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Guards! Guards!

A NOVEL OF DISCWORLD®

Terry Pratchett

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Dedication

They may be called the Palace Guard, the City Guard, or the Patrol. Whatever the name, their purpose in any work of heroic fantasy is identical: it is, round about Chapter Three (or ten minutes into the film) to rush into the room, attack the hero one at a time, and be slaughtered. No one ever asks them if they wanted to.

This book is dedicated to those fine men.

And also to Mike Harrison, Mary Gentle, Neil Gaiman and all the others who assisted with and laughed at the idea of L-space; too bad we never used Schrödinger's Paperback . . .



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This is where the dragons went.

They lie . . .

Not dead, not asleep. Not waiting, because waiting implies expectation. Possibly the word we're looking for here is . . .

. . . dormant.

And although the space they occupy isn't like normal space, nevertheless they are packed in tightly. Not a cubic inch there but is filled by a claw, a talon, a scale, the tip of a tail, so the effect is like one of those trick drawings and your eyeballs eventually realize that the space between each dragon is, in fact, another dragon.

They could put you in mind of a can of sardines, if you thought sardines were huge and scaly and proud and arrogant.

And presumably, somewhere, there's the key.

In another space entirely, it was early morning in Ankh-Morpork, oldest and greatest and grubbiest of cities. A thin drizzle dripped from the gray sky and punctuated the river mist that coiled among the streets. Rats of various species went about their nocturnal occasions. Under night's damp cloak assassins assassinated, thieves thieved, hussies hustled. And so on.

And drunken Captain Vimes of the Night Watch stag-

gered slowly down the street, folded gently into the gutter outside the Watch House and lay there while, above him, strange letters made of light sizzled in the damp and changed color . . .

The city wasa, wasa, wasa wossname. Thing. *Woman*. Thass what it was. *Woman*. Roaring, ancient, centuries old. Strung you along, let you fall in thingy, love, with her, then kicked you inna, inna, thingy. Thingy, in your mouth. Tongue. Tonsils. *Teeth*. That's what it, she, did. She wasa . . . thing, you know, lady dog. Puppy. Hen. *Bitch*. And then you hated her and, and just when you thought you'd got her, it, out of your, your, whatever, then she opened her great booming rotten heart to you, caught you off bal, bal, bal, thing. *Ance*. Yeah. Thassit. Never knew where where you stood. Lay. Only thing you were sure of, you couldn't let her go. Because, because she was yours, all you had, even in her gutters . . .

Damp darkness shrouded the venerable buildings of Unseen University, premier college of wizardry. The only light was a faint octarine flicker from the tiny windows of the new High Energy Magic building, where keen-edged minds were probing the very fabric of the universe, whether it liked it or not.

And there was light, of course, in the Library.

The Library was the greatest assemblage of magical texts anywhere in the multiverse. Thousands of volumes of occult lore weighted its shelves.

It was said that, since vast amounts of magic can seriously distort the mundane world, the Library did not obey the normal rules of space and time. It was said that it went on *forever*. It was said that you could wander for days among the distant shelves, that there were lost tribes of re-

search students somewhere in there, that strange things lurked in forgotten alcoves and were preyed on by other things that were even stranger.¹

Wise students in search of more distant volumes took care to leave chalk marks on the shelves as they roamed deeper into the fusty darkness, and told friends to come looking for them if they weren't back by supper.

And, because magic can only loosely be bound, the Library books themselves were more than mere pulped wood and paper.

Raw magic crackled from their spines, earthing itself harmlessly in the copper rails nailed to every shelf for that very purpose. Faint trceries of blue fire crawled across the bookcases and there was a sound, a papery whispering, such as might come from a colony of roosting starlings. In the silence of the night the books talked to one another.

There was also the sound of someone snoring.

The light from the shelves didn't so much illuminate as highlight the darkness, but by its violet flicker a watcher might just have identified an ancient and battered desk right under the central dome.

The snoring was coming from underneath it, where a piece of tattered blanket barely covered what looked like a heap of sandbags but was in fact an adult male orangutan.

It was the Librarian.

Not many people these days remarked upon the fact that

¹All this was untrue. The truth is that even big collections of ordinary books distort space, as can readily be proved by anyone who has been around a really old-fashioned secondhand bookshop, one of those that look as though they were designed by M. Escher on a bad day and has more staircases than storeys and those rows of shelves which end in little doors that are surely too small for a full-sized human to enter. The relevant equation is: Knowledge = power = energy = matter = mass; a good bookshop is just a genteel Black Hole that knows how to read.

he was an ape. The change had been brought about by a magical accident, always a possibility where so many powerful books are kept together, and he was considered to have got off lightly. After all, he was still basically the same shape. And he had been allowed to keep his job, which he was rather good at, although “allowed” is not really the right word. It was the way he could roll his upper lip back to reveal more incredibly yellow teeth than any other mouth the University Council had ever seen before that somehow made sure the matter was never really raised.

But now there was another sound, the alien sound of a door creaking open. Footsteps padded across the floor and disappeared among the clustering shelves. The books rustled indignantly, and some of the larger grimoires rattled their chains.

The Librarian slept on, lulled by the whispering of the rain.

In the embrace of his gutter, half a mile away, Captain Vimes of the Night Watch opened his mouth and started to sing.

Now a black-robed figure scurried through the midnight streets, ducking from doorway to doorway, and reached a grim and forbidding portal. No mere doorway got that grim without effort, one felt. It looked as though the architect had been called in and given specific instructions. We want something eldritch in dark oak, he’d been told. So put an unpleasant gargoyle thing over the archway, give it a slam like the footfall of a giant and make it clear to everyone, in fact, that this isn’t the kind of door that goes “ding-dong” when you press the bell.

The figure rapped a complex code on the dark woodwork. A tiny barred hatch opened and one suspicious eye peered out.