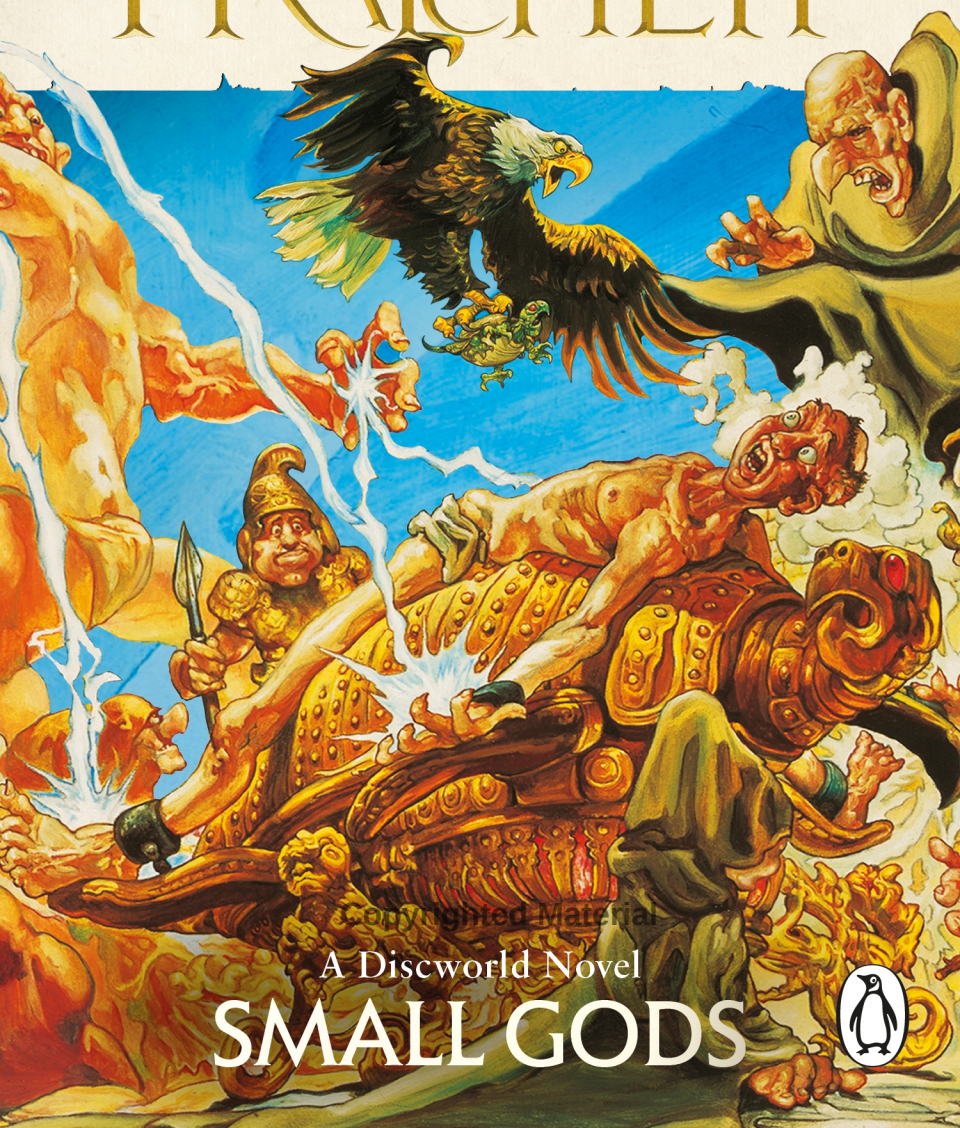


TERRY PRATCHETT



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A Discworld Novel

SMALL GODS



INTRODUCING DISCWORLD

The Discworld is a world not totally unlike our own, except that it is flat, and magic is as integral as gravity to the way it works. Though some of its inhabitants are witches, dwarfs, wizards and even policemen, their stories are fundamentally about people being people.

The Discworld novels can be read in any order, but *Small Gods* is a good place to start.

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SMALL GODS

A Discworld® Novel

Terry Pratchett



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Now consider the tortoise and the eagle.

The tortoise is a ground-living creature. It is impossible to live nearer the ground without being under it. Its horizons are a few inches away. It has about as good a turn of speed as you need to hunt down a lettuce. It has survived while the rest of evolution flowed past it by being, on the whole, no threat to anyone and too much trouble to eat.

And then there is the eagle. A creature of the air and high places, whose horizons go all the way to the edge of the world. Eyesight keen enough to spot the rustle of some small and squeaky creature half a mile away. All power, all control. Lightning death on wings. Talons and claws enough to make a meal of anything smaller than it is and at least take a hurried snack out of anything bigger.

And yet the eagle will sit for hours on the crag and survey the kingdoms of the world until it spots a distant movement and then it will focus, focus, *focus* on the small shell wobbling among the bushes down there on the desert. And it will *leap* . . .

And a minute later the tortoise finds the world dropping away from it. And it sees the world for the first time, no longer one inch from the ground but

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five hundred feet above it, and it thinks: what a great friend I have in the eagle.

And then the eagle lets go.

And almost always the tortoise plunges to its death. Everyone knows why the tortoise does this. Gravity is a habit that is hard to shake off. No one knows why the eagle does this. There's good eating on a tortoise but, considering the effort involved, there's much better eating on practically anything else. It's simply the delight of eagles to torment tortoises.

But of course, what the eagle does not realize is that it is participating in a very crude form of natural selection.

One day a tortoise will learn how to fly.

The story takes place in desert lands, in shades of umber and orange. When it begins and ends is more problematical, but at least one of its beginnings took place above the snowline, thousands of miles away in the mountains around the Hub.*

One of the recurring philosophical questions is:

'Does a falling tree in the forest make a sound when there is no one to hear?'

Which says something about the nature of philosophers, because there is always someone in a forest. It may only be a badger, wondering what that cracking noise was, or a squirrel a bit puzzled by all the scenery going upwards, but *someone*. At the very least, if it was deep enough in the forest, millions of small gods would have heard it.

*Or, if you are a believer in Christianity, the hole.

Things just happen, one after another. They don't care who knows. But *history* . . . ah, history is different. History has to be observed. Otherwise it's not history. It's just . . . well, things happening one after another.

And, of course, it has to be controlled. Otherwise it might turn into anything. Because history, contrary to popular theories, is kings and dates and battles. And these things have to happen at the right time. This is difficult. In a chaotic universe there are too many things to go wrong. It's too easy for a general's horse to lose a shoe at the wrong time, or for someone to mishear an order, or for the carrier of the vital message to be waylaid by some men with sticks and a cash flow problem. Then there are wild stories, parasitic growths on the tree of history, trying to bend it their way.

So history has its caretakers.

They live . . . well, in the nature of things they live wherever they are sent, but their *spiritual* home is in a hidden valley in the high Ramtops of the Discworld, where the books of history are kept.

These aren't books in which the events of the past are pinned like so many butterflies to a cork. These are the books from which history is derived. There are more than twenty thousand of them; each one is ten feet high, bound in lead, and the letters are so small that they have to be read with a magnifying glass.

When people say 'It is written . . .' it is written *here*.

There are fewer metaphors around than people think.

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Every month the abbot and two senior monks go into the cave where the books are kept. It used to be the duty of the abbot alone, but two other reliable monks were included after the unfortunate case of the 59th Abbot, who made a million dollars in small bets before his fellow monks caught up with him.

Besides, it's dangerous to go in alone. The sheer concentratedness of History, sleeting past soundlessly out into the world, can be overwhelming. Time is a drug. Too much of it kills you.

The 493rd Abbot folded his wrinkled hands and addressed Lu-Tze, one of his most senior monks. The clear air and untroubled life of the secret valley was such that all the monks were senior; besides, when you work with Time every day, some of it tends to rub off.

'The place is Omnia,' said the abbot, 'on the Klatchian coast.'

'I remember,' said Lu-Tze. 'Young fellow called Ossory, wasn't there?'

'Things must be . . . *carefully observed*,' said the abbot. 'There are pressures. Free will, predestination . . . the power of symbols . . . turning-point . . . you know all about this.'

'Haven't been to Omnia for, oh, must be seven hundred years,' said Lu-Tze. 'Dry place. Shouldn't think there's a ton of good soil in the whole country, either.'

'Off you go, then,' said the abbot.

'I shall take my mountains,' said Lu-Tze. 'The climate will be good for them.'

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And he also took his broom and his sleeping mat. The history monks don't go in for possessions. They find most things wear out in a century or two.

It took him four years to get to Omnia. He had to watch a couple of battles and an assassination on the way, otherwise they would just have been random events.

It was the Year of the Notional Serpent, or two hundred years after the Declaration of the Prophet Abbys.

Which meant that the time of the 8th Prophet was imminent.

That was the reliable thing about the Church of the Great God Om. It had very punctual prophets. You could set your calendar by them, if you had one big enough.

And, as is generally the case around the time a prophet is expected, the Church redoubled its efforts to be holy. This was very much like the bustle you get in any large concern when the auditors are expected, but tended towards taking people suspected of being less holy and putting them to death in a hundred ingenious ways. This is considered a reliable barometer of the state of one's piety in most of the really popular religions. There's a tendency to declare that there is more backsliding around than in the national toboggan championships, that heresy must be torn out root and branch, and even arm and leg and eye and tongue, and that it's time to wipe the slate clean. Blood is generally considered very efficient for this purpose.

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* * *

And it came to pass that in that time the Great God Om spake unto Brutha, the Chosen One:

‘Psst!’

Brutha paused in mid-hoe and stared around the Temple garden.

‘Pardon?’ he said.

It was a fine day early in the lesser Spring. The prayer mills spun merrily in the breeze off the mountains. Bees loafed around in the bean blossoms, but buzzed fast in order to give the impression of hard work. High above, a lone eagle circled.

Brutha shrugged, and got back to the melons.

Yea, the Great God Om spake again unto Brutha, the Chosen One:

‘Psst!’

Brutha hesitated. Someone had definitely spoken to him from out of the air. Perhaps it was a demon. Novice master Brother Nhumrod was hot on the subject of demons. Impure thoughts and demons. One led to the other. Brutha was uncomfortably aware that he was probably overdue a demon.

The thing to do was to be resolute and repeat the Nine Fundamental Aphorisms.

Once more the Great God Om spake unto Brutha, the Chosen One:

‘Are you deaf, boy?’

The hoe thudded on to the baking soil. Brutha spun around. There were the bees, the eagle and, at the far end of the garden, old Brother Lu-Tze dreamily forking over the dung heap. The prayer mills whirled reassuringly along the walls.

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He made the sign with which the Prophet Ishkible had cast out spirits.

‘Get thee behind me, demon,’ he muttered.

‘I *am* behind you.’

Brutha turned again, slowly. The garden was still empty.

He fled.

Many stories start long before they begin, and Brutha’s story had its origins thousands of years before his birth.

There are billions of gods in the world. They swarm as thick as herring roe. Most of them are too small to see and never get worshipped, at least by anything bigger than bacteria, who never say their prayers and don’t demand much in the way of miracles.

They are the small gods – the spirits of places where two ant trails cross, the gods of microclimates down between the grass roots. And most of them stay that way.

Because what they lack is *belief*.

A handful, though, go on to greater things. Anything may trigger it. A shepherd, seeking a lost lamb, finds it among the briars and takes a minute or two to build a small cairn of stones in general thanks to whatever spirits might be around the place. Or a peculiarly shaped tree becomes associated with a cure for disease. Or someone carves a spiral on an isolated stone. Because what gods need is belief, and what humans want is gods.

Often it stops there. But sometimes, it goes further. More rocks are added, more stones are raised,

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a temple is built on the site where the tree once stood. The god grows in strength, the belief of its worshippers raising it upwards like a thousand tons of rocket fuel. For a very few, the sky's the limit.

And, sometimes, not even that.

Brother Nhumrod was wrestling with impure thoughts in the privacy of his severe cell when he heard the fervent voice from the novitiates' dormitory.

The Brutha boy was flat on his face in front of a statue of Om in His manifestation as a thunderbolt, shaking and gabbling fragments of prayer.

There was something creepy about that boy, Nhumrod thought. It was the way he looked at you when you were talking, as if he was *listening*.

He wandered out and prodded the prone youth with the end of his cane.

'Get up, boy! What do you think you're doing in the dormitory in the middle of the day? Mmm?'

Brutha managed to spin around while still flat on the floor and grasped the priest's ankles.

'Voice! A voice! It *spoke* to me!' he wailed.

Nhumrod breathed out. Ah. This was familiar ground. Voices were right up Nhumrod's cloister. He heard them all the time.

'Get up, boy,' he said, slightly more kindly.

Brutha got to his feet.

He was, as Nhumrod had complained before, too old to be a proper novice. About ten years too old. Give me a boy up to the age of seven, Nhumrod had always said. **Copyrighted Material**

But Brutha was going to die a novice. When they made the rules, they'd never allowed for anything like Brutha.

His big red honest face stared up at the novice master.

'Sit down on your bed, Brutha,' said Nhumrod.

Brutha obeyed immediately. Brutha did not know the meaning of the word disobedience. It was only one of a large number of words he didn't know the meaning of.

Nhumrod sat down beside him.

'Now, Brutha,' he said, 'you know what happens to people who tell falsehoods, don't you?'

Brutha nodded, blushing.

'Very well. Now tell me about these voices.'

Brutha twisted the hem of his robe in his hands.

'It was more like one voice, master,' he said.

'—like one voice,' said Brother Nhumrod. 'And what did this voice say? Mmm?'

Brutha hesitated. Now he came to think about it, the voice hadn't *said* anything very much. It had just spoken. It was in any case hard to talk to Brother Nhumrod, who had a nervous habit of squinting at the speaker's lips and repeating the last few words they said practically as they said them. He also touched things all the time – walls, furniture, people – as if he was afraid the universe would disappear if he didn't keep hold of it. And he had so many nervous tics that they had to queue. Brother Nhumrod was perfectly normal for someone who had survived in the Citadel for fifty years.

'Well . . .' Brutha began.

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Brother Nhumrod held up a skinny hand. Brutha could see the pale blue veins in it.

‘And I am sure you know that there are *two* kinds of voice that are heard by the spiritual,’ said the master of novices. One eyebrow began to twitch.

‘Yes, master. Brother Murduck told us that,’ said Brutha, meekly.

‘—told us that. Yes. Sometimes, as He in His infinite wisdom sees fit, the God speaks to a chosen one and he becomes a great prophet,’ said Nhumrod. ‘Now, I am sure you wouldn’t presume to consider yourself one of them? Mmm?’

‘No, master.’

‘—master. But there are *other* voices,’ said Brother Nhumrod, and now his voice had a slight tremolo, ‘beguiling and wheedling and persuasive voices, yes? Voices that are always waiting to catch us off our guard?’

Brutha relaxed. This was more familiar ground.

All the novices knew about *those* kinds of voices. Except that usually they talked about fairly straightforward things, like the pleasures of night-time manipulation and the general desirability of girls. Which showed that they were novices when it came to voices. Brother Nhumrod got the kind of voices that were, by comparison, a full oratorio. Some of the bolder novices liked to get Brother Nhumrod talking on the subject of voices. He was an education, they said. Especially when little bits of white spit appeared at the corners of his mouth.

Brutha listened.

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Brother Nhumrod was the novice master, but he wasn't *the* novice master. He was only master of the group that included Brutha. There were others. Possibly someone in the Citadel knew how many there were. There was someone somewhere whose job it was to know *everything*.

The Citadel occupied the whole of the heart of the city of Kom, in the lands between the deserts of Klatch and the plains and jungles of Howondaland. It extended for miles, its temples, churches, schools, dormitories, gardens and towers growing into and around one another in a way that suggested a million termites all trying to build their mounds at the same time.

When the sun rose the reflection of the doors of the central Temple blazed like fire. They were bronze, and a hundred feet tall. On them, in letters of gold set in lead, were the Commandments. There were five hundred and twelve so far, and doubtless the next prophet would add his share.

The sun's reflected glow shone down and across the tens of thousands of the strong-in-faith who laboured below for the greater glory of the Great God Om.

Probably no one *did* know how many of them there were. Some things have a way of going critical. Certainly there was only one Cenobiarch, the Superior Iam. That was certain. And six Archpriests. And thirty lesser Iams. And hundreds of bishops, deacons, sub-deacons and priests. And novices like rats in a grain store. And craftsmen, and bull breeders, and torturers, and Vestigial Virgins.

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No matter what your skills, there was a place for you in the Citadel.

And if your skill lay in asking the wrong kinds of questions or losing the righteous kind of wars, the place might just be the furnaces of purity, or the Quisition's pits of justice.

A place for everyone. And everyone in their place.

The sun beat down on the temple garden.

The Great God Om tried to stay in the shade of a melon vine. He was probably safe here, here inside these walls and with the prayer towers all around, but you couldn't be too careful. He'd been lucky once, but it was asking too much to expect to be lucky again.

The trouble with being a god is that you've got no one to pray to.

He crawled forward purposefully towards the old man shovelling muck until, after much exertion, he judged himself to be within earshot.

He spake thusly: 'Hey, you!'

There was no answer. There was not even any suggestion that anything had been heard.

Om lost his temper and turned Lu-Tze into a lowly worm in the deepest cesspit of hell, and then got even more angry when the old man went on peacefully shovelling.

'The devils of infinity fill your living bones with sulphur!' he screamed.

This did not make a great deal of difference.

'Deaf old bugger,' muttered the Great God Om.

Or perhaps there was someone who *did* know all there was to be known about the Citadel. There's always someone who collects knowledge, not because of a love of the stuff but in the same way that a magpie collects glitter or a caddis fly collects little bits of twigs and rock. And there's always someone who has to do all those things that need to be done but which other people would rather not do or, even, acknowledge existed.

The third thing the people noticed about Vorbis was his height. He was well over six feet tall, but stick-thin, like a normal proportioned person modelled in clay by a child and then rolled out.

The second thing that people noticed about Vorbis was his eyes. His ancestors had come from one of the deep desert tribes that had evolved the peculiar trait of having dark eyes – not just dark of pupil, but almost black of eyeball. It made it very hard to tell where he was looking. It was as if he had sunglasses on under his skin.

But the first thing they noticed was his skull.

Deacon Vorbis was bald by design. Most of the Church's ministers, as soon as they were ordained, cultivated long hair and beards that you could lose a goat in. But Vorbis shaved all over. He gleamed. And lack of hair seemed to add to his power. He didn't menace. He never threatened. He just gave everyone the feeling that his personal space radiated several metres from his body, and that anyone approaching Vorbis was intruding on something important. Superiors fifty years his senior felt apologetic about interrupting whatever it was he was thinking about.

It was almost impossible to know what he was thinking about and no one ever asked. The most obvious reason for this was that Vorbis was the head of the Quisition, whose job it was to do all those things that needed to be done and which other people would rather not do.

You do not ask people like that what they are thinking about in case they turn around very slowly and say ‘You’.

The highest post that could be held in the Quisition was that of deacon, a rule instituted hundreds of years ago to prevent this branch of the Church becoming too big for its boots.* But with a mind like his, everyone said, he could easily be an archpriest by now, or even an Iam.

Vorbis didn’t worry about that kind of trivia. Vorbis knew his destiny. Hadn’t the God himself told him?

‘There,’ said Brother Nhumrod, patting Brutha on the shoulder. ‘I’m sure you will see things clearer now.’

Brutha felt that a specific reply was expected.

‘Yes, master,’ he said. ‘I’m sure I shall.’

‘—shall. It is your holy duty to resist the voices at all times,’ said Nhumrod, still patting.

‘Yes, master. I will. Especially if they tell me to do any of the things you mentioned.’

‘—mentioned. Good. Good. And if you hear them again, what will you do? Mmm?’

*Which were of the one-size-fits-all-tighten-the-screws variety.

‘Come and tell you,’ said Brutha, dutifully.

‘—tell you. Good. Good. That’s what I like to hear,’ said Nhumrod. ‘That’s what I tell all my boys. Remember that I’m always here to deal with any little problems that may be bothering you.’

‘Yes, master. Shall I go back to the garden now?’

‘—now. I think so. I think so. And no more voices, d’you hear?’ Nhumrod waved a finger of his non-patting hand. A cheek puckered.

‘Yes, master.’

‘What were you doing in the garden?’

‘Hoeing the melons, master,’ said Brutha.

‘Melons? Ah. Melons,’ said Nhumrod slowly. ‘Melons. Melons. Well, that goes some way towards explaining things, of course.’

An eyelid flickered madly.

It wasn’t just the Great God that spoke to Vorbis, in the confines of his head. *Everyone* spoke to an exquistor, sooner or later. It was just a matter of stamina.

Vorbis didn’t often go down to watch the inquisitors at work these days. Exquistors didn’t have to. He sent down instructions, he received reports. But special circumstances merited his special attention.

It has to be said . . . there was little to laugh at in the cellar of the Quisition. Not if you had a normal sense of humour. There were no jolly little signs saying: You Don’t Have To Be Pitilessly Sadistic To Work Here But It Helps!!!

But there were things to suggest to a thinking man

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that the Creator of mankind had a very oblique sense of fun indeed, and to breed in his heart a rage to storm the gates of heaven.

The mugs, for example. The inquisitors stopped work twice a day for coffee. Their mugs, which each man had brought from home, were grouped around the kettle on the hearth of the central furnace which incidentally heated the irons and knives.

They had legends on them like *A Present From the Holy Grotto of Ossory*, or *To The World's Greatest Daddy*. Most of them were chipped, and no two of them were the same.

And there were the postcards on the wall. It was traditional that, when an inquisitor went on holiday, he'd send back a crudely coloured woodcut of the local view with some suitably jolly and risqué message on the back. And there was the pinned-up tearful letter from Inquisitor First Class Ishmale 'Pop' Quoom, thanking all the lads for collecting no fewer than seventy-eight *obols* for his retirement present and the lovely bunch of flowers for Mrs Quoom, indicating that he'd always remember his days in No. 3 pit, and was looking forward to coming in and helping out any time they were short-handed.

And it all meant this: that there are hardly any excesses of the most crazed psychopath that cannot easily be duplicated by a normal, kindly family man who just comes in to work every day and has a job to do.

Vorbis loved knowing that. A man who knew that, knew everything he needed to know about people.

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Currently he was sitting alongside the bench on which lay what was still, technically, the trembling body of Brother Sasho, formerly his secretary.

He looked up at the duty inquisitor, who nodded. Vorbis leaned over the chained secretary.

‘What were their names?’ he repeated.

‘... don’t know ...’

‘I know you gave them copies of my correspondence, Sasho. They are treacherous heretics who will spend eternity in the hells. Will you join them?’

‘... don’t know names ...’

‘I trusted you, Sasho. You spied on me. You betrayed the Church.’

‘... no names ...’

‘Truth is surcease from pain, Sasho. Tell me.’

‘... truth ...’

Vorbis sighed. And then he saw one of Sasho’s fingers curling and uncurling under the manacles. Beckoning.

‘Yes?’

He leaned closer over the body.

Sasho opened his one remaining eye.

‘... truth ...’

‘Yes?’

‘... The Turtle Moves ...’

Vorbis sat back, his expression unchanged. His expression seldom changed unless he wanted it to. The inquisitor watched him in terror.

‘I see,’ said Vorbis. He stood up, and nodded at the inquisitor.

‘How long has he been down here?’

‘Two days, lord.’

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‘And you can keep him alive for—?’

‘Perhaps two days more, lord.’

‘Do so. Do so. It is, after all,’ said Vorbis, ‘our duty to preserve life for as long as possible. Is it not?’

The inquisitor gave him the nervous smile of one in the presence of a superior whose merest word could see him manacled on a bench.

‘Er . . . yes, lord.’

‘Heresy and lies everywhere,’ Vorbis sighed. ‘And now I shall have to find another secretary. It is too vexing.’

After twenty minutes Brutha relaxed. The siren voices of sensuous evil seemed to have gone away.

He got on with the melons. He felt capable of understanding melons. Melons seemed a lot more comprehensible than most things.

‘Hey, you!’

Brutha straightened up.

‘I do not hear you, oh foul succubus,’ he said.

‘Oh yes you do, boy. Now, what I want you to do is—’

‘I’ve got my fingers in my ears!’

‘Suits you. Suits you. Makes you look like a vase. Now—’

‘I’m humming a tune! I’m humming a tune!’

Brother Preptil, the master of the music, had described Brutha’s voice as putting him in mind of a disappointed vulture arriving too late at the dead donkey. Choral singing was compulsory for novitiates, but after much petitioning by Brother Preptil a special dispensation had been made for Brutha. The sight of

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his big round face screwed up in the effort to please was bad enough, but what was worse was listening to his voice, which was certainly powerful and full of intent conviction, swinging backwards and forwards across the tune without ever quite hitting it.

He got Extra Melons instead.

Up in the prayer towers a flock of crows took off in a hurry.

After a full chorus of *He is Trampling the Unrighteous with Hooves of Hot Iron* Brutha unplugged his ears and risked a quick listen.

Apart from the distant protests of the crows, there was silence.

It worked. Put your trust in the God, they said. And he always had. As far back as he could remember.

He picked up his hoe and turned back, in relief, to the vines.

The hoe's blade was about to hit the ground when Brutha saw the tortoise.

It was small and basically yellow and covered with dust. Its shell was badly chipped. It had one beady eye – the other had fallen to one of the thousands of dangers that attend any slow-moving creature which lives an inch from the ground.

He looked around. The gardens were well inside the temple complex, and surrounded by high walls.

'How did you get in here, little creature?' he said. 'Did you fly?'

The tortoise stared monoptically at him. Brutha felt a bit homesick. There had been plenty of tortoises in the sandy hills back home.

'I could give you some lettuce,' said Brutha. 'But

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I don't think tortoises are allowed in the gardens. Aren't you vermin?'

The tortoise continued to stare. Practically nothing can stare like a tortoise.

Brutha felt obliged to do something.

'There's grapes,' he said. 'Probably it's not sinful to give you one grape. How would you like a grape, little tortoise?'

'How would you like to be an abomination in the nethermost pit of chaos?' said the tortoise.

The crows, who had fled to the outer walls, took off again to a rendering of *The Way of the Infidel Is A Nest Of Thorns*.

Brutha opened his eyes and took his fingers out of his ears again.

The tortoise said, 'I'm still here.'

Brutha hesitated. It dawned on him, very slowly, that demons and succubi didn't turn up looking like small old tortoises. There wouldn't be much point. Even Brother Nhumrod would have to agree that when it came to rampant eroticism, you could do a lot better than a one-eyed tortoise.

'I didn't know tortoises could talk,' he said.

'They can't,' said the tortoise. 'Read my lips.'

Brutha looked closer.

'You haven't got lips,' he said.

'No, nor proper vocal chords,' agreed the tortoise. 'I'm doing it straight into your head, do you understand?'

'Gosh!'

'You *do* understand, don't you?'

'No.'

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The tortoise rolled its eye.

‘I should have known. Well, it doesn’t matter. I don’t have to waste time on gardeners. Go and fetch the top man, right now.’

‘Top man?’ said Brutha. He put his hand to his mouth. ‘You don’t mean . . . Brother Nhumrod?’

‘Who’s he?’ said the tortoise.

‘The master of the novices!’

‘Oh, *Me!*’ said the tortoise. ‘No,’ it went on, in a singsong imitation of Brutha’s voice, ‘I don’t mean the master of the novices. I mean the High Priest or whatever he calls himself. I suppose there *is* one?’

Brutha nodded blankly.

‘High Priest, right?’ said the tortoise. ‘High. Priest. High Priest.’

Brutha nodded again. He knew there was a High Priest. It was just that, while he could just about encompass the hierarchical structure between his own self and Brother Nhumrod, he was unable to give serious consideration to any kind of link between Brutha the novice and the Cenobiarch. He was theoretically aware that there was one, that there was a huge canonical structure with the High Priest at the top and Brutha very firmly at the bottom, but he viewed it in the same way as an amoeba might view the chain of evolution all the way between itself and, for example, a chartered accountant. It was missing links all the way to the top.

‘I can’t go asking the—’ Brutha hesitated. Even the *thought* of talking to the Cenobiarch frightened him into silence. ‘I can’t ask *anyone* to ask the High Cenobiarch to come and talk to a tortoise!’

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‘Turn into a mud leech and wither in the fires of retribution!’ screamed the tortoise.

‘There’s no need to curse,’ said Brutha.

The tortoise bounced up and down furiously.

‘That wasn’t a curse! That was an order! I am the Great God Om!’

Brutha blinked.

Then he said, ‘No you’re not. I’ve seen the Great God Om,’ he waved a hand making the shape of the holy horns, conscientiously, ‘and he isn’t tortoise-shaped. He comes as an eagle, or a lion, or a mighty bull. There’s a statue in the Great Temple. It’s seven cubits high. It’s got bronze on it and everything. It’s trampling infidels. You can’t trample infidels when you’re a tortoise. I mean, all you could do is give them a meaningful look. It’s got horns of real gold. Where I used to live there was a statue one cubit high in the next village and that was a bull too. So that’s how I know you’re not the Great God’—holy horns— ‘Om.’

The tortoise subsided.

‘How many talking tortoises have you met?’ it said sarcastically.

‘I don’t know,’ said Brutha.

‘What d’you mean, you don’t know?’

‘Well, they might all talk,’ said Brutha conscientiously, demonstrating the very personal kind of logic that got him Extra Melons. ‘They just might not say anything when I’m there.’

‘I am the Great God Om,’ said the tortoise, in a menacing and unavoidably low voice, ‘and before very long you are going to be a very unfortunate priest. Go and get him.’

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‘Novice,’ said Brutha.

‘What?’

‘Novice, not priest. They won’t let me—’

‘Get him!’

‘But I don’t think the Cenobiarch ever comes into our vegetable garden,’ said Brutha. ‘I don’t think he even knows what a melon *is*.’

‘I’m not bothered about that,’ said the tortoise. ‘Fetch him now, or there will be a shaking of the earth, the moon will be as blood, agues and boils will afflict mankind and divers ills will befall. I really mean it,’ it added.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said Brutha, backing away.

‘And I’m being very reasonable, in the circumstances!’ the tortoise shouted after him.

‘You don’t sing badly, mind you!’ it added, as an afterthought.

‘I’ve heard worse!’ as Brutha’s grubby robe disappeared through the gateway.

‘Puts me in mind of that time there was the affliction of plague in Pseudopolis,’ it said quietly, as the footsteps faded. ‘What a wailing and a gnashing of teeth was there, all right.’ It sighed. ‘Great days. Great days!’

Many feel they are called to the priesthood, but what they really hear is an inner voice saying, ‘It’s indoor work with no heavy lifting, do you want to be a ploughman like your father?’

Whereas Brutha didn’t just believe. He really Believed. That sort of thing is usually embarrassing

when it happens in a God-fearing family, but all Brutha had was his grandmother, and she Believed too. She believed like iron believes in metal. She was the kind of woman every priest dreads in a congregation, the one who knows all the chants, all the sermons. In the Omnian Church women were allowed in the temple only on sufferance, and had to keep absolutely silent and well covered-up in their own section behind the pulpit in case the sight of one half of the human race caused the male members of the congregation to hear voices not unakin to those that plagued Brother Nhumrod through every sleeping and waking hour. The problem was that Brutha's grandmother had the kind of personality that can project itself through a lead sheet and a bitter piety with the strength of a diamond-bit auger.

If she had been born a man, Omnianism would have found its 8th Prophet rather earlier than expected. As it was, she organized the temple-cleaning, statue-polishing and stoning-of-suspected-adulteresses rotas with a terrible efficiency.

So Brutha grew up in the sure and certain knowledge of the Great God Om. Brutha grew up *knowing* that Om's eyes were on him all the time, especially in places like the privy, and that demons assailed him on all sides and were only kept at bay by the strength of his belief and the weight of grandmother's cane, which was kept behind the door on those rare occasions when it was not being used. He could recite every verse in all seven Books of the Prophets, and every single Precept. He knew all the Laws and the Songs. Especially the Laws.

The Omnians were a God-fearing people.
They had a great deal to fear.

Vorbis's room was in the upper Citadel, which was unusual for a mere deacon. He hadn't asked for it. He seldom had to ask for anything. Destiny has a way of marking her own.

He also got visited by some of the most powerful men in the Church's hierarchy.

Not, of course, the six Archpriests or the Cenobiarch himself. They weren't that important. They were merely at the top. The people who really run organizations are usually found several levels down, where it's still possible to get things done.

People liked to be friends with Vorbis, mainly because of the aforesaid mental field which suggested to them, in the subtlest of ways, that they didn't want to be his enemy.

Two of them were sitting down with him now. They were General Iam Fri't, who whatever the official records might suggest was the man who ran most of the Divine Legion, and Bishop Drunah, secretary to the Congress of Iams. People might not think that was much of a position of power, but then they'd never been minutes secretary to a meeting of slightly deaf old men.

Neither man was in fact there. They were not talking to Vorbis. It was one of *those* kinds of meeting. Lots of people didn't talk to Vorbis, and went out of their way not to have meetings with him. Some of the abbots from the distant monasteries had recently been summoned to the Citadel, travelling secretly for up to

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a week across tortuous terrain, just so they definitely wouldn't join the shadowy figures visiting Vorbis's room. In the last few months, Vorbis had apparently had about as many visitors as the Man in the Iron Mask.

Nor were they talking. But if they *had* been there, and if they *had* been having a conversation, it would have gone like this:

‘And now,’ said Vorbis, ‘the matter of Ephebe.’

Bishop Drunah shrugged.*

‘Of no consequence, they say. No threat.’

The two men looked at Vorbis, a man who never raised his voice. It was very hard to tell what Vorbis was thinking, often even after he had told you.

‘Really? Is this what we’ve come to?’ he said. ‘No *threat*? After what they did to poor Brother Murduck? The insults to Om? This must not pass. What is proposed to be done?’

‘No more fighting,’ said Fri’it. ‘They fight like madmen. No. We’ve lost too many already.’

‘They have strong gods,’ said Drunah.

‘They have better bows,’ said Fri’it.

‘There is no God but Om,’ said Vorbis. ‘What the Ephebians believe they worship are nothing but djinns and demons. If it can be called worship. Have you seen this?’

He pushed forward a scroll of paper.

‘What is it?’ said Fri’it cautiously.

*Or would have done. If he had been there. But he wasn't. So he couldn't.

‘A lie. A history that does not exist and never existed . . . the . . . the things . . .’ Vorbis hesitated, trying to remember a word that had long since fallen into disuse, ‘. . . like the . . . tales told to children, who are too young . . . words for people to say . . . the . . .’

‘Oh. A play,’ said Fri’it. Vorbis’s gaze nailed him to the wall.

‘You know of these things?’

‘I — when I travelled in Klatch once—’ Fri’it stuttered. He visibly pulled himself together. He had commanded one hundred thousand men in battle. He didn’t deserve this.

He found he didn’t dare look at Vorbis’s expression.

‘They dance dances,’ he said limply. ‘On their holy days. The women have bells on their . . . And sing songs. All about the early days of the worlds, when the gods—’

He faded. ‘It was disgusting,’ he said. He clicked his knuckles, a habit of his whenever he was worried.

‘*This* one has their gods in it,’ said Vorbis. ‘*Men in masks*. Can you believe that? They have a god of *wine*. A drunken old man! And people say Ephebe is no threat! And this—’

He tossed another, thicker scroll on to the table.

‘*This* is far worse. For while they worship false gods in error, their error is in their choice of gods, not in their worship. But this—’

Drunah gave it a cautious examination.

‘I believe there are other copies, even in the Citadel,’ said Vorbis. ‘This one belonged to Sasho. I believe you recommended him to my service, Fri’it?’

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‘He always struck me as an intelligent and keen young man,’ said the general.

‘But disloyal,’ said Vorbis, ‘and now receiving his just reward. It is only to be regretted that he has not been induced to give us the names of his fellow heretics.’

Fri’it fought against the sudden rush of relief. His eyes met those of Vorbis.

Drunah broke the silence.

‘*De Chelonian Mobile*,’ he said aloud. “‘The Turtle Moves”. What does that mean?’

‘Even telling you could put your soul at risk of a thousand years in hell,’ said Vorbis. His eyes had not left Fri’it, who was now staring fixedly at the wall.

‘I think it is a risk we might carefully take,’ said Drunah.

Vorbis shrugged. ‘The writer claims that the world . . . travels through the void on the back of four huge elephants,’ he said.

Drunah’s mouth dropped open.

‘On the back?’ he said.

‘It is claimed,’ said Vorbis, still watching Fri’it.

‘What do they stand on?’

‘The writer says they stand on the shell of an enormous turtle,’ said Vorbis.

Drunah grinned nervously.

‘And what does that stand on?’ he said.

‘I see no point in speculating as to what it stands on,’ snapped Vorbis, ‘since it does not exist!’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Drunah quickly. ‘It was only idle curiosity.’

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‘Most curiosity is,’ said Vorbis. ‘It leads the mind into speculative ways. Yet the man who wrote this walks around free, in Ephebe, *now*.’

Drunah glanced at the scroll.

‘He says here he went on a ship that sailed to an island on the edge and he looked over and—’

‘Lies,’ said Vorbis evenly. ‘And it would make no difference even if they were not lies. Truth lies within, not without. In the words of the Great God Om, as delivered through his chosen prophets. Our eyes may deceive us, but our God never will.’

‘But—’

Vorbis looked at Fri’it. The general was sweating.

‘Yes?’ he said.

‘Well . . . Ephebe. A place where madmen have mad ideas. Everyone knows that. Maybe the wisest course is leave them to stew in their folly?’

Vorbis shook his head. ‘Unfortunately, wild and unstable ideas have a disturbing tendency to move around and take hold.’

Fri’it had to admit that this was true. He knew from experience that true and obvious ideas, such as the ineffable wisdom and judgement of the Great God Om, seemed so obscure to many people that you actually had to kill them before they saw the error of their ways, whereas dangerous and nebulous and wrong-headed notions often had such an attraction for some people that they would – he rubbed a scar thoughtfully – hide up in the mountains and throw rocks at you until you starved them out. They’d prefer to die rather than see sense. Fri’it had seen sense at an early age. He’d seen it was sense not to die.

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‘What do you propose?’ he said.

‘The Council want to parley with Ephebe,’ said Drunah. ‘You know I have to organize a deputation to leave tomorrow.’

‘How many soldiers?’ said Vorbis.

‘A bodyguard only. We have been guaranteed safe passage, after all,’ said Fri’it.

‘*We have been guaranteed safe passage,*’ said Vorbis. It sounded like a lengthy curse. ‘And once inside . . . ?’

Fri’it wanted to say: I’ve spoken to the commander of the Ephebian garrison, and I think he is a man of honour, although of course he is indeed a despicable infidel and lower than the worms. But it was not the kind of thing he felt it wise to say to Vorbis.

He substituted: ‘We shall be on our guard.’

‘Can we surprise them?’

Fri’it hesitated. ‘We?’ he said.

‘I shall lead the party,’ said Vorbis. There was the briefest exchange of glances between himself and the secretary. ‘I . . . would like to be away from the Citadel for a while. A change of air. Besides, we should not let the Ephebians think they merit the attentions of a superior member of the Church. I was just musing as to the possibilities, should we be provoked—’

Fri’it’s nervous click was like a whip-crack.

‘We have given them our word—’

‘There is no truce with unbelievers,’ said Vorbis.

‘But there are practical considerations,’ said Fri’it, as sharply as he dared. ‘The palace of Ephebe is a labyrinth. I know. There are traps. No one gets in without a guide.’

‘How does the guide get in?’ said Vorbis.

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‘I assume he guides himself,’ said the general.

‘In my experience there is always another way,’ said Vorbis. ‘Into everything, there is always another way. Which the God will show in his own good time, we can be assured of that.’

‘Certainly matters would be easier if there was a lack of stability in Ephebe,’ said Drunah. ‘It does indeed harbour certain . . . elements.’

‘And it will be the gateway to the whole of the Turnwise coast,’ said Vorbis.

‘Well—’

‘The Djel, and then Tsort,’ said Vorbis.

Drunah tried to avoid seeing Fri’s expression.

‘It is our duty,’ said Vorbis. ‘Our holy duty. We must not forget poor Brother Murduck. He was unarmed and alone.’

Brutha’s huge sandals flipfopped obediently along the stone-flagged corridor towards Brother Nhumrod’s barren cell.

He tried composing messages in his head. Master, there’s a tortoise who says – Master, this tortoise wants – Master, guess what, I heard from this tortoise in the melons that—

Brutha would never have dared to think of himself as a prophet, but he had a shrewd idea of the outcome of any interview that began in this way.

Many people assumed that Brutha was an idiot. He looked like one, from his round open face to his splay-feet and knock-ankles. He also had the habit of moving his lips while he thought deeply, as if he was rehearsing every sentence. And this was because that

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