will be filled with entertaining small-talk or deep personal revelations. This in no way applied to the current situation. Vimes and Angua could certainly be described in terms of small-talk but only if you used the phrase 'never engages with' first. But that is nothing compared to the likelihood of personal revelation.

Not that they weren't finding out things about each other. You don't get to be a copper on the streets of Ankh Morpork without being able to read people like a book. Angua had the added advantage of all the senses at a wolf's disposal. She was well into the novel of Vimes, and anxiety poured out of its pages. Sure, there was a white-hot anger as well, but there always was. It was the facade Vimes used every day to hide his own deep concerns. He was anxious about Carrot, that was obvious. But there was more. Angua could see he wished Sybil was safe, but probably didn't even know for sure where on the Disc that would be right at the moment. And he was confused. Crime is actually quite simple. It's when you're trying to figure out what the crime is and who's involved that the complications start to appear.

Sam, for his part, was sitting next to a bundle of coiled-spring tension. This also wasn't hard to pick up. A werewolf with their hackles up triggers something deep down in what could be considered nearby prey. Besides, the term 'hackles up' is not a figure of speech when you're talking about lycanthropes. If they didn't find Carrot soon there would be Hell to pay for someone. And this, too, wasn't a figure of speech.

'Try this one,' said the barman in a battered version of Ankh Morporkian, approaching the table with two drinks in tall glasses. For some reason, even though he'd never seen a cocktail before, when he was making the drink he'd found himself wanting to add all sorts of paraphernalia to the glass. This is called the Cocktail Resonance. It is one of the lesser-known forces in the universe, largely because the researchers are never sober enough to report on it. As paper umbrellas and swizzle sticks had not entered this part of the world yet, the barman had opted for a wide variety of fruit, which hung off and in glass, adding so much weight that he'd had to build some mini scaffolding so it wouldn't topple over. He'd tried a range of vegetables in the mocktail to begin with because he'd had an urge to make the drinks healthy, but there's only so much you can do (that's legal) to a squash and none of them involve exotic drinks. The drink itself contained the sort of colour spectrum more commonly associated with young girls armed with a full set of colouring pencils, determined to draw unicorns and rainbows.

Vimes looked at the orchard-in-a-glass with suspicion. 'Turnips?' he said.

'Gone,' replied the barman, 'along with the Brussel sprouts.'

Vimes nodded and the barman erected the drinks for them. Angua sipped hers and shuddered as sixteen varieties of fruity sweetness coursed through her.
'If something doesn't happen soon …’ she growled.

'I know,' he replied. Apparently coppers needed patience, but right now there was a fair chance that soon he'd be dealing with patients instead.

'Hang on,' said Angua, her eyes snapping to the street, 'is that her?'

A well-dressed woman had emerged from the building and was walking up Via Nostromo towards the restaurant quarter. A moment later they were out on the street, leaving behind a pile of coins, two teetering glasses and a barman with dreams.

Following someone is remarkably easy, doing so without being noticed is another thing all together. It takes years to get the distance and the level of indifference in the walk right. Excessive nonchalance is a common failure amongst rookie cops. Not that this was an issue for Vimes or Angua. They caught up with Isabella as quickly as well-measured insouciance permitted. Angua had to admit that the woman had style. Angua took a pragmatic approach to clothing but even she could see the woman had perfect dress sense, and the way she walked certainly made sure every eye followed her. Lithe is an overused word, especially when skinny is available and generally far more accurate, but in Isabella's case she wore it like a second skin. This woman, Angua realised with some surprise, was not some plaything. She was a hunter in her own right.

Then, just like that, Isabella was gone. One minute she was swaying down the opposite footpath, the next there was only torchlight and shadows.

'Bugger,' cried Vimes as they dashed across the street. There was a narrow alleyway and something moving in the darkness at the other end. Suddenly it had become a Pursuit, and Vimes smiled. He'd never like tailing people. It felt … underhanded. But a Pursuit…. There was nothing deceptive about that. All the cards were on the table and everyone involved knew what was expected of them.

It should have ended quickly. They were experienced coppers and even though the streets were unfamiliar the chase wasn't. Angua could have sworn no one was capable of walking quickly in the shoes and tight dress Isabella had been wearing, let alone running but, even with the fruit-sugar high, they never got closer as they wound from street to alleyway and back again.

And then it was over. They rounded a corner to be met with a dead end. Not the sort of dead end that has handy doors to disappear into. This was the sort that said more about the ad hoc nature of civic planning in Ahroma than anything else. It was an alleyway to nowhere but a brick wall. And it was totally empty.

'Angua?'

She sniffed. There it was the distinct aroma that made her hackles rise.

'She was here. I can smell her, but it's fading.'

They went through the obligatory process of checking for secret doors (no copper would ever live it down back at the station if they missed one of those*) without success. There was only one other way out. Vimes stepped back and looked up.

* The same sort of shame that applies to players of Dungeons and Dragons.

xxxx

La Hussiata had been everything Sybil had hoped for, and more. The costuming and scenery were
amazing, their rich grandeur a constant reminder of why cities struggle to support even one opera house. And the voices ... She could still hear them and even the walls seemed to hum with the ghosts of performances past trapped beneath their lavish wallpapering. Even more exciting, Enrico Basilica must have spotted her from stage and had sent her a message to catch up with her after the performance. She'd met him in Ankh Morpork when he had toured there and she'd had him over for dinner. What an experience that had been. There's always a risk you can run out of food if you're hosting a crowd, but when it's only one person ... there was nothing petite about his appetite - it was, to ruin a perfectly good word, apenormous.

Enrico Basilica had begun life as Henry Slugg, from Ankh Morpork. Seeing little prospect with a name like that and possessing an uninspiring past, he left the city, transformed along the way, like a caterpillar, into the butterfly that was Enrico. A very large butterfly admittedly. And certainly not the kind you associate the word flitting with, but a great success nonetheless. She'd kept his secret, even from Sam, because that's what you did. Some people's idea of keeping a secret involves sharing it as widely as possible at the first available opportunity, prefaced by the words 'Now you mustn't tell anyone...' but Sybil was not 'some people'. She knew trust had to be earned every day and that it could be lost in a heartbeat, a glance, a word out of place.

As they wound their way backstage Sybil and Joseph joined a select group of opera lovers who had been granted the rare privilege of meeting the great man. It was a chatty group. They clearly knew each other and had been back stage many times before. Just because no one would dream of calling opera lovers groupies doesn't mean this isn't exactly what they were. Obsession is a remarkably inclusive bedfellow.

They had reached the backstage door and were shuffling around in that awkward way people do when they find themselves in a space about one size too small for the group they're part of. Sybil turned to make room for a new arrival, and gasped.

Many criminals, at least those in fictional works, like to operate in shadows and darkness. But when you're big enough the light doesn't matter. Fred and Nobby had been escorted into one of the private rooms at the Caviar Temptor and they had no problem seeing the company they were keeping. Around the room stood four larger gentlemen whose demeanour, possibly in an unfair way, made the word thug spring to mind. You shouldn't judge a book by its cover, though it may be prudent to be aware of those that look like they could pack a wallop. These ones left no doubt that there would, at some point, be at least one punchline.

Seated at a large table, surrounded by parchments, was a large man - large even by Fred Colon's standards. Beside him sat another man - small, nervous. The sort of person you never registered other than in the context of being with other people. He looked like a mouse, in the company of rats and weasels.

'Take a seat gentlemen,' said the man indicating two chairs across the table from him. Colon noted his accent. Foreigner, he thought with the mild distain of those who have no problem with complaining about the influx of those born from different cultures whilst enjoying their klatchian hotpot and a spot of wine from Quirm. The Colons were fourth generation Ankhmorporkians and proud of it. Before that they weren't, but that didn't seem to count, unless you're into genealogy. Then it's all she wrote. There is no known cure once you contract family history.

'My name is Alberto Hattoni, and I’ve had my eyes on you for some time,' he continued as Nobby and Fred shuffled over to the chairs with the same enthusiasm as penguins at the front row of an iceberg when the seals are in town.
Tell me gentlemen, how much property do you own?

'None of its mine,' blurted Nobby. 'I just took it from the lost property cupboard back to my place to make sure it was safe.

'You just can't trust people these days,' he added softly. Nobby was not a sportsman, preferring to watch any events in a crowded stadium where petty theft often went unnoticed, but when it came to brazen hypocrisy he regularly scored natural 10s.

Hattoni changed tack, as people often found they had to when holding conversations with Nobby and Fred.

'How would you both like to live in Ankh Heights?'

'Can't really afford to, at the moment sir,' said Nobby, 'beside, I bet they're all pretentious knobs.'

Colon nodded in agreement. 'They would be, wouldn't they?'

'But weren't you planning to live their Sarge?' Nobby asked.

Fred blinked. He was happy as the next person to chop down any other aspirational members of society. It came as a surprise to realise that he was the subject of his own bias.

'Yeah, well, maybe we were, but it wouldn't have been in the posh part. You see Nobby, and this is why I'm the Sergeant and you're only the Corporal, I can see the difference. We would have lived there, if we could afford it, because we had earned the right through hard work. It's the other ones that would have been the pretentious ones.'

There's a theory that as humans evolved so did their ability to lie convincingly and to self-delude about it. Once again, it had presented the disturbing possibility that Fred Colon maybe at the forefront of evolution and that this was where humanity was heading. It's enough to make someone wonder whether or not there should be a higher power, and that if there was had they fallen asleep at the reins?

Hattoni smiled. His people had found the perfect pair to do his work. He'd thought the small one, who appeared to belong to his own species (and thank the gods for that) was the stupid one, but he was only a novice compared to the sergeant. The imp at least had some rat cunning, possibly in his genes. If ignorance was bliss, then the sergeant must be the most blissful person in Ankh Morpork.

'How would you like to own a property in Ankh Heights?' Hattoni tried for the third time, and because he was a quick learner, he added 'outright. Just yours. No debts owing. Freshly built. Good workmanship. All the modern conveniences. Pest free. Good location. Big back yard. No surprises.'

There was a moment's silence as this sunk in. But only a moment.

'It's what Mrs Colon and I have always dreamed of,' said Fred, despite the fact that Ankh Heights was such a new suburb it had only just registered on the Mrs Colon’s social map. She'd quite liked their downtown home right up until the time when she'd seen neighbours moving on and moving up. Then she'd discovered she must have been unhappy all along, without realising it. It's not what you've got, or what you haven't got, it's what other people have got that you haven't that has driven much of the unhappiness in the world. It would be nice to think that at least possessing what you desired would make you happy, but that's not the way life rolls.

Nobby nodded eagerly. As a person, or at least individual, whose most common address over the
years had been Number 1, No Fixed Abode, home ownership had seemed out of reach. Now there it was, bright and shiny. The only thing he'd have to worry about was protecting it from all the other would-be Nobby's out there who shared his view on the liberation of other people's property.

'Good,' said Hattoni, 'so here's what we'll do. I get two new homes for you, unconditionally ... on one condition.'

There it was. The Catch. The nemesis of all dreamers who think they've found a way to success that doesn't involve actually working towards it. And the reality of why they were here and who sat opposite them came crashing home, like a huge home-crashing thing.

'Now, I know you boys will agree to this, because you are both survivors, and right now survival should be at the very front of your minds,' Hattoni said with a smile like a flick knife. 'Here's what I need you to do. There are people in this city who think it would run much better if the Patrician was no longer in charge. The same people who intend to make a lot of money out of the housing boom and certainly don't want him interfering with their plans, or taking a slice of their profits.

'I'd like to help them out but the Patrician and I have something of an agreement, so my involvement needs to be ... less obvious. This is where you .... fine gentlemen ... come in. Tomorrow there will be a 'spontaneous' protest over new land taxes. This will start on Broad Way and make its way to the Palace. I need you two to be patrolling the street when the trouble begins. Make sure you do just enough so the city knows police were present, but couldn't do anything about it. We don't want any excessive exuberance on the part of the Watch to interfere with the riot. I think you are both well versed in demonstrating restrained policing.'

Fred Colon, much to his own surprise, raised his hand. 'Excuse me, Mr Hattoni, but what if we can't be there?'

Again Hattoni smiled, and this time it involved at lot more teeth. 'The perennial problem of 'What if'. You know I don't like what-if's, which is why I have procured the services of Mr Blatworm.'

The man sitting besides Hattoni, who had completely dropped off Nobby and Fred's radar, shifted uncomfortably under their swivelled gazes.

'Mr Blatworm is an expert on contracts, especially in his line of business,' continued the large man. 'I've got him to draft up something for you to sign. Of course, this will be of your own free will.'

'So, we don't have to sign it if we don't want to?' said Fred.

'You know,' replied Hattoni, 'I've never had the problem before.' At that moment that was the subtle non-sound that police ears are trained to hear, of four other bodies in the room shifting from lounging to something quite different.

Something seemed to have changed in Blatworm appearance. Maybe it was the strange sheen to his skin, which seemed more than just perspiration. Maybe it was the lack of white to his eyes. Maybe it was the way his ears were surprisingly pointed. Or perhaps the way his hands looked curiously claw-like. Fred couldn't quite put his finger on it but he was sure there was something not quite normal about Blatworm. He was proud of this observation. Mostly people seemed to think he couldn't find his arse with both hands, but he'd show them.

Blatworm pushed a document across the table and drew out a quill. 'If you could both sign here, and here, we can get this over quickly,' the man rasped in a voice that sounded like a blade being dragged across stone. Definitely strange, Fred noted as he pulled the parchment towards himself.
'What's it say Sarge?' said Nobby.

Colon had, some years ago, mastered the art of reading words but had never taken the next step involving comprehension. The height of this inability was only exceeded by his determination not to reveal it. He scanned his eyes over the words like a seagull does over a chip wrapper - hoping to find a scrap of substance. Words were slippery enough as it was, but legal jargon is serpentine. He had no hope, so he just moved his head around and nodded, making noises he hoped sounded sage, but probably qualified more as dill.

'All seems in order,' he mumbled. 'We just agree to follow Mr Hattoni's instructions and not tell anyone about this and we'll get a house into the bargain.'

'Sarge,' said Nobby urgently, 'I really don't know if we should sign this. There's a lot of fine print.'

There certainly was print, but the last thing Colon would have called it was fine. Bloody small maybe, but definitely not fine.

'Shut up, Nobby,' he growled. 'What choice have we got?'

Colon reached over and took the quill, slowly signing the document. He passed the quill to Nobby. Among the many things Nobby didn't want to do, such as have a bath, signing his name currently filled the number one spot. But he did, because Fred was right. There was a choice, but only one option. He signed.

A warm wind sprang up out of nowhere, followed by a groaning sound that made Nobby and Fred shudder. Blatworm snatched the scroll up and checked the signatures. 'All in order,' he said.

'Thank you gentlemen,' said Hattoni loudly. 'Welcome to the payroll and the family. I'm sure you'll find it most rewarding. I think we're done for now, but this is just the start of things to come.'

That was it. A minute later a dazed Fred and Nobby were back out on the streets.

'Well, that could have gone worse,' said Fred.

'What do you mean Sarge?,' replied Nobby, incredulously.

'All we did was sign our names on a bit of paper. It's not like we're bound to do what he asks.'

'Fred, did you notice anything about Blatworm?'

Colon nodded proudly. 'Yes I did. I was detectoring all along. Definitely not your average citizen.'

'That's because he was a demon, Sarge. We've just signed a contract with the devil.'
Foretold

You didn't survive the streets of Ankh Morpork as a flea-bitten mutt who'd been short-changed in the looks catalogue and over compensated for in the odour department without knowing you were in trouble. Right now the only thing Gaspode wasn't sure of was how deep the midden went.

'Come closer,' said the voice from the darkness. 'You have nothing to fear but fear itself.'

'Yeah, right,' Gaspode replied. 'Well it's doing a damn good job by itself.'

It is said that the night is dark and full of terrors, but right then the darkness was mostly full of doggy flatulence. Behind him Gaspode could hear the sound of ragged breathing and paws clicking as his pursuers closed in. Around him the darkness turned to shadows as his eyes adjusted. Ahead of him a shape loomed. An old fishing boat rested at the back of the shed and perched on top of it was a lounge chair reclaimed from heavens knew where. Possibly the world's strangest fishing expedition. He'd heard that all manner of things end up at sea, he hoped he wasn't about to become one of them.

Seated in the chair was a dog, though that word hardly did the speaker justice. They didn't just have pedigree they had pedigree. Gaspode got the feeling they weren't so much a member of a breed as a breed in themselves. Like a greyhound, but even more so. Lean, sculpted, statuesque, with edges so sharp they could cut. Whippet of the gods. She sounded female. Not that anyone would ever consider calling her a bitch, especially when taking into consideration the two large dogs that flanked her, belonging to a breed comprised of only teeth and muscle and where having a brain just gets in the way.

'Today you are with friends,' she said. 'Friends who have long awaited your coming. Friends who have followed you here today, on this most remarkable of days.'

'You call that following? More like hot pursuit.'

'Did you ever give them a chance to explain themselves?' she said pointing to the back of the shed. Gaspode looked around. The shed, which was no small space, was wall-to-wall dog. It looked like every breed that had ever existed and every crossbreed of those, had followed him. From dogs you could fit into tea cups to those that looked like they'd descended from horses, the streets of Ahroma had delivered.

Gaspode was impressed. Strike that. He was now officially bordering on freaked-out. Being chased by dogs is a terrifying thing but being stared at by hundreds of dogs was not necessarily much less frightening. There was an air of expectation about them that unnerved Gaspode. It wasn't that he was unfamiliar with the expectations of others, it's just that he wasn't used to them being positive.

'The reason I'm here today is that I don't waste precious time looking backwards,' he said.

A murmur went through the gathered throng, rising on every canine breath. 'He speaks as foretold,' said a dog from the crowd. 'Forward, only, must we look.'

'And sideways,' said another.

'That has never clear,' said a third dog. 'But today we can find out. Oh, great Gaspode, did you mean that we should only look forward, or could we look sideways as well?'

Gaspode hadn't noticed how much background noise the pack had made until, suddenly, it wasn't
there. It was a genuinely breathless moment, which can be quite a godsend when dogs are involved. Gaspode frowned. Whatever play was unfolding he certainly hadn't been given a copy of the script. 'Well, of course you look sideways, just in case some is coming at you from a side street ... but only a glance, mind you,' he answered.

And with that a wave of excited, triumphant and even dismayed yelping swept away the silence.

'What on earth is going on?' Gaspode barked at the top of voice.

For a moment the silence returned, and then it too was broken, by dogs barking in unison. 'The Question. The Question.'

This did as much to quell Gaspode's concerns as a bucket of oil does for a raging fire. 'Seriously?', he yelped, spinning around in confusion. Just as the chanting rose to a crescendo a sharp bark cut it short.

' Enough,' said the figure in the chair. 'Come forward Gaspode.' With that the crowd itself edged forward taking anyway any option he had. He climbed the stairs, which was an experience in itself. It would be wrong to call them handmade, because it was clear no creature with opposable thumbs had been involved. They were certainly bespoke and what they bespake was 'don't blame us - it was your choice.'

'Welcome to the temple,' she continued. 'My name is Pythia, and I am the Oracle of Yelpi ...'

'... an oracle foretells the future,' she added, much to Gaspode's relief. He'd thought it might have been some sort of small boat which, despite the nautical location, made even less sense than his current situation.

'Yes, I'm a seer, and the reason that we are here today, is that your coming has been foretold for generations of oracles.'

'Me? Foretold. You have so got the wrong dog.'

'The First Denial,' the pack chanted.

'For crying out loud, what is that all about?'

'It was foretold by the twenty-third oracle that you would deny your role three times.'

'You’re joking? Me?'

'Yes.'

'Anybody who chose me to be some sort of miracle is clearly crazy in the coconut.'

And the crowd sighed. 'Oh, come of it,’ said Gaspode after a thoughtful moment, 'they weren't denials, more difference if opinion.'

He turned back Pythia. 'What is going on?' he said, too softly for the crowd to overhear.

Pythia smiled. 'Your coming has been foretold for so long and, in the handing down from dog to dog, you have become something more than a hero. Once you have a belief, it's amazing how quickly theologians turn up. Half the time they're more like troubadours, without the lute, which is how the story grows. They're dangerous enough, but it's the ones who interpret that you really have to keep your eye on. I can't tell you how many schisms that's led to. You met two of them with the
Lookaheaders and the Sideways Movement. Today will bring clarity and wonder no doubt, but not everyone is happy to see you, and certainly not if it turns out that they're wrong. Already the Lookaheaders are in disarray.'

'Well, that's a barrel of laughs,' Gaspode whispered. He looked around at the canine crowd, which had fallen silent. Gaspode shook his head. 'Let me guess,' he said after a pause, 'there's a group called the Whisperers?''

'Close,' replied Pythia, 'but they're quite a pretentious bunch, mostly pedigreed, so they go by the name Sottovoceists.'

Gaspode grunted. 'So, tell me what this is all about.'

'Ever since the founding of Ahroma, by Ahromulus and Ahromus who were suckled at the breast of a wolf, there has been the Oracle of Yelpi - and that wolf was the first of us,' Pythia said, raising her voice so that all could hear. 'And for almost as long the oracles foresaw a time of great trial and tribulation where dog turned on dog.'

'It has been our misfortune that we have had to live through these times. Where the streets are no longer safe for dogs, and Caesar and his pack have stolen away our food, our friends and our freedom. And have done so for many years. Life has been brutal, tragic and unforgiving....

'... but we are also truly blessed to have been born to see the Great Gaspode. Gaspode, whose foretelling inspired others before us to achieve amazing things. Gaspode who gave us a model to raise our pups by. Gaspode who will deliver us from evil.'

As she spoke, Pythia's voice rose and with it rose the pack's excitement - and when she fell silent, they did not.

'You're not helping my cause here,' growled Gaspode.

'This moment was foretold and so must it unfold.'

'Are you saying we've got no choice?'

'Not all. It just happens that I know what it will be.'

Gaspode frowned. 'Yeah, but how does that work for you? I mean if you've seen what you're doing, how is that a choice?'

Pythia smiled. 'That, Great Gaspode, is what we call in the oracle business a conundrum.'

'What sort of explanation is that?!'

'What I have are answers, not explanations. Would you have preferred it if I had said 42?'

'No! You mystics are always so ... damn mystical. What happens now?'

'Look.'

Gaspode turned and his gaze fell upon a sea of expectant faces. Possibly an ocean. He didn't know the difference and it probably didn't matter since you could easily drown in both. At the very least it was a dire strait. Of all the facets that come with intelligence, perhaps the most challenging is awareness of the expectations of others.

'They know, don't they?"
'Yes, but here's the important part - you don't. The choice is totally yours.'

Gaspode growled. This made no sense. It was like a snake eating its tail. He was beginning to loathe conundrums ... or was it conundra? Come to think of it was tundra just a lot of tundrums? Gaspode howled in frustration and the pack sighed.

'Just stop that will you,' he barked, 'and start thinking for yourselves. Dogs may need packs, but you don't have to be a mob. You're all individuals.'

With that the pack howled in perfectly choreographed unison.

Pythia stepped forward and the hush returned. 'Gaspode has spoken the final words foretold. From here no oracle has seen the one true path. But do not fear uncertainty. It is a part of the change we have been waiting for. Now, go before Caesar finds us. So it begins.'

The mention of Caesar's name was a remarkable catalyst. Gaspode wouldn't have believed it possible, but in hardly any time at all the room was cleared until only the oracle and her two guards remained.

'Right,' he said, 'enough of the oracling. Tell me what is really happening here, and you can start with how you knew I was the one.'

'As you have already guessed, predicting the future, oracling as you call it,' replied Pythia as Gaspode sat down, assuming the I'm-Not-Leaving-Until-I-Get-Answers position, 'is a complex thing and more than one oracle has gone mad trying to understand it. The power passes from generation to generation through bloodline. All the oracles before me have been mothers or, at worst, aunts. And they have all been female. We oracles do not bear male children.

'Since the beginning of Ahroma we have been here. Before that, who knows? We look forward, not backwards in time. The stories we pass down say that in the early days the power was slippery, like an eel, and predictions could only be understood after an event had occurred. Not that helpful really. Not much better than two-penny fortune-tellers with a healthy dash of mysticism thrown in to bring customers back. But the power was genuine and it grew and become more refined, more focussed.

'Generations ago the oracle predicted a time when evil would take power, suppressing the canines of Ahroma. With time this became clearer and the oracles predictions more accurate. This hardly made us popular so imagine our relief when predictions began to emerge of a saviour. These too became clearer until the picture and a name emerged. Gaspode. We did not know for certain when you would arrive, timing is always difficult in these matters, but we knew that you would appear out of the ether and that it would be at a place of many books. We have kept watch at the library, bookshops, large private collections and even the footpath library where you arrived.'

'Hang on,' said Gaspode, 'if every dog has seen this coming, thanks to you oracles blabbing away, why isn't Caesar here right now? I would be if it was me. And that would be the end of Gaspode. I wouldn't be the Great, unless you followed that with Big Smear On The Ground.'

'Doubt,' she replied. 'Up until this truly unfolded he couldn't have been certain. Not all of our predictions come out the way people expect. We make sure of that. Oh, and he was here in his own way. Some of those dogs would have been his. He'll know of your coming and will be planning his next move. He probably has been for some time. Besides, even Caesar wouldn't be game to take on the oracle so publicly. Now the future is open and all bets are off ...which we need to be as well.'

Gaspode didn't budge. 'I reckon you haven't told me everything yet and I reckon we've got a bit
more time because you've seen this already. You said that no oracle could look beyond this point, but whose word have we got for that? The oracles! Handy isn't it, and no one's going to question it are they?"

Pythia smiled. 'I was hoping that we'd follow this path. You're right, of course. The oracles did see beyond your arrival, but it's not a simple as that. At every moment the world makes decisions and heads down its own path. The truth is that oracles don't so much see the future as see probabilities. Most of the time things follow predictable high probability paths, but every now and again there are confounding factors where many equally likely scenarios lay before us. We are in one of those times and it is very hard to predict what will unfold - but yes, we do have some more time in all the probabilities.'

'Fine. Handy to know when you're a saviour. Now tell me the other stuff because I don't think you can be an oracle and not be involved.'

The smile slipped away from the oracle's face. 'We do have to move soon,' she said, 'so we don't have much more time. The question you have asked was .... not expected, and it makes things difficult to .... navigate.'

'By navigate, you mean steer, don't you,' growled Gaspode. 'You see, and I know you really do see, predicting the future must change how it happens. You oracles don't just tell the world about your visions, you play the odds, and load the dice. You made sure Caesar wouldn't turn up today by making predictions that created doubt. You said it yourself - and how many oracles were involved in that plan, for how many years? Maybe I was always going to turn up when I did and where I did, but everything that happened after that has got your hands all over it. Otherwise I could have been a random dog that no one would have paid any attention too.'

'We must go,' said Pythia, nervously looking around. 'We do not want to be part of any future where Caesar catches you here. You don't have to be an oracle to figure that out.'

Pythia stood up and the two guards rose with her. They headed towards a door at the back of the shed and Gaspode, who only toyed briefly with the idea of ignoring her advice, followed. He didn't like being manipulated but it was a darn sight more appealing than being mauled.

xxxx

'How bad can it be?' said Fred as they fled away from the Caviar Temptor.

'We signed a deal with the devil! Where do you think that sits on a scale of one to badness? Can you think of any stories you've heard of involving deals with the devil that have happy endings?'

Nobby had him on that front. The stories always had endings, but the word happy never featured in them. Brutal, painful, cruel - you could bank your new house on those appearing.

'We'll tell Cheery what Hattoni's up to, but that's it. And remember, just act normal Nobby,' he said as they approached the Watch.

'Try my best, Sarge. Just not sure what normal is anymore,' Nobby replied.

Cheery looked up as they came through the door. She watched them pause and look around, almost guiltily. She watched them whisper and avoid eye contact with her. And finally she watched them take a deep breath and walk towards her. She'd known Fred and Nobby long enough and had caught them often enough committing some sort of minor crime to sense when things weren't right. Moralists will tell you that petty crimes lead to greater ones but life isn't as rigid as that. There are
religions that claim people are born tainted and have to work their way up from there. It was hard to believe Nobby and Fred (especially Nobby) hadn't been born with some level of corruptibility. Maybe right now they were on the upswing ... stranger things had happened, though probably not that many. The fact was that being guilty was standard for both of them - the difference was that this time they weren't behaving normally, they were acting it.

What had they done out there now? What had she done in sending them there in the first place? Whilst she had every confidence in the integrity of the Watch, it was a police officer’s every confidence, which meant you took precautions, and this included having a door to close when you needed it. 'Let's go up to the Commander's office,' she said, leading them up the squeaky stairs.

'Anything to report?' she asked once they were inside.

Colon nodded, and then the strangest thing occurred. He opened his mouth to say something but no matter how hard he tried nothing came out. Cheery watched the struggle as Fred passed from surprise to realisation and failure, going through horror along the way for good measure.

'What's the problem, Sarge? Didn't you have something to tell Littlebottom?'

'You try is Nobby. I've got something stuck in my throat.'

With growing amazement Nobby went through a similar face contorting exercise, though with Nobby the difference between his normal face and one suffering ugly contortions was a fine line, all with the same result. Nothing but silence and lead-booted realisation.

'So, nothing to report then?' she asked, not out of any hope of getting further information but to fill the uncomfortable silence.

Both Nobby and Fred dejectedly shook their heads.

'What are your plans for Operation Shoelace?'

It wasn't really necessary for them to have given the operation a name. Vimes had only every given Fred and Nobby one investigation at a time, on the basis that even that might be too many. But he knew that the pair, despite their limited personal resources, had a pride that craved attention, so he'd let them name their own operations, on the one condition that the name wasn't a giveaway*.

Among the vast Fred-Nobby catalogue of what human resources departments like to call a skills deficit was a general lack of imagination (except when it came to excuses) and a tendency to jump at whatever first came to mind, usually on the basis of what was right in front of them. Such decision-making practices had led to operations named Wall, Desk, Wobbly Chair, Gravy Stain and, on one bizarre occasion, Ferret in Trousers.

* A lesson learned from the abject failure of Operation Catching Spider Thompson In The Act At Number 23, Broad Way On The Fifteenth of Sektember Around About Midnight

'Wellll,' said Fred cautiously, testing the waters to see what would happen next, 'I'm thinking tomorrow we might just stay .... gnnnhhhh .... we might head to ..... hnnnnn .... we'll patrol Gru...... Sator..... Broad Way.'

The last two words seem to claw their way out of his mouth and his head dropped.

'Oh, Sarge...' whispered Nobby.

'Corporal Nobbs, you will do exactly what I say you will,' Colon snapped, turning and glaring. 'It's
not like you've got any choice. Choice is out of the question. Do you understand?'

Nobby blinked under the tirade, and gave a sad hardly-worth-the-effort nod.

Fred turned back to Cheery. 'If that's ok with you Acting Commander?'

So that was how it was, she thought to herself. Fred only bothered with rank for two reasons - using it to demonstrate his own importance (and lord knows he needed all the help he could get there) or because the trouble he was in was so deep that you'd need special mining equipment to get out and he was trying to pass some of it up the line.

'Yes, that's fine Fred. You can patrol Broad Way.'

And I'll be there too, she added to herself.
'What on the Disc have we got ourselves into?' Vimes said loudly, as much to the world in general as to Angua. Vimes was dead against the idea that greater forces controlled lives*. He believed people should take responsibility for their own problems and then they just might find a solution, but right now the idea that something greater was in control was starting to get traction.

* Except for the Watch. They got special dispensation on the grounds that they weren't controlling so much as correcting. Which just goes to show how perceptive the old marketing adage is that 'people make decisions and then post-rationalise'.

'If that's normal behaviour for a mistress, I'm damn glad I don't have one,' he added as they walked back to the apartment. 'She knew she was being followed right from the start, and that means she's good. Very good. Or very bad. If she's an innocent bystander in this I'll eat my hat ... more than that ... I'll eat one of Dibbler's pies.'

Angua nodded thoughtfully. Vimes's digestive system was safe from the impressively persistent assault that came with eating a Dibbler creation. Isabella was different. Blind Freddy could see that, but a werewolf could notice even more. There was sometime about her smell that was totally unusual and intense. She'd never smelt anything quite like it before and yet it stirred up diced memories that she simply could not find a place for in her past. Of the chase. Of wild places. Of struggles. Of the surging joy of triumph ... and the rending pain of defeat. Memory can be a bugger like that.

'Hello Sam,' Sybil greeted them as they came through the door, 'any luck?'

Vimes grunted. He was an expert at grunting and disgruntlement*. And he was never a fan of questions, unless he happened to be the one asking them.

* The etymological world is a harsh one, scattered with words that never really made it. Disgruntled is a survivor, but gruntled (pleased, satisfied, contented) is almost extinct and appears only at the most pretentious of dinner parties.

'Oh, well, better luck next time,' replied Sybil cheerily. Sybil was the only person in the rich panoply of sentient beings living on the Disc that could get away with a cheerful response to Sam at a time like this without causing a major reduction of gruntlement.

'Well, I had the most wonderful evening,' she continued unabated and wilfully oblivious. 'La Hussiata was incredible and Enrico Basilica at the top of his form. I also met someone you just might find it worthwhile talking to.'

He'd registered voices when they were coming up the stairs and had presumed it was Sybil and Joe talking. Joe was certainly there, standing at the window (making a damn useful silhouette and target - he'd have to give that young fool a few survival tips) but for the first time Vimes noticed the room had another occupant. Seated in one of the voluminous armchairs that gave the impression the occupier was in the process of being devoured sat a woman who could have been described as being of a certain age, with the certain knowledge that if Vimes said this out loud would lead to 'certain' outcomes.

The term elegant sprang to mind and once it did it was hard to imagine a better word. She held herself with the sort of grace and style that most cats would envy. It would be easy to say she looked impeccable but Vimes, who knew that impeccable implied without sin, thought otherwise.
There was a worldly look in her eyes that suggested not everything had worked out in her life the way she'd planned.

'Sam, Angua, this is Bianca Hattoni. It turns out she's an old friend of mine, though I knew her then as Blanche Witherspoon. We met at the opera and got to talking. Blanche thought she'd like to meet you, so we snuck out the backstage door. I should add that Blanche doesn't have much time before she'll be missed.'

This is how the world turns on its head, thought Vimes. One minute you've lost the chase the next minute you discover there's a whole different race you didn't know was being run, or even who was in the field.

'Welcome to Ahroma, Commander Vimes,' Blanche said with a many-layered smile. 'Sybil tells me you, too, have only got a short while in our beautiful city, and that you're on something of a mission.'

Vimes glanced at Sybil and she nodded. 'Blanche and I go way back, Sam. There are no secrets between us. She'd like to help us out,' she added.

He turned his gaze back to the woman. When it came to circles of trust Vimes's could barely fit around a pinhead, but right in the centre of that select group sat Sybil. The problem was that the woman in front of him was the wife of the mobster who had kidnapped Carrot and was doing god-knów-what to his city right now.

'A bit of a dilemma for you Commander, but you should always trust Sybil,' Blanche said, cutting through his thoughts. 'I always have. Trusting Sybil is one of the reasons we were such good friends. It's the basis for all friendships really. Hard for a policeman though, isn't it? How many friends do you really have Commander?

'But let me make things easier. I'll go first. When I left school I decided to see the world and thanks to having a wealthy family there was plenty of the world I saw. My travels eventually led me here and the city enthralled me. It still does. I settled in an apartment much like this one and decided I would stay for some time. Soak up the culture. Again, a luxury afforded by wealth.

'That's when I caught the eye of certain locals. Wealth has many advantages but invisibility is not one of them. In short, Alberto Hattoni found me and wooed me. He can, as you know, be very persuasive and I really was young, naive and as innocent as youth will allow. He was younger then too, of course, and quite dashing in his way. I fell in what can probably be called love, and thought Alberto had done the same. I know better now. We fool ourselves into thinking love is universal but there are those who simply have no ability to experience it. The dangerous ones learn how to fake love. And they are incredibly good at it. But they always see love as a weakness to be exploited. They use its absence to satisfy what really motivates them. Power and ownership. Marrying me gave Alberto both. Mine was a wealthy family and I really was something of a rarity in Ahroma. Definitely worth possessing.

'I guess in the early days I tried to make it work. After all, it was the stuff of romance novels, which I now believe is the most dangerous literature in the world. It didn't take long for reality to sink in. My private girls schools training was sadly short on academic content and even more sadly long on developing the skills of being a good wife. They don't teach subservience as a subject but they might as well do. I should have accepted my lot and made a damn good fist if it, as they say. Lie back and think of Ankh Morpork.

'But, to my eternal surprise, and definitely to Alberto's, I didn't. With the emotional filters gone from my eyes I saw him for what he was - a brute, obsessed with power and bereft of compassion. I
resisted. I cut my ties with Ankh Morpork, sorry Sybil, and I most certainly did not lie down, in any sense of the word.

'Hattoni grew to hate me. Isn't it curious that those incapable of love have abundant supplies of hatred? Perhaps the two emotions are closer than we'd like to admit. But, like all narcissists, he was also incapable of admitting a mistake, which is clearly what I was. So the sham continued and now we avoid each other and only show our loathing behind closed doors when avoidance is unavoidable. He has taken many mistresses over the years, a fact I am eternally grateful for. Isabella is just the latest one. I suspect he has bitten off more than he can chew there, so she'd best be careful.

'Which brings us almost to the present and why you are here today. Alberto has, for many years, looked at Ankh Morpork with desire - I was his first failed attempt at getting a foothold. But now some of those idiots that go by the totally inaccurate title of gentry, have let him in. For all his wickedness Alberto is no fool and a remarkably good and patient planner. He recognised that the two biggest obstacles to his takeover were the Patrician and you, Commander Samuel Vimes. He will be working on the Patrician now, especially as he has taken you out of the picture. You see, Hattoni does understand people, in the same way a scientist understands the creatures he is studying, and he knew that Sam Vimes had one perceived weakness he could exploit. Loyalty to those loyal to him, and the rock hard certainty that Sam Vimes would take matters into his own hands. So he kidnapped a member of the Watch and, like clockwork, here you are right where he wants you.

'Now it's your turn.'

Vimes stared at the woman and let silence fill the room in a way that made seconds feel like hours. When he spoke his tone was measured, which isn't necessarily the same as calm.

'I put my faith in human nature,' he said, 'which is why I hardly trust anyone. You're right about Sybil and about police not having friends. That makes you pretty clever in my books, which just gives me another reason not to trust you. Maybe everything you've said is the truth and I should be getting out the violin for you, poor little rich girl, or maybe it's the biggest serving of tripe I've had in ages, and I can tell you right now, I hate tripe.'

'Sam!' snapped Sybil but Blanche waved any further berating away. 'Please, Sybil, this is between your husband and me.

'Commander Vimes,' she said, never dropping her gaze from the thermal lances that passed for Sam's eyes, 'that is exactly the response I was hoping for. If we are to get out of this situation we need every ounce of your righteous distrust. I certainly don't expect you to trust me.'

Vimes snorted, but with less certainty than usual. This wasn't the way things normally went - people telling him not to trust them. It was a novel approach. Did that make him trust her more, or less? He snorted again, this time with conviction.

'All right, Blanche, let's play it that way but remember I'm really just a plain copper who only sees what's in front of him. And right now that's you, and right now you're going to tell me something more about my missing policeman, Captain Carrot, and then you're going to tell us you already have a cunning plan to save him. Right?'

Blanche nodded. 'There is far more metal to you than just plain copper, Sir Samuel,' she said, 'and a brain that you sometimes forget to hide. Yes, I do have some more information for you on Captain Carrot. What an unusual name. Are all the members of the Watch named after vegetables?'
'Oh no, some are named after body parts. Maybe one day you'll meet Colon and Littlebottom.'

'I rather hope I do,' she continued. 'Captain Carrot is being held in one of the many small, inescapable rooms that lie under the Hattoni mansion. Alberto may move around in the daylight, but he's much happier operating in dark places. It would be unfair, though, to call him a cockroach. I believe even those animals serve some purpose in the cycle of life.

'He will be guarded, of course, and Roberto will be lurking around somewhere. Be careful of him. He is not as smart as Alberto but he is totally without conscience, which is worse than being evil in my books. Evil gives you something to push back on, but with Roberto there's just empty, endless darkness.'

'And the cunning plan?'

'I wish it were a cunning plan but there's not much to it. Alberto treats his home more like a fort than a castle. The grounds are patrolled, day and night, and the night is the worst because the dogs roam free and you do not want to meet them. Then there's the protection glyphs that Alberto paid good money to have placed over the house, and then arranged for the wizard who knew about them to go on a terminal holiday. Alberto doesn't like loose ends. The only way in is to be invited and escorted through the grounds. I have that authority. One of my small victories. The problem is that if I invite you in Roberto will know you are here.'

'That's not really a problem, Señora Hattoni,' Vimes replied. 'If he doesn't know already he will within a couple of days. We've hardly been keeping a low profile. You have a perfect excuse to invite Sybil, your dear old school friend who you haven't seen in years, to dinner. And, of course, she'll have some sort of modest retinue. No one can stop you on that front, and they wouldn't want to anyway. If Roberto did and you were innocent he runs the risk of creating tensions between Ankh Morpork and Ahroma and he knows Alberto wouldn't be happy about that.

'On the other hand, if we are here to cause trouble then Roberto will want to keep a close watch on us, and what better place than in his own house? The trick is not getting in, it's keeping some cards up our sleeve. The minor problem is that at this point I don't have any cards at all, not even jokers.'

'Sometimes, at a moment like this, everyone talks at once and the problem is how to choose the best idea. This was not one of those moments. This was the kind where the room goes very quiet. Or at least it would have been if Joe hadn't said 'Ummm.'

'It seems to me that what you really want to do is to smuggle someone into the mansion, that someone presumably being Commander Vimes,' he said slowly as he put his jigsaw puzzle thoughts together. 'But you also don't want him to go missing and raise any suspicions. I have an idea that might just achieve both. There are, perhaps, a few more things you should know about me.'

xxxx

The human alimentary system plays many vital roles. One that is often overlooked is the assistance it provides to those who wish their activities to pass unnoticed. Nature can readily accommodate the 'output' of a single person but when you bring them together into a city you've got a whole world of issues. The standard response to bodily waste on the Disc involved developing resilient nostrils and the ability to change where you were about to step in a split second. In a handful of locations, though, some form of sewer system was installed by enlightened civic leaders who not only gave a crap, they figured out a way to deal with it. And once you construct a system to deal with the movement of movements it's amazing what else turns up in those tunnels.
Pythia led the four of them through the septic maze with the confidence of one who knew it backwards, which is probably exactly how most people knew it, thought Gaspode. In front and behind were the two guards, who should have gone by the names of Gnasher and Mauler but, thanks to the vagaries of the human-canine connection, were called Spot and Mr Waggy. This could have led to a laugh-out loud moment for Gaspode if the consequences wouldn't have been so clearly painful. He may be the hero of the dogs here, but he knew even that had limits.

'Here we are,' said Pythia, pausing at the bottom of a ladder leading up into the darkness.

'Riiiggght,' said Gaspode after a thoughtful pause. 'I'm obviously missing something here. It seems to me we've just confronted the old Oh-Dear-if-Only-I-Had-Hands-I-Could-Open-The-Food-Cupboard conundrum.'

'Yes you are,' replied the oracle and then gave three sharp barks. Moments later a roughly made platform descended and bumped to a halt on the floor. The platform suggested craftsmanship by a crafter that should never have been let near blunt or sharp objects. On a positive note, at least it showed that the term death trap was not coined in vain.

'You've got to kidding!' said Gaspode, safe in the knowledge that the moment contained a total absence of humour and baby goats. He sighed and trotted forward onto the rickety construction. 'Just put on my gravestone 'He died with a splat.'"

The journey upwards featured an abundance of rocking, creaking, swearing and a brief but pungent moment of flatulence but at least it was blessedly short. They emerged under a gantry that, quite remarkably, made the platform appear a model of safe work practice. Next to the gantry stood a large gentleman, puffing from raising them up. His attire, which appeared to be made up of layers of what might have once been called clothing, suggested that here was a person that not only marched to a different drummer, but to a whole unique orchestra.

'Thanks, Ben,' barked Pythia as she leaped off the platform.

'Pleasure,' the man replied.

Gaspode followed suit, surveying his surroundings as the giant lowered the platform again. They were in a large room, if you were comfortable with the definition of a room allowing for the removal a wall, holes punched in the ceiling and an open invitation to the local plant life.

'We're on the fringe of Ahroma,' explained Pythia. 'Part of a derelict estate. Ben and his friends live here and they've been helping us get around for years when we want to move unseen.'

'This is totally insane .... Hang on .... did you and Ben just speak to each other? I thought I was the only dog in the world to speak human.'

'You may be,' answered the oracle. 'I certainly don't. We were speaking Canine.'

'That's right,' barked Ben as the platform rose out of the pit.

'I told you that the dogs of Ahroma came from Ahrumulus and Ahromus, but there is another part to that story,' said Pythia. 'There was a third cub raised by the wolf and it was said to be human. We think Ben descended from that line.'

Gaspode shook his head. 'You know how crazy that sounds, but it's no crazier than anything else I've seen today. Are there any more like Ben?'

'Not that we know.'
'Ok, so what happens now?'

'You saw all the dogs that believed in you. Caesar may have a brute squad but there are only so many of them. They control the rest of us through fear and cruelty. United we could overwhelm them but no one has ever been able to. There’s been some great dogs who tried and failed.'

'And let me guess, they're not around to have a second go? But you think I can lead them and this time is will all end with beer and skittles and Caesar will just disappear off into the sunset? This isn't a fairytale. This is real life and in real life it's not the uprisings you watch out for it's the downtreadings.'

'That is why you are different Gaspode. All the other leaders had charisma, passion and a steadfast belief in their cause, but they lacked one important ingredient - suspicion, with a rich vein of cynicism. You have that in abundance.'

'Wouldn't be here if i wasn't ... bugger ... walked into that one didn't I?'

'The greatest heroes know their own mortality, which is how they achieve immortality.'

Gaspode snorted. 'Keep that mystical claptrap for your oracly stuff. Let's just say that right now I reckon my options are limited. Just remember when you pass the story on in years to come to the survivors that I warned you I was a coward who'd run away at the first chance.'

'Agreed. The plan is a simple one.'

'Well that's a relief. The only thing worse than a simple plan to overthrow the forces of evil is a complicated one.'

'We call the Pack together,' Pythia continued, 'you say something appropriately rousing ...'

'... like run for the hills?'

'And then we storm Caesar in his own fortress. He won't be expecting that.'

'I was wrong. That is worse. Let's hear the complicated one. You seriously think that will work and the Caesar will be all surprised and say something like “Well, I didn't see that coming. What a clever plan. It's a fair cop. I'll just be out of here then?”'

Pythia stared at him and silence filled the room. Ben, Spot and Mr Waggy may as well have been statues. Gaspode squirmed. He squirmed some more. 'Alright,' he growled eventually, 'this is dumb as a box of hammers but .... anyway ... when is the Glorious Uprising happening?'

'Tomorrow night.'

xxxx

'How'd you sleep Sarge?'

'Like a baby, Nobby.'

'You kept waking up crying?'

'Exactly.'

'What are we going to do, Fred?'

Colon shuddered. 'Got no idea Nobby. Doesn't feel like we've got much choice right now. The
Commander will go spare when he hears we’ve signed a deal with the devil.’

‘If he ever does,’ replied Nobby. ‘Reckon that’s one of those things we won't be able to do.’

‘Only thing we can do is go along for the ride and see where we can hop off. Let's get going.’

Fred and Nobby headed out the door of the Watch towards Broad Way and, moments later, Cheery slipped out behind them.

She had to admit they had sauntering down to a fine art. Technically the legs were in motion, there just didn’t seem to be much movement. Like watching those giant turtles at the zoo. She constantly had to pull herself up in case she overshot. Eventually, though, they arrived at Broad Way, and Cheery set up camp in a nearby alleyway. That's when things started to get strange.

One of Nobby and Fred's greatest skills was to be oblivious to what was unfolding around them but today they seemed to be looking for something to happen. Like fish swimming around in a small pond wondering when the stork was going to turn up.

It didn’t take long, but it was so subtle that Cheery didn't recognise it as first. Broad Way was always a busy enough street but now there just seemed to be a lot of people flowing into it, from all directions. Then the normal street chatter began to take a shape and focus. Next thing she knew there were placards and the crowd had transformed into a mob.

‘No Land Taxes' said one sign, and 'Enough is Too Much' said another, whatever that really meant. A large man appeared at the front of the crowd with some sort of trumpet which he shouted down, his voice ringing out across the street.

‘Hey ho, hey ho
The Patrician has to go'

In no time at all the mob picked up the chant, and that drew in onlookers. One of the ubiquitous attributes of the citizens of Ankh Morpork is to gravitate to any situation where trouble is brewing. They took up strategic vantage points that minimised the risk of involvement and maximised the entertainment value. It's quite a skill.

While all of this was occurring Fred and Nobby did absolutely nothing, other than look deeply uncomfortable. Actually, it was worse than nothing. They were visibly inactive to everyone there. To the average punter this was tantamount to a sanctioning by the Watch.

‘Oh, gods,’ she cursed, wedged her helmet tight in her head, and headed out into the throng. Dwarves are naturally suited for moving in tunnels without splitting their heads open. This is not, however, an advantage when you're trying to bring a mob back into line.

‘Fred, Nobby,’ she cried, ‘give me a hand.’

To her dismay and mounting horror the pair looked at her with surprise and then, almost like puppets on strings, they dropped their heads and continued with their active inactivity. They were abandoning an officer in need!

‘Right,’ she yelled, 'I'll deal with you later.' Then she pulled out her whistle and blew it so hard the pea shattered. Well, that got the crowd's attention at least.

‘Listen here,’ she shouted across the momentary silence, 'now would be a really good time for you to move away peacefully, before things turn uglier.'
'You saying we're ugly?' shouted a voice from the back of the crowd. There is always someone anonymous like this in every mob.

'Right now you don't look that pretty,' Cheery replied.

'And what's going to make us?' continued the unidentified voice and the crowd grumbled in agreement.

'Captain Vimes will find out.'

That worked. The protesters moved rapidly from grumble to mumble. There wasn't one of them that hadn't encountered Sam Vimes, or at least knew someone who'd been on the wrong side of his expansive bad side. It might even have worked if that damned voice hadn’t piped up again.

'So, where is he?'

You can get away with lot with self-confidence but as soon as there's a chink in the brickwork it has a habit of falling down around the owner's ears. Cheery blinked.

'Thought so. He's not in the city is he, because he'd be here right now if he was? So who's going to stop us?'

'Me,' Cheery replied in desperation.

'You and whose army?' the voice laughed.

'Dat would be me,' answered Detritus as he stomped around the corner from the Street of Small Gods. Strictly speaking it's not correct to consider an individual as an army but no one in the crowd seemed inclined to argue the point.

'What's going on Sergeant Littlebottom?' he rumbled.

'This crowd won't disperse.'

'Right,' said the troll turning his naturally stony gaze on the gathering, 'any of youse got a permit to protest?'

The silence that had descended with the appearance of Detritus just grew deeper.

'Well?'

There was a general shuffling of feet and a shaking of heads.

'In dat case youse all breaking de law and I will be forced to take dramastic action. Now you can take de easy way and disperse or I can I help you. Dat's der hard way in case you was wondering.'

Not taking the hard way when trolls are involved is a survival mechanism hard-wired into the psyche. The crowd dissolved, even the onlookers, who felt they'd got their money's worth. Persuasive arguments have their place but a troll trumps them every time.

'I didn't know you needed a licence to protest,' said Cheery softly.

'Neither did I,' the troll replied. 'You learn a new fing every day. Sometimes two fings.'

Cheery had to agree. She was definitely learning that there were hidden depths to Detritus. She turned and glared across the street where Colon and Nobby stood, heads hung. 'What the Hell were
you up to?' she growled as she stormed over to them. 'Wait until the Commander hears about this.'

'I ... I .... we .... can't tell you, Cheery, honestly we can't,' mumbled Fred.

'You call that an answer?'

'No we don't,' said Nobby miserably, 'but it's the only one we've got. You've gotta believe us.'

One of the fundamental ground rules for working at the Watch was to disbelieve anything Fred and Nobby told you for the first, second and usually third time, but this time Cheery stopped herself. Fred and Nobby weren't necessarily what you call good coppers but they did stand by their mates. And they truly did look like they were struggling with something.

'Yeah Cheery, we can't tell a living soul,' added Colon.

Cheery frowned, and then her face lightened. 'Can't tell a living soul, hey? Well it's lucky we've got Reg Shoe on the force isn't it?'

xxxx

An hour later the Watch's only resident zombie, Reg Shoe, was conveying to Cheery exactly what Fred and Nobby had told him.

'Thanks for that Reg.'

'Happy to help our Sarge. Mind you, I'm a bit miffed about the 'no living soul' thing. It's not like I just lie around and do nothing like all those slackers that fill up the graveyards.'

'Don't take it personally Reg. it's just a technicality.'

So, she thought, as Reg headed off, Fred and Nobby have signed a deal with the devil and they can't do anything to work against Hattoni. That meant the only hope the lads had was to find some loophole, or getting the devil to tear up the contract. Neither sounded promising but they both pointed to the same thing. They needed to find Hattoni's demonic associate. What she wouldn't give to have Angua and her nose here right now.

'Hello, Sergeant. You look troubled. Is there anything I can do help? Perhaps a pamphlet on how to fight your demons would help?'

It was Lance-Corporal Visit. He was an Omnian, through and through, which meant his answer to everything was a religious pamphlet.

'Not unless you've got something on how to track down the devil.'

'Sorry, don't have any pamphlets on that.'

'Shame.'

'What you need for that is a hellioscope.'

'Right. Thanks anyway,' Cheery said, her mind drifting off into other avenues. 'Tell me when you find one.'

'Oh, that's not a problem. I've got one in my room. I brought it at Demon Begone when I went home last year.'
Cheery's mind came screeching back with a jolt. 'You have a device to track demons back in your room?'

'That's right, and it's not just demons. It can find all sorts of hellspawn.'

'It works?'

'Eternal lifetime guarantee. Of course, it does struggle a bit here in Ankh Morpork. There's a surprising amount of low level background nastiness.'

'That's just about the least surprising thing I've heard all day, Visit. Do you think you could help me track down a devil with it?'

Visit's eyes lit up. To date his campaign to convert the heathen to Om had achieved, in round terms, somewhat less than one conversion, presuming pigeons didn't really count. But being asked to track down a demon must surely score some brownie points in the Hereafter.

'Of course, Sergeant, and if you can find out as much about the infernal creature as possible I'll be able to fine tune the settings.'

Cheery smiled. The game was afoot, or possibly ahoof.
What the devil?

The official invitation to dinner at the Hattoni residence arrived early the next morning, for that night. This gave them to whole day to refine their plans or ....

'Come on, let's go out and see the city,' Sybil said after breakfast, in her Ramkin voice, which brooked, streamed and rivered no dissenting opinion. Even Vimes, whose views on tourism were not that different to his views on crime, or even lawyers, had to admit the idea had merit. The weather was perfect and there was something in the atmosphere of Ahroma that just dragged you out into the street.

Though still largely unknown to most residents in other parts of the Disc Ahroma did have a thriving tourist trade, made up of Brindisians and a fair smattering of visitors from all corners, though not so much when it came to the non-human races, observed Vimes. When it came to being multicultural Ankh Morpork led the field. Of course, it was probably right up there for overt specism too, but Vimes had his own views on that. He believed all races had the same level of tribalism and that all Ankh Morpork had done through its open door policy was to give some parts of the community a trigger. If the trigger wasn't there, the tribalism still would be. It's the difference between overt and covert.

The tourists had, as is the way of things, created a tourism industry. It seemed to have two main features. One was definitely the tour group. This involved a large group of people following a designated expert, like a flock of ducklings. These groups usually featured a flag on a pole so you didn't lose anybody*, some sort of loudhailer which the tour leader used to blare commentary across the group and a tendency to push into the smallest space possible, preferably right in front of what was being looked at. It created total chaos and reduced the overall experience of independent travellers. This is the primary purpose of tour groups.

* Science had discovered at least three breeds of tourists a) the loud and obnoxious, whose role is to say how much better things are at home, then often throwing up b) the safe and sounders, who always do exactly what the guide says and like to point out to fellow travellers when they stray from the guidelines c) the wanderers, who can be distracted by a dandelion and are prone to drift off in any direction. The wanderers generally have the best time of all, but they do have a higher mortality rate. The flags on the pole are for this group. They don't work.

The other sign that a location had contracted tourism was the sudden appearance of miniature replicas of the tourist sight in question made with all the fine attention to detail generally possessed by a deranged badger and peddled by vendors who had the determination of vultures around a carcass and the persistence of the most enduring bouts of wind.

Sam would have been beside himself if there wasn't a tourist already standing in the spot, but he went along for the ride because he could see how wonderful the whole day was turning out for Sybil.

'Can you believe it Sam' she said with her irresistible boundless joy. 'Wasn't the Basilica amazing? And so grand in scale.'

'Yes, you can see how Enrico got his name really.'

'And the Septine Chapel. What a ceiling. Such detail. Can you imagine how long it must have taken?'
'If Leonard da Quirm was involved, inside a month,' said Vimes. 'Otherwise, years.'

'And to be standing here at the Trevor Fountain, throwing our coins into the water for good luck.'

Good luck for the bugger that fishes it out for sure. That was our lunch money, thought Vimes but he bit his tongue.

'You do know they give the coins from the fountain to charity, don't you Sam?'

Damn. How did she do it? He knew she hadn't been looking at him and yet she'd read his mind like a map*. Sometimes he wondered why he even bothered to hold back when she knew he was thinking it anyway.

* Which is by far the quickest way to read a mind. Books take so much longer and it's often hard to tell where they're heading until the end.

'And I really do appreciate it when you try, for me.'

Damn.

'Shame about the public baths,' she said in a voice low enough so that only he could hear, 'but Angua was so dead against it.'

'It's her racial heritage Sybil. I'd try and avoid even saying the word bath again if I were you.'

'Where to now, darling?'

'Can we find somewhere a little less crowded,' said Angua as she approached them, dragging the purveyors of miniturised fountains in her wake.

'Excellent idea, Captain,' said Vimes with energy. People who are used to being in charge are some of the most difficult people in the world if they don't feel like they are in charge. Political advisers and courtiers understand this perfectly, especially the concept of 'feel'. Most of the great decisions and achievements of humanity belong to actors on the fringe of the scene, they just get attributed to those in the spotlight. Sybil also understood the general principles.

'So what would you suggest, Sam?'

Somewhere with room to move, he thought, and possibly even hide. He spun around looking for any option - and there it was, standing above the skyline. Surely you could lose yourself in that. He pointed. 'There.'

'Wonderful choice Sam. The Whopperseum. It would have been such a shame not to have visited it.' What she didn't say was that it was the next place she had on her list. A successful relationship involves tongue-biting in both camps.

The Whopperseum was just as popular as anywhere else, but at least its sheer size thinned out the crowd. They paid the entrance fee and, in a moment of weakness, Vimes paid extra to be allowed into an exclusive part of the stadium.

'Sam, who would have thought a week ago that we'd be here now in the gladiator’s area of the Whopperseum?'

'Actually, Lady Ramkin, I think it might have been a place where they kept wild animals,' said Angua. 'There's a faint but sharp smell. Pretty amazing it's kept that odour over the years.'
It was something of a rabbit warren under the Whopperseum, not that a rabbit would have survived long down here when it was active, though Angua as she wandered down a side tunnel. She just needed to get away for a while. This whole situation with Carrot was winding her up tight and a loaded werewolf is definitely not something you point at other people. Besides, the Commander and Lady Sybil deserved some time together.

Distracted by her thoughts she didn't notice she had company until the voice spoke out of the darkness. 'Captain Angua,' it said.

This startled her so much that the first thing she had to do was fight the automatic urge to transform. Stress can be as effective as a full moon on werewolves. She spun around trying to find the voice's owner.

'Don't bother with that,' it continued, 'neither of us have got time and you don't have a hope of trapping me. I have a word of warning for you, your commander and any friends you might have acquired in Ahroma. From my master. I am to tell you this "Do you have any idea who you are dealing with and how powerful they are? If you do anything further the consequences will be unavoidable." There, I think that covers it. Please pass that on to the Commander, at your own discretion.'

Then with the barest movement of air, the tunnel was empty again. Angua growled. What the ... Did Hattoni seriously think unveiled threats would work on the Commander. If you've got a blink-first-and-you-lose approach to life you're not about to let threats run the show. This was possibly Vimes's greatest strength (and, thanks to the flip side nature of life, his biggest weakness).

'What the ...' shouted Vimes two minutes later. 'Does that thug really think I'll back off when there's an officer in danger? To be honest, I had some doubts about the plan actually working, but right now I say bring it on!'

And that was the end of the holiday.

Dibbler couldn't help himself. He'd listened to what Commander Vimes had said and had tried his best to stay away from the property market but the truth was he was addicted. Not to the acquirement of land in particular, but more broadly to the acquirement of acquirement. Somewhere inside him honestly did have what passed for a social conscious but that only thrived when it didn't clash with his ambitions on wealth. Fear worked too, of course. The fuel to feed the flames of fear was still there but a fire needs oxygen or, in this case, Sam Vimes, and he seemed to be missing in action. That was patently obvious to everyone in the city after the protest. The Commander would have been all over it like a rash. And where were Captains Carrot and Angua? Even the Patrician seemed to have gone silent.

Just as the flames of fear were on the wane the fires of greed were waxing. The protest about land taxes had given the market a shot in the arm and there were more potential buyers on the streets than ever, in desperate need of his assistance*. Really, it wasn't Dibbler's fault at all when you thought about.

* An outsider may be tempted to observe that needing Dibbler's assistance must, by definition, indicate desperation.

It had all gone to hell in a hand basket anyway, thought Cheery, so she was hardly making things worse. With a little bit of luck she might even be able to extract the aforementioned hell from the
overburdened hand basket. And what the heck did hell have to do with hand baskets anyway?

'Based on what Colon and Nobbs reported through Reg, I'd say we're not looking at one of the major devils or demons,' said Visit. 'They rarely come to this realm anyway. It's the minions who do all the real soul stealing and signature entrapment. I'd be betting it was a Moggroth. They like the dark and don't mind being near water either. The prophet Endoscop posited they were descended from giant toads, though the translation is a bit vague on that and the scholar Foussa offers the alternative that they are descended from giant goats. Of course, this claim put Foussa at the risk of heresy, as it could be seen to contradict the book of Ossary, which you can imagine .....

'Yes, thank you Visit,' said Cheery quickly, throwing a verbal sleeper in the path of the conversational locomotive. Visit had given up trying to convert Cheery to Om, other than in a token fashion, and had moved onto his favourite and, apparently, only topic - Om. He could talk about it for hours and didn't need any help at all. This was an ability common to most Omnians and could only be rivalled by genealogists and the occasional proud grandparent. 'Right now we need to find this demon as soon as possible.'

Visit nodded and picked up a small box, at the centre of which bobbed a compass. 'I'll just set it to Moggroth and we can be in our way,' he said turning a dial on the side of the box. Visit stared at the compass and said after a moment 'Nothing yet. We need to move around. And start near water.'

'The River Ankh will have to do as a substitute.' The River Ankh didn't just pass through Ankh Morpork it passed through the silt-laden Sto Lat plains and then the alimentary system of every resident of the city. It had many well-known qualities, including a unique set of bacteria that could go through the average person like a ball of lead shot and, in a certain light, could be said to flow but no one who had ever seen it, smelt it or cut chunks off it would ever call it water. 'Let's go. Onwards and downwards.'

Xxxx

Blatworm sighed. It didn't matter how you looked at it, he'd lost his passion for the job. Most demons, devils, daemons* and other assorted hellspawn came with a desire to climb the infernal ladder. And they were good at it. They'd invented ambition in the first place and one of Hell's greatest achievements in corrupting humanity had been to plant those seeds of ambition and watch them flourish. If you can get people to tie their sense of self-worth to it, then the game is over.

* A pretentious class of demons

Every now and again, though, a demon would take stock. They call this condition Balor's Lament. A handful of those that paused in their nefarious activities would see through the matrix and come face to face with Hell's ultimate weapon - blissful ignorance. Not that this knowledge, in itself, made them any happier, that's not the function of knowledge, but it does give back the ability to choose. Right now Blatworm wanted out. Of course it wasn't that simple. There weren't any demonic retirement plans and, besides, he had an added complication. But if the chance arose he'd grab it with both claws.

Thanks to the arrangement with Hattoni he'd taken up accommodation in Ankh Morpork. The commute back and forth to Hades would have been a nightmare. It was designed to be. Travel to and from the netherworld was never meant to be a joyride. The term accommodation was a loose one as was often the case in Ankh Morpork, especially if you wanted a low profile. The best place to be a nobody was in the Shades and, for good measure, close to the Ankh. Being a nobody wasn't the same as being unobserved, but it did mean that at least no one was reporting in on you. The river was an upside for Blatworm. He liked the damp and the aroma wasn't a problem. If anything it reminded him of home.
He'd taken up lodgings in a downstairs apartment, though dank cellar was a more accurate
description. Soon after he'd moved in Blatworm had discovered that there was an underworld
beneath the city, and his cellar was part of it. Some previous tenant had made a hole in the wall and
then hidden it behind the large wardrobe. Blatworm had found it when he noticed a small draft. He
had no idea what the reason was for making the hole and he didn't really care, but he was grateful.
It had opened up a whole new world for him and he'd taken to wandering through the under-city
after work.

There were entire areas swallowed up by mud but mostly it was easy enough to get around. In fact,
in some areas the mud had been cleared away and sometimes he'd hear voices or see lanterns. In
the interests of all parties concerned he made sure he avoided them. But tonight was different. He'd
seen the lights bobbing along and headed off down a side passage, only for the lights to appear
once again. Demons have excellent hearing and he began to pick up snatches of conversation.

'.... moving around now ....'

' .... Ossary ...'

'... enough Visit ....focus ..'

Ossary, thought Blatworm. That name was familiar ....

He turned another corner and once again the light appeared behind him. He'd headed into an
unfamiliar area and to his annoyance found he'd trapped himself in a dead end. He'd have to do
tings the hard way now, at least for his pursuers. There wasn't much a demon was afraid of. He
didn't have to wait long.

'We're almost on top of it,' whispered a voice. 'Can you hold the scope please Acting Commander?
Thanks.'

And then there they were. Two members of the city Watch. A human and a dwarf, the dwarf
holding some sort of box. Not exactly standard demon hunting material. Blatworm snorted.

'Why don't you both just leave now before things turn ugly,' he said with the sort of toothy grin that
only dentists could love.

'Not an option for us,' said the dwarf.

'That's a real shame,' replied the demon, 'I really wish it had been. People are depressingly good at
forgetting that by narrowing down their own options they do the same for everyone else. It's really
very selfish, you know. Now you've left me no other choice.'

Life is made up of a series of heartbeats and some of them are life changing. In the next one the
glamour fell from Blatworm. Skin became scale, hand became claw and his flickering shadow
grew to rival the surrounding darkness.

'I'd like to say this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you, but we all know that's always been an
excuse for nastiness. One of Hell's best ones.'

'Ummm, you might be wrong there, Hellspawn,' said the human.

'Playing chicken with demons doesn't end well for the chicken. There's not a lot that makes us
blink.'

'There doesn't have to be a lot. Really only one thing when you think about it. Have you seen this
before?" the human replied and from behind his back he drew out a small mirror. It was an unadorned thing, but in the curious way of items of power it didn't need to be. It didn't have to bluff.

'Where did you get that?' the demon cried, taking a step backwards.

'My grandmother, and it was old then. She told me that no demon could tolerate their own true reflection and that if you had a true mirror you could defeat them.'

Then the demon did blink. 'Ossary ... Ossary...,' he said. 'You're a bloody Omnian aren't you? You people never understood that religion isn't the issue for demons did you? But you believed, and that became Belief. Rock hard Belief. That's where the power lies. Put that damn thing away. It gives me a headache just looking at it. And tell me what this is all about.'

Cheery patted Visit on the back, as high as she could reach, and nodded. 'You're in possession of a certain contract between Señor Hattoni and two of our officers. We want you to destroy it.'

Blatworm laughed, but there was no humour in it. 'And here I was thinking you wanted something simple, like boundless wealth. You ask the impossible.'

'Why?'

'Because Señor Hattoni is much too smart to trust a demon without having a safety net. There is another contract. One that carries my own signature and binds me to him. Just as the two officers cannot work against him, neither can I.'

'You let yourself get caught in your own trap?'

'Hattoni plays a long game. He found out my weakness for the 'demon' drink. On the pretext of him signing up his own soul he got me drunk and switched contracts. Now I work for him. Whilst the contract exists I cannot help you.'

'And if it didn't ....'

'I would show you how to break the other contract. There is a clause that not even Hattoni realises is there.'

'Why can't you just take the contract yourself?'

'Hattoni had it sealed in a box no demon can open and has placed a condition in the contract that prevents me from simply taking it.'

'So if we were to bring it to you, and give it to you, we could free the others?' asked Cheery.

The demon nodded.

'Where is it?'

'It would be somewhere with Hattoni. But we would need some powerful artefact to destroy it, even if you found it.'

'Would the Thurible of Righteousness do the trick?' asked Visit.

'Of course, but there aren't any of those left in existence. We made sure of that ..... wait, let me guess .... your grandmother?"
'Grandfather.'

'That would do it. Wouldn't work on the contract you're worried about, in case you were wondering.'

'How can we trust that you'd help us once you were released?' demanded Cheery.

'You can't. I'm a demon and we have low standards to uphold. But what choice do you have?'
Half-baked ideas

There were a few more things to Joe than met the eye. It turned out that he was something of an inventor. An inventor of contraptions that could be used in covert police operations. He had a room full of them. There were mechanisms to hide weapons up sleeves, a vest with secretly woven-in chain links, special listening devices, a chute that could open if you were falling a long way and even glasses designed to see what was behind you.

'I first got the invention urge reading a treatise on flying by Leonard da Quirm. Perhaps you've heard of him? I'd like to meet him one day.'

'It's definitely an experience,' said Vimes.

'My current project is to make an even better vest using spider's web. Apparently it's tougher than metal. I have to admit it's only in the early days and the spiders aren't quite as enthusiastic.' He pointed to a glass chamber that contained a jungle of interconnecting webs. 'At least I've learned a lot more about spider venom.

'But this is what I wanted to show you. It's never been tested and requires the perfect physique, which I believe we truly do have amongst us. I can't say it will be comfortable for all those involved but I honestly do think it will work.'

The group turned its gaze on the contraption Joe has unveiled. It was complex and intricate and Vimes could immediately see how it was inspired by Leonard. It had all the hallmarks of genius, woven through with all the potential pitfalls that accompany that dangerous boundary where theory and practice collide. There was one universal emotion that Leonard's inventions inspired - trepidation.

'And now to the other part of my plan,' continued Joe, undaunted by the silence of his audience. 'My collection of disguises.'

xxxx

'Everything is in place?'

'It will happen tonight. By the morning the city will be ours.'

'The Patrician?'

'He hides in his Palace, unseen and unheard. He places too much faith in Vimes, and we have taken that piece off the board. For good measure both of Vimes's senior officers are also gone, and the other two are ours. He's reduced to having a dwarf in charge of the Watch! And a female one at that.'

Hattoni laughed and it sounded like victory.

xxxx

'They will come,' said Pythia standing under the spreading chestnut tree in the middle of the largely unkempt park on the edge of the city. 'The message has gone out.'

It was late in the afternoon and it was easy to believe a beautiful evening lay ahead, but Gaspode had no illusions on that front. Some dogs are born to be inspirational and lead their packs into the teeth of adversity and sometimes even come out the other side. These dogs had entered into a
global canine mythology. There was Fangthane, who held off the ice hounds until his pack could reach freedom. And Lady who, despite her genteel appearance, brought down the corrupt ruler of the now lost kingdom of Thurg through an amazingly brazen guerrilla war. These stories were handed down from dog to dog.

These were not the ones Gaspode was thinking of. It was all those other great and inspirational canine leaders you'd never heard of because their rebellion had been crushed and the followers thrown to the wolves, quite literally in some cases, he suspected. Good leadership was just statistical. He hated million to one chances because people fooled themselves into believing in them nine times out of ten.

They did come, though. As the sun dipped down behind the body of the Disc and the moon began to make its appearance over the Rim they appeared. Dogs of all shape and size emerged from the behind trees and out of the long grass. He'd thought the crowd at the fish markets had been impressive but by the time the moon had gained a foothold in the sky it had been dwarfed, or possibly hobbited, by the throng in the park.

'You want me to inspire all of these dogs to overthrow Caesar? How are they even going to hear me?'

'The message will be passed from dog to dog, now and down through the ages,' Pythia replied.

'Let me guess, it will end up being 'Blessed are the cheese makers.' '

'Sorry?'

'Never mind, you'll make it up to suit your needs, if anybody survives, of course.'

'You must begin now, before they become restless. Remember, inspire them. They must Believe.'

'Yeah, right,' answered Gaspode. 'Who knows, it might even work on me.'

There was a low level yapping in the crowd. It dropped away to silence as Gaspode stepped up on the wobbly platform Ben had constructed for him. Gaspode drew a deep breath. Here goes, he thought. He'd been working through inspirational things to say all afternoon and the best he'd come up with was ‘watch my dust’.

'Listen up,' he barked. 'Today you want to rise up against Caesar and have chosen me to lead and inspire you. And I would say to you this: every dog must look after themselves.'

'What did he say?' yelped a dog from the back.

'He said that we must not forget that in our triumph we will all play an individual part,' passed on a dog from the front row.

'Cool.'

'No, no, no,' barked Gaspode. 'I meant that charity begins at home.'

'We must care for all of us who live together,' the dog translated again.

'Right on.'

'Arrggh,' snapped Gaspode. 'You do realise its survival of the fittest out there, don't you? That the losers will be torn apart?'
'We're going to win a great and bloody battle because we are so fit,' continued the self-appointed translator.

'Is there anything I can say to stop the slaughter?'

'There's nothing he can say that will stop us being victorious.'

'Woo hoo!'

Gaspode flung his head back in despair, and there was the moon climbing up the sky. Larger than life, fuller than hope, it held his gaze and looked back at him. There has always been a connection between dogs and the moon, but this time the moon connected to Gaspode. They say you can lose yourself but sometimes it's a matter of being found.

Here is what the breathless, waiting pack saw. Gaspode the Great arched his back and as the moon bathed him in silver he grew in size until his stature became statuesque. Carved from moonlight marble the hound that Gaspode had become stopped the moon in its tracks with his gaze and then he Howled. No dog that was there that night would ever forget the sound. Gaspode spoke and every dog heard the words as though Gaspode were speaking directly to them and only to them.

'We feared him down the nights and down the days' he bayed.
'Ve feared him down the arches of the year;
'Ve feared him in the labyrinthine ways
Of our own minds, and in the midst of tears
We hid from him.'

Gaspode turned to the crowd and his eyes swam silver. 'Do you hear me brothers and sisters? Do you hear me?'

The Pack, in one voice, replied.

'Tonight there will be such an ending and such a beginning. Tonight we will let the dogs out and they will never be caged again.'

The Pack howled. It was a sound as ancient as thought. A call to arms. An irresistible thing.

'That was incredible,' whispered Pythia. 'It was like you transformed into something else. What happened?'

Gaspode turned his lunar gaze on the oracle and for a moment she was bathed in the same moonlit silver. The Pack saw her shudder. Gaspode the Great open his chiselled jaws to speak ....

..... just as a heavy bank of clouds swallowed up the moon.

This time it was Gaspode that shuddered violently.

'What the ....?' he yelped as a wind sprang from nowhere, knocked a passing flock of ducks out of the sky and snatching his final word.

So it was heard and so it was written. Canine scholars would ponder for years the true nature of that lost word and whether ducks really were more important in the scheme of things than they'd realised.

This time when the Pack howled the moon and every canine below it listened.
The message came when Colon was inspecting the bakery for any products that could assist him with his investigations. He was eying off a particularly tempting looking slice when the baker leaned across the counter and whispered 'Mr Hattoni says tonight. At the Ankh River gates of the Palace. And you have to lead it. You and the imp, he said. Would you like a free slice?'

A free cake is a free cake but even its chocolate sweetness turned to dust in his mouth as he walked back to the station.

'You've got no choice, Fred,' said Cheery after he'd passed the message on through Reg. 'You can't resist and we can't let Hattoni know we know about his plans. Not yet anyway.'

Which was why Colon and Nobby found themselves at the steps of the Palace as the afternoon rolled into dusk. Cheery had told Fred and Colon that she couldn't be there this time but had arranged for Detritus and a few other members of the force to be nearby, without looking too obvious, which is no mean feat when a troll is involved. None of this did anything to calm the pair's nerves.

'Strethewt,' said Nobby as he watched the ebb and flow of the street and saw the tell-tale signs of a crowd forming.

Colon nodded. 'That's a good word Nobby. Got no idea what it really means but it sounds right.'

'Picked it up from a traveller from Xxxxxxxx at the docks. He used it all the time ... along with a few other .... new words.' Nobby didn't describe them as colourful words because their meaning was so black and white.

'What are you going to say, Fred?'

Colon shook his head in dismay. 'No idea, Nobby. I'm caught between a roc and hard place.'

Fred had grown up with that saying and he thought being caught between the ground and a giant bird in the sky summed up a pretty nasty situation. Especially if the ground was a long way away. Fred had never heard of the word homonym and would be deeply suspicious of anybody who used it in mixed company.

'I reckon you pretend to say something that could sound like you're leading a riot, but really works the other when people hear them. Like that time you tried to help Angua and Carrot settle an argument and in the end they didn't speak to each other for a week. But in reverse. You're good with words Sarge.'

Despite no objective evidence to support the last claim, Colon's head rose and his chest swelled. The difference between self-belief and self-delusion is a fine one and a distinction that can't, by definition, be understood by self-deluders. The human brain is wonderful at protecting us from many things but, sadly, not from itself.

'You know Nobby,' he said slowly, as though savouring a new thought, 'I've just had an idea. What about if I pretend to stir up the crowd but I say things that calm them down?'

There was a pause before Nobby replied. 'Great idea, Sarge. Wish I'd thought if it.'

'Ach, well, Nobby, it's called tactical thinking. That's why I'm the Sergeant and you're the Corporal.'

The street in front of the gates was now packed. You couldn't call it a crowd because it had teeth
and you couldn't call it a rabble because it had focus. It was a mob and it was ready for some mobbing. Colon strode out until he stood between the mobbees and the Palace.

'You're here because you're not happy with the land tax. Is that right?' he shouted. 'And you think the Patrician has lost the plot?'

'Damn right he has,' answered a voice from the crowd.

'But are you sure you're ready for this?' replied Colon with tactical thinking in full swing.

'Absolutely!'

'Ah ... but do really believe the people have the power and right to overthrow the government?'

'You said it Sergeant Colon, and we're 100% behind you on this,' shouted someone.

'No, no,' stammered Fred, 'what I meant was ... well ... this isn't about one man changing the world.'

'Yes it is. Vetinari changed ours and did we ask for it?'

The mob roared 'No.'

'So let's change it back again and with the support of the Watch who can stop us? Lead us to victory Sergeant.'

Whatever Fred was about to say next was swallowed up by a chant that ran through the crowd, swelling into a battle cry. 'Colon. Colon. Colon.'

There have been better battle cries but, as with all rallying points, the words don't have to make much sense. The mob surged in that irresistible way mobs do and the tide of revolution swept Sergeant through the gates and into the history books.

'Well that went to plan,' gasped Nobby as he ran after them. By the time the backup Watch arrived a minute later there was nothing left to say.

'Bugger,' growled Detritus.

Well, almost nothing.

xxxx

Meanwhile ... there's always a meanwhile at times like these ... Corporal Visit was in hot pursuit. As visitors to Ankh Morpork have discovered, often to their deep misfortune, there are many ways to disappear in the city. The average citizen knows how to avoid these urban Be Trobi Triangles* but those residents which the notably thin and sometimes bloodied Ankh Morpork tourist guide likes to refer to as 'colourful characters' are more than happy to seek these places out when matters become pressing - and there's hardly anything more pressing than being pursued by the Watch, other than, possibly, some more colourful characters.

* An area in the Be Trobi Islands, deep in the heart of the Turnwise Ocean famed for the inexplicable disappearance of ships that sail through certain of its waters. Also, coincidentally, noted for its pirates.

The best place to disappear was, of course, The Shades, which was why part-time thief, Tommy 'Halfbaked' Turbot, was currently sprinting through its torturous network of what could be loosely
described as streets. Tommy had all the natural thieving ability to have earned an unsteady income from his work were it not for one solitary failing - he was thick as two short planks. The cruel irony of this was that, thanks to the shallow pool in which his intellect swum, he had no appreciation of how stupid he truly was. His was not as uncommon an affliction as it should be. Evolution drops the ball all the time.

In Tommy's under-resourced mind he was just unlucky. Especially tonight. He'd honestly been up to nothing when suddenly this copper had turned up and next thing he knew, here he was. The only thing going in his favour at the moment was that he'd nearly made it to alley way, well-known to the local criminals as an escape route into an even deeper maze. If he made it there no copper would catch him.

He skidded around the last corner and then, to his sudden surprise, he was no longer running, he was tripping over an extended leg. He became airborne - but not for long, tumbling to a groaning stop.

'The problem with well-known escape routes,' said Cheery as she walked over to him, 'is that they're well-known. Now Tommy, today you get to volunteer for what could be the most important mission of your short life. Just before you argue over the meaning of the word volunteer I'd also like you to think very carefully about the meaning of short life.'

Which was why, a few minutes later, Tommy found himself in the company of the Watch. It would be morally satisfying to say he was walking out of the darkness into the light and while this was broadly true, it was only because the streets were better lit in this part of the city.

'So, here's what's going to happen Halfbaked. You're going to do a job for us, and when it's done we're going to pretend that nothing happened, including the little failed burglary attempt that occurred on Treacle Street where you happened to be, no doubt innocently,' said Cheery as they walked up town.

Cheery had been monitoring Hattoni's movements and knew he'd taken up residence in a rather impressive establishment on Kings Way. The irony of this wasn't lost on Cheery and she wondered if he'd chosen this location intentionally.

'Don't work for no coppers,' mumbled Halfbaked.

'Consider us off duty,' the dwarf replied. 'As you can see, we're not in uniform. We're just normal citizens doing our civic duty. And Halfbaked, this is one of those times you make the right choices. Not like the usual ones you make.

'This is the place we're looking at,' she said with a casual nod at the stately building across the street as they walked casually past ten minutes later. 'Corporal Visit is going to create a distraction and you and I are going to head around the back, find our way in, grab what we're looking for and get out. A clean crisp getaway, something you may not be that familiar with.

'You ready Visit?'

'I was born for this Sergeant.'

There was a narrow alley behind the house where the everyday business of operating a wealthy establishment, that for reasons of appearance had to be done discretely, took place. Why this has to be important to those that think themselves important is beyond the rest of society, who just get on with doing the really important things that keep the show on the road. It was, after all, a bonus if you wanted to move around without drawing too much attention.
'Visit should be in full swing by now,' said Cheery as she carefully opened the back gate, 'now get us in their Halfbaked.'

Tommy wasn't totally stupid (though he could see it on a clear day) and he knew that right now wasn't the best time to take his future into his own hands but the time would come soon enough. Besides, he wanted to see what they were stealing. It might just turn out to be a profitable day after all.
Labyrinthine ways

Visit was in full swing and Lenny didn't know how to stop him. Lenny had been hired by Señor Hattoni to guard the house at all times. And he'd done it well. He had also been instructed to behave normally and so, quite normally, he'd answered the knock at the door. He was now regretting that decision profoundly.

'And this pamphlet here explains why Om is the only true God and how following in his footsteps will lead to rich rewards in the afterlife.'

Lenny mutely took the pamphlet. He'd already learned that not taking the pamphlet just led to further prothlesizing and him eventually ending up with the damn bit of paper anyway.

'That's just the first step down the path to Om. You really need to read Ossary to find out why Om can save your soul. Have I told you about Ossary?'

Lenny sadly shook his head. Again, it wasn't worth faking it. He'd just get quizzed.

'Right,' said Visit, with his eyes shining with a righteous and joyful gleam, 'this could change your life.'

xxxx

The house had a cellar and the cellar had an outside door. It was locked but that was only a momentary concern. Halfbaked may have been a permanent presence in the Top Ten worst thieves in Ankh Morpork but is wasn't through lack of ability. Cheery was grateful that a box of hammers could give Halfbaked a run for his money at the Mended Drum's trivial night. The city had enough smart criminals as it was, many of them awarded the status of pillars of society. All crooks did their time, but some of them got to do it in luxury mansions.

Cheery listened at the door which led into the main body of the house. All she could hear was a distant murmur that had all the hallmarks of Visit failing to convert yet another potential follower of Om. She quietly opened the door and she and Halfbaked entered what turned out to be the kitchen. This was not a safe place to loiter. Who knew if there were servants around? The pair slipped out the door opposite into a corridor that led to the front of the house. Cheery was planning her next move when Halfbaked tapped her in the shoulder and pointed to a set of stairs. She nodded and they padded across to it. Old staircases generally pride themselves on having an impressive repertoire of squeaks and groans but this one was something of a rebel and remained mute during their cautious ascent.

At the top of the stairs they were confronted by a range of doors, presumably leading to bedrooms. One though, stood ajar, which was sufficient reason to try it first. They found themselves in the sort of room often referred to as a den. The descriptor did little to ease Cheery's nervousness. She knew the sort of things that could be found in dens. This one contained a desk, bookshelves, the obligatory painting featuring a woman who clearly had limited interest in clothing and several comfortable lounge chairs. The desk was the obvious place to start but it rapidly proved disappointing, containing little more than stationery. Cheery was hardly surprised. What she was looking for wasn't likely to pop up in such an easy fashion.

Next she moved to the bookshelves, quietly hoping that the clichéd secret panel would open as she moved a novel. The luck they'd had in getting this far didn't stoop to such a level and time was running out when she turned to see Halfbaked reaching up to the picture on the wall. She scuttled
'What are you doing?' she hissed.

'Always wanted one of these,' whispered Halfbaked. Cheery wasn't sure if he meant the painting or a scantily clad woman. 'Put it back. It's not like we can carry it anyway .... oh.'

Paintings of woman with a disinclination to clothing may, or may not, be a fine thing but chance certainly is. Behind the painting that Halfbaked had now removed was a safe embedded in the wall. The dwarf and the intellectually short-sheeted looked at each other and then without a word the thief went about his business.

There were safes that would take a skilled safecrack hours to break into, even with a range of safe cracking devices and surprisingly explosive liquids. Fortunately this wasn't one of those. Those safes weren't mass produced yet - they were bespoke and it could take months to get one made. Hattoni had needed one quickly and this was it. Not that it was an easy thing to crack, but it was within the realms of Halfbaked's abilities.

Downstairs Cheery could hear the steady rise in the tenor of the front-door conversation and knew this signalled a tactical withdrawal by the victim. She knew Visit could hold out for a few more minutes, but that was it. She watched as Halfbaked placed his ear against the barrel of the dial and slowly turned it. He'd already sorted out the keyed component of the safe.

The front door clicked shut just as Halfbaked leaned back with triumph. The safe door swung open on its hinges. Inside there was no money, no jewellery and no important and revealing documents. There was just a box. It was made of wood so plain that it made the word plain look exotic. And it was solid. Cheery reached in and carefully removed it. They needed to get out but that had now become a major problem. Cheery snuck out onto the landing and very carefully peered over the edge. Sure enough, there was the guard. He headed into the kitchen and emerged a few moments later with a glass of water. Cheery understood why. She'd had her share of discussions with Visit regarding religion and every single one of them had left her with a dry mouth.

The guard glanced at the stairs before heading up to check the front door was locked. Cheery knew he would be doing his round shortly and she looked around desperately for any alternatives that didn't involve violence.

That was when it happened. Another knock at the door. It was Corporal Visit's master stroke. The guard looked up in horror, ducked into the front room and then gave the perfect imitation of being totally not there. This phenomenon happens to religious converters the world over. Often accompanied by a subtle movement of curtains.

'I just realised I had another pamphlet I should have given you,' came Visit's muffled voice through the door. 'Hello? Hello? I know you're there. As Ossary said, 'Speak and the wax will fall from the ears of those who are deaf.' How about if I just read it to you?'

Cheery grabbed the chance Visit had given them with both hands. With much greater alacrity then their entry the pair found themselves back out in the alleyway, complete with box and painting, which Halfbaked refused to part from. They made their way around to the Kings Way and signalled to Visit. The corporal nodded.

'Actually, I just realised I have a conversion appointment in Scoone Avenue. I'll be back later,' he said through the door.

'No hurry,' came the reply from behind the curtains.
Cheery was desperate to find out what the box contained but sensible enough not to rush into it. After all, she was a dwarf. This is not stereotyping, it's genetics. Dwarfs that weren't sensible didn't tend to survive long in the mines, and certainly not long enough to continue their line. She didn't want to open the box at the Yard either. It was secret business for now. In the end she led the group to the Apothecary Gardens. The gardens offered discrete spaces but enough visibility and people movement to reduce (though never completely eliminate) the chance of a casual mugging.

The locked box presented something more of a challenge than it first appeared. The keyed lock wasn't the issue, Halfbaked had no real problem with that, it was when he went to open it that things got tricky. Halfbaked paused and carefully withdrew his hand. 'There's a magic trap on that. Don't know what'll happen when someone opens it but I'll be watching from a safe distance.'

The three of them stared at the box. 'What now?' said Visit.

Cheery growled in frustration. She didn't have time for this. 'Give it to me,' she said tersely. It's always polite to refer to the brevity in a dwarf's conversation as terse rather than short.

'But Sergeant ...'

'Listen, Visit, humans are so busy stereotyping us dwarves that they don't have time to find out more about us other than to laugh at our height, love of gold, practical nature and lack of humour. Sometimes that's handy. For example, did you know that dwarves have a strong resistance to magic? No one knows why, but dwarf scientists suggest that our down-to-earth practicality and lack of humour have something to do with it*. I didn't say the stereotyping was statistically wrong, by the way, it just limits your thinking and your perspective. We have a saying about assuming ....'

* As you can imagine the research had the potential to be extremely painful along the way, though not, fortunately, for the researchers. This is yet another reason to pursue higher education.

'That it makes an ass out of you and me?'

'Huh. Haven't heard that one. Quite like it. No, our saying is 'Assuming is stupid.' Catchy sayings aren't our strong suit either, but it comes to the same thing. Magic struggles with dwarves, so let's see if I can struggle with it.'

Cheery took the box as both Halfbaked and Visit retreated to a nearby tree. The dwarf slowly opened the lid. Not that the speed of opening seemed to help. There was a bright flash followed by a loud pop and Cheery was wrapped in a glowing purple cloud. As they watched, her body began to swell. Larger it grew until the point of explosion and then, like a rubber band, it snapped back shrinking beyond Cheery's normal size to something no bigger than a bucket. As Visit stared on in horror the body began to writhe and she could swear she saw extra legs appearing ... and then, something else. In the heart of the purple cloud a patch of dull, earthy brown was forming, and as it did the dwarfish shape started to re-assert itself. The purple cloud fought back but it was no match for the stubborn brown. With a further, frustrated crack and flash of colour the cloud disappeared, leaving behind the slumped dwarfish figure. Visit dashed over.

'Are you alright, Cheery?' he cried, not sure how close he should approach.

She nodded wearily. 'I'll survive,' she croaked. 'Though I do have a strange craving for flies. Let's see what's inside.'

'Not so fast, copper,' said Halfbaked, who'd picked up the box. 'I figure what's inside must be pretty valuable if coppers are prepared to risk their lives for it. Don't even bother to try and catch me,' he laughed as he reached and grabbed the contents. 'Oww,' he added as he withdrew the rolled up
parchment. 'Is this it?' He turned the box upside down but all that fell out was a small pin. 'This is a joke,' he roared. 'You coppers are idiots,' he added and then burst out laughing.

Laughter can ease the mood in a room, it can lift spirits and put things in perspective. This laughter was the other kind. It was also unexpectedly cut short. In mid-guffaw a strange look passed across Halfbaked face, but that was nothing compared to the bright blue colour that followed it. With the remarkably common final word 'Urgh,' Halfbaked collapsed to the ground in a distinctly terminal fashion.

'Well, I've heard of laughing yourself to death,' said Visit in the ringing silence that followed, 'but I never imagined it would look like that.'

'That's because the real cause of death was the venom of the motherfungus spider,' said Cheery, whose background in forensics had opened her eyes to how diverse the world of poisons was and how ingenious people were at discovering them. 'Hattoni had left it on that pin and Halfbaked found it for us.' Cheery carefully picked up the pin with tweezers, placed it back in the box and closed the lid. 'Now let's go and find ourselves a demon.'

'The body, Sergeant?'

Cheery looked down at the blue corpse. 'Don't worry, Visit, it'll be gone by the morning.'

Typically this would mean one of two things in Ankh Morpork. Either the clean-up boys would have done their job or those denizens of the city that tend to shun the public eye would have done it for them. In this case, though, it was the third option, dissolved. There are snappier sayings in the world but none more noteworthy than 'Don't mess with that motherfungus spider.'

xxxx

For every miraculous time someone steals something from a ruthless criminal there is a secondary, largely untold story of what happened to the person who was guarding the item. These stories are generally very short and highly predictable. Lenny had seen one or two unfold over the years, which was why he didn't hang around when he saw the door to a safe he didn't know existed hanging open in Hattoni's office.

He cut through back streets and was just sprinting across a park when something on the ground caught his eye. Two things, in fact. One was a body that was rapidly moving from the solid to the liquid state and the other was a painting. He'd seen it before in the house, covering that safe. Perhaps because he appreciated art, or pictures of woman with a clothing aversion, or because, after all, he did live on the dark side of the law, Lenny picked up the painting and left Ankh Morpork with nothing else but some pamphlets in his pocket.

History remains silent on what happened to Lenny 'The Lug' Shadrach... but that's because history is lazy. Sometimes it's about looking for the footprint rather than the foot.

What certain records do show is that several months later an art dealer in the Agatean Empire, of all places, acquired, for a considerable sum, a rare painting by the acclaimed artist Mortadello, Woman Who Forgot To Get Dressed. Years later still the great chronicles of Om note the establishment of a highly successful mission in the Brown Islands supported by a passionate and wealthy benefactor and acolyte. There are rumours that one day the Omnian church may well add another Leonard to its impressive collection of saints.

Footprints and, possibly, butterfly wings. There are times when blind chance and blind faith come
to some sort of arrangement and the word miraculous tends to crop up. It pays not to look too closely at these events. Contemplating the finer detail tends to bring on headaches or, in extreme cases, wandering around deserts in loin cloths.

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It was, without a doubt, one of the most uncomfortable and certainly the strangest journey Vimes had ever undertaken. Worse even than a camel, though this was one observation he was definitely keeping to himself. But the suffocating, body-numbing discomfort paled beside the boundless admiration he had for Sybil. He'd always know she was remarkable (her only flaw being a poor chooser when it came to husbands) but, yet again, she'd forced him to redefine remarkable.

Once she'd heard the plan Sybil had agreed immediately despite Sam's loud, angry protestations. Sybil was incredibly agreeable and accommodating but on rare occasions the other Sybil shut the door in Sam's face. He was reduced to incoherent mumbles of protestation - the last resort of the stubborn loser.

Vimes had to admit the contraption was almost as remarkable as Sybil. Joseph may still have had a lot to learn about policing but he was right up there when it came to being imaginative. And it needed a fertile mind, unfettered by convention, to design the Bustler. What impressed Vimes the most was Joe's ability to combine such a traditional feminine element with such unfeminine expectations. It took a special mind to make the connections and a very special woman to carry it through. Perfect is, and can only ever be, in context. Sybil could not, in all likelihood, be described as the perfect shape for a tightrope walker, chimney sweep, ballet dancer or any task that required fitting into a small or even moderate space but she was the perfect shape for the Bustler.

The word contraption is often over-used when the much more constrained term device will suffice but in this case it was right in the money. Vimes wasn't sure he'd seen anything more contrapting in his life. Only Leonard da Quirm could give it a run for its money. The principle was simple enough. The Bustler was a construction of wire and leather designed to fit over the shoulder and allow a woman to carry a person in a sling under her bustle. Theoretically.

Despite all his outraged outpourings, laced with particularly colourful vernacular, on the difference between theory and practice Sam Vimes eventually found himself slung in a location that not even poets could safely describe. There followed a brief period where modifications were made to avoid a diagnosis of 'suffocation by bustle' and the journey had begun.

The other element to plan involved another deception. Joe really did have skills when it came to disguise and by happy coincidence he was much the same shape as Sam. When the party left the apartment it included one embustled Sybil, one Angua and one passable version of Sam Vimes. The carriage ride was an adventure in itself and required Sybil to stand up to 'better see the sights of this wonderful city.'

The weight pressing down on Sybil was extraordinary but Sybil came from a long line of Ramkins many of whom had had to carry their husbands on their backs. The Ramkin women could generally be described by the 3 Sts - Stoic, Stable and Staunch. Sometimes is was the 6 Sts, which included Stolid, Steely and Stubborn. Mentally and physically. This didn't make the weight any the less - quite the reverse. The mission was not going to fail because of weakness on her part.

Sam for his part, hung on to Sybil. Many couples spoon but, outside of the fabled Karma Zabingo from Klatch which was reputed to feature more intimate positions than a person could get through in a lifetime (possibly shortened through the attempt), he doubted anyone had ever attempted the current arrangement. As for spooning ... there were other items from the kitchen drawer that were probably more accurate. As the carriage bounced over what felt like every kidney-bruising
cobblestone in the city, he reflected on the various ways he would exact retribution on Hattoni.

He hated that the world seem to reward arseholes, and the bigger arsehole you were the bigger the reward. One of the cruellest conditions a person can suffer from is a sense of justice. Especially if you look up and see the larger picture. The world was damaged goods and it was hard to believe that civilisation was actually all that civilised. What frustrated him was that if everyone got their act together the whole mess could be sorted out in a weekend. The problem was, as it always is, that it involved people thinking outside their own small heads and that certainly wasn't going to happen in a hurry. Trying to fix the world individually was proving to be an admirable form of suicide. In recent times, though, he'd changed tack, thanks in large part to Sybil. He'd never give up on the principles of universal justice but, on a day-to-day basis, he was learning to focus on the localised version. This was keeping him busy enough as it was and he was certainly seeing more of the world .... though only a very limited and intimate patch of it right at the moment. Sybil saw this as an important change of heart, Sam saw it more along the lines of taking as many bastards with him as possible.

They'd almost reached the mansion when Sybil saw Angua's head snap up.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Can't you hear that?' Angua replied in a surprised tone.

'No.'

Angua turned to Joe, who shook his head.

'Dannn it,' she growled in clenched frustration. 'It's the Howl.'

'What's the Howl?'

'You'll hear it in a moment. It's a calling to all those that have canine in the blood. It's the pack summoning. It happens all the time but I've never heard one like this. It's huge.'

'And that's a problem?'

'Yes. I don't know how to explain it to you in ways that you could understand. It's a force, a bit like gravity. Mostly it's just used to bring a small group together for the hunt, but ... this is something else. You can't ignore gravity, it wins every time, and that's why it's a problem.'

'You have to go, don't you?' said Sybil.

'Mmmmfff!' said her bustle.

'Yes. I'm sorry. I have to do this. But I'll be back.' With those universally resonant words Angua leapt off the moving coach. 'There's more than one Pack,' she added as she disappeared into the darkness.

'xxx

'So wonderful to see you again Sybil, and this must be Sam, who you've told me so much about.' She embraced Sybil and extended her hand to Joe. 'You know,' she said as she greeted him, 'it's almost like I've met you before.'

'Ahh, well,' said Joe/Sam with a smile, 'it's the copper's lament. We all start to look alike after a while. One of many laments, really.'
'That must be it,' Bianca replied, with only a hint of doubt. 'Please, do come through to the drawing room.'

'Actually Bianca, do you mind I freshen up first?'

'Not at all dear. Harold, can you show Lady Sybil the way.'

Bathrooms, throughout their history, have brought more relief to the occupant than any other room in the house, though rarely for two people at once. Both Sybil and Sam groaned as he slipped out of the Bustler and onto the floor. Harold, the butler, heard the noise and with rapid discretion retreated back down the corridor.

'Are you alright, Sam?' Sybil whispered, shrugging her shoulders in an effort to ease the pain. Sam nodded, blinking in the light and gasping, like some hitherto undiscovered creature brought up from the watery depths.

'What about you?' he asked after several raggedy breaths.

'I'm fine darling,' she replied, with barely a wince. 'I've probably had worse over the years and who knows what's to come. I am a big girl you know.'

That was certainly true. The plan had relied on it. Now to stage two, or whatever stage it was. Vimes had never figured out what constituted a stage. As far as he was concerned it was all one long series of events. Perhaps there were stagelets? He'd even heard of using milestones but that was just plain stupid and, besides, they were damned heavy to carry around.

'When you're ready Sybil.'

She nodded and straightened her dress. Then she turned to Sam, standing unsteadily before her, and gave him a blanketing hug. 'Please take care, Sam,' she said with concern. 'I know what you're like. If anybody can find and save Carrot it's you, but if anyone can get themselves into the deepest trouble possible, it's also you.'

She released him and Sam returned the hug with a smile. He smiled regularly at many people but those were usually smiles that made it quite clear that teeth lay just below the lips. This was one of Sam's rare smiles that said thank you and, if you looked closely enough this time, I love you.

'You go out there and wow the household and keep Joseph out of trouble,' he replied, safe in the knowledge that though Sybil was quite skilled at slipping into the background she could also fill any foreground to the edges if needed. 'And I'll make sure I get through this. The only person who has any right to kill me, only a daily basis, is you Sybil, and I plan to preserve that right.'

'Good enough. I'll see you back at the apartment.' She gave one final adjustment to her hair and swept out the door, blowing him a kiss as she went.

Sam listened to the galleon that Sybil had become sail down the corridor dragging the butler and everybody else into her wake. Silence descended, or ascended, depending on which way it had come from. He waited another minute for good measure and to give his body a chance to have a fair old grumble about its recent treatment before opening the door and slipping out into the corridor. Blanche had said Carrot would be held somewhere downstairs and that there was an entrance to the cellars at the back of the mansion.

That was pretty much the extent of his planning so far. It sounded like one of those cheap Boys Own adventure stories where plot and reality were largely irrelevant as long as there was a daring uncomplicated rescue involving knights and swords and stupid guards. Technically he was a knight
but not in the armour and sword department. And it's possible the guards were stupid, but he knew Alberto and Roberto wouldn't be. Still, he hadn't honestly thought he'd have got this far unscathed (other than possible long term kidney damage), so he just had to hold on for the ride.

It didn't take him long to find the entrance thanks to a distinct lack of household staff. Even from here Vimes could hear Sybil regaling at the top of her game. He knew that the staff would be whirlpooling around the dining room and the dining room would be whirlpooling around Sybil. Sam smiled. She really was remarkable. She'd done everything he'd asked if her. Now it was his turn. He opened the door with the barest of clicks and descended.

The stairs were not just well made, they were well worn. Vimes wondered if the Hattoni mansion might be a bit like those icebergs he'd heard about - most of it underground. Blanche hadn't mentioned that directly, probably because she was never allowed, or inclined, to come down here. At best she'd only have an inkling. What was an inkling anyway? A small ink, perhaps. Hardly useful in any circumstance that didn't involve writing short letters.

The stairs ended in a corridor and that corridor led to even more corridors, each offering up doors to choose from. Hattoni could keep an army down here, and possibly he did. No wonder the man could run the city and maybe even the country. His real problem, if you ignored all the other real problems stacked up on top of it, was that there was nowhere to hide in these corridors and he knew he currently stood out like a polar bear in a tuxedo at the Penguin Ball. There was enough movement around the corridors to make sure his progress was constantly interrupted. It was inevitable that he would get caught.

He'd just scuttled back down a side corridor to avoid a small group when the door he was standing near swung inwards. Vimes was taken by surprise but the advantage he had was that his surprise happened two heartbeats before that of the room's exiting occupant. Two heartbeats isn't a lot of time but it's amazing what you can achieve in it when desperation is holding the reins. Vimes sprung forward driving the man back into the room and slamming the door behind him.

Before his winded opponent had a chance to regain his breath he was met not just by the notorious Vimes knuckle sandwich but the full dinner menu.

Despite his best efforts, the last few seconds had been noisy enough to attract attention. Vimes waited. And, quite distinctly, nothing happened. It kept on not happening. The stone walls would have helped muffle the sound but Vimes also suspected that the sounds of sometime being beaten were not uncommon down here.

He'd been lucky, of course. The room only had one occupant. It was a sleeping chamber, and a spartan one at that. A bed. A chair. A table. No window down here. Cell was a better description than room. But even in this setting the human ability to 'put up with this sort of crap' shone through. On the table there was a painting that featured a small, smiling family and a lumpen piece of clay, presumably made by a child, that suggested it had been modelled on something like a horse, dragon or possibly chicken. Stuck to the wall was a picture featuring another hybrid animal involving more horns than you'd normally see in an orchestra, below which was written 'I love you Dab.' All of this was a solid reminder that much of the time being a bad guy just depended on what job opportunities were available.

If this really was a Boys Own adventure the unconscious man would have been exactly the same size and shape as Vimes and be carrying an impressive sword, preferably of the magical variety. The audit of what was available to Vimes, best described in this case as a reality check, revealed an oversized uniform and a shortage of swords, magical or otherwise. On the credit side, the pockets did contain a sap (the upmarket version of the classic Ankh Morpork 'brick in a sock') and a rope belt. It didn't look pretty but he could probably get away with it if he didn't have to move too
quickly and Hattoni's men weren't all snappy dressers.

Vimes drew a breath, opened the door and with casual confidence headed back down the corridor. Detection may have become slightly less concerning but direction certainly hadn't. He had no idea which way would lead to Carrot and it didn't help that the place felt like a maze. As he wandered up the umpteenth (which is at least two curses and one vulgarity more than a truckload) similarly looking, possible familiar corridor, ignored by anyone he encountered, he noticed something he definitely hadn't seen before. Two simple letters … SV … drawn on the wall of a crossing corridor. Fairly unobtrusive and largely cryptic unless your name happened to be Sam Vimes.

Over the years Vimes had jumped to so many conclusions that he could give those strange bouncing creatures that lived on the continent of Xxxxxxxx a run for their money. All coppers do, of course. It's an important weapon in the detection armoury. The only problem is that not only is it a two-edged sword, it has razors on the hilt for good measure. The trick is not in the jumping it's in the direction and, just as importantly, in the landing. Sam jumped. And turned down the corridor. Two passageways later he was led left at the next SV. And so on it went for several minutes. Every fibre in his body was humming. Its times like these you have to respect how tight the anal sphincter can get. Maybe that's why ducks don't sink, he thought. Maybe they're permanently nervous.

From somewhere deeper in the maze a sound broke his brief duck-related thoughts. It was soft. The sort of noise you wouldn't notice if your hearing wasn't on high alert. A movement of sorts. He realised he hadn't seen any other guards recently, which didn't necessarily ease his tension. He paused but the rich blanket of silence had descended once again. He shrugged and moved on slowly. It wasn't like he was spoilt for choice at the moment.

The next corridor left him with no doubt as to which way to go. Slumped against a wall was a guard, resting in such a manner that suggested his guarding days were over. This one was dressed differently to the others Vimes had encountered. The uniform was distinctly more professional and the ex-guard was armed with the sort of sword that was made for cutting not flourishing. Not that it had done the holder any good. He stepped around the body and moved on. The theories of entropy argue that the world will always head towards greater chaos. Vimes had no doubt about this, especially with humans involved. He was also starting to subscribe to theory that everything moved towards increased levels of Interesting. Oh, for a slice of Boredom, with a side-serving of Dullness.

His theory bore fruit a short distance down the narrowing corridor. Two lumps in the shadows turned into the bodies of guards, unconscious or worse. Between them stood a door. It might as well have had the word Destination written above it in flashing lights. Vimes strode forward. 'Are you in there Carrot?' he asked.

'Yes Captain,' came the wood-muffled response. 'I knew it would be you. Can we go now? I'm getting a little tired of this place.'

That was Carrot for you. No doubt. No sound of distress. No need to know more than was necessary at the time. It would be easy to think of him as some sort of mechanical policeman if you hadn't seen how huge and inclusive his heart could be. Vimes bent down to one of the guards, took the key from his belt and unlocked the door. Carrot emerged, with a stretch and a smile.

'Thank you, Commander,' he said. 'What happens now?'

Everything apparently. It turns out that you can only incapacitate so many guards before someone notices. Life's like that. Shouting rose in the corridors behind them. Their options were drying up faster than a Klatchian waterhole in the summer heat.

'You're on your own now, Commander,' a voice drifted out of the darkness. 'Though I always
suggest moving forwards.'

'Tell that to the fellow who's just walked into quicksand,' Vimes shouted back. 'Aargh,' he added for good measure.

'Come on Carrot,' he growled and then loped off down the unexplored corridor. The guards and the darkness closed in behind them.
Nothing like a good decree

Many a self-deluding narcissist (is there any other kind?) would dream about being swept to power on the back of a righteous uprising of the people. Colon was not one of these. Granted, he was self-absorbed and did his own share of self-delusion but this describes just about every ape that learned how to hold a comb. The difference lies in thinking you're better than everyone else. Colon knew, with rich evidence to back him up, that he wasn't.

Yet here he was. In the Throne Room. Sitting on what felt like a very dodgy gold-veneered chair that deserved to be called a throne simple because of the shitiness of the situation.

Beside him stood Nobby. The two were, after all inseparable, like Klatchian curry and indigestion. Whilst Fred was living solely in a world of terror, Nobby was drifting between that one and another involving the desire to laugh out loud.

The Throne Room was filled wall-to-wall with people. There were those who were true believers, largely outnumbered by those who were along for the ride. That latter group had two distinct subgroups. There were those who were looking for whatever they could get from the situation (Dibbler was there, of course) and those who were there for the entertainment value. Ankh Morporkians liked a good laugh. They didn't mind if it involved a bit of suffering along the way as long as it was happening to someone else. Then there was, as with all revolutions, the other group.

'What do I do now, Nobby?' whispered Colon in desperation. You knew it was desperation because he was asking Nobby for advice.

'Tell them what they want to hear,' Nobby replied with more political nous than his vague claim to humanity suggested.

Colon nodded and turned to the throng. 'I wasn't expecting this ...' he began.

'But we were,' someone shouted. 'It's time for change. Tell us what to do.'

'But you're all individuals,' Colon replied trying to find the voice.

'Yes we are,' the audience sang back in unison, and a lone voice added 'but some are more individual than others. Tell us your plan.'

'Yes, let's have some decrees.'

The crowd murmured in approval. There was nothing like a good decree to get things rolling. Fred blinked. His brain, which already operated with spare capacity and could have easily taken on tenants, went even blanker than usual. He had nothing.

'Yeah, how about a decree about eating more pies,' threw in a familiar voice.

The crowd paused and digested the idea, which was more than could be said for the pies in question. And then self-interest won the day. The time it takes for the average person to move from communal good to personal benefit is so small it can only be measured by equipment that hasn't been invented yet.

'And pay rises for people working in retail,' cried the leader of the Retail Workers Union. The crowd roared its support.
'And a reduced minimum wage,' cried the President of the Chamber of Commerce. The crowd roared its approval for this too. Crowds are like that. Logic isn't important at times like these as belonging is. Resolving differences could come later during the counter-revolutions, subsequent uprisings and political purgings. You can't mess with tradition.

'What our new leader needs right now,' said a voice with such authority that the audience obediently fell silent, 'is a trusted advisor.'

A woman emerged from the crowd. She was tall, though this had as much to do with her bearing as her physique. In defiance of convention she did not have flaming red hair but that didn't matter because all the rest of her seemed alight with the sort of passion that could change worlds or, at the very, least destroy them.

'Lady Rust,' Colon acknowledged as she approached, with evident relief in his voice. It's a mistake made the world over that people allow those who want to lead them to do exactly that. Far better to have a reluctant leader. It is said that people elect the leaders they deserve which carries the laughable assumption that they have the power and wisdom to do otherwise.

'Sergeant ... Colon, I put myself forward as that advisor. I will selflessly dedicate my time to correct all the errors of judgement that have arisen under the tenure of the erstwhile Patrician.'

Fred frowned. Regina Rust processed the look, smiled a crocodilian smile of understanding and added 'erstwhile means previous.'

Colon sighed with relief. Things were going better than planned and he'd even learnt a new word. What could possibly go wrong now? He nodded in agreement.

'Excellent,' said Lady Rust. 'Now bring me the Patrician if anyone can find him and whoever is in charge of the Watch. The rest of you get out of here. We have a city to get back on its feet.'

The crowd roared with approval and obediently began to leave. General consensus was that things would get better now that someone of a firm and determined mind was in charge. Stupid is universal.

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The Patrician, of course, was nowhere to be found.

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The Howl had brought them up from the gutters and down from the hills. They came in their hundreds to follow the Great Gaspode and change the world. Right now the Great Gaspode would have happily changed it to anything that didn't involving him leading a revolution.

'You have no choice ' said Pythia. 'Your path and all of our paths have been set now. We must ride this dragon to the end.'

'You got exactly what you wanted didn't you,' he growled. 'Independent observer, my arse. This is all going to end up pear-shaped. I'm not a leader I'm a survivor, and a pretty immoral one at that. I don't even have a white horse to ride on,’ he added for good measure.

'What makes you think that,' replied Pythia, and whistled. There was movement at the edge of the crowd and a large dog emerged, with what looked like some form of seat strapped to its back. The dog was stunningly attractive in that charismatic way that implied both a lack of intelligence and the certainty that other dogs would happily follow them despite this absence.
Gaspode blinked. 'Laddie?' he yapped in amazement.

'Bark, bark,' the canine Adonis replied with a tail wag of bullroarer proportions. The last time Gaspode had seen Laddie was when he had risen to fame in Holy Wood. Fame is fickle, as that actress, Whatshername, from the moving picture, Somethingorother, can attest. Despite saving the world, the world had largely forgotten about Laddie which, admittedly, didn't seem to worry Laddie at all. Funny how he had disappeared until trouble had once again come to town. Gaspode didn't have time to ponder on this further, which was a shame because it did deserve deeper thought. Most people aren't comfortable with deeper thought. They leave it up to philosophers and we all know what happens to those poor souls. Madness is just the beginning.

'Seriously?!!' yelped Gaspode.

'Woof, woof,' answered Laddie.

'I think that says it all,' added Pythia. 'Climb on board.'

Gaspode's shoulders dropped in resignation, a mood that was not eased by the giant lick he received from Laddie. 'Right,' he growled as he leapt into the saddle-chair, 'you've made our bed and now we all get to lie in it.'

Laddie surged forward and the Pack swept around behind him. The park emptied. Soon all that was left was a rather bemused owl. And a darker shape in the darkness that had watched this unfold and had waited. Up until now. It padded into the clearing and the owl, wisely, didn't give a hoot.

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Cheery and Visit made their way as quickly as possible to Blatworm's underground chamber. 'I must say, I'm pleasantly surprised to see you back here,' the demon observed. 'Were you successful?'

Cheery nodded and displayed the roll of parchment.

'And you have the Thurible of Righteousness?'

Visit held out a small censer suspended on chains.

'Keep that away from me,' the demon growled. 'It hurts just to look at it. Now put the damn contract in the Thurible and light it.'

'And how can we trust you not to just leave if we do?'

'I thought we'd been over this before. You can't. I'm a demon. Untrustworthiness is a job requirement.'

Cheery glared, caught on the horns of both the demon and the dilemma. 'Look,' added Blatworm, returning her stare, 'you can't make me do anything, but I can make my own choices. How do you think I feel right now about Señor Hattoni? Do you think I'd be inclined to make his life a little bit easier ..... or a little bit harder?'

Cheery held Blatworm's gaze, looking deep into the demon's glowing eyes. Cheery was a copper and coppers that survive know how to read people. Blatworm was a demon and demons had long ago realised that they could learn plenty from people. This meant that Cheery had a passing ability at reading demons. After a moment she nodded.
'Do it, Visit,' she said.

Corporal Visit gently laid the Thurible on the ground. He took the parchment from Cheery, gave it a twist so it would fit in the censer and then took out a flint and tinder.

'This has to be done the traditional way,' he explained. 'And you can only use flint from Om.'

'Done this often?' asked the demon.

'Officially, no, it hasn't been used for this sort of purpose for generations. But unofficially, yes. I think every child in my family has got to play with it at some time.'

'Your parents gave you this as a toy?'

'Of course,' replied Visit as he struck up a spark, 'what else would you give children to play with?'

The demon was impressed. They started them young. At some point Omnism ceased to be indoctrination and became more familiar - like the family lounge. Was there no end to the things demons could learn from people?

'I'd stand back if I was you, especially you,' Visit added, looking at the demon as she dropped burning tinder into the censer and closed it. 'I have to swing it around for it to really work,' he continued. 'You'll get smoke in your eyes, Sergeant. I suspect it will get into a lot more places for you, demon.'

Visit wasn't wrong. Cheery had seen a few censers in action over the years, and they'd always been used in a dignified manner, emitting a subtle stream of incense. The gentle hand of god. This censer had clearly never grown up in that sort of company. It was, in every sense, a battle censer. Smoke poured out of it in black threads, woven through with iridescent flashes that you could pretend were just sparks if you were craving a bit of delusion. Then there was the smell, or possibly stench - the word acrid sprang to mind, as did 'sharp as cat's piss.' It made Cheery cough and her eyes stung like the blazes, but that was nothing compared to what it did to Blatworm. The smoke had wrapped itself round him like a winding sheet. So thick was it that it was hard to see the infernal being within, which was probably a good thing. As Blatworm writhed and groaned Cheery was sure she could see the demon's shifting and twisting as he struggled to maintain his shape, or possibly existence.

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So loud and anguished was the demon's struggle that by a freak of geology his groans were carried through vents in the rock into the temple of a Buttlescut, a lesser God in the ridiculously broad pantheon that inhabited Discworld. Thanks to the combination of this sound (the voice of God) and the willingness of people to believe any old thing if it makes them feel like they're backing the winning religion and have booked a seat at the heavenly table, the priest on duty at the time, Dinglebat (a religious opportunist of the highest order), whipped his followers into a religious fervour. The word crusade was certainly being dusted off by Dinglebat and, even worse, martyr. With the right kind of nudge who knew where this could have led?

Not that far as it turned out. The priests of Buttlescut had preferred over the years to invest what funds they collected into acquiring religious artefacts as opposed to building maintenance. This would prove to be an unwise decision. The groans had also vibrated through the structure of the temple and, at the height of one of Dinglebat's passionate exhortations several days later the roof finally collapsed, terminally ending plans of religious expansion and banishing Buttlescut to centuries in the wilderness. As a result, the target of the proposed Buttlescutlian Crusade, the
peace-loving Amorians, not only survived, they thrived and filled the gap left by the demise of Buttlescut. People traded anger and revenge for love and tolerance and things were wonderful for as long as possible when humans and religion as involved. It's this sort of thing that drives theologians crazy. Not all tragedies are tragic.

Back underground, unaware of the impact he was having on the religious landscape above, Blatworm wrestled with the smoked that shrouded him, and slowly won. Demons have heard just about every expletive in the business, which proved quite handy for Blatworm while the smoke dissipated from the now ashen remains of the contract. With one final cough the demon turned his gaze on the two members of the Watch. Eyes that had previously glowed red now shone like beacons. Everything about Blatworm seemed sharper and definite. What have I done? thought Cheery.

'I'll tell you exactly what you done,' replied Blatworm in a voice so resonant that the stones in the Buttlescutlian temple ceiling trembled a bit more. 'You've just unshackled a demon on the strength of his word. Do you know what happens now?' he laughed.

Cheery shook her head, though she was starting to get a fair idea.

The demon's voice dropped down to one of those whispers that are louder than shouting. He leaned towards them and smiled, revealing the sort of teeth that piranha dream of. 'I'm going to do .... exactly what I promised,' and then he roared with laughter. 'Oh, you should have seen the looks on your faces. Wouldn't want to be wearing your underpants right now.'

Cheery breathed again and she heard Visit do the same.

'Now, you do understand that as a demon I've got every right to betray you, but I'm not going to. For starters, I am happy to make life difficult for Hattoni but, more importantly, I want you to see that demons don't have to pander to stereotypes. We don't have to be all bad. We can be honourable and keep our word. We can be trusted.'

Blatworm smiled at the stunned pair and then a slight frown creased his scaly brow. 'Of course, most of us really would double-cross our own mother, just as she'd taught us to do. But that's just statistics, it's not a racial imperative. I'm getting out of this demon game and settling down on a few acres where I can raise ducks* but before I do, here's what you need to know about that contract your colleagues signed.'

* Contrary to popular theory the duck did not evolve on the Disc, it migrated there from Pandemonium and settled in. Don't believe it? Look one in the eye.

The well-carved corridor had quickly given way to one that that looked like it had been hacked out of the stone, and then into one that didn't look like any human hands had been involved in its construction. The floor had become rough and abundantly blessed with ankle-twisting holes which were avoidable in the light - the minor problem being that the corridor, now really a tunnel, had ceased being lit for quite some distance. Vimes had acquired the ability to be able to see through the inky blackness thanks to demonic possession some years ago, but it was hard going for Carrot. Dwarfs have a racial ability to see in the dark but as Carrot was dwarf by adoption the genetic benefits were limited. They'd had to slow down.

'We should be fine Commander,' said Carrot after several minutes. 'There's no one chasing us now.'
I didn't think they would.'

Vimes stopped and listened. 'You're right Carrot,' he said after a moment, 'they've given up. Why did you know they would?'

'Oh, you know guarding, it's pretty boring stuff. You end up filling in the time talking, mostly about a lot of nothing. The guards at my cell spent a lot of times just talking, to me as well. One of their favourite topics was what lived down this corridor.'

It's amazing how quickly the body can turn on an icy sweat. Vimes's attention which had been shifting between the tunnel ahead, what options they had and what was happening with Sybil was suddenly incredibly focussed on what Carrot was saying. Another part of him, which represented most of his organs, including the bladder, didn't want to hear another word.

Oblivious to all of this, Carrot continued. 'Apparently Hattoni bought this mansion because of the underground network built by previous owners. I suspect not many of them were law-abiding citizens, to be honest Commander. Otherwise why would they have to carry out their business out of sight?'

That was Carrot for you. Always looking for the good in people even when he so regularly encountered the bad. Vimes had once asked Carrot what drew him into the sort of profession that just about guaranteed seeing the worse of humanity (and an increasing number of other sentient beings) and he'd answered 'Because that's where I'm needed.' Even the most cynical side of Vimes, which could win trophies for its acerbic observations on life, had no answer to that one. People are like onions, and not just because they often make you want to cry. They grow through life layer by layer until it's hard to see their core. Carrot was rare, possibly unique, he was core all the way through - built from a simple understanding of what was right and what was wrong. Either that or he was the most complex person he'd ever met with depths to him that not even the most skilled dwarven tunnellers could reach. Vimes had his suspicions about that, but those suspicions had their own suspicions. And then he'd felt guilty about having suspicions of Carrot in the first place. What he did know was that Carrot would always make the right decision no matter what that meant for him personally.

'Anyway,' Carrot went on, 'Hattoni, decided to expand it even further. That's when they came across this tunnel. He was excited at the thought of it opening up even more space to extend his network and sent a small team down to explore it further. They never came back. Nor did the search team. It could have gone on like that for a while if Roberto Hattoni, that's Alberto's nephew, hadn't led the next party down there because it needed to be led by a real man. No one knows what Roberto saw down there but only he returned. He went straight to his uncle and whatever he told him must have been serious because Hattoni immediately stopped sending people down there. He couldn't bring himself to block it off completely but he did decide that it would be a good place to house prisoners near. The guards also said that sometimes Hattoni sends someone who might be causing him trouble down the tunnel. They're never seen again. Anywhere.'

A good storyteller could have woven this information into a terrifying account. Carrot was not one of those by any stretch of any imagination but even his deadpan police-report style delivery made the hairs stand up on Vimes's neck.

'You didn't think of mentioning this a little earlier,' he said softly.

'It didn't seem to me like we had much choice,' replied Carrot in what Vimes considered to be far too loud a voice in the present circumstances. 'Besides, where's the actual proof there's anything down here?'
'Yes, good point,' said Vimes dryly. 'Thanks to a total absence of livening witnesses. A popular approach to problem solving in the criminal sector too. You know Carrot, I'm tired of having choices that aren't really choices at all, they're just indicators of impending crapness. You're right, there's no direct evidence of some lurking horror down here, though I suspect we might be putting that theory to the test. Besides I need to get back to Sybil.'

Vimes led them on through the natural cave system and brought Carrot up to speed on what had unfolded. Carrot, for his part, had little to add other than being kidnapped on a routine patrol and finding himself locked up.

'I always knew you'd come for me,' he said, not with confidence but rock hard certainty. 'Where did you say Angua was again?'

Vimes knew that Carrot and Angua were, in some sense of the word and in their own unique way, a couple. A bonding between a werewolf and a dwarf, even if the dwarf was by adoption, was probably unique. Vimes didn't ever ask questions about this though, largely because he wasn't sure he could handle the answers. One thing he had learned over the years was that Carrot always preferred the truth, which was handy because Vimes wasn't good at lying, even when it came to white ones.

'She was on her way here to help with your rescue when she heard dogs baying and had to rush off.'

Carrot nodded. 'It must have been the Howl. She's where she needs to be.'

No she's not, Vimes screamed to himself. If that had been me and Sybil instead of you and Angua I'd be here not there. Carrot was probably right but in a frightening kind of way. I could never be like that, he thought.

'You know, like you trust Sybil to be upstairs in the mansion of possibly the Disc's greatest criminal while you're down here rescuing me,' Carrot added with complete, track-stopping innocence.

My god, thought Vimes, he's right. That's exactly what I did. I mean, I did protest a bit but maybe it was just enough for good form but not enough to halt the plan. Am I really that driven? Am I some kind of monster? The daggers of self-reflection never lose their edge and always find the vital organs.

'Commander,' said Carrot softly, 'I was just wondering if things seem a little strange? Like feeling colder, but not because of any change in temperature?'

Vimes dragged himself back from the edge of the pit and looked around. Carrot was right. There was something in the air that wasn't actually in the air. A coldness without a drop in temperature. A stillness with no change in air pressure. A deepening silence in the total silence. An expanding darkness in the pitch black .... hang on. He could see in the dark. That deeper darkness in a chamber they had just entered wasn't a metaphor for fear, it really was there. It really was moving. And it really was getting larger.

From depths Vimes would prefer he didn't have something stirred. A voice that came from a million miles away and no further than his own mind. 'The Grandmother,' it said and his bones hummed with the passage of the words.

The Summoning Dark. The demon within, if that's what it was, that had taken up residence inside some primate chamber of his heart, soul or mind. It had given him the power to see in the dark but
everything comes with a price, especially when infernal beings are involved. Vimes wasn't sure if he'd paid it already, was paying for it every day or the bill was yet to come. 'The Grandmother?' he asked.

'We, the Summoning Dark, are called into this world when a dwarf seeks bloody vengeance. This you know, but have you thought what this must mean? Has only one dwarf every called on the Summoning Dark? And what if more than one dwarf makes that call? Yes, Commander, you understand now. There is more than one Summoning Dark, and the greater the need for vengeance the greater the Dark that is called.

'Mostly, those calls are unanswered, which is something you can be grateful for - the Disc already has its full quota of trouble - but every now and then, the right kind of call, in the right howling cry, is heeded. And once here, we stay. How long do you think dwarfs have been seeking vengeance? How old do you think we can grow and what happens if you feed us?

'You have walked into the path of the Grandmother. There may be no Summoned Dark older than her. She is truly ancient and whatever evil act brought her into this world, it must have been bloody and black. I have never seen such power, and that fool Hattoni has been feeding it. She is awake and she has an appetite.'

'Commander?'

'Listen Carrot, you're right,' Vimes replied. 'There is something up there. Think of it as a demon. This is what Hattoni's men met. And now it's interested in us.'

'Lucky I've got you here then Commander. What's your plan?'

That was Carrot in a nutshell. Boundless optimism and faith. Not what he needed right now unless it came bundled with demon repellent.

'Yes. Well I still working on that,' he replied grimly. 'Might need a couple of minutes to iron out the details.'

'Ssamuel Vimesssss,' hissed a voice from the approaching deeper dark. 'What an unexpected pleasure, at leassst for one of usss.'

Darkness shouldn't be allowed to laugh, but it did, blackly, of course.
In just a few short, or possibly very long, days mayhem had rolled out across the city, but it wasn't the kind that you could easily see. Mostly everything looked to be business as usual. Shoppers shopped, shops sold and thieves stole. Ankh Morpork had always teetered on the edge of chaos. The way it kept going was to simply keep going and not look down. But things were different this time. Regina, and whoever she represented, had taken control, through an overwhelmed Fred Colon, and had moved quickly. The Watch had been suspended, the staff at the Patrician's Palace had been overhauled and new faces were prowling the corridors of power. Order had been established, which was why chaos was in the air. Yes, everything was normal until you looked into people's eyes.

What the populace was beginning to realise, after the surge of self-righteous and stage-managed rebellion was that, whereas most, if not all, of them had felt like they were losers under the Patrician, they were all losers together. But now there were winners. Clear winners, which meant there were clear losers. They'd invited the vampires across the threshold and they'd moved in. The worst thing about it, though, was how keen the new rulers were to tell everyone how much better things would be if they all just accepted the change, moved on and bucked up.

Governments the world over have never really understood the people they're governing. Humans don't forget and move on. They remember, sometimes for centuries, handing feuds down through the generations. Oh, they can choose to ignore something if it's tricky (like persecution of ethnic minorities) but they don't forget. It's like asking a fish to forget how to swim. And telling them to forget and move on only makes them remember all the harder.

'They'll get over it,' said Lady Regina to the inner sanctum of power. This consisted of various heads of wealthy families, Alberto Hattoni and a handful of professional remoras who dream one day of becoming sharks. This last group believe that using theories of people management is the same as managing people. They believe in the power of personality profiles and models of human dynamics. They are right behind giving the people a chance to have their say, using such tools as visual management boards, but they're incredibly bad at listening. The group had named itself The Organisational Reform Committee. They were, as it were, all TORC.

'Absolutely, my Lady,' said one of the remora, 'what we need to do is develop a media campaign, focusing on the positives and then run some change management workshops in key locations around the city. We can't have people thinking negative thoughts.'

Lady Regina stared coolly at the speaker, before nodding in agreement. There was a subtle non-movement away from the interrupter amongst the other remora. You had to know your place, until the time was right. It looked like there might be a vacancy shortly and a chance to move up in the pecking order.

'Now,' said Lady Regina grabbing back the attention she had momentarily lost, 'back to the agenda. Item one - Branding.'

At the edge of the room, silent throughout, Señor Hattoni smiled.

xxxxx

Cheery had never felt more alone. There was no Commander Vimes, no Captains Carrot and
Angua, no Patrician and now no Watch. Well, the latter wasn't quite true, the Watch still existed but it might as well not. Lady Regina, through Fred Colon of all people, had taken over. The Watch had been told in no uncertain terms that their whole and sole role was to patrol the streets and keep the peace. A tall order in Ankh Morpork on a good day. Cheery wasn't sure if the city had ever really know peace and damned if she knew where to keep it even if she found it. The Watch didn't keep the peace, it kept the law. Or it used to.

'Now .... Sergeant Littlebottom, where are Commander Vimes, Lady Ramkin and Captains ... Carrot and Angua?' said Lady Regina looking up, with distain, from the desk that had recently belonged to the Patrician. Regina always spoke with distain but this time it bordered on loathing. She despised the tolerant approach the Patrician had taken to other races. Ankh Morpork had been founded by humans for humans. The subspecies, as she thought of them, had their place, but it was out of sight, keeping the machinery of the city running. Now here she was talking to a dwarf, as though they were someone, something, important! It was a disgraceful situation she intended to remedy. She already had plans for a border patrol, wherever the damn border was (that was another project), an aggressive relocation policy for surplus species, a detention centre and, an emerging favourite, a Wall. The last day or so she'd been sensing some push-back in the city and she needed something to unify the people. Speciesism had always run through the city in a low-key way, she planned to change that. All she needed was support from the media and a truckload of ignorance in the general population. She was meeting with the editor of the Ankh Morpork Times this afternoon to address the former and she was confident that the city was already delivering the latter. Regina came from the school of thought that believed the best way to unify the population was to persecute minorities within it. This does work, in the same way eating your own body in stages when you're hungry works. There is a world of difference between holding power and leading.

Cheery was all in favour of seeing women rising to positions of influence. For too long men had held all the reins because of little more than anatomical difference. What she was starting to realise was that resolving the gender gap was only part of the solution. You also had to find leaders who had a moral compass and weren't just high-functioning sociopaths. These appeared to be in limited supply.

'As you'll see in my written report, Lady Regina,' she said carefully (there is nothing to be gained by upsetting a tyrant, unless it's the ultimate upset), 'Commander Vimes and Lady Ramkin are on holidays.'

'And you have no idea where?' Regina demanded.

'No, Your Ladyship. It appears it was their wedding anniversary and they made a last minute decision to go somewhere to celebrate.'

This was a total fabrication. The anniversary was a month away but Cheery was confident Regina would be too self-absorbed to have remembered. Regina wrinkled her nose in even deeper distain. That was another matter to be addressed in the fullness of time. The aristocracy marrying commoners! Was there anything more disgusting?

'And the two captains?'

'That's an investigation in progress Your Ladyship. Captain Carrot did disappear recently and Captain Angua is currently out in the field as part of our investigation.'

'These are hardly satisfactory answers are they Sergeant?'

'No, Your Ladyship.'
'I expect to have much better answers very soon. Otherwise there will be consequences.'

'Yes, Your Ladyship. ... Your Ladyship, there is one thing that might help the investigation,' Cheery added, with the sort of caution familiar to those zookeepers that look after the big cats enclosure.

'What?'

'Could I have a word with Sergeant Colon? If he's got a moment in his busy schedule. He might be able to provide me with further information.'

Regina glared at the dwarf. Cheery could see the wheels of suspicion that are always present in those who believe everyone is as untrustworthy as themselves, turning. For once Regina's prejudices played in Cheery's favour. She simply couldn't entertain the thought that a dwarf maybe intelligent.

She nodded. 'Now get out of my sight.'

The dwarf left, taking the underground reek with it. Those jumped-up moles definitely needed to be put in their place. Now, where was she up to? That's right, working on a slogan. A rallying point. Something about making Ankh Morpork great maybe.

xxxx

Cheery scurried down the corridor to the Throne Room, where Colon sat, cutting a sad and lost figure. Beside him stood Nobby because, well, where else did he belong?

'Fred,' hissed Cheery as she approached, 'what the Hell are you up to?'

Fred looked up with a brief flash of hope that quickly faded. 'Oh, hi Cheery. Here to make me feel worse? Best of luck with that.'

'But Fred, the Watch ....'

'I know Cheery, I tried not to but I really couldn't stop it. It's that damn contract.'

'He's right Cheery, we just couldn't,' added Nobby, now well beyond the point of seeing the humour in the situation.

Cheery's anger slowly morphed into one of determination. 'Regina thinks she holds all the cards and she can hide behind Colon the Liberator. If it goes belly-up, which it better, guess who'll she sacrifice first?'

This observation did nothing to improve the moods of Fred and Nobby. 'But what she doesn't realise is that there's another joker in the pack. And that's you Fred and Nobby.'

That the pair could be considered jokers should have come as no surprise to anyone, based on their accumulated impact on the world in general, but it did.

'Timing is critical,' she continued. 'Here's what I need you to do.'

xxxx

It knows who I am, thought Vimes. How?

'That is hardly important right now,' said the Grandmother. 'What you should be more concerned
'It's right,' said Carrot. 'Have you sorted out your plan yet?' he added.

Vimes growled. It was a primitive thing. The sort of growl that ancient forebears would have made when they found themselves trapped by some prehistoric creature with more teeth than brain cells. The one thing you could say about having your choices taken away was that at least it made decision making easier.

'We fight,' he said.

'Exccellent,' answered the Grandmother, 'let'sss hope it'sss not too quick.'

This time the air really did grow cold as the demon sucked all the energy out of the room. The temperature plummeted and the darkness became thicker, larger, almost solid. Now the Grandmother filled the cavern and she swept towards Carrot and Vimes in an irresistible tsunami of despair.

Except that it didn't quite work out like that. As the wave of darkness came crashing down something else rose up to meet it.

'This one is mine,' said the Summoning Dark as the Grandmother recoiled in surprise.

'You fool,' she hissed. 'You know how much more powerful I am than you? You upstart. You Come-From-Nothingness. I had thought to let you free, but you have sacrificed that chance. Why?'

The Summoning Dark was silent for a moment before it answered. 'Because,' it said, 'and if that makes no sense now, then it never will.'

'You have no chance.'

'Even so.'

Vimes had been listening and thinking. He knew how the Grandmother worked. Once she had overcome the Summoning Dark, which seemed inevitable, she would flow through his being burning away hope with despair until there was nothing left to save. Was the Summoning Dark now his friend? No, that wasn't right. Ally maybe. He would have to find out more about that if he got through the next few minutes. Right now, though, they needed more troops, so he turned to the only one left.

The Grandmother was wily, which may even be a trait of grandmothers the world over. In the middle of the conversation she struck with the element of surprise.

Wiliness, though, is not the exclusive domain of grandmothers. The Summoning Dark and Vimes had fought over possession of his body, mind and soul when they had first encountered each other in the dwarfish mines at the scene of a murder. Vimes had stayed Vimes because of an inner Vimes he didn't know existed. His own Guarding Dark. The Grandmother's cobra strike was fast, but not fast enough. It was met now by two adversaries, two shields, and again it recoiled.

'Ahhh, Sssir Sssamuel, there is more to you than meets the eye,' she whispered, 'but isss it enough? I don't think ssso.'

Then it was Vimes who laughed, a strange double laugh that had nothing to do with echoes in the tunnel. 'I've never been enough,' he said. 'The difference between you and me is that I know that. I can deal with failures because my whole life has been filled with them. It's easy to fall when you've
had plenty of practice. But you, you've never fallen have you? You don't know how to lose and that's why you will. This is going to hurt you more than it hurts me. Trust me on this."

The Summoning and Guarding Darks struck back and the Grandmother reeled before them. Whoever said darkness is my friend probably didn't have a lot of friends but right here, right now, they were the very friends Vimes needed. They pushed forward, driving the Grandmother backwards like smoke before the wind and Vimes, in a rare moment, knew the sweet taste of triumph.

The strength of Vimes lay in the strength of his failings. The distracting sense of success was all the Grandmother needed. Smoke can find the smallest hole and it did. The Grandmother poured through.

'You fool,' she howled, 'do you ever think you could defeat me? You who have failed your men, your city and, most of all, your wife and child. Abandoning them on some self-righteous quest for justice? You self-absorbed, worthless thing. You will be remembered for nothing more than your great litany of failures. You will make history for all the worst reasonss.

It was true. The Grandmother was right. He had failed and abandoned everyone. He'd deserted Cheery and the city, he'd left his son at home to who-knew-what and his wife was alone in Hattoni's mansion. He was worthless and every brick that he'd built in his wall tumbled down until there was nothing left but him. Alone.

He was never enough. He was never going to be enough. He could never do this alone. He had never done it alone .... he had never done it alone? In all his years of struggle, mostly against himself, it was the belief of others that had carried him through. No one ever does it by themselves. People who say things like 'we're born alone' clearly have a limited understanding of the birth process. He reached out - and met Carrot's hand reaching back.

Carrot believed in Sam Vimes, not just what he stood for, but in Sam Vimes himself. This is much rarer than you might think. Most leaders have followers who believe in their cause, very few of those truly believe in the person. Carrot's belief shone like a beacon, fanned on the winds of unquenchable optimism. It burned Vimes clean, and more than that, it cleared the fog.

'How did you know my name Grandmother? And how did you know about my family? Because we're connected. Connected by the Dark. And connections flow both ways.'

This time when he struck he rode the back of Carrot's belief through the black arrow of the Summoning Dark. Time lost all meaning. And now he was riding the back of the Grandmother herself. He rode her down the nights and down the days. Smaller and smaller she grew, the bitter spite of her darkness no match for the boundless, foolish, ridiculously hopeful hope that poured out of Carrot. The universe is the kind of place where infinity feels at home. How on earth could the sentient creatures that inhabit it hope to survive there on their own? The Grandmother tried and failed. Vimes didn't and succeeded.

'Wait,' cried the Summoning Dark as the Grandmother writhed towards nothingness. That which was Carrot and Vimes and Dark and Light paused in surprise.

'This is the Grandmother. All the Darks know of her. Do not take everything away. She cannot harm you now. That was me once. Not everything will change, but sometimes, when the winds blow the right way, it can.'

The others listened and then Vimes spoke. 'Grandmother, I do not place my faith in people or
demons changing. It's why I'm still here. Give me a reason, one reason, why we/I should trust you.'

The silence had stretched under the weight of the cavern-dark before the Grandmother replied. 'Because,' she said, 'and if that makes no sense now, then it never will.'

And then Vimes laughed. Not cynically, bitterly or darkly as he normally did but with all his tired and aching bones. A joyful unexpected thing. 'Grandmother, I think that was the only answer. Who can argue with Because? So, what happens now?'

'The Grandmother is my responsibility,' answered the Summoning Dark. Vimes felt his dark passenger stretch out into the blackness and suddenly the deeper darkness that was the Grandmother was gone.

'Who says demons can't have their own demons,' said the Summoning Dark and even though it had no face to speak of Vimes could feel the smile.

Vimes turned to Carrot. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Couldn't have done it without you. Did you know what was happening there?'

Carrot nodded.

'And did you know about my own Darkness?'

'Well, I figured that there must have been some sort of demon in there.'

'Yes, thought Vimes, there is, and it probably isn't the only one. 'And what about you? What was that .... thing .... that was inside you?''

'Oh, that, it's always been there. And it's not really a thing, it's just more of me. If ever I have doubts it's there to help me make the best decision.'

'Your conscience?'

'No ... well, sort of, but it's more than that, it's ....'

'His Guiding Light,' said the Summoning Dark.

'Yes, that's it,' said Carrot.

Vimes nodded. 'Right,' he said, 'I think that's enough time we've wasted down here. Let's get on with saving the world.'

People are notorious for jumping to conclusions about profligacy in the context of time. For example, on another day Vimes might have wondered how Carrot had heard the Summoning Dark and how the Summoning Dark knew of the Guiding Light, but he had other things on his mind. The bearers of darkness and light headed down the tunnel and into the future.

xxxx

The dinner was proving to be one of the strangest affairs she'd ever been involved in. Like one of those lollies that for some reason people persist in making, which start off incredibly sour and then turn amazingly sweet. That was this dinner. Joyful reminiscing with Blanca was juxtaposed with the presence of Roberto who spent an inordinate amount of time staring at Joe/Sam as though trying to remember if he'd seen him before and then throwing in some acerbic comment on foreigners, ungrateful workers and the rights of honest businesses to conduct their operations in
privacy. Catching up on all the highlights of their lives since going separate ways was broken by almost laughable attempts by Joe to appear as Ankh-Morporkian as possible. No wonder Roberto was suspicious thought Sybil, though that was probably his natural state. One of the hidden prices criminals have to pay is constantly being distrustful of anyone and always being on guard. The same could also be said for those who turn to policing, she admitted. Sometimes you had to wonder how different those on either side of the law were, putting aside the whole question of morality, of course. It takes a thief to catch a thief.

They were well into the sweet and sour roller coaster ride of the meal when Roberto looked up in visible surprise. Sybil didn't really know what pricked ears looked like on a human but if anybody had them it was Roberto at that moment. Without a further word he pushed his chair back, stood up and left the room in something approaching a dash.

'Well that's a relief,' said Bianca once she was sure he was out of earshot. 'It's easy to think Alberto is the most wicked person you'll come across until you meet Roberto. There's something predatory, almost inhuman about him.'

Sybil nodded. She'd felt that too. 'Keep up the good work, Sam,' she added, turning to Joe, 'but maybe go easy on the Ankh Morpork style. Half the things you've mentioned that are traditionally from that city I've never heard of, and Sam certainly wouldn't either. Authentic isn't the same as real. Just be Sam Vimes, which is a tall order in itself.'

'Sure, Lady Sybil. I'm always keen to learn,' replied Joe. She couldn't argue with that. She'd never met someone so much like a human sponge than Joe, with the exception of Captain Carrot, who was a dwarf or, quite possibly, a race in himself.

And then they heard it. A distant wailing that lived on both the high and low-pitched end of sound. It grew as their conversation fell silent. Larger, more complex and clearly getting nearer.

'What on earth is that?' said Bianca.
The running of the Pack had felt like a fairytale unfolding. It swept through the city with Gaspode (the Great) sitting astride the golden-maned and undeniably heroic Laddie at the head of the arrow while dogs from everywhere streamed to join in. This didn't make Gaspode (the Great) any happier. You couldn't trust fairies to save yourself (sneaky little beggars) so why tales told by them should be roadmaps to anywhere was beyond him. Besides weren't there grim fairytales? No, things going smoothly doesn't count for much. It's the ending you have to watch out for. Just ask the person who's fallen off a high tower. All good for the first few seconds. Smooth sailing. Yeah, right.

As the Pack ran it Howled. It should have been a chaotic thing but it wasn't. The howls and yowls from dogs large and small wove into themselves in a strange rise and a fall that wasn't quite music but something much more - the thrill of the chase and the pound of the paw. No wonder other dogs were joining them. Who could resist? There wasn't a canine in the city who wouldn't have heard it by now.

In far less time than he'd hoped they'd arrived at the mansion. The walls around the place should have presented them with their first problem, but this wasn't to be. For some reason the gates were open and the normal guards missing. The Pack poured through ... and then came to a milling, clumsy, run-into-each-other halt that is always good for a laugh unless you're right in the middle of it all.

Stretched across the grounds in front of them was a canine wall of teeth and spite. Most protective landowners who think having nasty vicious pieces of work patrolling their grounds is a good idea source their dogs from companies that carefully train canines to become furry assholes. Hattoni saw that as a total waste of time. The streets of Ahroma could be brutal enough so why pay someone to create guard dogs when they were already out there. How this was done was something of a mystery. Convincing a street killer to work for you should be as easy as setting up an ice cream parlour in Hades, and yet it happened. Every so often Roberto would head out into the city, accompanied by Caesar, and they would always come back with a least one former terroriser of the streets padding along behind them with its tail between its legs and looking the worse for wear.

It was these products of Hattoni's recruitment drive that confronted the Pack. As motley a looking wall of pain as you could imagine and Gaspode (the Great) had a pretty good imagination. So, apparently, did all the other dogs, based on a fair amount of previous history. Not so long ago many of the members of the Pack had been literally hounded by the creatures that stood in front of them. The Howl had gone silent, replaced by the occasional whimper and the trickle of weak bladders.

'What happens now?' whispered Gaspode (the Great) hoarsely.

'You do,' answered Pythia.

'What?! Me? How?, and in case you didn't hear it the first time What?!'

'We are dogs, it will be done the canine way. See.'

Out of the darkness padded the most complete and ruthless dog Gaspode had ever seen. It wasn't some sort of pure breed, but it was the perfect mongrel. It had the deathlock muzzle of the pit bull, the brutal bulk of the Rottweiler, the madness of the Doberman and the intelligence of the Alsatian. With all the positive aspects of those breeds gnawed away by teeth a wolf would envy.
'So this is the famous Gaspode that the oracles have foretold would be their saviour,' said the dog, or whatever it was. 'Doesn't look much like a saviour to me,' Caesar growled and his motley crew howled derision in unison. It was a warcry. 'Little dog, little dog, come out and play.'

'Not likely,' Gaspode barked back ... or he would have done if Laddie hadn't trotted forward. In the end all that came out was 'Noooo.' Not much of a call to arms, unless you were part of a downtrodden mass. Then No wasn't a denial it was defiance. The Pack howled in reply.

'Good,' smiled Caesar. 'My dogs would have torn yours apart anyway. This is how it should be done. Leader against ... leader, winner takes all. They will still talk about you when this is over, and it will be over so quickly, but it won't be about Gaspode the Great - they'll call you Gaspode the Useless, the Failure - the Dead. And they'll never find all the pieces to bury you in one place.'

Maybe it was the moonlight, maybe it was because someone had actually believed in him, maybe it was because he'd grown up on the streets, but something inside Gaspode snapped.

'Oh shut up,' he growled. 'I know your type. All piss and not much vinegar. You think you're so great the battle's over before it's begun. History's full of thugs like you but you've never heard of them. Why? Because they lost. Your type always does in the end. You think strength is everything and you don't even know what strength is. Your time is over Caesar and you'll never get the chance to realise it.'

Caesar leapt because that's what the strong do. Gaspode and Laddie didn't, because that's what survivors do. They sprang aside, narrowly missing the outstretched claws. Caesar skidded to a halt, growling in frustration. 'Cowards,' he spat. 'Running away from a dogfight.'

'You really think the fight has only just begun?' said Gaspode. 'It's been going for years. You think you're fighting just me? You're own Pack would tear you apart without shedding a tear. You really are stupid.'

The only colour Caesar had ever seen in the world was red. The red of a fresh kill. The red of blood in his arteries and the red of hate in his eyes. The difference between the beast within and the dog without had only ever been a veneer and now the veneer was gone.

Gaspode saw all of this. This was the most dangerous time of all. He'd seen fights like this. They just needed to stay away from Caesar until the rage made him do something stupid and then it was their turn. It was a fine plan and may even have worked if the door to the mansion hadn't swung open, spilling light onto the grounds in a distracting way just at the moment Caesar sprang again.

Gaspode's world turned into a tumbling chaos of teeth, claws and pain. The impact of Caesar threw him clear of Laddie and he hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud. The night was alive with the howl and wail of dogs as Gaspode struggled to his feet. Pack was baying at Pack and between them two figures were locked in a deadly struggle. Laddie had taken the full impact of Caesar and was limping in pain. Caesar was circling, waiting for that inevitable moment when Laddie would miss his step and then he would finish him off.

It came soon enough. Laddie's back paw gave way and he stumbled. Caesar sprang pinning the dog to the ground, his death trap jaws closing in on the throat.

The thing about attention is that you can only focus it on one thing and right then Caesar's attention was firmly on Laddie's throat. He was also, by the nature of the situation, remarkably exposed in other areas, anatomically speaking. This was about to change. Gaspode understood a lot about winners and losers, especially losing, and he knew that there was some benefit to being honourable in defeat. It tended to soften the blow. He also knew that when it comes to victory the important
thing is the winning not in the nature of the triumph*. You can't have a dogfight without being a bit of a dog. He attacked from behind and snapped down hard in a most ungentlemanly way in the most gentlemanly of places. The male dog onlookers groaned, though this was largely drowned out from the cheering of the females in the crowd.

*There are notable exceptions to this as any follower of the Brazilian football team can attest.

The red in Caesar's world drained to white and the eyes burning with intent now just burned and, for good measure, crossed. He rolled to his side and howled in agony. Gaspode let go and trotted forward. He turned to his army of supporters.

'Watch carefully,' he said, 'and remember what happens next. Tell your pups and their pups about this day. You see, what I'm about to do next is not what you want in your leader, but it's what needs to happen. I know how important mercy is and when to use it. Sometimes though, it's a different kind of mercy. The kind that brings an ending. You'll need a new leader after tonight, and I think you've already got one.'

With that Gaspode lent over Caesar, who may or may not have heard what Gaspode whispered next. 'You know you were dead already, don't you,' and then he bit down hard.

At that moment pain shot through Gaspode and everything went black.

xxxx

This is what Sybil, Joe and Bianca saw when they opened the door. The moon shone down on the strangest of scenes. The front lawn of the mansion was filled with dogs! Hattoni's guard dogs ranged out in front of the house, a pack of what looked like every dog from the streets gathered opposite them. If that wasn't strange enough something was happening in the space between. The leader of the guard dogs, Caesar, Bianca called him (adding in some rather colourful adjectives along the way), was in a dog fight with what appeared to be a small dog riding a large one.

Something had happened as they'd emerged and it looked like Caesar was about to kill his larger opponent when the small white dog shot into the scene and latched onto a part of Caesar that would never trouble lady dogs again. As they watched on the small dog barked something to the onlookers and then quite calmly, with a well-placed bite, made sure that nothing about Caesar would ever trouble any dog this side of the netherworld again.

It should have been a moment of triumph but a figure strode out of the darkness and kicked the small dog hard in the side. Roberto then did something even more surprising - he looked down at the body of Caesar for a long moment and then threw back his head and howled. Howled at the moon, bayed at the stars. An unearthly cry, neither human, nor animal, but something much more than either. A sound filled with pain, loss and vengeance. Every other dog on the grounds drew back and most cowered. Roberto turned his focus on the large dog who had also been in the fight and was struggling now towards the inert shape of the smaller dog. Roberto strode towards it ... and stopped.

Not every combatant on the field that night had drawn back. Another howl filled the air, also carved from something more human than animal, or possibly the reverse. A wolf, for it could be nothing less and, in the moonlight, looked like so much more, loped out of the invading canine army. Roberto froze and stared at the newcomer with amazement. Then in a very human way, he laughed. 'This is wonderful,' he shouted. 'I knew you were out there. I smelt you on the streets and even on our guests tonight. I've hunted and killed more creatures than you could imagine .... or maybe you could. This will be the first time I've had the pleasure of killing one of your kind.'
Then he turned to the guard dogs, who had looked totally confused since the death of Caesar, and barked something harsh and guttural. Only those who knew canine understood it. 'The stupid dog told you all to remember tonight. He's right. Don't forget Caesar and don't forget what we did. There will be such a reckoning as makes dogs cower to hear its retelling.'

There was no careful circling of each other to look for weaknesses. It was never going to be that sort of fight. The wolf and human flew at each other and the sound of their impact could be clearly heard as far away as the mansion steps.

What followed was hard to follow. There was a blurring of claws and teeth and fists and teeth until it was difficult to tell where the wolf ended and the human began, or even which was which. A dance of sorts - brutal, primal, driven. There are religions that speak about the gods dancing life into existence. There were parts of that dance in the moonlit struggle, and parts from a much darker, equally old, dance as well. They grappled backwards and forwards across the lawn, sometimes separating only to drag ragged breath and then leap back into the arm wrestle.

In those moments when they were separated it was obvious to everyone there that they were tearing each other apart. This was a battle to the death. There would only be one survivor and, to the growing fear of the Pack and those on the steps, it looked like that would be Roberto. More and more it was the wolf who tried to break free from the grapple and every time it seemed a bit smaller and Roberto a bit larger. When the end came it was sickeningly quick. Mid-wrestle Roberto picked the wolf up, somehow finding the strength to raise it above his head and then slam the body down.

The wolf lay still and, as the moon slid behind the scudding clouds, it changed. Transforming from wolf into human. Roberto looked down in exhausted triumph and lent back and howled the howl of victory.

The Pack drew back and the guard dogs padded forward. It was the turning of the tide in the battle of the two armies, which is why they never saw the wave coming. That's the thing about tsunamis they travel small until it's too late. There was a roar fit to wake the dead and from the Pack a figure emerged. Some would say it was a giant man. Some, prone to what sceptics* would call flights of fantasy, would say it was more like a creature from some primitive past. Still others would say it was something of both on that moon-dappled night.

* Though not the Disc's greatest sceptic, Mariana von Dout. It wasn't that Mariana had taken to being open-minded about possibilities that weren't 100% logically evident, it was just that she hadn't been wearing a silver cross when she met the vampire and nobody had heard from her since.

The creature stormed across the lawn towards Roberto and even he quaked at the sight. 'To me,' he cried, 'to me,' and the guards dogs moved forward but they might as well have been chaff in the wind. The monster swept all before it until it reached Roberto himself. It grabbed him and shook him like a raggedy doll and threw him into the darkness. Then in an eye-of-the-storm moment of stillness he picked up the fallen figure and the unconscious small dog and strode back the way it had come.

The rest was over quickly. Leaderless twice over the guard dogs were confused and uncertain, and you don't win many battles in that state of mind. The Pack, for their part, believed. Not necessarily in what they'd just seen, that would take time, but they did believe in themselves. And Gaspode (the Great). This, by comparison was a much healthier mind state to be in. And they had a leader. Laddie had struggled to his feet during the bizarre fight and did what he was born to do. He barked. He beaconed. He Laddied. The Pack responded, and guard dogs did also, but in the other way. They fled and the Pack followed. They chased them down the streets and down the ways. Canine
balladeers would come to sing of it as The Night of the Hound. It was a tale of noble and poetic beauty which did require a fair amount of tasteful editing when it came to what happened to the dogs that got caught. Besides, it's often hard to find rhymes for internal body parts.

'Thank you, Ben,' said Pythia as the giant man laid the two unconscious bodies down in front of her. 'Your part in this will never be forgotten.'

'Didn't do this to be part of something,' the man replied. 'Did it because it was right. Sometimes you oracles forget there's a difference.'

Pythia stared at Ben. Where had that come from? It was like having a pawn on the chessboard speak back at you. Maybe Ben had a bigger role in a bigger picture than she thought. Any further thinking was cut short by the arrival of the mansion guests.

'Good grief, its Captain Angua,' Joe cried out. 'What on earth ....'

'She's a werewolf,' said Ben casually. 'They change like that if they've had a shock. But she'll be fine. See.'

Angua stirred and groaned. Every rib felt broken and probably quite a few were. At least healing fast was one of the scant benefits of being a werewolf. She pulled herself slowly to her feet. Sybil rushed over to lend her a hand, discretely draping Angua in Sybil's generously proportioned shawl. Wolves may have no need or interest in clothing but humans do. It's just another hang-up in a long list of hang-ups. It's probably not even in the Top 100.

'What happened? Where is he?' Angua mumbled.

No one asked who she meant. They'd seen what happened but even in the residual canine mayhem on the lawn it was clear that Roberto was nowhere to be seen. The sleek dog who had been sitting, largely unnoticed, nearby, barked. Angua cocked her head and listened.

'He's heading to the Whopperseum,' she said. 'Come on, let's go.'

'This one is your story now,' said Ben. Then he turned to Bianca. 'Don't forget what was done for you today.'

Then he turned and headed off into the night.

Joe shook his head in an effort to find a bit more room in his brain to fit in everything he had seen tonight. 'Did that dog understand what we were saying?' he asked pointing a Pythia.

Pythia barked. 'Didn't understand a single word,' Angua translated.

They emerged, finally, from the twisting tunnels of subterranean Brindisi into the back of a musty room. The sort of mustiness that said in no uncertain terms no one, not even rats, had been there for years. The musty room led to a musty corridor and then through several more rooms and corridors until they finally entered a passageway that hinted at people having been there. And so it went until they spilled out a small doorway into the open air. Above them the heavens sprawled, as they generally do. The moon, battling the scudding clouds, cast a silvery glow over a wide expanse, enclosed by walls that had seen so much they had long ceased to talk.
'I've been here before,' said Vimes after they'd taken a moment to breath in the air that hadn't lived underground all its life. 'It's the Whopperseum.'

'Really?' said Carrot. 'I've read so much about it. I wish we had time to explore it.'

'I'll give you a couple of minutes while I figure out what happens next,' replied Vimes. And to catch my breath he added to himself. He refused to accept he was getting older but he had to concede he wasn't as young as he used to be.

'Thanks, Commander,' replied Carrot as he trotted off around the edifice. Vimes watched him drift in and out of the shadows and the chequerboard moonlight. There was something implacable about Carrot. He was one of those rare people that the world seemed to define itself around. Did he know this? Vimes hoped not. People who know they're central and important aren't necessarily either.

His thoughts were interrupted by the realisation that Carrot seemed to have disappeared. He'd headed into a distant archway and he hadn't come out again. Police who aren't suspicious are corpses waiting to happen. He'd begun to walk briskly towards the last place he'd seen him when two figures staggered into the moonlight, locked in a deadly struggle. He began to run, which is often a poor choice when your trousers are two sizes too large. They slipped and he crashed to the ground in a tangle of legs and a twisting of fabric.

This is what Angua, Joe and Sybil saw. On the distant side of the Whopperseum Carrot and Roberto were locked in a terminal battle. On the other side Sam Vimes was struggling on the ground. What they didn't see, though, was even more important.

'Did you really think you could get away from here?' Roberto growled into Carrot's face as they wrestled. Carrot knew the voice well. It had taunted him through the door of his cell often enough. That realisation wasn't as important as the pressing reality that Roberto, who looked like he'd already been through the wars, was still stronger than him.

'You think your city is so great, and it is nothing,' Roberto went on. 'No history, no respect. The Hattonis have always been here. We were suckled on the very teats of the wolfmother of Brindisi herself. Your great families are all upstart fools not fit to run a kindergarten let alone a city. But that's all changed. What do you think has been happening since you've been gone? My uncle will be ruling by now.'

Carrot grunted. 'If he thinks he can rule Ankh Morpork he's already in trouble. Rulers need rules and all we've got is guidelines.'

Francesco Di Quattro always moved his footpath library into a warm sheltered spot overnight. It helped protect the books and his clientele appreciated it. For years he had been sleeping under the protection that the Whopperseum ceiling provided. Mostly the nights were much the same but tonight was about to become quite different. Into his informal library two grappling figures staggered.

Fighting is frowned upon in any library and the interconnectedness of L-Space resonates with this transgression. It calls forth spirits retribution.

The Librarian's moods were enigmatic and he liked to keep it that way. The last thing he needed was humans trying to understand him. It's not like they'd even figured out their own species yet. He
was the proud owner of physiological array of weaponry that made full grown tigers cautious. He regularly made others aware of this in a casual, baring-of-daggerlike-incisors way if some disagreed with him but it was hard to tell if he was genuinely angry. That was not the issue today. He’d been trying to find out where the dog had disappeared to in L-Space and his success on that front could only be defined in terms of its total absence. Now somebody was fighting in a library! There are spirits that haunt libraries, some benign, some malignant but none more dangerous than an angry orangutan.

There was a loud pop and through the modest but important doorway that connected Francesco's footpath library to the greater L-Space emerged the sort of nemesis that gave nightmares nightmares. It paused, took stock and then knuckled with purpose towards the combatants, both of whom were so caught up in their own world they never saw what was coming. Own worlds are dangerous like that. An arm that moved in a comical fashion, except that it was no laughing matter, extended above the two figures. The total distance it then travelled downwards was no more than six inches but they were six inches multiplied by an enraged orangutan. There was only ever going to be one outcome for the recipient. There's only so much a body can take, especially when orangutans are involved. In one brief moment Roberts's struggles not only ceased, they deceased. He dropped to the ground.

The Librarian turned to Carrot who was still on his feet only because he was too tired to fall down, shook his finger ferociously at him and then shrugged and offered him a banana. You can forgive friends almost anything, though Carrot had no doubts that being caught fighting a second time in a library was not on the forgiveness list.

Then all things converged. The Commander arrived holding up his trousers, Angua was hugging him, Lady Ramkin was there consoling him, but the one that took the cake was what appeared to be another Commander, or at least someone who looked vaguely like Sam Vimes if the observer had a very active imagination and one of a range of illicit drugs in their system. It was at this point that Carrot gave up on reality, as it had clearly given up on him.

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Roberto opened his eyes and shook his head. There was a sensation of knowing you should be in pain and at the same time feeling nothing. He looked around. It was still night, or at least, darkness, but that weak human was gone. Everything seemed to be gone.

NOT EVERYTHING.

Roberto turned around. A figure buried deep in a large black cape stood beside him. Roberto lacked many of the features that are usually associated with being human, starting with a conscience, but intelligence was not one of them. He frowned. 'How did that happen?'

AH, WELL AN ORANGUTAN WAS ALSO INVOLVED.

'Ha,' said Roberto, 'I knew I was stronger than him.'

A COMMON MISCONCEPTION AMONGST THOSE WHO ARE OBSESSED WITH MEASURING STRENGTH. HOW MANY PEOPLE WOULD COME TO YOUR AID WHEN YOU WERE IN TROUBLE?

None,' said Roberto proudly. 'I did not need them.'

WHICH IS WHY YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND WHAT STRENGTH TRULY IS.
'You don't scare me.'

NO? GOOD. I WILL LEAVE THAT TO OTHERS. YOU WILL SOON FIND OUT THAT, EVEN USING YOUR NARROW DEFINITION, THERE ARE MANY THINGS STRONGER THAN YOU WHERE YOU ARE HEADED.

'I don't know the meaning of fear.'

AH. THEY DO SAY YOU LEARN A NEW THING EVERY DAY.
A change is as good as a holiday

The night could have been filled with discussions about what had unfolded but in the end it was filled with sleep and exhaustion. The one thing that was agreed upon was a meeting with the Patrizio, which Joe would arrange. They slept like the living, which is much more rewarding than sleeping like the dead and rose later than usual. Over breakfast they unravelled each other's stories, amazed at how events had unfolded, and then it was time for their appointment at the Palace. No one had the energy to walk and though Vimes scorned the benefits of the wealthy he had to admit that carriage rides had their advantages. Besides, he believed they'd earned it, which is a whole philosophy away from believing in privilege.

The meeting did not go to script or, at least, not to Vimes's script. That's one of the tricks with scripts, you never know whose is running the show. They’d sat in the foyer for some time, long enough for Vimes to recognise bureaucracy in full swing. The waiting game. Designed to throw people off their stride, which was fine by him since he refused to march to any but his own drummer. At the stage when patience was estimated to be at breaking point they were ushered into a large room. Seated behind an equally large desk, whose only purpose seemed to be to convey more largeness, sat a woman who you knew, even without looking, would be impeccably dressed.

'Please, take a seat,' she said as the delegation from Ankh Morpork, including Joe and Blanche (formerly Bianca) approached.

'Captain,' hissed Angua, 'that's ....'

'Good morning, Isabella,' said Blanche in a guarded tone, 'fancy seeing you here.'

'Good morning .... is it Blanche or Bianca?'

'Blanche will do fine.'

'And good morning to the rest of you,' Isabella continued. 'No doubt we could exchange further pleasantries but I doubt anyone has any interest in those, so, shall we get down to business?'

'Are you the Patrizio?' said Vimes sharply.

'No.'

'Then there's no point in continuing,' he said.

'Commander Vimes, I am well aware of the significant position you hold in Ankh Morpork and the respect that entails. It is important you realise that, in a somewhat different way, I fulfil a similar role in Ahroma. I can assure you that the fact I am meeting with you personally recognises your seniority. Up until today very few people have ever meet me face-to-face in my actual role in the Palace. Is that not true Blanche?'

Blanche stared coolly at Isabella and then nodded. 'It's true, I had no idea you were connected to the Palace, though perhaps it does not surprise me all that much. You were always drawn to the power game. I wonder, though, if you realise that half the pieces on the board are pawns?'

'Blanche, you have every reason to despise me and today is not about changing that view. Perhaps you are right, and all I am is a pawn who can be sacrificed in the course of the game.'

Or perhaps you're dreaming about becoming a king - or a queen, thought Vimes. Pawns are the
only piece that can do that.

'The important thing is that we keep making the right moves,' Isabella continued, 'and that is why we have to talk.'

'But without the Patrizio?' said Vimes.

'I am sorry Commander, but that is a fundamental requirement of this meeting. The Patrizio would not see you, even if he could. If this is an insurmountable problem then I suggest we end this conversation now and other, less ideal plans, are implemented.'

Vimes grunted. Most of his challenges these days were insurmountable, it seemed. Everything was by negotiation. This was politics and he hated it, if for no other reason than he felt like he was becoming a politician.

'I take it that's a yes,' said Isabella without any trace of a smile. When it comes to politics smiling is generally bad form. It reminds people too much of crocodiles. 'So, let's start with what you want.'

The group exchanged glances and it was Blanche who spoke first. 'Roberto is dead and good riddance. Alberto is missing, probably in Ankh Morpork trying to build his empire. At the moment I am in charge of the Hattoni estate, and I want it to stay that way.'

Isabella stared at Blanche and Vimes realised something was happening between these two women. They were assessing each other to decide where the lines of power should be and what the rules were. He was prepared to bet good money that the two had never really met on these terms before but already it felt like they had been playing the long game. Perhaps they had been masters rather than mistresses all along. Gender based titles have a lot to answer for.

'I think that would be in the interests of several parties,' replied Isabella slowly. 'But you will have many enemies very soon, which is why we must move quickly. Roberto's death will be announced today and also that Alberto is to be charged with crimes against the State. We are not sure what these will be yet, but rest assured we will find them. We will acknowledge you as head of the household until such times as this can be officially resolved and, since the resolution will be in our favour, from then on as well.'

'How can you be confident you'll win?' said Vimes. 'What about fear and corruption in the legal system?'

'Oh, we're counting on that. The important thing is to make sure that we control both the corruption and the fear. When it comes to justice it's not the scales you need to worry about, it's where you put your finger on them.'

'Speaking of justice,' said Joe, who had been quietly observing all of this, 'Ahroma needs a proper police force, with enough staff to actually enforce the law, whatever that is in this city.'

For the first time Isabella did smile. 'And where do you think the funding for that can come from?'

'Well,' replied Joe, 'I don't think that's my problem now. I think that if you really do want to deal with Hattoni and everything he's created that makes it your problem.'

Good on you, thought Vimes. There's hope for you yet if you can just learn how to stay alive long enough to learn everything else you need to. We definitely need to have a talk about that.

Once again Isabella had that look, like she'd gone to pat a pup only to discover it was a wolf cub. 'It turns out, Captain Petrosini,' she replied after a lengthy pause, 'that the Patrizio does share your
thoughts on needing a more suitably resourced police force and that there may be some funding to achieve that. Besides, we're also planning to recover some of the proceeds of criminal activities very soon.'

'I think the Hattoni estate can help out there, too,' added Blanche. 'In fact, I can't think of a better way for some of our wealth to be redistributed. Not all of it, mind you,' she added. 'There has to be some reward for what I've put up with.'

'Good,' added Isabella, 'that's one less difficult conversation. This can be arranged. Now what about the needs of Ankh Morpork?'

'Before we get on to that,' said Angua, 'sorry Commander but I need to sort this out too. The dogs of the city. It seems like they've had a pretty rough trot and they did play a part in all of this. You need to set up some proper dog shelters and a place to deal with bad dogs too.'

Isabella sighed. 'The Patrizio is not going to be happy about this.'

'Any leader worth their salt should never be happy,' observed Vimes. 'Satisfied is as good as it gets and the Patrizio must be satisfied by now.'

'All right, we'll set up shelters and a pound. For dogs.'

'And cats, maybe too?' said Angua with a peculiar smile. 'You do like cats don't you?'

Isabella returned her gaze for several long heartbeats. 'Yes,' she said carefully. 'I do like cats. The world is a better place for having them.'

'I wouldn't go that far.'

'Perhaps you've gone far enough already. Anything more?'

'Yes,' added Sybil. 'You need to do something about the homeless. People like Ben. They're your citizens as well.'

'Are you saying we need to give them houses!'

'Maybe for some of them, but not everybody wants that. A place where they can find food and shelter when they need it - that would be a good start.'

'I have to draw the line somewhere.'

'Fine, but draw it somewhere else.'

'We will set up shelters for the homeless and a soup kitchen,' replied Isabella coolly.

'And a public library network,' said Carrot.

'What? Where did that come from?' said Isabella, truly surprised for the first time.

'From a long way away,' he replied. 'And if it wasn't for librarians we wouldn't be having this conversation now. Besides the world is ignorant enough as it is. Libraries can change that.'

'I doubt that very much,' answered Isabella darkly. 'Ignorance is fundamental to human nature. The Patrizio has mixed feelings about educating the public. What happens if they go out and use it? Imagine how much harder our job would be'
'Nevertheless ...'

'Fine. We'll trial a public library. Just one, mind you.'

'Thank you,' replied Carrot because there's always room for gratitude. 'It's something I've wanted to see happen in Ankh Morpork for some time. I'll be having a word with our Patrician about it when I return.'

'Speaking of which,' said Isabella in a tone that indicated the line how now been clearly drawn and reached, 'back to the question of Ankh Morpork.'

'Is everybody else quite done?' said Vimes quickly in case he missed his chance. 'Good. The gods know what's happening in my city. We need to return as quickly as possible to sort out the mess.'

Isabella nodded and smiled, this time with something approaching relief and even humour. 'I do believe we may have a pair of ruby slippers that are purported to transport the wearer back to their home. I'm not sure if they'd fit you, though.'

'No thank you,' he replied. 'We'd rather travel by library.'

That's the thing about libraries. If you really know how to use them they can take you anywhere.

xxxx

The problem with plans is that no matter how good your own ones are everybody else has plans too and if you don't know what those are its impressive how pear-shaped the best-laid plans can go.

Hattoni smiled. These fools thought they were in control and they had no idea what was unfolding. He played the long game and everything was going exactly to plan. Right now there was just the minor issue of the public protest. The reason it was easy enough to take control of a city like Ankh Morpork was that the people were always happy to complain about who was in charge. The difficulty was stopping them from then protesting once you'd taken over. But Hattoni had ways of dealing with that. All in good time. Right now he just needed to pour oil on troubled waters.

'I think we can use Colon one more time', he said to Regina, 'and it's time the people saw me. After that the Sergeant may have reached his expiration date.'

Minutes later Fred found himself being ushered on to a balcony overlooking a sizeable and agitated crowd, who were currently chanting 'Bring back the Patrician.'

'Do this right,' said Hattoni to him as he was walking out, 'and all of your troubles will be over. Tell them about the bright new future, and introduce me when the time is right. I don't need to tell you what will happen if you make any mistakes?'

Colon shook his head. 'I'll give them the performance of my life, sir.'

'Yes, you will. One way or another.'

Colon gulped and walked out. The crowd fell silent; waiting to see what came next. When it came down to the cut and thrust of politics what the public most looked for was entertainment value. They don't call it a circus for nothing and were happy for the cut and thrust to be quite literal.

'Good morning,' said Colon after a moment's deep contemplation. That seemed safe enough.

'What's good about it?' cried a voice. Colon looked down. To the casual observer it looked like an
everyday mixture of the hoi polloi that the city was famous for but Colon was anything but the casual observer. There were a surprising number of faces in the crowd that were familiar. Members of the Watch, dressed in civies, which was fair enough, since someone, himself probably, had pretty much disbanded the Watch anyway.

'Well, we're all here still aren't we?'

'Not the Patrician! Bring back the Patrician!'  

'But I thought you wanted to see him gone a few days ago?'  

'Yeah, well, maybe, we did,' conceded the voice, 'but that was then. Now we want him back.'

'But what has the Patrician ever done for you?'

'Well, the roads. They're much better now he's set up a works program. You hardly ever fall through a crack anymore.'

'All right,' said Colon, 'but apart from the roads.'

'The Thieves Guild. He set that up. Say what you like about it but it's safe to go out on the street now as long as you've paid your dues .... well mostly safe,' the voice added because it was Ankh Morpork they were talking about.

'Then apart from the roads and safety?'

'He got the postal service up and running again.'

'And the bank. Our fiscal management structure is the envy of the Disc,' added a voice that sounded suspiciously like AE Pessimal, the head of the Watch's forensic accounting section.

'And der Watch. Dats another fing what gets envied .... hang on .... is envy like when you want something someone else has, or is it a type of plant? What's dat? Oh, it's the first one. Fanks. Der Watch den.'

And that would be Detritus.

'Fine,' said Colon in an exasperated tone, ‘apart from the roads, and being able to go out safely, and the postal system, the best banking system on the Disc and the finest police force, what's the Patrician ever done for you?'

This did lead to a moment's reflection. It is a curious reality that nobody mentioned all the times nothing happened because the Patrician had saved the city from so many potentially devastating conflicts. People aren't all that good at noticing these things.

'You idiot,' hissed Hattoni, 'you're only making the situation worse. Now they're thinking of all the reasons why they need the Patrician. Just introduce me and I'll take it from there.'

Hattoni was right. Rumblings were sweeping through the crowd and, as is the nature of crowds, it was beginning to grow in size as the famous Ankh Morpork curiosity kicked in. There’s nothing like the chance to have a good grumble in public.

'Ummm,' said Colon loudly. Not a great start he had to admit but at least he'd got their attention. 'Sure we can debate what the Patrician may or may not have done for the city, but it's time to stop thinking about the past,' he continued, 'and look to the future. And to help steer us into that future
I'm going to introduce you to the city's new chief advisor, Señor Alberto Hattoni.'

Hattoni moved out on to the balcony to a single lonely handclap that died immediately when the clapper realised they'd got the mood of the crowd totally wrong and that they now looked like a complete twat. Ankh Morporkians are notorious for not giving away anything for free and this included respect. Hattoni shrugged and smiled. He'd faced a lot worse than this. He'd prepared the perfect speech to introduce himself to the city. What he hadn't prepared for was Colon's ongoing 'assistance'.

'That's right,' said Colon, 'Señor Hattoni comes to us from the distant country of Brindisi and has much experience in running a city.'

'You mean he's a foreigner?' came a voice from the crowd.

'Yes,' Fred continued, 'and not only that, but he's got some great ideas on changing what we do?'

'So, he's a foreigner who's going to tell us what we're doing wrong and how to change things to his ways?'

'That seems to sum it up nicely,' said Colon.

Ankh Morpork owed much of its success over recent years to becoming the most multicultural city on the Disc, but just because you're whole wellbeing and prosperity relies on racial diversity doesn't necessarily guarantee racial tolerance. That's humanity for you. To be fair, treatment of other races and species had improved dramatically (if grudgingly in some quarters) but it's always a fine dance. And right now was not the best time for the foreigner card to be dropped. But that wasn't the only card on the table. People are great at accepting change as long as it involves everyone else changing to the way they do things. Otherwise it's a bit of a middenstorm. And the worst kind of change was being forced into accepting foreign ways delivered by a foreigner. The Patrician may have opened the doors to the world and orchestrated an incredible amount of change but he had always been inside the tent. Besides, he knew how to dance. One day the residents of Ankh Morpork may well elect a dwarf to government, but they would come from a long standing Ankh family. One of Ankh's own. If irony really had anything to do with iron the world would never run out of that metal whilst ever humans existed.

'Just shut up,' hissed Hattoni who could see that the face of the crowd was now ugly enough for even a mother to struggle loving it.

'Sorry, Señor Hattoni, just trying to help.'

'You're useless. The only helpful thing you could do was disappear, for good.'

'Well, I do have to follow your orders and all,' said Fred. 'And from where I'm standing,' he continued, looking around, 'the best way to disappear for good would be to jump off the balcony.'

'Ha, that would be something worth seeing,' said Hattoni out of the side of his mouth, 'and see if you can land on some of those idiots below along the way.'

'Sooo,' said Colon slowly, 'you're ordering me to jump off the balcony even though I know it will kill me?'

'Yes, if we're lucky.'

There was a sound that nobody heard but Fred felt. It was the sound of a scroll crumbling to dust. It was the sound of freedom. 'Woo hoo,' cried Colon as he punched the air and leapt for joy (which
was never going to be that high, all things considered, but when it comes to leaps of joy it's the joy that counts not the spring in the step). 'I got you, I got you,' he shouted. 'You never read the fine print of the contract did you? Clause 66.6 says that if you order me to do something that we both know will kill me the contract's broken, permanently. How do you like them apples Alberto?'

There is nothing worse (that doesn't involve pineapples, cactuses or other sharp pointy things and the various orifices of the human body) than realising you have been the architect of your own downfall. Hattoni screamed in rage.

The crowd had watched all of this unfold with a fair degree of satisfaction. As public addresses go, what it had lacked in any form of cohesion or heart-swelling motivation it had made up for in comedic value. The revelation of the foreign fellow was a bit disturbing but not yet terminal for Hattoni. It's amazing what you can get away with if you can play the cards right (and you happen to own a few newspapers). The problem was that he'd just lost control of the joker and was discovering that, sometimes, the cards can play you.

Fred Colon turned to the burgeoning crowd and shouted 'Don't trust him. He forced me to sign a contract with the devil so I couldn't speak out, but I tricked him and now I can.'

Colon moved to the balcony's edge and looked straight down at the upturned faces. 'This man has tried to destroy the Watch, has chased off your own fairly elected .... elected .... self-appointed leader and he's set up his own gang in town. And you can bet that pretty soon all your hard-earned money will be heading into foreign pockets ... if it isn't already.'

And there it was. The tipping point. When things did become terminal. There's a lot people can be conned into tolerating but the thought of our money ending up in foreign pockets was beyond the pale. Besides, why would you have confidence in anybody that could be outsmarted by Fred Colon?

'Bring back the Patrician,' Cheery shouted, and a wave of support swept through the crowd, changing the lone voice into first a chant and then a roar when Colon joined in.

Something in Hattoni snapped. Anger and violence had always been part of his rise to power but in recent years it had been funnelled through third parties. Now it was just him and he wasn't in the party mood. His strode over to the idiot sergeant, grabbed him and heaved him over the balcony.

That was the plan anyway. What it hadn't taken into account was the years of training Fred had put into establishing a low centre of gravity encased in a large centre of mass. Anyone in possession of a full set of faculties would be hard-pressed to use the term fit in any context associated with Fred's physique but in this rare instance it was fit - for resistance.

Hattoni had intended to experience the satisfaction of watching Colon plummet to the ground. Instead what he experienced was a strained back. With a cry of pain he staggered away from the verandah railing.

'You idiot' he shouted in frustration.

'Bring back the Patrician,' the crowd roared.

'You called?' said the Patrician.

'Oh,' said Colon.

There are times when even surprise gets caught with its pants down. There was only one person who had expected the Patrician to appear on the balcony and that was the Patrician himself. Which
was exactly how Vetinari liked the world to operate.

'What the ....' said Hattoni, joining Colon and every member of the crowd below in a unique moment of unity.

The Patrician strode forward. 'Thank you,' he continued over the pin-loud hush, 'I cannot tell you how heart-warming it is to be missed and wanted by the people.'

It was a testament to the enthralment of the crowd that no one, even to themselves, challenged the concept of the Patrician having a heart, let alone one that could be warmed.

'I apologise for causing this distress. I had some important matters to attend to relating to the safety and wellbeing of this wonderful city. I believe these matters have now been addressed, and I am free to resume my normal duties, if you will have me,' Vetinari added.

The crowd roared its approval, comfortable with the consistency of advocating disapproval only days ago. If you expect anything else you're bound to be disappointed. The Patrician was rarely disappointed.

Then a voice in the crowd shouted 'He's getting away, he's getting away!'

Sure enough, as the new chant took hold, Hattoni could be seen slipping from the balcony and into the darkness. Vetinari nodded, without turning around. 'I believe that any matters associated with Señor Hattoni will be addressed in due course,' he said in a way that made Cheery wonder exactly what the Patrician really meant by both the words 'due' and 'course'.
Loose ends

For a large man Alberto Hattoni could move with surprising speed. He fled through the Palace, collecting three of his bodyguards along the way. Things hadn't gone the way they should have and now his fevered brain was making up plans on the spot. The problem with snap plans is the strong presence of snap and the part of Hattoni that had snapped had taken control. Insanity is in the eye of the beholder which was why Hattoni liked what he saw.

The idiots who had put him in power were meeting in the Caviar Temptor Restaurant, planning their own feeble plans. He'd bully them into some sort of solution. They were too stupid to know when they'd been played. Bare minutes later (as opposed to fully clothed respectable minutes) Hattoni leaped out of his carriage and headed to the door.

'Scuse me Mr Hattoni,' rumbled a voice from the alleyway, 'I don't fink you'll be welcome today.'

Frank stepped forward from the shadows, bringing his own impressive shadow with him. 'Seems like der word has got out about your problems in der Palace. Lady Rust has asked me to discourage you from entering.'

Contrary to popular opinion just because someone has wandered into madness doesn't mean they've lost their brains. How on earth could the word have got here so quickly? ... Unless it had already been here in the first place. It's bad enough when you discover you've lost control of the cards, it's considerably worse when you realise you've lost control of the players as well.

Frank loomed with more loom than you'd find in your average carpet weavers establishment. 'Mr Hattoni, don't do sumfing you're going to regret,' he added in a loomy kind of voice.

Alberto glared and signalled to his bodyguards. There followed a brief flurry of practical mathematics which demonstrated:

1 x Frank > 3 x bodyguards

followed by

Frank + 3 x bodyguards = Frank + 2 x bodyguards + 1 x casualty

It could be argued that certain laws had been briefly suspended and that Hattoni's action had triggered considerably more than an equal and opposite one in Frank. What common sense still prevailed in Hattoni's brain took hold and without further ado* he and the remaining two bodyguards were back in the carriage.

* As opposed to the often misquoted 'without further adieu', though in this case that would have proved appropriate as well.

Plan A, or whatever letter he was up to had failed, so he moved onto Plan B, which, like most Bs, had notably decreased quality to it. This one involved a lot less survival and a lot more revenge.

The carriage skidded to a halt outside Pseudopolis Yard, headquarters of the Watch, or what was left of it. Hattoni may not have personally doled out violence for some time but you don't forget how to ride a bike. His carriage was fitted out for speed and it was also designed with purpose. By the time they'd arrived several incendiary devices had been selected from a cabinet he'd had
installed containing what he liked to call problem solvers.

He clambered out with his personal favourite in hand - Grandma's Little Explosive Helper* and sized up the building. Unfortunately this sizing up had to be considerably expanded as it now included a rapidly approaching troll. Cheery had sent Detritus directly from the protest to the Watch building on a remarkably astute hunch. Dwarves get unfairly tarnished by the word canny, as in 'canny little bastards' but that has more to do with ignorance, specism and, usually, being at the receiving end of a particularly hard bargain. There's nothing wrong with being canny, or even uncanny for that matter.

* Not all grandmothers are nice.

'I'd put dat down if I were you, Mr Hattoni,' said Detritus with the sort of politeness that implied impoliteness was out of the room at present but could return at any moment. 'You could hurt someone wiv dat. Dat's a GEH, dat is.'

'Exactly,' screamed Hattoni and flung the device at the building with all his strength. Many a traveller has been surprised, in a trampled sort of way, to discover that slow-looking creatures, like hippopotamus, can move with unexpected speed. Detritus' hand shot out and the GED exploded in a pyrotechnic display of light. A wave of heat wafted over Hattoni and the guards.

The momentary blindness passed and, to his dismay, Hattoni found himself face-to-face with a smouldering troll. This is generally recognised as much worse than the non-smouldering variety. 'Dat was not nice, Mr Hattoni,' said Detritus in an aggrieved tone as he patted out spot fires. 'And der I was being respectful and all. I fink it might be time for you to go away before I forget my manners. I can be very forgetful at times.'

Hattoni growled. 'Get rid of this rock,' he spat.

The two remaining bodyguards looked at each other nervously caught, as it were, between a rock and a hard place. When they'd signed up they hadn't envisaged an immediate future quite like this.

'I can see you gentleman are caught on the horns of dat fing with two lemmas,' said the troll as he strode forward. 'If I fink I can help you out der,' he continued delivering what is known as the Troll Tap in street boxing circles to one of the bodyguards. The recipient’s body only stopped sliding when it hit the wall on the opposite side of the street.

'Now you've only got one lemma to worry about, and dat's my left hand,' Detritus continued in a helpful tone.

Hattoni glared and backed slowly into his carriage taking the grateful bodyguard with him. 'This won't be the last you hear of me', he hissed.

'I hope not,' shouted the troll as the carriage shot off. With a bit of luck he'd hear Hattoni's next scream.

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This left Hattoni with Plan C, which could prove to be the most satisfying of all. No time for crying over spilt milk, he thought, as they rumbled along. Hattoni was not certain where all his problems had begun but there was one source he'd be happy to destroy. He wasn't sure where Vimes or his huge wife was but he did know the location of their home and that his young son was there. That gave him a lot to work with. The drive from the Yard to the Ramkin mansion flew by and he tumbled out of the carriage in anticipation as they pulled up.
'Right, we'll start with the kid and finish with the house,' he said as they strode up the path. The last remaining bodyguard, Stan, who has earned the right of being named through the good fortune of being the last man standing, had deep reservations - and not the kind that involved booking accommodation. He was used to being involved with violence but more of the giving rather than receiving kind. And children ... well that was a different matter altogether. He was relieved when the door opened as they approached to reveal a member of both the dwarfish and Watch persuasion. 'I figured you might come here, Hattoni,' said Cheery. 'Nothing like a sore loser and if you've already been via the Yard I'm guessing you're even sorer.'

'Get out of my way dwarf,' snapped Hattoni. 'Do you seriously think you could stop me?'

Cheery blinked thoughtfully and, after a moment, stood aside as Hattoni and Stan brushed passed. 'Keep an eye on her Stan,' he growled as he headed up the hallway.

'Hi Stan,' said Cheery as the bodyguard approached her. 'I think you might want to consider a career change. After all, your boss has been making some seriously bad calls and who wants to work for an employer like that? For example, he thought I was here as the last line of defence when it turns out I'm just the messenger.'

Hattoni was drawn to the back yard by the sound of a child's laughter. It was innocent and untroubled by thoughts of the future. When people talk about putting aside childish ways they forget what this truly means and many spend their lives wondering why they seemed to forgotten what joy felt like. None of this went through Hattoni's mind, if you could still call it a mind now all that made it human had been burnt away. He reached into his pocket as he swung the door open.

'And here I was thinking it was going to be a quiet day,' said Willikins in a casual tone, pushing away from the wall he'd been leaning on.

Hattoni spun round. 'You,' he said in surprise. 'What are you doing here?'

'We don't all have to be stuck in the past Mr Hattoni,' replied Willikins. 'Some of us move on. I'm the butler for His Grace now.'

'Then you're not half the man I remember,' Hattoni laughed. 'Now get out of my way while you still can.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Hattoni, I seemed to have given you the wrong impression. My mistake. You see, by moved on, I meant finding something to live for. Where you might be confused is in thinking I've forgotten everything I learned in those darker times. It is true that I'm not half the man I was. Why would I want to be that when I can be so much more?

'Put that knife away, Hattoni' the butler continued in a softer voice, 'or I'll break both your arms and then stick that blade where the sun don't shine, and neither of us want the boy to see that, do we?'

'Stan,' shouted Hattoni.

'Now would be the perfect opportunity for a career change, Stan,' said Cheery as the call for help drifted down the corridor. 'Have you considered the opportunities currently available in law enforcement?'

Up until this point in time Stan had not but in view of what was unfolding he was prepared to consider his options. 'Seriously?' he said.

'Commander Vimes is always open to innovation,' replied Cheery, which was broadly true. More accurately, he hated innovations, especially if technology was involved, but he could see its uses. 'I
suspect he will soon be considering the benefits of an organised crime unit, possibly with an international arm. He could always use people with inside knowledge.’

Stan's knowledge of most things could be fitted on a postage stamp but he was rapidly growing a whole new set of wisdom teeth. He may not have been a fortune teller but he was doing a pretty good job of predicting the future.

‘What should I do?’ he said.

'Disappear for now. When it's safe, report to the Yard and ask for Sergeant Littlebottom.'

Stan laughed for the first time in a long time.

'Did I say something funny?'

'No, Sergeant Littlear....bottom,' replied Stan who was learning fast that the day, and possibly the rest of his life, was going down some interesting paths.

'Good. Now clear off before I change my mind.'

Stan may not have often had the chance to use butter on his bread but he still knew what side it was buttered on. He ran off down the path. Hattoni heard none of this, but he did know he was on his own now. Fine. He'd come from nothing and he could do it again.

'This isn't over,' he hissed as he backed away.

'No, I'm sure it isn't,' replied Willikins. 'I'm planning for a long life myself. I'm not so sure about yours though.'

Hattoni stormed back down the hall, pushing aside the dwarf as he left. 'Headquarters,' he barked at the driver, his mind working overtime on the ride back. His time would come again. It always did. He entered his office, deep in thought, and sat down at his desk.

'Hello, Hattoni,' said a voice.

'Blatworm,' said Hattoni after a moment, noticing the darker shadow in the corner of the room.

'Good. You've save me the trouble of calling you. It's time we brought this farce to an end.'

'I couldn't agree more,' said the demon.

Detritus was out on patrol when he heard the scream. He nodded with satisfaction. 'Now dat would be the last we hear from Hattoni,' he said to the world in general. 'Dat's what I call closure.'

'Looks like everything worked out just fine for you,' said Gaspode in a flat voice.

'Better than fine,' Pythia replied. 'Who could have foreseen dogs shelters, soup kitchens and public libraries.'

'Well, you could have done.'

It had seemed fitting that they should be talking here in the fishmarket shed where it had all began because something was definitely on the nose. 'Seriously, how much of this did you see through your crystal ball?' growled Gaspode.
'Not as much as you think.'

'But more than you told me.'

'Predicting the future is complex, and there are many variables ...'

'Yeah, and I bet one of those variables was telling me more. Could you see futures where you did and it all went south?'

Pythia remained silent.

'It's not like I haven't been used before,' Gaspode continued, 'it's just that this time it felt like I was just a prawn in a bigger cosmic game.'

'The word's pawn.'

'Not round here it isn't, Oracle,' Gaspode replied with a pointed sniff. 'Everyfing's fishy. But what really does my head in, is when I think about how big the picture was. You oracles predicted Caesar and you predicted me but how much of what you predicted required you to predict it? And, then, this is the crazy bit ... see there's all these different things that had to happen just for this one future to exist. Like Hattoni deciding to take over Ankh Morpork and him kidnapping Carrot. For me to slip on a banana peel and coming out in a different place. Geez, even Angua being born a werewolf and joining the Watch. How much of what we think of being the randomness of life has been put there in the first place just so certain things can happen?'

'Nothing or everything, depending on your philosophy.'

Gaspode snorted. 'Take Ben for example. You needed him, so he had to be homeless and a friend of dogs. He never had a hope of living a normal life, did he? He was always going to be an outcast for your grand plan to work.'

Pythia sighed. 'You give me too much credit, Gaspode. Perhaps we're all just prawns in a bigger scheme, or perhaps Ben was always going to march to a different drummer and this way he marched into canine history and helped bring down a powerful criminal.'

Maybe,' conceded Gaspode, after a moment, 'maybe. But it makes me wonder why I should even bother making any decisions at all because it won't change a thing.'

'Don't go down that path. Next thing you'll be wondering if you had any control over making the decision not to make decisions. That way lies madness. Trust me. Most oracles end up with one or two loose screws and we rarely live to a ripe old age.'

'You know,' Gaspode said after a lengthy pause, 'the oracling job isn't all it's cracked up to be is it?'

'Tell me about it,' Pythia replied.

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Gaspode was tracked down (it's always handy having a werewolf in your back pocket, except in the literal sense) and under the watchful, banana-peel-free guidance of the Librarian the return journey to the University Library was as uneventful as such a trip can ever be when travelling in L-Space. Sybil would never forget the sight of the herd of thesauri disappearing down the non-fiction aisle. Perhaps it was because of all the prescience in the air over the last few days that a strange image sprang to mind of a world without these magnificent creatures. Where people looked up synonyms and antonyms on devices they carried with them everywhere. She prayed it would never come to
pass or, at worst, happened on some other world.

There was no one to greet them when they arrived and no fanfare either, which suited Vimes down to the ground. He'd always valued actions above accolades and, besides, it wasn't exactly clear how what they had done would be viewed by Ankh Morporkians who were notoriously bad at handing out awards and even worse at understanding international politics.

The order of things was important. Vimes may have been a son of the city, but the city was not his son. First stop was the Ramkin mansion to make sure young Sam was safe.

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'So, what happened while we were gone, Willikins?' he said, looking around suspiciously. Everything looked in perfect order, which only made him even more suspicious. There was nothing like the appearance of normality to trigger Vimes's inner copper. There was always something going on and he preferred it when it was out there in the open.

'Well,' replied the butler, 'Sam was in trouble at school the other day for getting into a fight with some children who he tells me were picking on another boy. And then he argued with the teacher who tried to break them up about who was in the right. The Principal got involved and next thing Sam was given an early mark. Apparently the Principal also went home early with a bad headache.'

'What about the bullies?'

'There's a curious thing. Sam tells me that after they got bandaged up they went very quiet and now the school is running special classes on respect.'

Old Sam nodded. That was the way of things. He'd heard it was wrong to counter violence with violence, but what about principle with principle? He knew that the world should just get it right in the first place, but sometimes it needed a helping hand, even if that hand was clenched. The ethics of this were murky, but then ethics always were and at least the debate kept a few active and potential dangerously intelligent minds busy. Might was not a good basis for right, but silence wasn't any better. He'd leave that conundrum to others. Right now he was deeply proud of his son and would make sure he got some sort of reward.

'And everything else?'

'Oh, there was a bit of a brouhaha in the city, I understand, but I'm sure you'll hear more about that.'

'Any unexpected visitors?'

'Just one. A door-to-door salesman, but I didn't want what he was offering.'

Vimes was sure there was more to it than that and he also knew that there was nothing he could do to make Willikins say more. That was why he was such an annoyingly good butler. All true butlers had, at some point in their ancestry, a branch of their tree in the mollusc family.

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Next stop was the Yard. Once again, Vimes found himself in a zone that was trying its darnedest to look totally normal. Perception is an unreliable bedfellow. Vimes perceived there was something going on but was this because there was something actually wrong with the world, or with his powers of perception? One look at the radiating innocence from Cheery answered his question. He was used to Colon and Nobby, despite all evidence to the contrary, claiming guiltlessness, he'd be
even more worried if they didn't, but Cheery ....

'Fill me in Cheery,' he said some time later, after all the stories had been told of their time in Brindisi. There's a time-honoured policing technique where you interview suspects separately to find gaps in their stories. It's a rigorous and meticulous approach that can yield rich evidence over time ... and Sam Vimes was having none of it. It was a lot more interesting asking the question in the office with everyone listening in. The tricky part was trying to keep an eye on everyone's faces at once. He doubted he'd ever find out all the facts but he was going have some fun not finding them out.

'As you can see Commander, everything is going along smoothly,' she replied, leading out on a positive note, 'though obviously less smoothly than if you'd been here, sir,' she added hastily.

'We both know that's not true,' replied Vimes with a tight smile. 'It never flows smoothly when I'm here. But you're right, the Yard is simply oozing smoothness.'

'Yes, well, we did have a few incidents along the way,' Cheery continued carefully, in much the same way as someone who has to cross a murky brown crocodile-infested river. 'As you know, Hattoni was working with some of the old families to establish a foothold here. Thanks to some ... sterling undercover work by Fred and Nobby we found out he was aiming to overthrow the Patrician.'

Vimes looked over at the pair whose efforts to look innocent grappled so much with their general surprise at this statement that it gave the impression they were both dealing with a case of ambush flatulence. The only sterling jobs Vimes was ever aware of involving Nobby related to the strange disappearance of silverware at crime scenes.

'Well done, gentleman,' said Vimes with a nod that gave all the impression of approval. 'Go on.'

'Sooo, Fred and Nobby were able to gain the confidence of Hattoni ....'  

'What?' Vimes had been determined to keep a straight face but the concept of Fred and Nobby ever winning the confidence of anyone was simply too much to confront with composure.

'How did you do that, Fred?' he asked innocently.

Fred squirmed. He had no problems being liberal with the facts, the real issue was with the fiction. Fred's ability to craft a believable story rated up there with his ability to compete the one hundred meter dash without medical assistance. Colon went simple, which was at least familiar territory on a range of fronts.

'By leading him to believe we were gullible and corruptible and winning over his confidence with witty reparty,' Colon replied.

Vimes waited. A statement like that was so hard to believe that it would die in seconds from sheer embarrassment and something else would step up to fill the hole.

'And not by signing any contracts drawn up by devils with unbreakable clauses,' Colon added.

'Ahhh, there it was.

'Then,' Cheery leapt in desperately, 'when Hattoni made his move, with the support of Lady Rust and all those other double-crossing toffs, Fred was there to help set up a counter revolution. He....'

'I think I'd like to hear how he did that from Fred himself,' Vimes said. He may not like being lied
too but this was sheer entertainment. 'You can chip in any time you like Nobby,' he added for extra value.

'Right ... well ... you see,' Fred stammered, 'when the mob had gathered to protest about the Patrician and his taxes ...'

'Just like you did the other day, Fred' added Nobby helpfully. 'You know when you said that the Patrician was the other kind of knob.'

'Don't distract the Commander, Corporal,' snapped Colon.

'Just showing him how widespread the dissent was,' Nobby replied. 'Which was why they chose you for the new Patrician, when you spoke so elephantly to them.'

'Oh, my.' said Vimes weakly, fighting the strange urge to sit down at the thought of Fred Colon running the city.

Fred glared at Nobby. 'I believe you meant eloquently,' he growled.

'Course I did, Sarge. Isn't that was I said?' Nobby answered with a smile so loaded with innocence that it generated its own localised gravity.

'You said eleph...' Colon paused as that small part of his brain that valiantly attempted higher order thinking kicked in and suggested he was only digging a rather deep hole even deeper. 'Never mind. Corporal Nobbs is right, sir, I did sway the crowd with my eloquent words and they did elect me as the new Patrician, which was exactly where I wanted to be.'

Vimes realised that despite the number of people in the room you could hear a pin drop. Everybody was waiting for what came next, including Fred he suspected.

'So, now that I'd won over the confidence of the people I began to roll out my cunning plan to undermine Hattoni ...'

'What was the Watch the doing at the time, Fred?'

'Well, they'd, sort of, gone undercover.'

'Undercover? The whole Watch?'

'Well it helped that Fred had pretty much disbanded them by then,' added the ever-helpful Nobby.

'All part of the plan, sir, all part of the plan,' Fred blurted out as fundamental survival skills kicked in and fired up the few remaining neurones that had bravely stuck around to see what was happening. 'This, this, this gave the men a chance to lead a protest march. Isn't that right Cheery?'

Cheery nodded. Strictly speaking this was true but only if you looked at the facts from a certainly angle, with one eye squinted and by moonlight.

'And, and, and, and then I inspired the crowd to revolt with an even more clever speech. And then the original Patrician turned up. And Hattoni disappeared. And everything went back to normal. And then you all turned up. And that's all sir,' Colon concluded in a rush.

The part of Vimes that was furious at the thought of Colon disbanding the Watch stared at the hopelessly hopeful look on Colon's face as the circle of silent disbelief swept through the room and met itself coming back the other way in a deafening hush. The anticipation in the air was so thick
you could cut it up and built a rock solid house from it. And then that part of Vimes stepped aside. He'd learned long ago how to roll with the punches; it was only late in his life that he was beginning to understand that sometimes you had to roll with other things as well. Words of wisdom whispered. Let it be. Let it be.

'And what did Mrs Colon think about all of this?' he said.

'Haven't been home yet to find out sir. Wasn't sure I'd survive. She's got aspirations, but I don't think she'd have been happy with being Mrs Patrician.'

'Good man, Sergeant. Wise choice,' Vimes observed and the room laughed with relief.

'Well, that seems to wrap a lot for things up neatly,' he continued. 'I'm sure we'll get the chance to tidy up the loose ends. A quick question. What's the petty cash balance looking like?'

There was a brief murmur amongst the crowd at this left-field question. 'It's all balanced,' said Corporal Visit after a moment's thought.

Vimes nodded. He may never find out exactly what had gone down but it had been serious. The petty cash never balanced, not with Nobby Nobbs in the force. If Nobby had been too preoccupied for small-time larceny things had been busy indeed. It was the canary in the coal mine.

'That's good news. Cheery, is there anything more you'd like to add?'

Cheery had spent all her time in the Watch working for Sam Vimes and an experience like that rubs off. The game has a range of rules and the most important one was to make up your own. 'That pretty much sums it up sir,' she said and then added 'I'd also like to recommend Corporal Visit for a commendation.'

'On any particular grounds you'd like to share?'

'No sir. Just general commendationness.'

Vimes smiled. 'Well then, you'd better draft it up. I'm sure it will be rich in the same sort of detail as everything else has been. And lose the word commendationness. Probably doesn't exist, shouldn't anyway and you'll never know when the damn thing should end once you start writing it.'

Sometimes the best way to deal with loose ends is to cut them off.
This time Vimes waited. He was curious to see how long it would take. Less than an hour as it turned out, before the summons to the Palace arrived. Sam was burning with a mixture of curiosity and his normal level of anger but today he took his time on the journey. He declined a carriage and sauntered through the streets. Walking was always so much better. Forget the health benefit, he'd never given them much truck anyway, it was how you saw the world and a copper that really sees the world is likely to get other health benefits anyway. Like surviving. What was on display was a city going around its typical chaotic business of being a city. What he saw was a city trying really hard to look like a city that wasn't trying really hard to look like a city. The populace that was happy to back a protest was the same populace that was happy to pretend it never happened and, even if it did, they certainly weren't there when it went pear-shaped and definitely weren't involved. In fact, they were out visiting relatives in the country.

He'd almost reached the Palace when he realised that someone was matching pace with him. He turned and the man who was walking beside him nodded. The face was as nondescript as they come, but looked vaguely familiar.

'Commander Vimes,' the man said. 'Yes, we have met before - Alberto Hattoni ...'

'You're his accountant or whatever it is,' said Vimes as realisation dawned.

'Was his accountant and lawyer,' the man replied. 'Neither my position nor, in fact, Señor Hattoni himself exist anymore. At least not on this plane.'

Vimes slowly smiled. 'Well, that's good news. First time today someone hasn't been trying to hide something from me. You may not be aware, and don't take this personally,' he continued, 'but I subscribe to the view that the emergence of lawyers as a profession is the strongest argument against evolution yet.'

The man returned Vimes's smile. 'Sadly, evolution answers only to the law of survival,' he replied. 'The emergence of lawyers is a comment on society and may even be a supporting case for evolution. The question you may wish to ask yourself is what are we evolving into? Don't blame the system.'

Vimes grunted, which was his standard response when he wasn't happy with what he'd heard. 'So what do you want?'

'Nothing. It's a strange feeling. Not unpleasant. I am here only to deliver something,' said the man and reached into his pocket. He drew out a dis-organiser. 'The previous owner has little need for it now, not where he is. Who needs to be reminded when to scream?'

Vimes took the proffered object. 'I do,' he answered in a distracted tone. 'Why are you giving me this?'

'Because the rest of my life is going to be a long journey and this is the first step.'

With that the man veered off down an alleyway and was gone. Every copper knows there is a time and a place for pursuit and Vimes knew this was not one of those times or places. He looked down at the dis-organiser. 'Imp,' he said.

A small head poked out from the device. 'You're not Alberto Hattoni', it squeaked.
And you're not my normal dis-organiser, so we're all square. I'm your new owner.'

The imp shrugged. 'I hope you're better with technology than he was.'

By this time he'd arrived at the Palace even the Patrician had moved on from the traditional tactic of making appointments wait. He was ushered directly in.

'Thank you for coming, Commander,' Vetinari said as he looked up. 'I had scheduled a meeting with you prior to the one I am about to attend but it seems we won't have the opportunity. I will put that as a diary note for any future reference. It seems that I have no choice but to bring you along to this meeting now.'

He smiled. It was an awkward look, as though the Patrician was trying to remember the right facial muscles involved in the process.

'Come,' he continued and rose to lead Vimes back into the main body of the Palace. Vimes had the strongest sensation that somehow his insolent late arrival had not created a problem but the reverse. They walked silently down the corridor until they reached a door behind which the normal palatial hush was being broken by vigorous conversation. Vetinari paused, constructed another smile, swung the door open and strode in.

The room contained a large table and seated around it was what appeared to be a representative of every wealthy family Ankh Morpork had ever spawned. The problem Vimes had with wealth acquirement was less about the wealth and more about the people involved.

'Thank you for finding time in your busy schedules to meet with me today,' began the Patrician, '....

'What's he doing here?' snapped Regina Rust pointing at Vimes.

'My sincerest apologies. I had planned to meet with His Grace before our happy gathering but circumstances beyond my control caused a delay, so I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone, as it were.'

'Get him out of here. He doesn't belong.'

'You know what, Lady Regina, I agree,' said Vimes. 'I don't belong here. The question I'd like to know the answer to is why? It can't be about wealth, because I tick that box. Or having a title - got one of those. And we all know I can be almost as obnoxious as all of you, so, please, tell me what is that special thing that involves all of you and not me?'

The room fell silent as the gathered pondered a reply. 'Thank you for that most unusual introduction to the topic at hand, Commander,' said the Patrician after a moment. 'Sir Samuel, in his inimitable style, has once again put his finger on the nub of the matter. Or at least stuck his finger somewhere, hasn't he? As you would all be aware I had a period of absence recently and during that time we appear to have had a revolution and a counter revolution. Turn your back for one moment ...' the Patrician added with a laugh so dry it belonged in a pyramid. 'Would anyone care to tell me what happened exactly, because I'm getting some very interesting accounts.'

'Sergeant Colon ....' began a pale-faced man seated at the far end of the table. The latest fashion amongst the wealthy was to show the world they were above such things as labour and physical activity by avoiding sunlight where possible. This particular trend had been so popular it could be measured in decades.
'Ah, Lord Alabaster,' said the Patrician, 'before we go any further down that path do be aware that I once spent an extended period with Sergeant Colon and I am fully cognisant of his mental faculties and leadership capabilities. At the moment I am stretching my imagination to the limits by presuming Sergeant Colon was part of a ruse. There is not enough imagination in the world for me to comprehend Sergeant Colon devising and implementing an insurrection to take control of the city. Let's start again, shall we?'

Vimes was enjoying this immensely and he suspected the Patrician was as well. There was no code among this group. You did what you did to whoever you needed to do it to to make sure you didn't get it done to you by someone else first. Which was a code of sorts, thought Vimes. You only worked together when it was personally worth doing so .... There was a lot of fear in that room. Fear has a smell, which is true. It's called flatulence and there was plenty of nervous evidence of that right now. They know they have to hold ranks and they don't know where Hattoni is. They're trying to figure out who to betray.

Lady Regina, self-appointed leader of everything, found, to her amazement and that of all those around her, that she was raising her hand. She had never before sought permission to speak in her life. She was a speaker not a speakee. That's how dangerous the situation is, thought Sam.

'Señor Hattoni,' she volunteered.

'Ah, of course,' said the Patrician. 'It would be inconceivable to imagine that one of Ankh Morpork's own would try and overthrow the city, but a foreigner ... well you can never trust them can you?'

'Definitely not,' someone barked in relief.

'Never know what they're thinking. Damn inscrutable.'

'Shifty-eyed.'

'Can't trust the beggars.'

'Steal your shoes off your feet. Happened to me once, you know ... of course that was here in the city, but you could tell the blighter was foreign.'

That said it all, really. The one thing that united the group, other than wealth, power, title and the morals of a cat, was bigotry. This didn't, of course, stop you taking a foreigner's money because that was just business, but it justified everything else. And you built in a wonderful circuitous logic which said that anybody who you didn't like for any reason became a foreigner by association, further reinforcing your view of foreigners. Sometimes governments get caught up in this kind of thinking. They are not, in any context, good governments.

'Commander Vimes,' said the Patrician above the satisfied rumble of unifying racism, 'it seems we must turn the focus of our investigations on Señor Hattoni and to do so with some urgency. Our missed meeting has proved a happy coincidence. Here is a perfect opportunity for you see what help some of our city's finest representatives can offer.'

Vimes smiled and the gathering shifted uncomfortably. They considered him to be something of a ferret, which is all well and good until you start to wonder what rat holes he could fit down.

'Vimes can ask all the questions he wants,' said Lady Regina coldly, 'but he will find we can offer little assistance. Señor Hattoni was an invited guest of ours on several occasions, but they were public and simply part of our civic duty. Other than that we have had little to do with him and I
would challenge Vimes to prove otherwise.'

'I appreciate the prompt feedback, Your Ladyship,' Vimes replied, 'and also the pleasing revelation that you all have a sense of civic duty. I must say I hadn't seen that coming. I do like a challenge, so how about we keep the game of surprises rolling.'

Vimes reached into his pocket and placed the dis-organiser on the table. 'This is Hattoni's personal diary. I think you'll find it quite interesting listening. Imp, can you look through the calendar for appointments from, say a month ago.'

This was one of those pin-drop moments and Vimes could swear even Vetinari held his breath.

'Righto,' said the imp. 'Whirr, whirr, whirr, click ... we like to add that for special effect, sounds good doesn't? Like I'm going back through time.....anyway, let's see.... here's one 23rd of Spune - 10 am - avoid meeting with Patrician. Make up excuse. 1 pm - avoid meeting with Neighbourhood Watch. Make up excuse. 5 pm - avoid committee meeting of Sunshine Sanctuary for Sick Dragons. Make up excuse. Whirr. Click.'

The silence in the room remained but it had changed. It was no longer the silence of tension, it was the silence of 'What the ...?'. Realisation dawned and Vimes grabbed the dis-organiser again. 'Ah. Seems like I've reached into the wrong pocket,' he added hastily. 'I think this is what we need,' he said as he placed another dis-organiser on the table.

'Can we stop this farce now, Vetinari,' snapped Regina. 'We all have better things to do with our time than listen to the mundane life of Samuel Vimes.'

'Were you the dis-organiser of Alberto Hattoni?' continued Vimes, as though the world had not just slapped a custard pie in his face.

'Yep, Guv.'

'Right. Can you look back in the calendar for any appointments in the past month.'

'Nope, Guv, not until you give me the password.'

'What?'

'Had to do a system update and I need the password to access the calendar.'

Goddamnit. Vimes was all in favour of personal privacy, but not when it came to everyone else. 'Hattoni', he hazarded. After all the man was self-centred enough to do something like that.

'Nope. Not even close.'

'Ahora?'

'Wrong again. I probably should have mentioned the system locks up after three incorrect guesses at the password. You've got one left.'

'Buggabuggabuggabuggabugga. It could be anything. Absolutely anything.

'You know Alberto had the same problem as you,' said the imp sympathetically. 'Just couldn't remember the password.'

'You're not being helpful,' he hissed ... and stopped. And thought. If I kept on forgetting a password, I'd make it damn simple wouldn't I? And what's the most simple thing I could come up
He drew a breath. Third time the charm. 'Password,' he said softly.

'That'd be the one sunshine,' chirped the imp. 'I'm all yours.'

Most words spoken don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world, but every now and then one pops up and changes everything. Usually they're words like Charge, or Stop, or Now, or No or Yes. For a rare moment Password had the chance to join that elite rank. Vimes knew it and so did the room*

* Not the room as such. Rooms aren’t actually all that good at knowing things.

'Right, well let's start with appointments in the calendar for the past month shall we?'

'There's quite a lot,' replied the imp. 'Would you like me to apply any filters?'

'Imp,' said Vimes softly, 'how about you presume I need all the help I can get and that I don't know much about technology and I'll presume I won't stick you in the back of my undergarments drawer for the rest of my life if things don't work out.'

'Right, right, no worries Guv,' said the imp hastily. 'How about we start with the appointments flagged as important.'

'That's better. See, we can get on well. And how about if you look for meetings, especially ones that seem to form a pattern.'

'There is this thing called Miago Meeting. It crops up a fair bit. And it's marked as important.'

'What's the details of the first one of those?'

'Second of Spune. 1 pm. Caveat Temptor.'

'And the next?'

'Fourth of Spune. 10 am. Caveat Temptor.'

'That's enough for now. Lady Regina. Would you be so kind as to share your appointments for those times with the group?' Vimes asked.

Whilst Regina Rust came from a long line of traditionalists who generally despised technology (unless it could be used to, say, lay off workers and save money - that was a totally different matter) Regina was more liberal with her views. Lord Rust would never have used a dis-organiser, but Regina could see the benefits. She glared at Vimes and slowly drew out the device.

'Much appreciated,' said Vimes. 'Just want to clear up one possible line of investigation. Can you please check to see what you were doing at those exact times.'

'Is this necessary, Vetinari?' she said through gritted teeth. 'Are you letting the puppet run the show? He has no respect for authority and does not know his place.'

Vetinari sighed. 'Would it were that simple Lady Rust. You see, there are two Samuel Vimes. There is the one who leads the Watch who may not have any respect but does have civil authority. And then there is His Grace, Sir Samuel Vimes, who has as much aristocratic authority as anyone here, however much he loathes that thought. It is an interesting legal question you ask and I would ask you something in return. Would you prefer this to play out in the more public arena of the
courts, or here and now?'

Regina's look had been cold before. Now it dropped low enough to snap-freeze penguins. She had always been in favour of not giving people choices - for the first time she was finding out what it felt to be 'people'.

'Imp,' she hissed and a moment later a small head popped out. 'What’s the calendar entry for 1 pm on the Second of Spune,' she demanded

'Whirr. Whirr. Whirr. Whirr. Click,' went the Imp. 'Um .... looks to be empty.'

'What?,' cried Vimes. 'Check again.'

'Empty's empty,' the imp replied calmly as though it was used to being yelled at.

'Fourth of Spune, 10 am,' he shouted.

'Whirr. Whizz. Click....did you like that? Added the whizz in for a bit of variety .... change is as good as a holiday, hey .... 10 am you say.... nothing there.'

It made no sense. Vimes knew Lady Rust didn't want him to see the calendar and he knew why. He was gutted and the knife was still in him when Regina twisted it.

'Satisfied, Vetinari?' she snapped. 'What an embarrassment he is to you and the city. This won't be the last you hear about this. He may live in a mansion but he belongs in a kennel.'

'Commander,' Vetinari replied, moving forward to stand next to Vimes, 'much as I deplore the language Lady Rust has used we do seem to have hit a bit of an impasse.'

'You called,' said Lady Regina's disorganiser. 'Oh, sorry, just that's my name Imp-Asse .... not one of the better names, when you think about it but what's in a name?'

'I don’t care what it is,' said Lady Rust, softly. 'You’re just a thing I bought. Why would I bother with a name, Thing?'

To Vimes’s surprise he discovered that it was possible to loath Regina Rust even more. Perhaps the worst kind of evil isn’t inhumanity to others it’s to deny them humanity in the first place.

'It sounds Quirmian,' answered the Patrician with a bemused smile.

'Yeah, and they certainly do things differently there. Sometimes I think they're not just in a different time but a different planet.'

The room had been following this exchange in an off-kilter silence and Vimes had already stormed out of it, metaphorically, when something in the conversation cut through.

'Different time?' he said, cautiously, in case the thought he was having might disappear with sudden movement.

'Oh, yes, it has to be. The sun doesn't hit everywhere at the same moment. Takes its time to get to some places. So you can't have the same time across the Disc. Otherwise you'd have people starting and finishing work at all hours and cocks crowing at midnight. Very occult that, and not in a good way. You have to have time zones. Each place a bit different.'

'Do you know what time is in in different cities around the Disc?'
'Sure do. Of course, it's complex what with the Disc rotating and all, but we keep our time zones up to date.'

'Soooo, what time is it in Ahroma?'

'The time right now is 8 am.'

'Three hours behind?'

'Yep. For this time of year anyway. Would have been the same back in Spune.'

Vimes did a quick calculation. 'Calendar appointment for 4 pm on Second of Spune.'

'Whirr. Click. Private appointment. Caveat Temptor.'

'Fourth of Spune. 1 pm.'

'Whirr. Buzz. Wow. Same again. Private appointment. Caveat Temptor. What are the odds of that!?'

'Surprisingly low, I suspect,' said the Patrician. 'And perhaps it would be useful to have a quick lesson in Brindisi history. Miago was a duke who overthrew the king, back in the day when that country had kings. I wonder why Hattoni called it a Miago Meeting, Regina?'

'That doesn't prove anything Vetinari,' she snarled.

'Oh, I'm sure that in a court of law you could present a convincing case of coincidental dining, but you are not in a court of law. You are in the court of Vetinari, and that court is far less accommodating. I sincerely hope you believe me when I say I can make your life and many others miserable and please don't discount that other other court - the one of public opinion. If they knew you'd supported a foreigner in a coup, then with a prod in the right place you might find that even the common people that you despise can have uncommon power.'

Vimes was in a sort of seventh heaven. He'd loaded the crossbow and the Patrician was happily shooting the bolts. And the man certainly knew about prodding, especially if the word cattle was also involved.

The Patrician's comments sank in like a cannonball through jelly. With the sort of audience he was speaking to it wasn't necessarily relevant to measure time in heartbeats. After long seconds Regina spoke. 'What do you want from us?'

'The new lending institutions that have the hide to call themselves banks. I know you are all behind these and the housing boom. That stops now. I want strict lending conditions in place so only those who can afford to buy a house get a loan.'

'That will dampen the market and discourage investors.'

'Excellent,' said the Patrician. 'All those artists and shysters who aren't working in the financial sector will appreciate the flow of investment money back into the more traditional channels involving hair-regrowth products, the sale of the Ankh Bridge, I believe it’s been months since it was last sold, and the importation of ungents from exotic countries which turn out to have been manufactured in the Shades.'

'That is ... acceptable.'
'Is it now? That holds promise for the remaining conditions then. You will refund any loans you have made to those you know cannot repay them. And to show everyone how community minded you are you will provide free insurance for every property you've loaned money on.'

The uproar that followed this regularly featured such words as impossible, idiotic and because it was that sort of crowd, balderdash and poppycock. The Patrician had a way of waiting that was so substantial it had its own personality. The shore-breakers of outrageous gave way to waves of indignation and then ripples of protestation before finally lapping into silence.

'I'm sure we all feel better for venting,' said Vetinari. 'As you now realise, these conditions are non-negotiable and I am confident you appreciate that matters could have gone considerably worse. Whilst I do not ever have to question the level of your honesty and integrity I am a bit of a stickler for checks and balances. An ombudsman to oversee banking practices will be established with all the authority necessary for them to prosecute any cases of inappropriate behaviour. I thought someone like Moist Von Lipwig could be involved. Nothing like a mostly-reformed conman when it comes to looking out for shysters.'

There is a point in any negotiation when it becomes clear that no matter how much 'neg' you've got left in you the door is closing fast.

'If these are the non-negotiables what is still negotiable?' said a disgruntled voice from the back of the table.

'Aah, of course. An excellent question,' replied the Patrician. 'I have two things to ask of you all. First, what would you like to name the banking watchdog? And how many of you would like tea or coffee?'

There was always wriggle room with the Patrician but as it was often at the end of a long rope it wasn't necessarily advisable to look for it.

'Commander Vimes, at last we have a chance to catch up,' said the Patrician a week later. 'Busy schedule?'

'Mostly for the others, trying to find new ways to keep what really happened from me,' Vimes replied.

'It was ever thus,' replied Vetinari.

Yes, except in your case, thought Vimes. There was never a 'thus' for you, was there? I struggle to see the bigger picture but you hold the paintbrush. He'd had enough of being painted into a corner.

'This has all turned out well for you hasn't it?' Vimes said. The Patrician raised his eyebrows quizzically and waited. No one says something like that as a stand-alone comment. 'The whole Brindisi situation has got your fingerprints all over it,' continued Vimes, on cue. 'When did you first visit there and see what was happening?'

'Are you familiar with the concept of the Grand Sneer?'

Vimes shook his head.

'Understandable really. It's dying out now, and good riddance, though things like this have a habit of surviving under another guise. Young members of the nobility were encouraged to go out and see the world and come back with an appreciation of how much better Ankh Morpork was than
everywhere else. As part of my own journey I visited Brindisi. Even back then I could see the potential for someone like Hattoni.'

'Are you saying you've been planning this since then!?'

'I'm not much for plans,' Vetinari replied, 'but I do like to put things in place. Like those explorers who leave caches of supplies.'

'Except you use people instead. And Isabella was one of these? Surely she wouldn't have been around back then.'

'No, but others were.'

'Do you mean ....' Vimes began and then stopped. He suspected the Patrician let his guard down just a little with him now and again, but he was the Patrician so what he meant was not always open for discussion. 'You made sure over the years that Isabella was at the heart of things. Did you encourage her into that relationship with Hattoni, because that makes you ...'

'Commander Vimes,' the Patrician cut him off. 'Be very careful what you imply. Isabella was raised to be resourceful and independent and many of the decisions she made, however distasteful, were hers and hers alone.'

Vimes nodded. Some ice is so thin it's not there at all. 'And this mythical Patrizio?'

'Have you met him yet?'

'You know,' replied Vimes, slowly, staring into those unreadable eyes, 'I believe I may have. He must have some means to get around quickly, though.'

'Perhaps a fast horse?'

'Perhaps, or something he found out in the library.'

'That's what libraries are there for aren't they? And they tell me you can travel the world in a library as well. Fancy that! Apparently they're also good for the people, or so Lady Ramkin believes. She's become quite passionate about them. I fear we maybe on the cusp of a public library expansion program, which can only lead to a more informed public and we all know how dangerous that can be.'

'So Brindisi is sorted out. The Hattoni power base is broken and Isabella and this mysterious Patrizio are in charge. You even have an ally with Señora Hattoni who looks like she'll be a reforming handful.'

'I don't think anyone sorts out a country, but it is true that things will be somewhat better in Brindisi, at least for a while.'

'And better in Ankh Morpork as a result. Makes your life much easier.'

'Really? Do you think my life ever gets easier Commander? I thought your view of mankind was a lot less ....lollipop than that. But, in one sense, yes, the problem of Hattoni in this city has been resolved satisfactorily.'

'What I don't understand is why you let Hattoni's bedfellows off so easily. You had them over a barrel.'
The Patrician rose from his seat and walked over to the window. 'Look down there, Commander, and tell me what you see,' he said.

Vimes joined him. After a while he replied. 'A city full of people being people. Good. Bad. Wealthy. Poor. Criminals. Law abusers. All struggling to survive and sometimes even live. It's a melting pot. That's Ankh Morpork for you.'

'A melting pot. Yes, that is a good analogy. And with any pot you need to know when to give it a good stir and what stick to use. Why else do you think the Watch and you exist, Commander? I see a vast and complex network, a living thing. With each part, however unlikeable, playing its part. Have you ever wondered why cockroaches were ever created? You have to see the bigger picture to imagine they have any place in the scheme of things.'

'Are you saying the Watch are cockroaches?'

'Heavens no. Mosquitoes at worst. No, Sir Samuel, you are one of the sticks. But if I punished the conspirators in the way you would, what do you think might happen to the city? There would be a power vacuum. Nature and, even more importantly, humans, abhor a vacuum. What would move in to fill its place?'

And how would you control them? thought Vimes. You had to have an ice-cold view of the world to think like that.

'I need Regina Rust and all her cronies until something better emerges. Maybe that day will come - it is not, however, today. But you are right as well. The time has come for a lesson to be learned. They have been playing far too many games and things are out of kilter.

'By the way, how are your investigations going with the tragic death of Jeremy Smythe-Browne?'

This is what the Patrician did. You were just planning your next move and then he shifted to a different board. 'Still progressing, sir,' he replied. 'Been a bit busy of late.'

'I wish you all the best with that case but do not think that his death was in vain or that those behind it will go unpunished. He, Graphite and Leonard da Quirm taught me an important lesson in property market realities. Are you familiar with pyramid selling?'

'Happens over in Djelibebi doesn't it? Never known a country for more pyramids.'

'That is certainly true, though not the avenue of thought I had in mind. Do you recall, then, the Gladioli Craze several years ago?'

Vimes nodded. What a debacle that was. It had begun slowly enough. First you started seeing more of the flowers for sale and then suddenly, at some point, a demand grew for bulbs, and for unusual varieties. He recalled the quest to breed to elusive Black Gladioli. There were crooks and charlatans everywhere, and everyone wanted a piece of the action. When even those with little money to spare had joined in the price of gladioli went through the roof. But what were people really buying? It was just a flower after all. They were buying into the demand. That was where the value lay. You bought a bulb so you could sell it for even more. And then one day somebody said 'But it's just a flower'. In no time the bottom had dropped out of the market and you couldn't give the damn things away. A lot of people had got burnt along the way.

'Now imagine that instead of gladioli bulbs, you were selling, say, houses or land,' asked the Patrician, following his thoughts. 'What would that do to a city when the bubble burst?'

'That's what Jeremy was working on and why they had him killed, isn't it? Those bastards were
squeezing us all for as much money as they could, and somehow they let Hattoni in along the way.’

'Yes, he came for the land, but stayed for the city.'

'So, you made them put protections in place.'

'That was part of the strategy. Do you recall our conversation some time ago about the geology of the region? No? A shame people don't take more of an interest in the ground beneath their feet.'

Vimes frowned again. What did he mean by that? You did a lot of frowning around the Patrician, especially when it came to trying to follow his train of thought. As far as trains go the one that carried the Patrician’s thoughts was a loco-motive, at least to the outsider.

'Tell me Commander, one last question. How is the petty cash tin looking?'

Vimes frowned. How on earth did he do that? 'Seems to have gone temporarily missing.'

'Ah, then things are moving back to normal.'

xxxx

Time passes, but not much. The first sinkhole appeared on the edge of the development, taking two houses under construction with it. Soon houses and land all over the place were disappearing into the deeper below. Countless everyday investors* in the property market would have been ruined if it weren't for the insurance protections that had recently been put in place. In the end it was the lending institutions that took the hit, though not the Bank of Ankh Morpork, which had received some sound financial advice from an outside source. Behind those other lending institutions lay a handful of investors who, try as they might, could not escape their legal obligations. They had enough wealth for most to get through, but not without wounds to lick. Just when things had hit rock bottom, so to speak, the ground under Pellucidar, where the new rich had built their new mansions decided it had also had enough of this 'holding up' gig and followed suit, deep into the Disc crust, taking with it the last vestiges of Hattoni's underground network and a number of surprised moules**. Rumour has it that the survivors established a huge underground world. This is an important purpose of rumour. It gives those with a spirit of adventure and exloration something to keep them busy for years and gives those without the spirit a bit of peace and quiet.

* This included Dibbler, which is why the term innocent was not used the describe the investors and may explain why sometime Justice really needs that blindfold.

** The moule is unique to the Discworld. Normal moles had given up trying to live in coastal areas prone to king tides and other vagaries of the Circle Sea, but a few had taken a shot at evolution. This had given birth, literally, to the moule. Perfectly adapted to burrowing in aquatic areas they had thrived in the Ankh-Morpork region, burrowing right up the Ankh-River but were now sadly in decline because it never pays to evolve in a way that makes you tasty to humans, especially in the company of chips.

Lesson are taught. Prices are paid and the balance shifts. Belief in justice is a recipe for heartbreak, but once in a blue moon it whips up a just dessert.

Just because something is resolved doesn't mean the story ends. You have to look carefully. Begatting isn't exclusively for holy texts.

xxxx

Time passes. Come closer now.
See an ambitious building program in Ahroma as soup kitchens and dog shelters are constructed. Humans and dogs who had forgotten what it had felt like to be needed start to remember and those working in the shelters and soup kitchens discover that happiness is a two-way street. Slowly the city learns that respect comes in all shapes and sizes, and even smells. And the world is a slightly better place.

See public libraries emerging not just in Ahroma but right across Brindisi and even in Ankh Morpork. See an organisation of librarians formed, led by Francesco, who lobby to establish public libraries around the Disc and, most importantly, especially in areas where people can't afford books. Those who have the luxury of being able to eat and read need to support those who don't. This is a story that doesn't end. Those who enter the doors of public libraries go on to write their own stories, and so the begatting continues.

See a bar in Ahroma selling a range of alcohols mixed with fruits. There is no sign of vegetables involved, but there's plenty of evidence of customers. The barman becomes quite famous but he never forgets how this all came about. He still remembers that night with the two customers. He knew they were police. Those who uphold the law have a unique darkness that glows in the general vicinity of alcohol. The barman regularly makes significant contributions to the local constabulary without, and this is the really important part, conditions attached.

See a small one-man police force grow into something much more and for that one man, after a visit to the Ankh Morpork Watch, to become one of the most legendary and cunning law enforcement officers the Disc would ever know. He was not Sam Vimes but even Sam Vimes wouldn't recommend being him. Sam had made, and would continue to make, many mistakes simply by being Sam. He also knew that often the world needed these mistakes to be made so it could get it right the next time round. This was his bed and nobody else had to lie in it (except Sybil, of course). It was Sam's gift to Joe and the gift Joe gave in return was to listen. It is not just the pupil who needs the teacher, Grasshopper.

xxxx

Time passes. Come closer now.

A dog sits at the end of a pier and watched the moon rise. No one but you sees what happens next. A moonbeam drifts up from the ocean surface and falls on her. Here it stays, growing brighter and brighter and for a moment the beam takes on the shape of a giant silver hound.

'Pythia,' says the Hound.

'Hound of Heaven,' replies Pythia.

'What had been foretold has come to pass,' the Hound says softly. 'You and all the Oracles before you have done everything asked of you. This is an ending. What would you ask of me as reward?'

'You know the answer.'

'It is an incredible gift.'

'And an incredible burden.'

'What will you do with the power of prophesy gone? You would no longer be the Oracle.'

'Start living my own life and not the lives of others.'

'Without the ability to see what is happening next?'
'That's what makes it living.'

And so the long line of oracles ended, leaving no one to predict the future of Pythia's choice. Those who find this ironic have totally missed the point.

xxxx

Time passes. Come closer now.

See a figure walking. Somewhere across the Disc. The location, in a geographic sense, does not matter. But the place he is at is a different thing all together.

Once his life had been filled with destinations and he has travelled on the wings of darkness. Now he walked for the sake of walking and saw for the sake of seeing. Darkness came and darkness went but only with the setting and rising of the sun.

Once he had brought consequences and taken souls. Now he brought wonder and took the same in return. Freedom is, after all is said and done, the right to take your own life, and the demon had taken it with both hands.

The best way to leave a mark on the world is to let the world leave a mark on you. Everything else comes next.

How long will this last? Never ask. All things pass and if we are always looking to the future how can we see the present until it becomes the past? Then there would be no time to make music. The world may needs its ants but it also needs grasshoppers, Grasshopper.

xxxx

Time Passes. Come closer now.

It is said Death has the loneliest job in the world. Perhaps, especially since he had begun to take an interest in humanity, this is true. Before then he was just unique. It is humans, in all their teeming millions that created the concept of loneliness. And the loneliest place can be right at the heart. Where comfort has to be found not in small mercies - only the large ones.

The Patrician looked out, alone, from his office as the night fell over the city. Though no-one saw it except the gathering dark, which sees far more than people realise, he smiled.

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