TERRY PRATCHETT

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

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A Discworld Novel

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 this is a good place to start.

Standalone Discworld novels

Pyramids
Moving Pictures
Small Gods
The Truth
Monstrous Regiment

A full list of the Discworld novels in order can be found at the end of this book.

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Terry Pratchett was the acclaimed creator of the global bestselling Discworld series, the first of which, *The Colour of Magic*, was published in 1983. In all, he was the author of over fifty bestselling books which have sold over 100 million copies worldwide. His novels have been widely adapted for stage and screen, and he was the winner of multiple prizes, including the Carnegie Medal. He was awarded a knighthood for services to literature in 2009, although he always wryly maintained that his greatest service to literature was to avoid writing any.

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Polly cut off her hair in front of the mirror, feeling slightly guilty about not feeling very guilty about doing so. It was supposed to be her crowning glory, and everyone said it was beautiful, but she generally wore it in a net when she was working. She'd always told herself it was wasted on her. But she was careful to see that the long golden coils all landed on the small sheet spread out for the purpose.

If she would *admit* to any strong emotion at all at this time, it was sheer annoyance that a haircut was all she needed to pass for a young man. She didn't even need to bind up her bosom, which she'd heard was the normal practice. Nature had seen to it that she had barely any problems in this area.

The effect that the scissors had was . . . erratic, but it was no worse than other male haircuts here. It'd do. She did feel cold on the back of her neck, but that was only partly because of the loss of her long hair. It was also because of the Stare.

The Duchess watched her from above the bed.

It was a poor woodcut, hand-coloured mostly in blue and red. It was of a plain, middle-aged woman whose sagging chin and slightly bulging eyes gave the

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cynical the feeling that someone had put a large fish in a dress, but the artist had managed to capture something extra in that strange, blank expression. Some pictures had eyes that followed you around the room; this one looked right through you. It was a face you found in every home. In Borogravia, you grew up with the Duchess watching you.

Polly knew her parents had one of the pictures in their room, and knew also that when her mother was alive she used to curtsy to it every night. She reached up and turned this picture round so that it faced the wall. A thought in her head said *No*. It was overruled. She'd made up her mind.

Then she dressed herself in her brother's clothes, tipped the contents of the sheet into a small bag which went into the bottom of her pack along with the spare clothes, put the note on her bed, picked up the pack and climbed out of the window. At least, Polly climbed out of the window, but it was Oliver's feet that landed lightly on the ground.

Dawn was just turning the dark world into monochrome when she slipped across the inn's yard. The Duchess watched her from the inn sign, too. Her father had been a great loyalist, at least up to the death of her mother. The sign hadn't been repainted this year, and a random bird-dropping had given the Duchess a squint.

Polly checked that the recruiting sergeant's cart was still in front of the bar, its bright banners now drab and heavy with last night's rain. By the look of that big fat sergeant, it would be hours before it was on the

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road again. She had plenty of time. He looked like a slow breakfaster.

She let herself out of the door in the back wall and headed uphill. At the top, she turned back and looked at the waking town. Smoke was rising from a few chimneys, but since Polly was always the first to wake, and had to yell the maids out of their beds, the inn was still sleeping. She knew that the Widow Clambers had stayed overnight (it had been 'raining too hard for her to go home', according to Polly's father) and, personally, she hoped for his sake that she'd stay every night. The town had no shortage of widows, and Eva Clambers was a warm-hearted lady who baked like a champion. His wife's long illness and Paul's long absence had taken a lot out of her father. Polly was glad some of it was being put back. The old ladies who spent their days glowering from their windows might spy and peeve and mumble, but they had been doing that for too long. No one listened any more.

She raised her gaze. Smoke and steam was already rising from the laundry of the Girls' Working School. It hung over one end of the town like a threat, big and grey with tall, thin windows. It was always silent. When she was small, she'd been told that that was where the Bad Girls went. The nature of 'badness' was not explained, and at the age of five Polly had received the vague idea that it consisted of not going to bed when you were told. At the age of eight she'd learned it was where you were lucky not to go for buying your brother a paint box. She turned her back and set off between the trees, which were full of birdsong.

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Forget you were ever Polly. *Think* young male, that was the thing. Fart loudly and with self-satisfaction at a job well done, move like a puppet that'd had a couple of random strings cut, never hug anyone and, if you meet a friend, punch them. A few years working in the bar had provided plenty of observational material. No problem about not swinging her hips, at least. Nature had been pretty sparing there, too.

And then there was the young male walk to master. At least women swung only their *hips*. Young men swung *everything*, from the shoulders down. You have to try to occupy a lot of space, she thought. It makes you look bigger, like a tomcat fluffing his tail. She'd seen it a lot in the inn. The boys tried to walk big in self-defence against all those other big boys out there. I'm bad, I'm fierce, I'm cool, I'd like a pint of shandy and me mam wants me home by nine . . .

Let's see, now . . . arms out from the body as though holding a couple of bags of flour . . . check. Shoulders swaying as though she was elbowing her way through a crowd . . . check. Hands slightly bunched and making rhythmical circling motions as though turning two independent handles attached to the waist . . . check. Legs moving forward loosely and ape-like . . . check . . .

It worked fine for a few yards until she got something wrong and the resultant muscular confusion somersaulted her into a holly bush. After that, she gave up.

The thunderstorm came back as she hurried along the trail; sometimes one would hang around the

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mountains for days. But at least up here the path wasn't a river of mud, and the trees still had enough leaves to give her some protection. There was no time to wait out the weather, anyway. She had a long way to go. The recruiting party would cross at the ferry, but Polly was known to all the ferrymen by sight and the guard would want to see her permit to travel, which Oliver Perks certainly didn't have. So that meant a long diversion all the way to the troll bridge at Tübz. To the trolls all humans looked alike and any piece of paper would do as a permit, since they didn't read. Then she could walk down through the pine forests to Plün. The cart would have to stop there for the night, but the place was one of those nowhere villages that existed only in order to avoid the embarrassment of having large empty spaces on the map. No one knew her in Plün. No one ever went there. It was a dump.

It was, in fact, just the place she needed. The recruiting party would stop there, and she could enlist. She was pretty certain the big fat sergeant and his greasy little corporal wouldn't notice the girl who'd served them last night. She was not, as they said, conventionally beautiful. The corporal *had* tried to pinch her bottom, but probably out of habit, like swatting a fly, and there was not enough for a big pinch, at that.

She sat on the hill above the ferry and had a late breakfast of cold potato and sausage while she watched the cart cross over. No one was marching behind it. No lads had been recruited back in Munz this time. People had kept away. Too many young men

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had left over the last few years, and not enough had come back. And, of the ones who'd come back, sometimes not enough of each man had come back. The corporal could bang his big drum all he liked. Munz was running out of sons almost as fast as it accumulated widows.

The afternoon hung heavy and humid, and a yellow pine warbler followed her from bush to bush. Last night's mud was steaming when Polly reached the troll bridge, which crossed the river in a narrow gorge. It was a thin, graceful affair, put together, it was said, with no mortar at all. And it was said that the weight of the bridge anchored it ever more deeply into the rock on either side. It was said to be a wonder of the world, except that very few people around here ever wondered much about anything and were barely aware of the world. It cost one penny to cross, or one hundred gold pieces if you had a billygoat.* Halfway across Polly peered over the parapet and saw the cart far, far below, working its way along the narrow road just above the white water.

The afternoon's journey was downhill all the way, through dark pines on this side of the gorge. She didn't hurry and, towards sunset, she spotted the inn. The cart had already arrived, but by the looks of it the recruiting sergeant had not even bothered to make an effort. There was no drum-banging like there had been last night, no cries of 'Roll

* Trolls might not be quick thinkers but they don't forget in a hurry, either.

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up, my young shavers! It's a great life in the Ins-and-Outs!'

There was always a war. Usually it was a border dispute, the national equivalent of complaining that the neighbour was letting his hedge grow too long. Sometimes it was bigger. Borogravia was a peace-loving country in the midst of treacherous, devious, warlike enemies. They had to be treacherous, devious and warlike, otherwise we wouldn't be fighting them, eh? There was always a war.

Polly's father had been in the army before he took over The Duchess from Polly's grandfather. He didn't talk about it much. He'd brought his sword back with him, but instead of hanging it over the fireplace he used it to poke the fire. Sometimes old friends would turn up and, when the bars were shut for the night, they'd gather round the fire and drink and sing. The young Polly found excuses to stay up and listen to the songs they sang, but that had stopped when she'd got into trouble for using one of the more interesting words in front of her mother; now she was older, and served the beer, it was presumably assumed that she knew the words or would find out what they meant soon enough. Besides, her mother had gone where bad words would no longer offend and, in theory, never got said.

The songs had been part of her childhood. She knew all the words of 'The World Turned Upside Down' and 'The Devil Shall Be My Sergeant' and 'Johnny Has Gone For A Soldier' and 'The Girl I Left

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Behind Me' and, after the drink had been flowing for a while, she'd memorized 'Colonel Crapski' and 'I Wish I'd Never Kissed Her'.

And then, of course, there had been 'Sweet Polly Oliver'. Her father used to sing it when she was small and fretful or sad, and she'd laughed to hear it simply because it had her name in it. She was word perfect on the words before she'd known what most of them meant. And now . . .

. . . Polly pushed open the door. The recruiting sergeant and his corporal looked up from the stained table where they were sitting, beer mugs halfway to their lips. She took a deep breath, marched over, and made an attempt at saluting.

'What do you want, kid?' growled the corporal.

'Want to join up, sir!'

The sergeant turned to Polly and grinned, which made his scars move oddly and caused a tremor to shake all his chins. The word 'fat' could not honestly be applied to him, not when the word 'gross' was lumbering forward to catch your attention. He was one of those people who didn't have a waist. He had an equator. He had gravity. If he fell over, in any direction, he would rock. Sun and drink had burned his face red. Small dark eyes twinkled in the redness like the sparkle on the edge of a knife. Beside him, on the table, were a couple of old-fashioned cutlasses, weapons that had more in common with a meat cleaver than a sword.

'Just like that?' he said.

'Yessir!'

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'Really?'

'Yessir!'

'You don't want us to get you stinking drunk first? It's traditional, you know.'

'Nosir!'

'I haven't told you about the wonderful opportunities for advancement and good fortune, have I?'

'Nosir!'

'Did I mention how the spanking red uniform will mean you'll have to beat the girls off with a stick?'

'Don't think so, sir!'

'Or the grub? Every meal's a banquet when you march along with us!' The sergeant smacked his belly, which caused tremors in outlying regions. 'I'm the living proof!'

'Yes, sir. No, sir. I just want to join up to fight for my country and the honour of the Duchess, sir!'

'You do?' said the corporal incredulously, but the sergeant appeared not to hear this. He looked Polly up and down, and Polly got the definite impression that the man was neither as drunk nor as stupid as he looked.

'Upon my oath, Corporal Strappi, it seems that what we've got ourselves here is nothin' less than a good, old-fashioned *patriot*,' he said, his eyes searching Polly's face. 'Well, you've come to the right place, my lad!' He pulled a sheaf of papers towards him with an air of bustle. 'You know who we are?'

'The Tenth Foot, sir. Light infantry, sir. Known as the "Ins-and-Outs", sir,' said Polly, relief bubbling through her. She'd clearly passed some sort of test.

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'Right, lad. The jolly old Cheesemongers. Finest regiment there is, in the finest army in the world. Keen to join, then, are yer?'

'Keen as mustard, sir!' said Polly, aware of the corporal's suspicious eyes on her.

'Good lad!'

The sergeant unscrewed the top from a bottle of ink and dipped a nib pen in it. His hand hovered over the paperwork. 'Name, lad?' he said.

'Oliver, sir. Oliver Perks,' said Polly.

'Age?'

'Seventeen come Sunday, sir.'

'Yeah, right,' said the sergeant. 'You're seventeen and I'm the Grand Duchess Annagovia. What're you running away from, eh? Got a young lady in the family way?'

''e'd 'ave 'ad to 'ave 'elp,' said the corporal, grinning. 'He squeaks like a little lad.'

Polly realized she was starting to blush. But then, young Oliver would blush too, wouldn't he? It was very easy to make a boy blush. Polly could do it just by staring.

'Don't matter anyway,' said the sergeant. 'You make your mark on this here document and kiss the Duchess and you're *my* little lad, you understand? My name is Sergeant Jackrum. I will be your mother and your father and Corporal Strappi here will be just like your big brother. And life will be steak and bacon every day, and anyone who wants to drag you away'll have to drag me away too, because I'll be holding on to your collar. And you might well be thinking there's

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no one that can drag that much, Mr Perks.' A thick thumb jabbed at the paper. 'Just there, right?'

Polly picked up the pen and signed.

'What's that?' said the corporal.

'My signature,' said Polly.

She heard the door open behind her, and spun round. Several young men— she corrected herself, several *other* young men had clattered into the bar, and were looking around warily.

'You can read and write, too?' said the sergeant, glancing up at them and then back to her. 'Yeah, I see. A nice round hand, as well. Officer material, you are. Give him the shilling, corporal. And the picture, of course.'

'Right, sergeant,' said Corporal Strappi, holding up a picture frame on a handle, like a looking-glass. ' 'Pucker up, Private Parts.'

'It's Perks, sir,' said Polly.

'Yeah, right. Now kiss the Duchess.'

It was not a good copy of the famous picture. The painting behind the glass was faded and something, some kind of moss or something, was growing on the inside of the cracked glass itself. Polly let her lips brush it while holding her breath.

'Huh,' said Strappi, and pressed something into her hand.

'What's this?' said Polly, looking at the small square of paper.

'An IOU. Bit short of shillings right now,' said the sergeant, while Strappi smirked. 'But the innkeeper'll stand you a pint of ale, courtesy of her grace.'

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He turned and looked up at the newcomers. 'Well, it never rains but it pours. You boys here to join up too? My word, and we didn't even have to bang the drum. It must be Corporal Strappi's amazin' charisma. Step up, don't be shy. Who's the next likely lad?'

Polly looked at the next recruit with horror that she hoped she was concealing. She hadn't really noticed him in the gloom, because he was wearing black – not cool, styled black, but a dusty black, the kind of suit people got buried in. By the look of it, that person had been him. There were cobwebs all over it. The boy himself had stitches across his forehead.

'Your name, lad?' said Jackrum.

'Igor, thur.'

Jackrum counted the stitches.

'You know, I had a feeling it was going to be,' he said. 'And I see you're eighteen.'

'*Awake!*'

'Oh, gods . . .' Commander Samuel Vimes put his hands over his eyes.

'I beg your pardon, your grace?' said the Ankh-Morpork consul to Zlobenia. 'Are you ill, your grace?'

'What's your name again, young man?' said Vimes. 'I'm sorry, but I've been travelling for two weeks and not getting a lot of sleep and I've spent all day being introduced to people with difficult names. That's bad for the brain.'

'It's Clarence, your grace. Clarence Chinny.'

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'Chinny?' said Vimes, and Clarence read everything in his expression.

'I'm afraid so, sir,' he said.

'Were you a good fighter at school?' said Vimes.

'No, your grace, but no one could beat me over the one-hundred-yard dash.'

Vimes laughed. 'Well, Clarence, any national anthem that starts "Awake!" is going to lead to trouble. They didn't teach you this in the Patrician's office?'

'Er . . . no, your grace,' said Chinny.

'Well, you'll find out. Carry on, then.'

'Yes, sir.' Chinny cleared his throat. 'The Borogravian National Anthem,' he announced, for the second time.

> 'Awake *sorry, your grace*, ye sons of the
> Motherland!
> Taste no more the wine of the sour apples
> Woodsmen, grasp your choppers!
> Farmers, slaughter with the tool formerly
> used for lifting beets the foe!
> Frustrate the endless wiles of our enemies
> We into the darkness march singing
> Against the whole world in arms coming
> But see the golden light upon the mountain
> tops!
> The new day is a great big fish!'

'Er . . .' Vimes said. 'That last bit . . . ?'

'That is a literal translation, your grace,' said Clarence nervously. 'It means something like "an

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amazing opportunity" or "a glittering prize", your grace.'

'When we're not in public, Clarence, "sir" will do. "Your grace" is just to impress the natives.' Vimes slumped back in his uncomfortable chair, chin in his hand, and then winced.

'Two thousand three hundred miles,' he said, shifting his position. 'And it's freezing on a broomstick, however low they fly. And then the barge, and then the coach . . .' He winced again. 'I read your report. Do you think it's possible for an entire nation to be insane?'

Clarence swallowed. He'd been told that he was talking to the second most powerful man in Ankh-Morpork, even if the man himself acted as though he was ignorant of the fact. His desk in this chilly tower room was rickety; it had belonged to the head janitor of the Kneck garrison until yesterday. Paperwork cluttered its scarred surface and was stacked in piles behind Vimes's chair.

Vimes himself did not look, to Clarence, like a duke. He looked like a watchman which, in fact, Clarence understood, he was. This offended Clarence Chinny. People at the top should look as though they belonged there.

'That's a very . . . interesting question, sir,' he said. 'You mean the people—'

'Not the people, the nation,' said Vimes. 'Borogravia looks off its head, to me, from what I've read. I expect the people just do the best they can and get on with raising their kids which, I might say, I'd

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rather be doing right now, too. Look, you know what I mean. You take a bunch of people who don't seem any different from you and me, but when you add them all together you get this sort of huge raving maniac with national borders and an anthem.'

'It's a fascinating idea, sir,' said Clarence diplomatically.

Vimes looked round the room. The walls were bare stone. The windows were narrow. It was damn cold, even on a sunny day. All that bad food, and that bumping about and sleeping on bad beds . . . and all that travelling in the dark, too, on dwarf barges in their secret canals under the mountains – the gods alone knew what intricate diplomacy Lord Vetinari had pulled off to get *that*, although the Low King owed Vimes a few favours . . .

. . . all of that for this cold castle over this cold river between these stupid countries, with their stupid war. He knew what he wanted to do. If they'd been people, scuffling in the gutter, he'd have known what to do. He'd have banged their heads together and maybe shoved them in the cells overnight. You couldn't bang countries together.

Vimes picked up some paperwork, fiddled with it, and threw it down again. 'To hell with this,' he said. 'What's happening out there?'

'I understand there are a few pockets of resistance in some of the more inaccessible areas of the keep, but they are being dealt with. For all practical purposes the keep is in our hands. That was a clever ruse of yours, your gr— sir.'

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Vimes sighed. 'No, Clarence, it was a dull old ruse. It should not be possible to get men into a fortress dressed as washerwomen. Three of them had moustaches, for goodness' sake!'

'The Borogravians are rather . . . old-fashioned about things like that, sir. On that subject, we appear to have zombies in the lower crypts. Dreadful things. A lot of high-ranking Borogravian military men were interred down there over the centuries, apparently.'

'Really? What are they doing now?'

Clarence raised his eyebrows. 'Lurching, sir, I think. Groaning. Zombie things. Something seems to have stirred them up.'

'Us, probably,' said Vimes. He got up, strode across the room, and pulled open the big heavy door. 'Reg!' he yelled.

After a moment another watchman appeared, and saluted. He was grey-faced, and Clarence couldn't help noticing when the man saluted that the hand and fingers were held together with stitching.

'Have you met Constable Shoe, Clarence?' said Vimes cheerfully. 'One of my staff. Been dead for more than thirty years, and loves every minute of it, eh, Reg?'

'Right, Mister Vimes,' said Reg, grinning and revealing a lot of brown teeth.

'Some fellow countrymen of yours down in the cellar, Reg.'

'Oh, dear. Lurching, are they?'

' 'fraid so, Reg.'

'I shall go and have a word with them,' said Reg. He

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saluted again and marched out, with a hint of lurch.

'He's, er, from here?' said Chinny, who had gone quite pale.

'Oh, no. The *undiscovered* country,' said Vimes. 'He's dead. However, credit where it's due, he hasn't let that stop him. You didn't know we have a zombie in the Watch, Clarence?'

'Er . . . no, sir. I haven't been back to the city in five years.' He swallowed. 'I gather things have changed.'

Horribly so, in Clarence Chinny's opinion. Being consul to Zlobenia had been an easy job, which left him a lot of time to get on with his business. And then the big semaphore towers marched through, all along the valley, and suddenly Ankh-Morpork was an hour away. Before the clacks, a letter from Ankh-Morpork would take more than a two weeks to get to him, and so no one worried if he took a day or two to answer it. Now people expected a reply overnight. He'd been quite glad when Borogravia had destroyed several of those wretched towers. And then all hell had been let loose.

'We've got all sorts in the Watch,' said Vimes. 'And we bloody well need 'em now, Clarence, with Zlobenians and Borogravians scrapping in the streets over some damn quarrel that began a thousand years ago. It's worse than dwarfs and trolls! All because someone's great-to-the-power-of-umpteen-grandmother slapped the face of someone's great-ditto-uncle! Borogravia and Zlobenia can't even agree a border. They chose the river, and that changes

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course every spring. Suddenly the clacks towers are now on Borogravian soil – or mud, anyway – so the idiots burn them down for religious reasons.'

'Er, there is more to it than that, sir,' said Chinny.

'Yes, I know. I read the history. The annual scrap with Zlobenia is just the local derby. Borogravia fights everybody. Why?'

'National pride, sir.'

'What in? There's nothing there! There's some tallow mines, and they're not bad farmers, but there's no great architecture, no big libraries, no famous composers, no very high mountains, no wonderful views. All you can say about the place is that it isn't anywhere else. What's so special about Borogravia?'

'I suppose it's special because it's theirs. And of course there's Nuggan, sir. Their god. I've brought you a copy of the *Book of Nuggan*.'

'I looked through one back in the city, Chinny,' said Vimes. 'Seemed pretty stu—'

'That wouldn't have been a recent edition, sir. And I suspect it wouldn't be, er, very current that far from here. This one is more up to date,' said Chinny, putting a small but thick book on the desk.

'Up to date? What do you mean, up to date?' said Vimes, looking puzzled. 'Holy writ gets . . . written. Do this, don't do that, no coveting your neighbour's ox . . .'

'Um . . . Nuggan doesn't just leave it at that, sir. He, er . . . updates things. Mostly the Abominations, to be frank.'

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Vimes took the new copy. It was noticeably thicker than the one he'd brought with him.

'It's what they call a Living Testament,' Chinny explained. 'They – well, I suppose you could say they "die" if they're taken out of Borogravia. They no longer . . . get added to. The latest Abominations are at the end, sir,' said Chinny helpfully.

'This is a holy book with an appendix?'

'Exactly, sir.'

'In a *ring binder*?'

'Quite so, sir. People put blank pages in and the Abominations . . . turn up.'

'You mean magically?'

'I suppose I mean religiously, sir.'

Vimes opened a page at random. 'Chocolate?' he said. 'He doesn't like chocolate?'

'Yes, sir. That's an Abomination.'

'Garlic? Well, I don't much like that, so fair enough . . . cats?'

'Oh, yes. He really doesn't like cats, sir.'

'*Dwarfs?* It says here "The dwarfish race which worships Gold is an Abomination unto Nuggan"! He must be mad. What happened there?'

'Oh, the dwarfs that were here sealed their mines and vanished, your grace.'

'I bet they did. They know trouble when they see it,' said Vimes. He let 'your grace' pass this time; Chinny clearly derived some satisfaction from talking to a duke.

He leafed through the pages, and stopped. '*The colour blue?*'

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'Correct, sir.'

'What's abominable about the colour blue? It's just a colour! The *sky* is blue!'

'Yes, sir. Devout Nugganites try not to look at it these days. Um . . .' Chinny had been trained as a diplomat. Some things he didn't like to say directly. 'Nuggan, sir . . . um . . . is rather . . . tetchy,' he managed.

'Tetchy?' said Vimes. 'A *tetchy* god? What, he complains about the noise their kids make? Objects to loud music after nine p.m.?'

'Um . . . we get the *Ankh-Morpork Times* here, sir, eventually, and, er, I'd say, er, that Nuggan is very much like, er, the kind of people who write to its letter column. You know, sir. The kind who sign their letters "Disgusted of Ankh-Morpork" . . .'

'Oh, you mean he really *is* mad,' said Vimes.

'Oh, I'd never mean anything like that, sir,' said Chinny hurriedly.

'What do the priests do about this?'

'Not a lot, sir. I think they quietly ignore some of the more, er, extreme Abominations.'

'You mean Nuggan objects to dwarfs, cats and the colour blue and there're more insane commandments?'

Chinny coughed politely.

'All right, then,' growled Vimes. 'More *extreme* commandments?'

'Oysters, sir. He doesn't like them. But that's not a problem because no one there has ever seen an oyster. Oh, and babies. He Abominated them, too.'

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'I take it people still make them here?'

'Oh, yes, your gr— I'm sorry. Yes, sir. But they feel guilty about it. Barking dogs, that was another one. Shirts with six buttons, too. And cheese. Er . . . people just sort of, er, *avoid* the trickier ones. Even the priests seem to have given up trying to explain them.'

'Yes, I think I can see why. So what we have here is a country that tries to run itself on the commandments of a god who, the people feel, may be wearing his underpants on his head. Has he Abominated underpants?'

'No, sir,' Chinny sighed. 'But it's probably only a matter of time.'

'So how do they manage?'

'These days, people mostly pray to the Duchess Annagovia. You see icons of her in every house. They call her the Little Mother.'

'Ah, yes, the Duchess. Can I get to see her?'

'Oh, no one sees her, sir. No one except her servants has seen her for more than thirty years. To be honest, sir, she's probably dead.'

'Only probably?'

'No one really knows. The official story is that she's in mourning. It's rather sad, sir. The young Duke died a week after they got married. Gored by a wild pig during a hunt, I believe. She went into mourning at the old castle at PrinceMarmadukePiotreAlbertHans JosephBernhardtWilhelmsberg and hasn't appeared in public since. The official portrait was painted when she was about forty, I believe.'

'No children?'

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'No, sir. On her death, the line is extinct.'

'And they pray to her? Like a god?'

Chinny sighed. 'I *did* put this in my briefing notes, sir. The royal family in Borogravia have always had a quasi-religious status, you see. They're the head of the church and the peasants, at least, pray to them in the hope that they'll put in a good word with Nuggan. They're like . . . living saints. Celestial intermediaries. To be honest, that's how these countries work in any case. If you want something done, you have to know the right people. And I suppose it's easier to pray to someone in a picture than to a god you can't see.'

Vimes sat looking at the consul for some time. When he next spoke, he frightened the man to his boots.

'Who'd inherit?' he said.

'Sir?'

'Just following the monarchy, Mr Chinny. If the Duchess isn't on the throne, who should be?'

'Um, it's incredibly complex, sir, because of the intermarriages and the various legal systems, which for example—'

'Who's the smart money on, Mr Chinny?'

'Um, Prince Heinrich of Zlobenia.'

To Chinny's astonishment Vimes laughed. 'And he's wondering how auntie's gettin' on, I expect. I met him this morning, didn't I? Can't say I took to him.'

'But he is a friend of Ankh-Morpork,' said Chinny reproachfully. 'That was in my report. Educated. Very interested in the clacks. Got great plans for his country. They used to be Nugganatic in Zlobenia, but

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he's banned the religion and, frankly, hardly anyone objected. He wants Zlobenia to move forward. He admires Ankh-Morpork very much.'

'Yes, I know. He sounds almost as insane as Nuggan,' said Vimes. 'Okay, so what we've probably got is an elaborate charade to keep Heinrich out. How's this place governed?'

'There isn't much. A bit of tax collecting, and that's about all. We think some of the senior court officials just drift on as if the Duchess was alive. The only thing that really works is the army.'

'All right, how about coppers? Everyone needs coppers. At least they have their feet on the ground.'

'I believe informal citizens' committees enforce Nugganatic law,' said Chinny.

'Oh, gods. Prodnoses, curtain-twitchers and vigilantes,' said Vimes. He stood up and peered out through the narrow window at the plain below. It was night-time. Cooking-fires in the enemy camp made demonic constellations in the darkness.

'Did they tell you why I've been sent here, Clarence?' he said.

'No, sir. My instructions were that you would, um, oversee things. Prince Heinrich is not very happy about it.'

'Oh, well, the interests of Ankh-Morpork are the interests of all money-lov— oops, sorry, all *freedom*-loving people everywhere,' said Vimes. 'We can't have a country that turns back our mail coaches and keeps cutting down the clacks towers. That's *expensive*. They're cutting the continent in half, they're the pinch

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in the hourglass. I'm to bring things to a "satisfactory" conclusion. And frankly, Clarence, I'm wondering if it's even worth attacking Borogravia. It'll be cheaper to sit here and wait for it to explode. Although I notice . . . where was that report . . . ah, yes . . . it will starve first.'

'Regrettably so, sir.'

Igor stood mutely in front of the recruiting table.

'Don't often see you people these days,' said Jackrum.

'Yeah, run out of fresh brains, 'ave yer?' said the corporal nastily.

'Now then, corporal, no call for that,' said the sergeant, leaning back in his creaking chair. 'There's plenty of lads out there walking around on legs they wouldn't still have if there hadn't been a friendly Igor around, eh, Igor?'

'Yeah? Well, *I* heard about people waking up and findin' their friendly Igor had whipped out their brains in the middle of the night and buggered off to flog 'em,' said the corporal, glaring at Igor.

'I promith you your brain ith entirely thafe from me, corporal,' said Igor. Polly started to laugh, and stopped when she realized absolutely no one else was doing so.

'Yeah, well, I met a sergeant who said an Igor put a man's legs on *backwards*,' said Corporal Strappi. 'What good's that to a soldier, eh?'

'Could advance and retreat at the thame time?' said Igor levelly. 'Thargent, I know all the thtorieth, and

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they are nothing but vile calumnieth. I theek only to therve my country. I do not want trouble.'

'Right,' said the sergeant. 'Nor do we. Make your mark, and you've got to promise not to mess about with Corporal Strappi's brain, right? *Another* signature? My word, I can see we've got ourselves a bleedin' *college* of recruits today. Give him his cardboard shilling, corporal.'

'Thank you,' said Igor. 'And I would like to give the picture a wipe, if it'th all the thame to you.' He produced a small cloth.

'Wipe it?' said Strappi. 'Is that allowed, sergeant?'

'What do you want to wipe it for, mister?' said Jackrum.

'To remove the invithible demonth,' said Igor.

'I can't see any invis—' Strappi began, and stopped.

'Just let him, all right?' said Jackrum. 'It's one of their funny little ways.'

'Dun't seem right,' muttered Strappi. 'Practically treason . . .'

'Can't see why it'd be wrong just to give the old girl a wash,' said the sergeant shortly. 'Next. Oh . . .'

Igor, after carefully wiping the stained picture and giving it a perfunctory peck, came and stood next to Polly, giving her a sheepish grin. But she was watching the next recruit.

He was short and quite slim, which was fairly usual in a country where it was rare to get enough food to make you fat. But he was dressed in black and expensively, like an aristocrat; he even had a sword. The sergeant was, therefore, looking worried. Clearly

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a man could get into trouble talking wrong to a nob who might have important friends.

'You sure you've come to the right place, sir?' he said.

'Yes, sergeant. I wish to enlist.'

Sergeant Jackrum shifted uneasily. 'Yes, sir, but I'm not sure a gentleman like you—'

'Are you going to enlist me or not, sergeant?'

'Not usual for a *gentleman* to enlist as a common soldier, sir,' mumbled the sergeant.

'What you mean, sergeant, is: is anyone after me? Is there a price on my head? And the answer is no.'

'How about a mob with pitchforks?' said Corporal Strappi. 'He's a bloody *vampire*, sarge! Anyone can see that! He's a Black Ribboner! Look, he's got the badge!'

'Which says "Not One Drop"," said the young man calmly. 'Not one drop of human blood, sergeant. A prohibition I have accepted for almost two years, thanks to the League of Temperance. Of course, if you have a personal objection, sergeant, you only need to give it to me in writing.'

Which was quite a clever thing to say, Polly thought. Those clothes cost serious money. Most of the vampire families were highly nobby. You never knew who was connected to who . . . not just connected to who, in fact, but to whom. Whoms were likely to be far more trouble than your common everyday who. The sergeant was looking down a mile of rough road.

'Got to move with the times, corporal,' he said,

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deciding not to go there. 'And we certainly need the men.'

'Yeah, but s'posin' he wants to suck all my blood out in the middle of the night?' said Strappi.

'Well, he'll just have to wait until Private Igor's finished looking for your brain, won't he?' snapped the sergeant. 'Sign here, mister.'

The pen scratched on the paper. After a minute or two the vampire turned the paper over and continued writing on the other side. Vampires had long names.

'But you can call me Maladict,' he said, dropping the pen back in the inkwell.

'Thank you very much, I must say, si— private. Give him the shilling, corporal. Good job it's not a silver one, eh? Haha!'

'Yes,' said Maladict. 'It is.'

'Next!' said the sergeant. Polly watched as a farm boy, breeches held up with string, shuffled in front of the table and looked at the quill pen with the resentful perplexity of those confronted with new technology.

She turned back to the bar. The landlord glared at her in the manner of bad landlords everywhere. As her father always said, if you kept an inn you either liked people or went mad. Oddly enough, some of the mad ones were the best at looking after their beer. But by the smell of the place, this wasn't one of those.

She leaned on the bar. 'Pint, please,' she said, and watched glumly as the man gave a scowl of acknowledgement and turned to the big barrels. It'd be sour, she knew, with the slop bucket under the tap tipped

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back in every night, and the spigot not put back, and . . . yes, it was going to be served in a leather tankard that had probably never been washed.

A couple of new recruits were already knocking back their pints, though, with every audible sign of enjoyment. But this was Plün, after all. Anything that made you forget you were there was probably worth drinking.

One of them said, 'Lovely pint, this, eh?' and the boy next to him belched and said, 'Best I've tasted, yeah.'

Polly sniffed at the tankard. The contents smelled like something she wouldn't feed to pigs. She took a sip, and completely changed her opinion. She *would* feed it to pigs. Those lads have never tasted beer before, she told herself. It's like dad said. Out in the country there's lads who'd join up for an uninhabited pair of breeches. And they'll drink this muck and pretend to enjoy it like men, hey up, we supped some stuff last night, eh, lads? And then next thing—

Oh, lor' . . . that reminded her. What'd the privy be like here? The men's one out in the yard back at home was bad enough. Polly sloshed two big pails of water into it every morning while trying not to breathe. There was weird green moss growing on the slate floor. And The Duchess was a good inn. It had customers who took their boots off before going to bed.

She narrowed her eyes. This stupid fool in front of her, a man making one long eyebrow do the work

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of two, was serving them slops and foul vinegar just before they marched off to war—

'Thith beer,' said Igor, on her right, 'tathteth of horthe pith.'

Polly stood back. Even in a bar like this, that was killing talk.

'Oh, you'd know, would you?' said the barman, looming over the boy. 'Drunk horse piss, have you?'

'Yeth,' said Igor.

The barman stuck a fist in front of Igor's face. 'Now you listen to me, you lisping little—'

A slim black arm appeared with amazing speed and a pale hand caught the man's wrist. The one eyebrow contorted in sudden agony.

'Now, it's like this,' said Maladict calmly. 'We're soldiers of the Duchess, agreed? Just say "aargh"'.

He must have squeezed. The man groaned.

'Thank you. And you're serving up as beer a liquid best described as foul water,' Maladict went on in the same level, conversational tone. 'I, of course, don't drink . . . horse piss, but I have a highly developed sense of smell, and really would prefer not to list aloud the things I can smell in this murk, so we'll just say "rat droppings" and leave it at that, shall we? Just whimper. Good man.' At the end of the bar, one of the new recruits threw up. The barman's fingers had gone white. Maladict nodded with satisfaction.

'Incapacitating a soldier of her grace in wartime is a treasonable offence,' he said. He leaned forward. 'Punishable, of course, by . . . death.' Maladict pronounced the word with a certain delight. '*However*, if

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there happened to be another barrel of beer around the place, you know, good stuff, the stuff you'd keep for your friends if you had any friends, then I'm sure we can forget this little incident. Now, I'm going to let go of your wrist. I can tell by your eyebrow that you are a thinker, and if you're thinking of rushing back in here with a big stick, I'd like you to think about *this* instead: I'd like you to think about this black ribbon I'm wearing. Know what it means, do you?'

The barman winced, and mumbled: 'Temp'rance League . . .'

'Right! Well done!' said Maladict. 'And one more thought for you, if you've got room. I've only taken a pledge not to drink human blood. It doesn't mean I can't kick you in the fork so hard you suddenly go deaf.'

He released his grip. The barman slowly straightened up. Under the bar he *would* have a short wooden club, Polly knew. Every bar had one. Even her father had one. It was a great help, he said, in times of worry and confusion. She saw the fingers of the usable hand twitch.

'Don't,' she said. 'I think he means it.'

The barman relaxed. 'Bit of a misunderstanding there, gents,' he mumbled. 'Got the wrong barrel in. No offence meant.' He shuffled off, his hand almost visibly throbbing.

'I only thaid it wath horthe pith,' said Igor.

'He won't cause trouble,' said Polly to Maladict. 'He'll be your friend from now on. He's worked out he can't beat you so he's going to be your best mate.'

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Maladict subjected her to a thoughtful stare. '*I* know that,' he said. 'How do you?'

'I used to work in an inn,' said Polly, feeling her heart begin to beat faster, as it always did when the lies lined up. 'You learn to read people.'

'What did you do in the inn?'

'Barman.'

'There's another inn in this hole, is there?'

'Oh no, I'm not from round here.'

Polly groaned at the sound of her own voice, and waited for the question: 'Then why come here to join up?' It didn't come. Instead, Maladict just shrugged and said, 'I shouldn't think anyone is from round here.'

A couple more new recruits arrived at the bar. They had the same look – sheepish, a bit defiant, in clothes that didn't fit well. Eyebrow reappeared with a small keg, which he laid reverentially on a stand and gently tapped. He pulled a genuine pewter tankard from under the bar, filled it, and timorously proffered it to Maladict.

'Igor?' said the vampire, waving it away.

'I'll thtick with the horthe pith, if it'th all the thame to you,' said Igor. He looked around in the sudden silence. 'Look, I never thaid I didn't *like* it,' said Igor. He pushed his mug across the sticky bar. 'Thame again?'

Polly took the new tankard and sniffed at it. Then she took a sip. 'Not bad,' she said. 'At least it tastes like it's—'

The door pushed open, letting in the sounds of the

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storm. About two-thirds of a troll eased its way inside, and then managed to get the rest of itself through.

Polly was okay about trolls. She met them up in the woods sometimes, sitting amongst the trees or purposefully lumbering along the tracks on the way to whatever it was trolls did. They weren't friendly, they were . . . resigned. The world's got humans in it, live with it. They're not worth the indigestion. You can't kill 'em all. Step around 'em. Stepping on 'em doesn't work in the long term.

Occasionally a farmer would hire one to do some heavy work. Sometimes they turned up, sometimes they didn't. Sometimes they'd turn up, lumber around a field pulling out tree stumps as if they were carrots, and then wander off without waiting to be paid. A lot of things humans did mystified trolls, and vice versa. Generally, they avoided one another.

But she didn't often see trolls as . . . trollish as this one. It looked like a boulder that had spent centuries in the damp pine forests. Lichen covered it. Stringy grey moss hung in curtains from its head and its chin. It had a bird's nest in one ear. It had a genuine troll club, made from an uprooted sapling. It was almost a joke troll, except that no one would laugh.

The root end of the sapling bumped across the floor as the troll, watched by the recruits and a horrified Corporal Strappi, trudged to the table.

'Gonna En List,' it said. 'Gonna do my bit. Gimme shillin'.'

'You're a troll!' Strappi burst out.

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'Now, now, none of that, corporal,' said Sergeant Jackrum. 'Don't ask, don't tell.'

'Don't ask? Don't *ask*? It's a troll, sarge! It's got crags! There's grass growing under its fingernails! It's a troll!'

'Right,' said the sergeant. 'Enlist him.'

'You want to fight with us?' Strappi squeaked. Trolls had no sense of personal space, and a ton of what was, for practical purposes, a kind of rock was looming right over the table.

The troll analysed the question. The recruits stood in silence, mugs halfway to mouths.

'No,' said the troll at last. 'Gonna fight wi' En Army. Gods save the . . .' The troll paused, and looked at the ceiling. Whatever it was seeking there didn't appear to be visible. Then it looked at its feet, which had grass growing on them. Then it looked at its free hand and moved its fingers as if counting something. '. . . Duchess,' it said. It had been a long wait. The table creaked as the troll laid a hand on it, palm upwards. 'Gimme shillin'.'

'We've only got the bits of pape—' Corporal Strappi began. Sergeant Jackrum jabbed an elbow into his ribs.

'Upon my oath, are you mad?' he hissed. 'There's a ten-man bounty for enlisting a troll!' With his other hand he reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a real silver shilling, and placed it delicately in the huge hand. 'Welcome to your new life, friend! I'll just write your name down, shall I? What is it?'

The troll looked at ceiling, feet, sergeant, wall and

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table. Polly saw its lips move. 'Carborundum?' it volunteered.

'Yeah, probably,' said the sergeant. 'Er, how'd you like to shav— to cut off some of that hai— moss? We've got a, a sort of a . . . regulation . . .'

Wall, floor, ceiling, table, fingers, sergeant. 'No,' said Carborundum.

'Right. Right. Right,' said the sergeant quickly. 'It's not a regulation as per such, actually, it's more of an advisory. Silly one, too, eh? I've always thought so. Glad to have you with us,' he added fervently.

The troll licked the coin, which gleamed like a diamond in its hand. It actually did have grass growing under its fingernails too, Polly noticed. Then Carborundum trudged to the bar. The crowd parted instantly, because trolls *never* had to stand at the back of the press of bodies, waving money and trying to catch the barman's eye.

He broke the coin in two and dropped both halves on the bar top. Eyebrow swallowed. He looked as though he would have said 'Are you sure?' except that this was not a question barmen addressed to people weighing over half a ton. Carborundum thought for a while, and then said: 'Gimme drink.'

Eyebrow nodded, disappeared briefly into the room behind the bar, and came back holding a double-handled mug. Maladict sneezed. Polly's eyes watered. It was the kind of smell you sense with your teeth. The pub might make foul beer as a matter of course, but *this* was eye-stinging vinegar.

Eyebrow dropped one half of the silver coin into it,

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and then took a copper penny out of the money drawer and held it over the fuming mug. The troll nodded. With just a hint of ceremony, like a cocktail waiter dropping the little umbrella into a Double Entendre, Eyebrow let the copper fall.

More bubbles welled up. Igor watched with interest. Carborundum picked the mug up in two fingers of each shovel-like hand, and swallowed the contents in one gulp. He stood stock still for a moment, then carefully put the mug back on the bar.

'You gentlemen might like to move back a bit,' murmured Eyebrow.

'What's going to happen?' said Polly.

'It takes 'em all differently,' said Eyebrow. 'Looks like this one's – no, there he goes . . .'

With considerable style, Carborundum went over backwards. There was no sagging at the knees, no girly attempt to soften the fall. He just went from standing up, one hand out, to lying down, one hand up. He even rocked gently for some time after hitting the floor.

'Got no head for his drink,' said Eyebrow. 'Typical of the young bucks. Wants to play the big troll, comes in here, orders an Electrick Floorbanger, doesn't know how to handle it.'

'Is he going to come round?' said Maladict.

'No, that's it until dawn, I reckon,' said Eyebrow. 'Brain stops working.'

'Shouldn't affect *him* too much, then,' said Corporal Strappi, stepping up. 'Right, you miserable

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lot. You're sleeping in the shed out the back, understand? Practically waterproof, hardly any rats. We're out of here at dawn! You're in the army now!'

Polly lay in the dark, on a bed of musty straw. There was no question of anyone's getting undressed. The rain hammered on the roof and the wind blew through a crack under the door, despite Igor's attempt to stuff it with straw. There was some desultory conversation, during which Polly found that she was sharing the dank shed with 'Tonker' Halter, 'Shufti' Manickle, 'Wazzer' Goom and 'Lofty' Tewt. Maladict and Igor didn't seem to have acquired repeatable nicknames. She'd become Ozzer by general agreement.

Slightly to Polly's surprise the boy now known as Wazzer had taken a small picture of the Duchess out of his pack and had nervously hung it on an old nail. No one else said anything as he prayed to it. It was what you were supposed to do.

They said the Duchess was dead . . .

Polly had been washing up when she'd heard the men talking late one night, and it's a poor woman who can't eavesdrop while making a noise at the same time.

Dead, they said, but the people up at PrinceMarmadukePiotreAlbertHansJoseph-BernhardtWilhelmsberg weren't admitting it. That was 'cos what with there being no children, and with royalty marrying one another's cousins and grannies

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all the time, the ducal throne would go to Prince Heinrich of Zlobenia! There! Can you believe that? That's why we never see her, right? And there hasn't been a new picture all these years? Makes you think, eh? Oh, they *say* she's been in mourning 'cos of the young Duke, but that was more'n seventy years ago! They *say* she was buried in secret and—

At which point her father had stopped the speaker dead. There are some conversations where you don't even want people to remember you were in the same room.

Dead or alive, the Duchess watched over you.

The recruits tried to sleep.

Occasionally, someone belched or expelled wind noisily, and Polly responded with a few fake eructations of her own. That seemed to inspire greater effort on the part of the other sleepers, to the point where the roof rattled and dust fell down, before everyone subsided. Once or twice she heard people stagger out into the windy darkness, in theory for the privy but probably, given male impatience in these matters, to aim much closer to home. Once, coasting in and out of a troubled dream, she thought she heard someone sobbing.

Taking care not to rustle too much, Polly pulled out the much-folded, much-read, much-stained last letter from her brother, and read it by the light of the solitary, guttering candle. It had been opened and heavily mangled by the censors, and bore the stamp of the Duchy. It read:

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Dear all,

We are in [redacted] which is [redacted] with a [redacted] big thing with knobs. On [redacted] we will [redacted] which is just as well because [redacted] out of. I am keeping well. The food is [redacted] [redacted] we'll [redacted] at the [redacted] but my mate [redacted]er says not to worry, it'll be all over by [redacted] and we shall all have medals.

Chins up!
Paul

It was in a careful hand, the excessively clear and well-shaped writing of someone who has to think about every letter. She slowly folded it up again. Paul had wanted medals, because they were shiny. That'd been almost a year ago, when any recruiting party that came past went away with the best part of a battalion, and there had been people waving them off with flags and music. Sometimes, now, smaller parties of men came back. The lucky ones were missing only one arm or one leg. There were no flags.

She unfolded another piece of paper. It was a pamphlet. It was headed 'From the Mothers of Borogravia!' The mothers of Borogravia were very definite about wanting to send their sons off to war against the Zlobenian Aggressor and used a great many exclamation marks to say so. And this was odd, because the mothers in Munz had not seemed keen on the idea of their sons going off to war, and positively tried to drag them back. Several copies of the pamphlet seemed to have reached every home,

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even so. It was very patriotic. That is, it talked about killing foreigners.

Polly had learned to read and write after a fashion because the inn was big and it was a business and things had to be tallied and recorded. Her mother had taught her to read, which was acceptable to Nuggan, and her father made sure that she learned how to write, which was not. A woman who could write was an Abomination unto Nuggan, according to Father Jupe; anything she wrote would by definition be a lie.

But Polly had learned anyway because Paul hadn't, at least to the standard needed to run an inn as busy as The Duchess. He could read if he could run his finger slowly along the lines, and he wrote letters at a snail's pace, with a lot of care and heavy breathing, like a man assembling a piece of jewellery. He was big and kind and slow and could lift beer kegs as though they were toys, but he wasn't a man at home with paperwork. Their father had hinted to Polly, very gently but very often, that Polly would need to be right behind him when the time came for him to run The Duchess. Left to himself, with no one to tell him what to do next, her brother just stood and watched birds.

At Paul's insistence, she'd read the whole of 'From the Mothers of Borogravia!' to him, including the bits about heroes and there being no greater good than to die for your country. She wished, now, she hadn't done that. Paul did what he was told. Unfortunately, he believed what he was told, too.

Polly put the papers away and dozed again, until

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her bladder woke her up. Oh, well, at least at this time of the morning she'd have a clear run. She reached out for her pack and stepped as softly as she could out into the rain.

It was mostly just coming off the trees now, which were roaring in the wind that blew up the valley. The moon was hidden in the clouds, but there was just enough light to make out the inn's buildings. A certain greyness suggested that what passed for dawn in Plün was on the way. She located the men's privy which, indeed, stank of inaccuracy.

A lot of planning and practice had gone into this moment. She was helped by the design of the breeches, which were the old-fashioned kind with generous buttoned trapdoors, and also by the experiments she'd made very early in the mornings when she was doing the cleaning. In short, with care and attention to detail, she'd found that a woman could pee standing up. It certainly worked back home in the inn's privy, which had been designed and built in the certain expectation of the aimlessness of the customers.

The wind shook the dank building. In the dark she thought of Auntie Hattie, who'd gone a bit strange round her sixtieth birthday and persistently accused passing young men of looking up her dress. She was even worse after a glass of wine, and she had one joke: 'What does a man stand up to do, a woman sit down to do and a dog lift its leg to do?' And then, when everyone was too embarrassed to answer, she'd triumphantly shriek, 'Shake hands!' and fall over.

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Auntie Hattie was an Abomination all by herself.

Polly buttoned up the breeches with a sense of exhilaration. She felt she'd crossed a bridge, a sensation that was helped by the realization that she'd kept her feet dry.

Someone said, 'Psst!'

It was just as well she'd already taken a leak. Panic instantly squeezed every muscle. Where were they hiding? This was just a rotten old shed! Oh, there were a few cubicles, but the smell alone suggested very strongly that the woods outside would be a much better proposition. Even on a wild night. Even with extra wolves.

'Yes?' she quavered, and then cleared her throat and demanded, with a little more gruffness: '*Yes?*'

'You'll need these,' whispered the voice. In the fetid gloom she made out something rising over the top of a cubicle. She reached up nervously and touched softness. It was a bundle of wool. Her fingers explored it.

'A pair of *socks*?' she said.

'Right. Wear 'em,' said the mystery voice hoarsely.

'Thank you, but I've brought several pairs . . .' Polly began.

There was a faint sigh. 'No. Not on your feet. Shove 'em down the front of your trousers.'

'What do you mean?'

'Look,' said the whisperer patiently, 'you don't bulge where you shouldn't bulge. That's good. But you don't bulge where you should bulge, either. You know? Lower down?'

'Oh! Er . . . I . . . but . . . I didn't think people

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