

This is a story about magic and where it goes and perhaps more importantly where it comes from and why, although it doesn't pretend to answer all or any of these questions.

It may, however, help to explain why Gandalf never got married and why Merlin was a man. Because this is also a story about sex, although probably not in the athletic, tumbling, count-the-legs-and-divide-by-two sense unless the characters get totally beyond the author's control. They might.

However, it is primarily a story about a world. Here it comes now. Watch closely, the special effects are quite expensive.

A bass note sounds. It is a deep, vibrating chord that hints that the brass section may break in at any moment with a fanfare for the cosmos, because the scene is the blackness of deep space with a few stars glittering like the dandruff on the shoulders of God.

Then it comes into view overhead, bigger than the biggest, most unpleasantly-armed starcruiser in the imagination of a three-ring film-maker: a turtle, ten thousand miles long. It is Great A'Tuin, one of the rare astrochelonians from a universe where things are less as they are and more like people imagine them to be, and it carries on its meteor-pocked shell four giant elephants who bear on their enormous shoulders the great round wheel of the Discworld.

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As the viewpoint swings around, the whole of the world can be seen by the light of its tiny orbiting sun. There are continents, archipelagos, seas, deserts, mountain ranges and even a tiny central ice cap. The inhabitants of this place, it is obvious, won't have any truck with global theories. Their world, bounded by an encircling ocean that falls forever into space in one long waterfall, is as round and flat as a geological pizza, although without the anchovies.

A world like that, which exists only because the gods enjoy a joke, must be a place where magic can survive. And sex too, of course.

He came walking through the thunderstorm and you could tell he was a wizard, partly because of the long cloak and carven staff but mainly because the raindrops were stopping several feet from his head, and steaming.

It was good thunderstorm country, up here in the Ramtop Mountains, a country of jagged peaks, dense forests and little river valleys so deep the daylight had no sooner reached the bottom than it was time to leave again. Ragged wisps of cloud clung to the lesser peaks below the mountain trail along which the wizard slithered and slid. A few slot-eyed goats watched him with mild interest. It doesn't take a lot to interest goats.

Sometimes he would stop and throw his heavy staff into the air. It always came down pointing the same way and the wizard would sigh, pick it up, and continue his squelchy progress.

The storm walked around the hills on legs of lightning, shouting and grumbling.

The wizard disappeared around the bend in the track and the goats went back to their damp grazing.

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Until something else caused them to look up. They stiffened, their eyes widening, their nostrils flaring.

This was strange, because there was nothing on the path. But the goats still watched it pass by until it was out of sight.

There was a village tucked in a narrow valley between steep woods. It wasn't a large village, and wouldn't have shown up on a map of the mountains. It barely showed up on a map of the village.

It was, in fact, one of those places that exist merely so that people can have come from them. The universe is littered with them: hidden villages, windswept little towns under wide skies, isolated cabins on chilly mountains, whose only mark on history is to be the incredibly ordinary place where something extraordinary started to happen. Often there is no more than a little plaque to reveal that, against all gynaecological probability, someone very famous was born halfway up a wall.

Mist curled between the houses as the wizard crossed a narrow bridge over the swollen stream and made his way to the village smithy, although the two facts had nothing to do with one another. The mist would have curled anyway: it was experienced mist and had got curling down to a fine art.

The smithy was fairly crowded, of course. A smithy is one place where you can depend on finding a good fire and someone to talk to. Several villagers were lounging in the warm shadows but, as the wizard approached, they sat up expectantly and tried to look intelligent, generally with indifferent success.

The smith didn't feel the need to be quite so subservient. He nodded at the wizard, but it was a greeting between equals, or at least between equals as far as the smith was

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concerned. After all, any halfway competent blacksmith has more than a nodding acquaintance with magic, or at least likes to think he has.

The wizard bowed. A white cat that had been sleeping by the furnace woke up and watched him carefully.

‘What is the name of this place, sir?’ said the wizard.

The blacksmith shrugged.

‘Bad Ass,’ he said.

‘Bad—?’

‘Ass,’ repeated the blacksmith, his tone defying anyone to make something of it.

The wizard considered this.

‘A name with a story behind it,’ he said at last, ‘which were circumstances otherwise I would be pleased to hear. But I would like to speak to you, smith, about your son.’

‘Which one?’ said the smith, and the hangers-on sniggered. The wizard smiled.

‘You have seven sons, do you not? And you yourself were an eighth son?’

The smith’s face stiffened. He turned to the other villagers.

‘All right, the rain’s stopping,’ he said. ‘Piss off, the lot of you. Me and—’ he looked at the wizard with raised eyebrows.

‘Drum Billet,’ said the wizard.

‘Me and Mr Billet have things to talk about.’ He waved his hammer vaguely and, one after another, craning over their shoulders in case the wizard did anything interesting, the audience departed.

The smith drew a couple of stools from under a bench. He took a bottle out of a cupboard by the water tank and poured a couple of very small glasses of clear liquid.

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The two men sat and watched the rain and the mist rolling over the bridge. Then the smith said: 'I know what son you mean. Old Granny is up with my wife now. Eighth son of an eighth son, of course. It did cross my mind but I never gave it much thought, to be honest. Well, well. A wizard in the family, eh?'

'You catch on very quickly,' said Billet. The white cat jumped down from its perch, sauntered across the floor and vaulted into the wizard's lap, where it curled up. His thin fingers stroked it absent-mindedly.

'Well, well,' said the smith again. 'A wizard in Bad Ass, eh?'

'Possibly, possibly,' said Billet. 'Of course, he'll have to go to University first. He may do very well, of course.'

The smith considered the idea from all angles, and decided he liked it a lot. A thought struck him.

'Hang on,' he said. 'I'm trying to remember what my father told me. A wizard who knows he's going to die can sort of pass on his sort of wizardness to a sort of successor, right?'

'I have never heard it put so succinctly, yes,' said the wizard.

'So you're going to sort of die?'

'Oh yes.' The cat purred as the fingers tickled it behind the ear.

The smith looked embarrassed. 'When?'

The wizard thought for a moment. 'In about six minutes time.'

'Oh.'

'Don't worry,' said the wizard. 'I'm quite looking forward to it, to tell you the truth. I've heard it's quite painless.'

The blacksmith considered this. 'Who told you?' he said at last.

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The wizard pretended not to hear him. He was watching the bridge, looking for tell-tale turbulence in the mist.

'Look,' said the smith. 'You'd better tell me how we go about bringing up a wizard, you see, because there isn't a wizard in these parts and—'

'It will all sort itself out,' said Billet pleasantly. 'The magic has guided me to you and the magic will take care of everything. It usually does. Did I hear a cry?'

The blacksmith looked at the ceiling. Above the splash of the rain he could make out the sound of a pair of new lungs at full bore.

The wizard smiled. 'Have him brought down here,' he said.

The cat sat up and looked interestedly at the forge's wide doorway. As the smith called excitedly up the stairs it jumped down and padded slowly across the floor, purring like a bandsaw.

A tall white-haired woman appeared at the bottom of the stairs, clutching a bundle in a blanket. The smith hurried her over to where the wizard sat.

'But—' she began.

'This is very important,' said the smith importantly. 'What do we do now, sir?'

The wizard held up his staff. It was man-high and nearly as thick as his wrist, and covered with carvings that seemed to change as the smith looked at them, exactly as if they didn't want him to see what they were.

'The child must hold it,' said Drum Billet. The smith nodded and fumbled in the blanket until he located a tiny pink hand. He guided it gently to the wood. It gripped it tightly

'But—' said the midwife.

'It's all right, Granny, I know what I'm about. She's a

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witch, sir, don't mind her. Right,' said the smith. 'Now what?'

The wizard was silent.

'What do we do n—' the smith began, and stopped. He leaned down to look at the old wizard's face. Billet was smiling, but it was anyone's guess what the joke was.

The smith pushed the baby back into the arms of the frantic midwife. Then, as respectfully as possible, he unpried the thin, pale fingers from the staff.

It had a strange, greasy feel, like static electricity. The wood itself was almost black, but the carvings were slightly lighter, and hurt the eyes if you tried to make out precisely what they were supposed to be.

'Are you pleased with yourself?' said the midwife.

'Eh? Oh. Yes. As a matter of fact, yes. Why?'

She twitched aside a fold of the blanket. The smith looked down, and swallowed.

'No,' he whispered. 'He said—'

'And what would *he* know about it?' sneered Granny.

'But he said it would be a son!'

'Doesn't look like a son to me, laddie.'

The smith flopped down on his stool, his head in his hands.

'What have I done?' he moaned.

'You've given the world its first female wizard,' said the midwife. 'Whosa itsywitsy, den?'

'What?'

'I was talking to the *baby*.'

The white cat purred and arched its back as if it was rubbing up against the legs of an old friend. Which was odd, because there was no one there.

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'I was foolish,' said a voice in tones no mortal could hear. 'I assumed the magic would know what it was doing.'

PERHAPS IT DOES.

'If only I could do something ...'

THERE IS NO GOING BACK. THERE IS NO GOING BACK, said the deep, heavy voice like the closing of crypt doors.

The wisp of nothingness that was Drum Billet thought for a while.

'But she's going to have a lot of problems.'

THAT'S WHAT LIFE IS ALL ABOUT. SO I'M TOLD. I WOULDN'T KNOW, OF COURSE.

'What about reincarnation?'

Death hesitated.

YOU WOULDN'T LIKE IT, he said. TAKE IT FROM ME.

'I've heard that some people do it all the time.'

YOU'VE GOT TO BE TRAINED TO IT. YOU'VE GOT TO START OFF SMALL AND WORK UP. YOU'VE NO IDEA HOW HORRIBLE IT IS TO BE AN ANT.

'It's bad?'

YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE IT. AND WITH YOUR KARMA AN ANT IS TOO MUCH TO EXPECT.

The baby had been taken back to its mother and the smith sat disconsolately watching the rain.

Drum Billet scratched the cat behind its ears and thought about his life. It had been a long one, that was one of the advantages of being a wizard, and he'd done a lot of things he hadn't always felt good about. It was about time that ...

I HAVEN'T GOT ALL DAY, YOU KNOW, said Death, reproachfully.

The wizard looked down at the cat and realized for the first time how odd it looked now.

The living often don't appreciate how complicated the

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world looks when you are dead, because while death frees the mind from the straitjacket of three dimensions it also cuts it away from Time, which is only another dimension. So while the cat that rubbed up against his invisible legs was undoubtedly the same cat that he had seen a few minutes before, it was also quite clearly a tiny kitten and a fat, half-blind old moggy and every stage in between. All at once. Since it had started off small it looked like a white, catshaped carrot, a description that will have to do until people invent proper four-dimensional adjectives.

Death's skeletal hand tapped Billet gently on the shoulder.

COME AWAY, MY SON.

'There's nothing I can do?'

LIFE IS FOR THE LIVING. ANYWAY, YOU'VE GIVEN HER YOUR STAFF.

'Yes. There is that.'

The midwife's name was Granny Weatherwax. She was a witch. That was quite acceptable in the Ramtops, and no one had a bad word to say about witches. At least, not if he wanted to wake up in the morning the same shape as he went to bed.

The smith was still staring gloomily at the rain when she came back down the stairs and clapped a warty hand on his shoulder.

He looked up at her.

'What shall I do, Granny?' he said, unable to keep the pleading out of his voice.

'What have you done with the wizard?'

'I put him out in the fuel store. Was that right?'

'It'll do for now,' she said briskly. 'And now you must burn the staff.'

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They both turned to stare at the heavy staff, which the smith had propped in the forge's darkest corner. It almost appeared to be looking back at them.

'But it's magical,' he whispered.

'Well?'

'Will it burn?'

'Never knew wood that didn't.'

'It doesn't seem right!'

Granny Weatherwax swung shut the big doors and turned to him angrily.

'Now you listen to me, Gordo Smith!' she said. 'Female wizards aren't right either! It's the wrong kind of magic for women, is wizard magic, it's all books and stars and jommetry. She'd never grasp it. Whoever heard of a female wizard?'

'There's witches,' said the smith uncertainly. 'And enchantresses too, I've heard.'

'Witches is a different thing altogether,' snapped Granny Weatherwax. 'It's magic out of the ground, not out of the sky, and men never could get the hang of it. As for enchantresses,' she added. 'They're no better than they should be. You take it from me, just burn the staff, bury the body and don't let on it ever happened.'

Smith nodded reluctantly, crossed over to the forge, and pumped the bellows until the sparks flew. He went back for the staff.

It wouldn't move.

'It won't move!'

Sweat stood out on his brow as he tugged at the wood. It remained unco-operatively immobile.

'Here, let me try,' said Granny, and reached past him. There was a snap and a smell of scorched tin.

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Smith ran across the forge, whimpering slightly, to where Granny had landed upside down against the opposite wall.

'Are you all right?'

She opened two eyes like angry diamonds and said, 'I see. That's the way of it, is it?'

'The way of what?' said Smith, totally bewildered.

'Help me up, you fool. And fetch me a chopper.'

The tone of her voice suggested that it would be a very good idea not to disobey. Smith rummaged desperately among the junk at the back of the forge until he found an old double-headed axe.

'Right. Now take off your apron.'

'Why? What do you intend to do?' said the smith, who was beginning to lose his grip on events. Granny gave an exasperated sigh.

'It's leather, you idiot. I'm going to wrap it around the handle. It'll not catch me the same way twice!'

Smith struggled out of the heavy leather apron and handed it to her very gingerly. She wrapped it around the axe and made one or two passes in the air. Then, a spiderlike figure in the glow of the nearly incandescent furnace, she stalked across the room and with a grunt of triumph and effort brought the heavy blade sweeping down right in the centre of the staff.

There was a click. There was a noise like a partridge. There was a thud.

There was silence.

Smith reached up very slowly, without moving his head, and touched the axe blade. It wasn't on the axe any more. It had buried itself in the door by his head, taking a tiny nick out of his ear.

Granny stood looking slightly blurred from hitting an

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absolutely immovable object, and stared at the stub of wood in her hands.

'Rrrrrightttt,' she stuttered. 'Iiiinnn tthhatttt ccasseee—'

'No,' said Smith firmly, rubbing his ear. 'Whatever it is you're going to suggest, no. Leave it. I'll pile some stuff around it. No one'll notice. Leave it. It's just a stick.'

'Just a stick?'

'Have you got any better ideas? Ones that won't take my head off?'

She glared at the staff, which appeared not to notice.

'Not right now,' she admitted. 'But you just give me time—'

'All right, all right. Anyway, I've got things to do, wizards to bury, you know how it is.'

Smith took a spade from beside the back door and hesitated.

'Granny.'

'What?'

'Do you know how wizards like to be buried?'

'Yes!'

'Well, how?'

Granny Weatherwax paused at the bottom of the stairs.

'Reluctantly.'

Later, night fell gently as the last of the world's slow light flowed out of the valley, and a pale, rain-washed moon shone down in a night studded with stars. And in a shadowy orchard behind the forge there was the occasional clink of a spade or a muffled curse.

In the cradle upstairs the world's first female wizard dreamed of nothing much.

The white cat lay half-asleep on its private ledge near the furnace. The only sound in the warm dark forge was the crackle of the coals as they settled down under the ash.

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The staff stood in the corner, where it wanted to be, wrapped in shadows that were slightly blacker than shadows normally are.

Time passed, which, basically, is its job.

There was a faint tinkle, and a swish of air. After a while the cat sat up and watched with interest.

Dawn came. Up here in the Ramtops dawn was always impressive, especially when a storm had cleared the air. The valley occupied by Bad Ass overlooked a panorama of lesser mountains and foothills, coloured purple and orange in the early morning light that flowed gently over them (because light travels at a dilatory pace in the Disc's vast magical field) and far off the great plains were still a puddle of shadows. Even further off the sea gave an occasional distant sparkle.

In fact, from here you could see right to the edge of the world.

That wasn't poetic imagery but plain fact, since the world was quite definitely flat and was, furthermore, known to be carried through space on the backs of four elephants that in turn stood on the shell of Great A'Tuin, the Great Sky Turtle.

Back down there in Bad Ass the village is waking up. The smith has just gone into the forge and found it tidier than it has been for the last hundred years, with all the tools back in their right places, the floor swept and a new fire laid in the furnace. He is sitting on the anvil, which has been moved right across the room, and is watching the staff and is trying to think.

Nothing much happened for seven years, except that one of the apple trees in the smithy orchard grew perceptibly taller

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than the others and was frequently climbed by a small girl with brown hair, a gap in her front teeth, and the sort of features that promised to become, if not beautiful, then at least attractively interesting.

She was named Eskarina, for no particular reason other than that her mother liked the sound of the word, and although Granny Weatherwax kept a careful watch on her she failed to spot any signs of magic whatsoever. It was true that the girl spent more time climbing trees and running around shouting than little girls normally did, but a girl with four older brothers still at home can be excused a lot of things. In fact, the witch began to relax and started to think the magic had not taken hold after all.

But magic has a habit of lying low, like a rake in the grass.

Winter came round again, and it was a bad one. The clouds hung around the Ramtops like big fat sheep, filling the gulleys with snow and turning the forests into silent, gloomy caverns. The high passes were closed and the caravans wouldn't come again until spring. Bad Ass became a little island of heat and light.

Over breakfast Esk's mother said: 'I'm worried about Granny Weatherwax. She hasn't been around lately.'

Smith looked at her over his porridge spoon.

'I'm not complaining,' he said. 'She—'

'She's got a long nose,' said Esk.

Her parents glared at her.

'There's no call to make that kind of remark,' said her mother sternly.

'But father said she's always poking her—'

'Eskarina!'

'But he said—'

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'I said—'

'Yes, but, he *did* say that she had—'

Smith reached down and slapped her. It wasn't very hard, and he regretted it instantly. The boys got the flat of his hand and occasionally the length of his belt whenever they deserved it. The trouble with his daughter, though, was not ordinary naughtiness but the infuriating way she had of relentlessly pursuing the thread of an argument long after she should have put it down. It always flustered him.

She burst into tears. Smith stood up, angry and embarrassed at himself, and stumped off to the forge.

There was a loud crack, and a thud.

They found him out cold on the floor. Afterwards *he* always maintained that he'd hit his head on the doorway. Which was odd, because he wasn't very tall and there had always been plenty of room before, but he was certain that whatever happened had nothing to do with the blur of movement from the forge's darkest corner.

Somehow the events set the seal on the day. It became a broken crockery day, a day of people getting under each other's feet and being peevish. Esk's mother dropped a jug that had belonged to her grandmother and a whole box of apples in the loft turned out to be mouldy. In the forge the furnace went sullen and refused to draw. Jaims, the oldest son, slipped on the packed ice in the road and hurt his arm. The white cat, or possibly one of its descendants, since the cats led a private and complicated life of their own in the hayloft next to the forge, went and climbed up the chimney in the scullery and refused to come down. Even the sky pressed in like an old mattress, and the air felt stuffy, despite the snow.

Frayed nerves and boredom and bad temper made the air hum like thunderstorm weather.