The Witching Hour is Flexible

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1066.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Fandom:	Discworld (Terry Pratchett)
Additional Tags:	Fantasy, Magic, Whimsical
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-11-02 Words: 24,767 Chapters: 6/6

The Witching Hour is Flexible

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Summary

In the magical, wonderfully absurd streets of Ankh-Morpork, being a witch is rarely a quiet profession. Meet Nell, a young witch with an unusual talent for solving supernatural problems through kindness, cleverness, a little magic, and an extraordinary amount of tea. From troublesome ghosts and rebellious enchanted objects to unruly weather, eccentric wizards, and bureaucratic nightmares, Nell discovers that even the strangest chaos can be negotiated with. But in a city where absolutely nothing behaves as expected, every solution is just the beginning of another adventure.

Chapter 1: On the Matter of Ghosts, Ledgers, Raisins, and Other Forms of Civil Negotiation

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Nell had an attic that thought it was a lung. It inhaled and exhaled weather through gaps in the tiles, it wheezed under heat, it whistled under cold, and on some mornings, when the light came in slantwise through a pane that had once been a bottle and still remembered it, the whole place seemed to expand on a creak and sigh as if it were preparing to sing. It did sing sometimes. This was usually the frying pan's fault. The pan, a dented relic with a handle that had known three owners and therefore possessed strong opinions about continuity, preferred sea-shanties. Nobody had asked the pan about this. It had been a private hobby for years. The pan would hum under its breath (metallurgically speaking) when eggs were involved, but give it onions, butter, and a proper sizzle, and the verses came rolling in - heave her up, boys, and mind the kelp - earthy, briny, and with the particular melancholy of a galley utensil that had never once seen the ocean.

Nell, being twenty and a witch, was the kind of person who could live happily with a singing pan, a broom that tried to sit down whenever there was nothing to sweep (which was always, because dust took any attempt at cleaning as a personal affront and returned in force), and a small tin of tea that had learned, by rigor and trauma, to remain calm even in boiling water. The broom had acquired a cushion. This was the broom's idea. The cushion was floral and faintly resentful. It shed tassels like sighs. When the wind moved through the rafters and the whole attic-lung drew breath, the cushion shifted and made a muffled noise, as if scandalized by the impropriety of air moving uninvited.

Below the attic were neighbors - of course there were neighbors, this being a city where property boundaries were an optimistic rumor - who were already composing formal complaints to themselves. In Ankh-Morpork, the art of complaining was a high craft, much like pastry. People polished their grievances the way others polished boots. They named them, bred them for endurance, and let them out for exercise. Nell had been resident for just six days. The neighborhood, through a delicate network of laundry lines and window-ledgers and shared stairs, had learned that she was young, a witch, and inclined to odd smells at odd hours. These were the facts. The conclusions varied according to temperament, theology, and whether one had ever spoken to a witch and come away improved.

Nell herself had tried to be considerate. She had placed a small dish of vinegar on the windowsill, which is the sort of thing people do when told that it clears the air. It didn’t, of course. It merely made the air better prepared to sting. But she believed in gestures. She believed in the moral effect of trying. She believed that if you warned existence that you intended to be kind to it, it might occasionally meet you halfway. This charming belief had been knocked about a bit by reality but had not yet been entirely evicted.

Today, the attic inhaled drizzle and exhaled the complicated aroma of boot polish, old wood, frying onions, fear, and ambition. This was the standard city blend. Ankh-Morpork had been stewing in itself for centuries and had acquired, like all great soups, a signature. Nell perched cross-legged near the window on a stack of stitched-together magazines that had been improved into a kind of chair. She was writing flyers. The flyers said: WITCH FOR HIRE, ALL OCCULT JOBS CONSIDERD, NO REFUNDS. The grammar looked hopeful, as if it had ambitions toward improvement if only given a bit of time and perhaps a biscuit.

She pinned the first flyer to the broom with a hatpin. The broom immediately tried to sit down, having been asked to stand upright and not feeling up to it. She pinned the second to the window frame, the third to the cushion (which made a sound like a scandalized aunt), and the fourth to a pigeon that had been watching her with the measured patience of a landlord. The pigeon accepted the title of Assistant to the Management in exchange for two oats and a smug look.

A witch for hire. It had a ring to it, like a bell that wasn’t entirely in tune but meant well. Nell’s eyes were bright with the sort of hope that believes chaos will get the hint and behave if you smile at it firmly enough. She consulted the tea leaves. This was a ritual. Nell’s tea, as previously established, was stoic. It did not wilt under scrutiny. Its leaves arranged themselves into patterns with the air of a guild performing a public service and not expecting thanks.

“What do you think?” she asked the cup, tipping it to the light. The leaves had fallen into an arrangement that any decent augury table would have recognized as a bold portmanteau of “salvation” and “duck.” It could be read as “a savior with feathers” or “a large bill soon due.” It was unwise to ignore either.

“Yes,” Nell said. “That’s helpful.” She spiked the tea with a dash of gin on general therapeutic principles, drank, and set off to wallpaper the neighborhood with her fortunes.

She descended through the building’s staircase, which had been constructed by a man who understood steps but not continuity. The sizes were aspirational. She navigated them with the ease of someone who had learned that stairs, like people and weather, respond best to being treated as if they mean well even when they have given ample evidence to the contrary. Down on the street - a ribbon of damp cobbles upon which fate, in the form of horse and cart, left comments - Nell stapled flyers to any surface that looked like it might survive the experience.

She had barely made it to the corner before the city answered.

The first client came hurtling out of the fog like an unpaid bill: a guild accountant with the haunted look of someone who had asked numbers to behave and been given behavior instead. He was thin in the exact way of string that has been stretched too often and ties itself in knots at night.

“You are the witch,” he said, not so much asking as accusing. He waggled a ledger. It shuddered beneath its covers.

“Yes,” Nell said, cheerful. “How nice of you to notice.”

“The figures keep… moving,” he said, as if the concept were indecent. “They add up to one thing at lunch and another thing after lunch and a third thing when I get home, and I am beginning to suspect a lunch-based conspiracy.”

“Have you been putting them next to anything, say a magnet or a strong opinion?” Nell asked. The accountant blinked. This was not on his list of allowable questions. “Never mind,” she added. “Bring it by.”

While the city was negotiating this, the second client whistled by in the opposite direction: a junior wizard in robes that were significant, not because they fit him (they didn’t) but because they had once belonged to someone taller and had developed a tragic sag around the hem. His beard had the airy, far-away look of a man who owned one but could not remember why. He clutched an empty bottle that had been full of potion, which is to say it had once held promise, regret, and citrus.

“Excuse me,” he said to the general vicinity. “I was told there is a… paramagical practitioner? A freelance thaumaturgical… person? The bottle keeps refilling itself if I stop looking at it.”

“Stop looking at it now,” Nell advised, which he did, because he was junior enough to take orders from anyone who sounded like they had a plan. The bottle made a small noise of disappointment and refilled itself in a sulky way. “All right,” she said, “that’s interesting. Bring it by. We’ll apologize to it until it calms down.”

The third client came later, smelling of alleys and the ratty end of hope. He wore a hat which, by long association with his head, had learned some of his thoughts and was declining to have any of them. The man carried a sack that watched the world with small unwinking eyes.

“Rats,” he said, by way of salutation. “Unionizing.” It was not a word he used often. It had been given to him, and like all gifts, it was both heavy and slippery.

“Congratulations to them,” Nell said, because while she had yet to meet a rat whose opinion she couldn’t admire, she had a very flexible use of congratulations. “Bring them by if they sign the consent form.”

“They chew forms,” the rat-catcher said bitterly.

“Even better,” Nell said. “Recycling.”

The city, having sent three harbingers, now sat back to enjoy the show. Wizards on the upper walkways of the Unseen University sniffed the air with the long-suffering faces of men who had argued with reality and won on a technicality. There was a twitch in the universal spoon drawer, as if cutlery were holding a caucus. The Library experienced a small inside-out breeze that left books open to pages of maps of places that didn’t exist yet, which is the library equivalent of staring out of the window and sighing.

By afternoon, Nell’s attic-lung had developed a wheeze of anticipation. The broom tried to sit lower in its cushion, as if it feared responsibility by proximity. The frying pan insisted on polishing itself in the reflection of the window, which is the sort of behavior that suggests

either vanity or fear of grease ghosts. The tea leaves flattened out into a pattern that said, with all the dignity of a seer who has seen far too much, “Brace.”

The first to arrive was the ledger, carried like a sleeping infant and hissed at like a cat. Nell cleared space on a crate that pretended very hard to be a table. She set the ledger upon it. The book bulged and settled, like a creature adjusting its scales. Numbers shifted internally, phasmagorical, becoming briefly something that added up to exactly a chorus line of ducks and then to the price of a medium onion and then to a negative quantity that smelt of mothballs.

Nell leaned close with the air of someone listening for declarations of love at a party. “All right,” she said to the book, “what do you want?”

It tried to look ordinary. Numbers arranged themselves with the anxious tidiness of children practicing innocence. Nell did not blink. The book deflated, and the columns sighed with the relief of a suitor who has finally been told no.

“Ah,” Nell said, “you’re bored.” She prodded the margin with a quill. “He keeps writing you the same thing, doesn’t he? Routine is all very well for bookkeepers, but it’s murder on books.” The ledger made a guilty little shift, and the bottom line formed the sum of a new hat. “There we are,” Nell said. “You want to play. But listen now. Numbers are serious, and people depend on them, and while I personally admire the impulse to become ducks, you must not do it during tax season. Compromise: you may rearrange yourself into birds between midnight and two, provided you return to arithmetic afterward. Also, stop charging for hats.”

The ledger, abashed, settled. The accountant looked at Nell as if she had arranged peace in our time with an abacus. “How did you - ”

“I asked. It answered,” she said. “Next.”

The junior wizard, observing from a safe distance, had been moving his eyes from the refilling bottle to Nell with the peculiar expression of a man realizing that the universe might be an employee rather than a boss. He held out the bottle. “It won’t… it won’t let me be done with it.”

“Of course it won’t,” Nell said. “You’ve given it a job with no dignity. Never ask a container to define itself by emptiness.” She took the bottle, looked into it, and saw, as one does when looking into the bottleneck of a well-designed regret, a tiny storm with a cork for a moon. “All right, darling,” she murmured into the glass, “what do you want to hold?”

The bottle trembled. A smell like new oranges rose. The storm cleared a little. “A mood,” Nell said. “You want to hold a mood, not a liquid. That’s why you refill yourself when no one’s looking - somebody’s always making more mood.” She handed it back. “You need to label it. Call it ‘Tuesday Afternoon Oh No.’ Then keep it on a shelf and do not drink it. Let it be what it is. Objects respond to respect.”

The wizard, whose entire education had been constructed of respect delivered in Latin at high volumes, stared at the bottle. He sat down on the cushion without asking and was immediately scolded by tassels.

This small convocation was interrupted by the rat-catcher, who arrived in a surrounding tide of commentary. Rats have voices like knives in drawers. They speak in scrapes and thumps and an occasional pianissimo squeal that would melt butter. The sack moved as if it were a very old ocean, and tiny dignities popped up like periscopes.

“We are striking on the matter of bait quality,” said a voice from the sack’s interior with the sardonic calm of a negotiator who has learned that life expects you to keep your temper because it has mislaid its own. “We have endured stale crumbs. We have endured, if you will believe it, the soft part of the loaf. We will accept a raisin, but it had better be a good raisin.”

“Hello,” Nell said, because good manners belong where fear used to live. “I’m Nell. I’m inclined to approve of unions. Do you have a representative?”

A rat emerged onto the lip of the sack with the measured pace of a statesman and the whiskers of a sorcerer. His fur had known the city intimately and had acquired a texture like maps. He tipped his head. “I am Chairman Sawtooth. We request improved working conditions, bait of distinction, and a wage structure commensurate with the danger of cats who have attended a seminar.”

“Fair,” Nell said, “especially the cats. They’ve been getting ideas.” She flicked a glance at the rat-catcher, who had arranged his face into a landscape of confusion with outcroppings of hope. “Do you, as a collective, want to keep being caught? Because I must be sure of the labor market.”

“We want to keep not being caught,” Sawtooth said. “But we want the option to consider being caught if the bait is exceptional and the escape routes are to code.”

“Done,” Nell said. “I will draft a Standard of Bait Excellence. The cheese shall sweat at room temperature but not weep, the bread shall be yesterday’s and not last Thursday’s, and raisins shall be the kind that look as though they remember grapes.” She produced a pencil from behind her ear. Pencils lived there, at attention. Her hair had a flair for provisioning. “Now, do you strike at the bakers, or at the notion of soldier’s biscuits as a rat food? Because - ”

This was the precise moment at which the universe, which had been waiting politely outside like a quiet thunder playing with its keys, decided to locate the plot. There came, from somewhere just left of the attic staircase, a sound like a sigh someone had forgotten in a cupboard. A breeze moved through the rafters, but it was a breeze with opinions: it fingered things; it chose. The frying pan, startled out of a chorus, clanged a note that does not exist on any recognized scale and yet has been played by bagpipes when they feel dangerous.

“Ah,” Nell said. “My first proper job.” She rose, tucked her skirt away from the ambitiously splintery crate, and reached for a small brass key that had chosen her pocket as home. “A haunting at a bakery, was it?” She smiled in the direction of the staircase, at the breeze, at the faint smell rising up - yeast, cinnamon, butter, the ghost of burn. “Come on, then.”

It is a city truth universally acknowledged that you can tell the time by the baker. Not the baker’s clock; bakers do not trust clocks. You tell the time by the dough’s face. The ovens in Tuttle & Son had faces of their own, in any case, stained by centuries and illuminated by fresh loaves into masks of flame. When Nell stepped in, the smell reached up and took her by the hand with all the friendliness of fresh bread and the occasional elbow of an anxious bun. The counter was a snowy field that had seen wars. A sign read: TODAY’S SPECIAL: BUNS (LOUD).

The widow behind the counter had sleeves rolled up to her shoulders and a grief that had settled into all the places where muscle becomes memory. When she saw Nell, she wiped her hands, rubbed flour into her hair by accident, and frowned. “Are you the witch?”

“I am a witch,” Nell said, which is the correct answer. The other kind - yes, I am the witch - invites coverage you may not be able to provide. “I understand there’s a haunting. I’ve brought nothing but kindness, incompetence, and a frying pan that sings sea-shanties. Between us we will be sufficient.”

The widow’s mouth did something that could be mistaken for a smile if you were generous and the lighting was bad. “He won’t leave,” she said, and the ‘he’ had a weight to it. “He hums at night. He warms the oven. He turns the buns so they brown evenly as if - ” She stopped, because as if’s are where heartbreak sets up shop.

“May I?” Nell asked. The widow gestured toward the kitchen with the resignation of a clerk presenting a ledger that has begun to dream of waterfowl.

The ghost appeared as a temperature before he appeared as a man. The ovens were warm in the respectful way of old kings greeting an heir. The air had the solemnity of flour about to become cake. And then he was there, outlined in a soft absence of light, the way a familiar person is visible in a dark room because your memory makes a lamp. He was tall, and carried the particular stiffness of the honest dead, the ones who suspect they are disappointing people by not being alive and cannot do anything about it.

“Evening,” Nell said, cheery. “I’m Nell. Your wife would like to sleep without humming. Is that negotiable?”

The ghost put his hands on his hips. Ghosts, like cats and certain executives, are born both proud and puzzled. He had a baker’s hands, which is to say hands that understood dough by touch and people by dough. He looked at Nell with the slow appraisal of someone who has learned that if he waits long enough, people will explain themselves. He hummed a bar of something likely to cause tears in buns.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” Nell said carefully. “The thing is, ovens must be given to the living. It’s not that you can’t warm them - obviously you can; good work, by the way - but in general they must be obeyed, and telling them white-hot stories is a living person’s job.”

The ghost tilted his head, and the air filled with the smell of pepper. “There was no one to mind the shortbread,” he said, with the particular force of a man who has approached eternity and found that his list is still running. “You let it go once, and then it’s all crumbs in crevices.”

“I know,” Nell said, because she did. The trick to talking to ghosts is understanding that they are not disembodied despair so much as unfinished instructions. “But perhaps we can agree on terms. Visit at dawn, warm the ovens to your liking, hum once in C major - do not go into D; D is for funerals - and then, if I bring you tea at six, you come back with me to my attic and hum there.”

He stared. Ghosts do not blink. Time does the blinking for them. “Why would I go anywhere?” he asked, which is the question city dwellers ask when shown a horizon.

“Because your wife deserves to sleep,” Nell said gently, “and because my attic is cold. It’s a lung, but a weak one. It needs a singer.”

The ghost considered this. Being dead had not diminished his stubbornness; it had curated it. In his silence, the ovens settled, and a small raindrop of butter died on the stone with a last golden sigh.

“Tea?” he said, which is the word that ends wars and begins rumors.

“Tea,” Nell agreed, and because she was doing very well thus far and hubris likes nothing so much as a girl with a broom, she added, “and biscuits.”

The tethering of a ghost, in its formal aspect, involves chalk, a mirror, a hair from the living relative (the widow supplied one without blinking, which tells you all you need to know about her), a pinch of salt, and an intention. This last is crucial. Magic is a great devourer of intent. It feeds well on ambiguity and gnaws on certainty when it can get it. Nell’s intention was clear: she meant to borrow the ghost on a long-term basis. She sketched the circle as one sketches forgiveness - imperfectly, but with care. She set the mirror to catch the bakery at an angle that made it look like a memory. She asked the ghost to please step forward while thinking of steam. The ghost obliged. He was very good at thinking of steam.

The tether snapped into place with the tiny sound of a spool ending. You know that sound. It's the precise noise hope makes when somebody says "oh!" in surprise. Nell felt the pull: a tug from the attic-lung, a whisper through the tiles, a request from the cushion to please not bring any ghosts onto it; it would stain. The ghost blinked, which he should not have been able to do, and looked at Nell as a cat does when it finds itself transported from one comfortable chair to another without consent but with a cushion.

"You'll like it," Nell said, bright. "It's drafty and ill-behaved, but it means well."

"Does it hum?" the ghost asked, with cautious hope.

"It tries," Nell said. "It makes a sort of optimistic creak."

They returned upstairs as the city pulled its shawl of evening around its shoulders and went about the business of pretending to sleep. News moves faster than rats. By the time Nell opened her door, the door knew what she had done and squeaked in either approval or gossip.

The attic took one look (attics look with their corners) and shivered contentedly. The frying pan, delighted, broke into a sea-shanty in the key of triumphant tin. The broom tried to sit lower in the cushion and nearly vanished into the tassels. The ghost stopped in the middle of the floor and inhaled; he didn't need to, of course, but habits like breath and kindness go on without us.

"Oh," he said, with soft surprise. "It's like the bakery the night before the fair."

"Yes?" Nell said, hopeful. "You'll stay?"

He nodded. "I will warm it when the rain comes sideways. I will hum to the beams. I will mind the draft. But - " and here he turned to the window, which was full of the city and its toasted evening - "I will go each dawn to turn buns."

"Of course," Nell said. "That is the agreement. The tether will stretch like good pastry."

The widow, when told, looked not at Nell but at the ghost's absence, and her mouth flattened into something reluctantly like peace. "Dawn, then," she said. "And the shortbread?"

"He will supervise," Nell said. "At a respectful distance."

The ghost hummed experimentally. The attic trembled with the sheer delight of not being alone. From the corner, the tea tin rattled in a proprietary manner. The rat-catcher, who had witnessed this with the open-mouthed awe of a man who had expected nothing and been given a complicated miracle, cleared his throat.

"About the bait," he said.

"Right," Nell said. "We must establish a Commission on Raisins. Chairman Sawtooth?"

From the sack, an approving rustle. "Motion carried unanimously," Sawtooth said. "We anticipate a new era in interspecies snacking."

The junior wizard stood up from the cushion with the theatrical noise a cushion makes when deprived of wizards. He was pale with thought. "Do you do that with everything?" he asked, sounding equal parts horrified and enamored. "Ask it what it wants and then tell it it's allowed to have that provided it behaves?"

"When possible," Nell said. "The world is made of temperaments. It's exhausted. People ask it to be one thing all the time. Sometimes it performs better when allowed to be two."

Outside, the Unseen University murmured to itself. Inside, the attic-lung learned a new rhythm. The ghost warmed the place by being a memory with opinions. The frying pan took this opportunity to harmonize, because of course it did. The ledger, tucked under the crate, crept its sums into neatness and left a small space in the back corner for birds between midnight and two. The bottle - now proudly labeled TUESDAY AFTERNOON OH NO - rested on a beam and did not refill itself out of sheer dignity.

And Ankh-Morpork, which knows exactly how to notice and exactly when to pretend not to, began to notice Nell.

It noticed by small things. A piece of paper, pinned dripping to a post in the mizzle, that read WITCH FOR HIRE and below it, in a different hand, “Kind.” A cat sitting on a fence and not falling off because someone had told the fence it was a balancing act and it had taken the compliment literally. A lane where cutlery clinked in a way that suggested the spoons were discussing union dues. A rumor that somewhere near the University there was a girl whose attic sang.

With noticing comes bureaucracy, and with bureaucracy come visits, and with visits comes a woman named Mrs. Whindle, who had made it her life’s work to ensure that no one in her vicinity enjoyed themselves incorrectly. She arrived the next morning like an unexpected audit. She had a hat that could have been used to settle debts and a mouth like a verdict. “Are you responsible for the singing?” she demanded without prelude.

“Yes,” Nell said, happy to own something good. “Do you like it?”

Mrs. Whindle considered this question in the same way a cat considers literature: as a challenge. “It is not that I do not like it,” she said, “it is that I have not yet decided whether I am prepared to be seen liking it.”

“Very wise,” Nell said sweetly. “Be sure to make a public announcement when you choose.”

This was perhaps uncharitable. But uncharitable does not always mean untrue. Mrs. Whindle huffed. “A witch,” she said, as if spitting a fishbone. “Very well. We don’t mind witches. We mind novelty. Novelty upsets the furniture.”

“Then I will be careful,” Nell said, “to keep my novelty vertical.”

Mrs. Whindle had to respect a joke even if she despised it. She withdrew with the dignity of a retreating ship. The neighbors, who had been peering, having had ‘important business with a

window’ all morning, exhaled. A city has a way of testing new citizens; if you can keep your wit under light artillery, you are granted the Right To Be Odd within reason.

There are, of course, limits. The first arrived in the shape of a rival. Every craft contains its snobbery. Every craft contains its copper-bottomed adherence to rules that were invented in a cottage and hardened into commandments over simmering soup. The hedge-witch from outside the city came in smelling of hedges, which is to say she smelled of damp purpose and twig. She arranged herself in Nell’s doorway like a moral.

“You are making people think witchcraft is chaos,” she said after introducing herself as Miss Coldfield and producing a card that might as well have read “Approved Witch (Non-Urban).” “It is a discipline, young person. A discipline.”

“It is,” Nell said, “and I am very bad at disciplining it. But I do give it tea.” The ghost hummed at the doorframe in a tone that could be mistaken for encouragement if you were hard of hearing and optimistic. Miss Coldfield glared at the general concept of hummed encouragement.

“You are tethering ghosts,” Miss Coldfield said, as if cataloging sins. “You are allowing ledgers to transform themselves after midnight. You are drafting food-based treaties with vermin. You are encouraging enchanted cookware to sing. You are” - she sniffed - “urban.”

“I am,” Nell said, “urban. The city is a living creature that cannot be put to bed at eight o’clock with a glass of milk.” She measured her words because it matters when one witch talks to another. “I have found that here, the line between magic and manners is interestingly thin. I behave politely to the chaos, and it behaves politely to me. Mostly. In return, I let it be chaotic and it lets me be me.”

Miss Coldfield pressed her lips thin. “You will bring the craft into disrepute.”

“People already think we ride brooms and blight cows,” Nell said cheerfully. “I do ride a broom, but it prefers to sit. And I promise I only blight cows if they deserve it. How is the hedge?”

“The hedge is orderly,” Miss Coldfield said. “We teach it to come to heel. We keep it trimmed straight.”

Nell wanted, very much, to say that the city’s hedges were all right angles until they weren’t and then they were short poems. Instead, she put on her best thoughtful look. “Would you like tea? And biscuits?”

Miss Coldfield hesitated. Tea is the secret handshake of all British-pattern realities. “Very well,” she said, and sat down on the cushion. The cushion made the sound it always made when people sat on it, which was a condescending puff.

By dusk, Nell had achieved a working détente with the ledger, a schedule for the ghost, a preliminary Standard of Bait Excellence signed by Chairman Sawtooth (pawprint) and a very small rat named Mabel (flour-smudge), and a bottle on a beam that declared itself a curator of moods. She had also achieved the city’s attention, the way a juggler achieves gravity’s. She stepped to the window and looked out. The University’s high roofs were conversational in silhouette. Some of them had roosting gargoyles who believed in the right to commentary. Some of them had junior wizards who believed in observation the way cats believe in burglary.

From somewhere along the stone walkways came the faint identifiable shout of someone discovering that their spoons were on strike. Not merely mismatched or unwashed. On strike. A banner fluttered across someone’s sink that read: SPOONS DEMAND LONGER TEA TIMES. Nell, who had been accused of novelty and had defended herself against it with jokes and biscuits, watched the banner and grinned.

“Ah,” she said to nobody in particular and everyone in general, “you noticed.”

The ghost, from his corner, answered with a hum that would have browned buns at fifty paces. The attic-lung breathed. The city held its breath back. And somewhere beyond the hedge of respectable witches and the murmur of respectable wizards, Ankh-Morpork shuffled its large, complicated feet and thought: this one, perhaps, might be fun.

That night, as raindrops performed tiny and precise emergencies on the roof, Nell brewed tea. She did it the proper way, with the solemnity of a rite and the flexibility of someone who had once read the proper way and then done it slightly sideways because the kettle had opinions.

She poured a cup for the ghost, which had no effect beyond comfort. She poured one for the ledger, because it had worked hard at being a book all afternoon. She poured one for the bottle so it would feel included. The bottle did not drink, but it gave off a faint aura of Tuesday.

She drank, and considered her day, and found that while she had been chaotic, she had also done the thing she most wanted to do in the world: she had made small peace treaties. You cannot save a city, not the way it wants to be saved. Cities want glory and mercy and the abolition of taxes,^1 all at once. What you can do is make deals between ledgers and midnight and buns and ghosts and the kind of rats who are clever enough to run a meeting. You can make a street kinder than it was yesterday, or a cushion braver than it thought it could be, or a tea tin prouder. And then you can do it again tomorrow.

The frying pan concluded the day with a low, satisfied verse, the broom sagged into its floral throne with the air of a monarch who has fulfilled constitutional duties, and Nell, who wore the grin of a girl who had told the universe a joke and heard it laugh back, blew out the lamp. The attic settled. The city outside rearranged its thoughts. The rain leaned in confidentially and said, “Here is the lullaby.”

In the morning, the ghost took himself to the bakery at dawn. He hummed the ovens into wakefulness; he turned the buns; he supervised the shortbread. The widow slept through all of it and woke with the unfamiliar, weightless knowledge that grief, like bread, can be sliced. The ledger spent midnight to two as a flock of very tidy birds and then delivered up, at nine a.m., an accounting so immaculate it brought the guild accountant to tears. Chairman Sawtooth inspected three raisins and deemed them adequate, which in rat language is both an accolade and a provocation. The bottle held a faint, unspillable mood that made people sigh and then smile in the way of those who have acknowledged their afternoon and decided to meet it armed with biscuits.

And Nell, stepping out into a morning that had the color of tin and the taste of toast, found that someone had annotated her flyer. Beneath NO REFUNDS, someone had written: NO NEED.

She laughed. The city allowed a small, amused exhalation. Over the University, a junior wizard took notes on the breeze: witch near the wall; attic hums; frying pan sings; spoon unionization ongoing; mood in bottle; ghost outsourcing; rat raisin standards. He drew a conclusion that was wrong in three significant ways and one interesting one. This is the function of junior wizards.

Nell tucked up her hair, took her broom by the hand (it preferred walking to flying; sitting was third choice, after dinner), and set out to see what would require negotiation today. The city arranged a list. A man who feared his shoelaces were plotting treason. A woman who had lost her laughter and kept finding other people's. A tower whose stairs went down when you went up. A cat that believed it was a theorem.

But first, there was a knock. It was Mrs. Whindle. She stood in the doorway wearing a face like policy and said, in the voice of someone very carefully not admitting defeat, "I have decided to be seen liking the singing on Tuesdays. On Thursdays I reserve the right not to like it again."

"Entirely reasonable," Nell said, smiling from somewhere many inches inside her chest. "There's a form."

Mrs. Whindle hesitated, then smiled back, as one does when one is surprised to find one's mouth capable. "Very well," she said. "I shall sign."

Which is how you know that chaos, when walked politely and offered tea, can sometimes be trusted to sit and stay. It will not fetch. Fetching is beneath chaos. But it will hum while it watches you work, and it will elbow the city into noticing it likes you. And if you happen to be a witch with an attic that breathes and a frying pan with the soul of a shantyman and a ledger that becomes a flock of birds after midnight, well, then, your Tuesdays may be more interesting than most.

And that was how Nell made an entrance: with buns that browned, spoons that organized, and a ghost who had agreed, tenderly, to warm a room that had not known it was waiting to be warm.

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^1 They don’t. The abolition of taxes is like the abolition of weather: it sounds elegant to children and pirates, but imagine a city with no tax collector and then imagine the people who would be delighted and then imagine them building anything. You see the problem.

Chapter 2: Of Kettles, Bubbles, and Other Unlicensed Phenomena

Chapter 2
Of Kettles, Bubbles, and Other Unlicensed Phenomena

The morning began with a smell. This was not unusual in Ankh-Morpork, a city which arranged smells with the artistry other cities reserved for fountains. Today's smell had notes of burnt toast arguing with damp wool and - if one stood in just the right place and tilted one's head toward the Unseen University's rooftops - the bright, tinny tang of new weather, still in its wrapper.

On the third crooked floor of a house that leaned against its neighbors like a drunk in polite company, Nell the witch was educating a kettle. The kettle was shaped more or less like a kettle but had a personality that suggested it did not think much of being boiled. It sat on a small brazier, rocking sullenly while Nell addressed it with the same tone she might use for a wayward child or a minor demon.

"Listen," she said, adjusting her hat to the angle that implied she was in charge (and causing two terrified moths to evacuate from the ribbon). "We are making a squall. Not a scandal, not a soufflé, and certainly not whatever you did last time that smelled like a secondhand rainbow. We need three minutes of rain over the Plaza of Small Gods, with a respectful breeze and no lightning. People keep losing their umbrellas to flash-bangs and it makes the Watch nervous."

The kettle clonked its lid as if to say, If you're going to be like that, I shall sulk at a rolling boil. A chalk circle surrounded the brazier, marked in the exacting geometry of someone who had measured using a boot and an optimistic string. Around it: Nell's attic. It was a museum of curated chaos; broomsticks with opinions lay in a straw basket like discontented cats; a proprietary tin labeled "IMPORTANT DUST (DO NOT SWEEP)" gathered further importance by the day; a row of baby jam jars contained bad ideas she was saving for later. [1]

[1] "Keeping" bad ideas is a hallmark of the profession. Proper witches know that ideas get worse if left unattended and better if pickled in clarity, salt, and the occasional dose of guilt. They're like cucumbers, morally speaking.

Nell peered into a hand mirror stained with the thumbprints of old weather. A drizzle ran down the glass from the inside. She wiped it away, and for a moment the mirror showed her own face - heart-shaped, sharp-eyed, wearing that expression young witches have when trying not to be impressed by the world. Then it showed a view of the Plaza of Small Gods: prayer sellers already hawking on the cobbles, iconographers with collapsible tripods, and a cloudless blue that looked a bit smug about itself.

“Right,” Nell said. “Time for the pinch.”

From the workbench she selected a thimble net, which is exactly what it sounds like: a piece of crocheted night sky woven fine as a whisper, stretched over a brass ring. It’s for catching thunderstorms on the small setting, and confetti on special occasions. She held it over an open book. Pages fluttered with the polite distress of paper confronted by a witch and a net.

The book was The Treasury of Useful Intangibles (Household Edition). Nell had acquired it from a barrow that had briefly been a bookshop before remembering it was a barrow. She’d paid with a handshake and a promise to look after the index. Now she found the entry for Squall, minor (portable, urban), and shook the net twice over the page. Something like a sneeze of weather - thin, silver, slightly embarrassed - settled across the threads.

“Gently does it,” Nell murmured to the kettle. “In you go, my sparkly darling.”

The net unhooked its hesitation and slid the squall into the spout. The kettle burped. The window rattled. Across the Ankh, a flock of pigeons experienced sudden introspection.

A voice drifted up the stairs, followed by the stairs themselves, which had become mobile in sympathy with the house. “Miss Nell? Miss Nell! Are we insured for incidental damp?”

That was Bolin, Nell’s landlord, whose cardigan had once been green before deciding that green was altogether too ambitious. The cardigan could have been declared a nature reserve if nature had been willing to take responsibility.

“We’re insured for non-specific outcomes,” Nell called back. “It’s the only policy that will cover me preemptively.”

Bolin’s head poked into the attic. He was a man who had been carved from the respectable end of a carrot and left to dry in good company. “That kettle is threatening to whistle in a key I don’t approve of.”

“It’s learning soprano,” Nell said. “Don’t fuss.”

She gave the kettle a stir with the splint of a fallen lightning rod - eight inches of bad decisions wrapped in copper wire - and the attic took a breath. Lacy condensation printed itself along the rafters; the broomsticks shifted, muttering; somewhere under the floor a mouse cheered because it thought a tap had been left on forever and this would be the making of its career.

Nell checked the mirror again. In the Plaza of Small Gods, people were adjusting to the day with the practiced shrug that says, “We live here, therefore everything is somebody else’s problem unless it becomes ours, at which point there will be paperwork.” She felt the kettle tremble like a dog about to bark. “Now,” she said, and with a single turn of the rod she let go of the net.

It slipped through the kettle with a discreet gulp, the way a good waiter removes a plate. The attic stilled.

In the Plaza of Small Gods, three minutes of tidy rain began, plinking off holy umbrellas (Blessed Are Those Who Keep Dry) and turning the cobbles into a mosaic of practical reflections. The breeze followed, soft, very nearly apologetic. People tilted their faces for it the way people do when they don’t admit to enjoying weather because it smacks of poetry and susceptible shoes.

Then the rain marched out of the Plaza, pivoted with the military precision of something that has read the map upside-down, and strode in the direction of the Unseen University.

“Ah,” Nell said. The ah you say when a cake comes out of the oven in an unexpected shape but an undeniably ambitious mood.

On the roofline of the University, a gargoyle felt a raindrop and closed one eye with professional suspicion. Wards hummed like bees who had signed an agreement not to sting, provided everyone behaved. They had been tuned to deflect weather, and this fell under the purview of Weather But Also Sort Of Intent, which always makes wards nervous; as any wizard will explain, intent is sneaky and might be carrying a concealed clause. The squall sniffed the wards, found them to taste of paperwork and ink, and decided that if it kept its head down and its edges tucked in, it could simply sidle past, as all respectable phenomena do in academia.

It sidled into the Library. Books tightened their spines and stared out the windows with that particular brand of panic only literature can manage (“think of the pages!”). The Librarian, who had long ago dispensed with complicated pronouns and adopted a robust orangutan-centric grammar, looked up at the sudden sprinkle and said “Oook,” which in this case meant, I have dealt with far worse than a precipitation incident, but nevertheless I would like it to stop.

The squall discovered the stacks, and like all tourists of taste, immediately got lost. It left droplets on indexes, streaked glossaries, and produced a rainbow so small it could be worn as a thoughtful brooch. Somewhere a book of maritime lore cleared its throat and suggested, loudly, that squalls belonged outdoors where they could have decent horizons. The squall, feeling both chastised and flattered, popped into a stairwell and found itself face-to-face with Professor Albemethe Slightly, Sub-Lecturer in Incidental Inclementation.

Professor Slightly wore a robe several sizes too big because he liked to make an entrance and also because the robe had belonged to a more intimidating relative. He had the sort of spectacles that turned his eyes into crystal balls, which was not itself a magical feature, merely a strong statement of intent. He was carrying an umbrella big enough for a family of four and a playful dog.

“Aha!” he cried, opening the umbrella indoors with the ferocity of a man who did not believe in indoor superstitions because outdoors had enough for everyone. “Unauthorized homebrew atmospheric!”

The umbrella wrestled in the corridor as if affronted by the concept of custody. The squall zipped past him down the stairs, brushing the banister with the respect owed to polished wood, and spun toward the lathe-room where apprentice wizards learned to turn complicated pieces of reality into tidy cylinders.[2]

[2] The lathe-room is a solution looking for a problem. Wizards love it because it is full of tools and danger and the smell of knowledge gained noisily. The city loves it because, when it explodes, the University usually foots the carpentry bills.

Nell saw most of this because she had her mirror, and also some of it because the mirror had decided she deserved a generous angle after that bit with the net. She put the lightning rod down and grabbed her hat. The hat grabbed back. “No time to be clingy,” she told it. “Someone’s about to assert jurisdiction, and it’s not going to be me if I must sign in.”

Bolin flapped in the doorway as she barreled past, nearly inhaling his own cardigan in self-defense. “Are you going out in that weather?” he asked.

“It’s my weather,” Nell said. “If I don’t go out in it, it will get ideas.”

She mounted her broom, which had very firm opinions about cobblestones (namely: they were uncooperative and lumpish) and flew from the attic window. She left behind a wake of startled pigeons, three strands of hat ribbon, and the notion that you get bollixed up if you try to fit normal errands into a day that’s already done you the courtesy of being unusual.

Ankh-Morpork unfolded below her: roofs like the backs of dragons, alleys that looked guilty without knowing why, shop signs that promised things they did not have the equipment to deliver. The breeze she’d ordered found her face with a sort of bashful friendship. She aimed for the University, keeping to the aerial lanes traditional for hastily improvised transport engineers and witches with appointments.

Which is when the Watch arrived, because the Watch always does. They cannot resist a moving violation with magical gloss.

“YOU THERE!” boomed a voice from ground level. Sergeant April Resk - who had the posture of a lamppost and the moral flexibility of one as well - stood at the corner of Tea Lane, flapping a hand for attention. She was, as ever, accompanied by an officious clipboard and an officious mustache. Neither belonged to her. Both belonged to the notion that if you wrote a thing down hard enough it would stop happening.

“Got a permit for weather-release over municipal walkways?” she called up. “And also… did you see the rainbow that tried to pickpocket a monk? I’m very prepared to make notes.”

“It wasn’t a rainbow, it was remorse,” Nell shouted back. “Resentful weather will always attempt to retrieve what it has just deposited. It’s like tipping.”

“Is tipping compulsory?” Sergeant Resk demanded, because she was the sort of person who recognized a policy issue at fifty paces.

“In Ankh-Morpork,” Nell said, banking left, “nothing is compulsory unless a guild says so or it happens to you while you’re not looking.”

She might have gone on, but the University had decided to assert itself: across the lawn, an ornamental sundial was throwing shade, literally, in slabs thick enough to trip over. The squall had dashed twice round the High Energy Building, overturning a table of glassware and giving a lab assistant an unwanted facial that left them smelling faintly of strawberries and yachts. Now it fled under the Archchancellor’s window, where it met a line of soap bubbles drifting from the laundry yard. The bubbles absorbed it at once, and for half a minute the air was full of shimmering spheres that contained tiny thunder, which is a phrase that ought to be printed on a bottle.

Nell landed on the lawn with the crunchy inevitability of someone who has landed on that lawn before. Wizardly heads popped up along windowsills like nervous mushrooms. Professor Slightly collided with her umbrella-first.

“You!” he announced, pointing with a hand that ought to have had a wand in it but was instead occupied by a damp sandwich. “Explain yourself! Or rather, explain your weather, which is in flagrant violation of Subsection Four of the Atmospheric Courtesy Act as adopted by the Faculty Board in a fit of cooperation.”

“I aimed it at the Plaza of Small Gods,” Nell said, brushing lawn off her skirt. “It has gone astray. Possibly intoxicated by learning. Take it up with the kettle if you must prosecute.”

“Kettle?” Professor Slightly repeated, in the tone of a man discovering that the Big Bad had arrived at the end of the corridor wearing a tea cozy. “Oh, we’ve had a day now, haven’t we.”

A bubble the size of a cathedral drifted between them, filled with lightning that looked deeply embarrassed about the acoustics. Nell lifted her thimble net and snagged the bubble’s edge. It wobbled, decided to mind its manners, and settled into the net with the obedient sigh of a dog who admits it has eaten something that was not food but was nevertheless delicious.

“Right,” she said. “I’ll take this back to the Plaza before it buys a degree.”

“You can’t simply - ” Professor Slightly began, because wizards feel it’s their job to finish other people’s sentences when physics has already surrendered.

“You’re absolutely correct,” Nell said briskly. “Let’s do it together. You can supervise.” She started toward the gate with the bubble bulging saucily in the net. It hummed to itself, and her hat hummed back in the key of Determination.

Professor Slightly trotted after her, juggling umbrella, sandwich, and the threadbare dignity of a department budget. They were joined at the gate by a young wizard with a face like an unfinished sentence, who panted, “Professor! The lathe-room has turned the apprentice into a dowel pin!”

“How large?” asked Slightly.

“Regrettably life-size,” the young wizard said. “He keeps rolling elegantly toward any incline.”

“I’m busy!” Slightly told him, in the voice of an academic torn between a crisis of the present and one that reflected more favorably on his tenure. “Tell him to wedge himself behind the bench until I return.”

“Should we call the Carpenter’s Guild?” Nell asked, struggling a bit with the net as the bubble attempted to admire itself in a window, producing a small echo of thunder synonymous with smugness.

“No,” said Slightly. “We call them only after we’ve made it worse, or it doesn’t count as research.”

They made it onto the street to find a spiritual entrepreneur selling consecrated towels (“For all your wet metaphysical needs!”), an iconographer trying to catch the sparkle of electric contrition, and Sergeant Resk marching toward them with a look that suggested she had located the correct line on her form and intended to use it liberally.

“You’ll want the bit where it says ‘temporary municipal blessing,’” Nell offered, as the Sergeant’s pen poised like a tiny sword.

“I’ll be the judge of what I want,” the Sergeant said, and then, because she was honest and no one's fool, glanced down and indeed wrote: Temporary municipal blessing. “Name of phenomenon?”

“Squall, minor, urban,” Nell said.

Professor Slightly leaned in and whispered, “Write ‘pedagogically recalcitrant’ after that.”

The Sergeant eyed the bubble in the net. “Is it armed?”

“Only with intent,” Nell said. “The worst kind, but nonetheless biodegradable.”

They proceeded like a small parade: Nell with the net, Slightly with the umbrella, the Sergeant with her clipboard, the bubble drifting along like a grand duchess who had just remembered she was made of water. Citizens paused to watch because citizens will watch anything if it looks as if it might eventually apologize in public. At Fink Street a dog barked at its own reflection in the bubble and became briefly philosophical; at Doodle Alley a grocer attempted to sell the bubble a cucumber; on the Bridge of Thrice Intriguing Carp a fisherman suggested they could use it as a weather float.

At last they reached the Plaza of Small Gods, now drying obediently where the squall had done its duty before being led astray by academia. Nell lifted the net and gave a small, confident twist, like a conjurer tidying up a flourish. The bubble elongated, turned into a column, became a ribbon, and then went off like polite applause: tiny drops pattering onto stone. The thunder inside it offered a small, apologetic cough.

This was when Nell's rival arrived, as rivals do when they have practiced timing in the mirror. Tansy Peavey wore her witchcraft like a fitted coat with the seams let out for ambition. She had a broomstick that gleamed as if it had been waxed with someone's hopes, and she leaned on it now with a smile that had borrowed its edge from a paper knife.

"Nellophelia," Tansy said. No one called Nell "Nellophelia" unless they wanted to be admired or arrested. "I saw an educational drizzle heading toward the University and thought, 'that has the stamp of a certain… exuberance.' So of course I came to see."

Nell, refreshed by a small rain of success, wiped her hands as if there were nothing to wipe. "Tansy," she said. "I didn't recognize you with your mouth closed."

Sergeant Resk held her pen poised, hopeful. "Would either of you like to repeat that slowly?"

Professor Slightly inserted himself diplomatically into the space where swords might have been if either witch had believed in them. "No harm done," he announced. "A learning experience for all concerned. And an important reminder that - ah - inter-institutional cooperation is key to the improved management of unscheduled barometric events."

"Also," Nell added, not to be out-importanted, "that the kettle will have to be taught about maps."

Tansy inspected the remains of the bubble turning to damp along the stones, the way you might inspect the crumbs of a cake to deduce whether it had been worth eating. “The city is not a classroom, you know,” she said lightly. “One is supposed to take one’s lessons far from the fragile minds of the public.”

“And one is supposed,” Nell returned, “to remember the public has better minds than most classrooms.”

Professor Slightly stage-coughed the cough of a man who knows he is one metaphor away from a committee. “Right! Well! I shall write an apology to the Librarian, and possibly a note to the lathe-room to remind them of the ratio of cylinders to people, which currently favors cylinders. Miss Nell - ”

“Nell,” Nell said.

“Miss Nell,” he repeated, with the cheerful obstinacy of a man ignoring a correction. “You will of course be invited to deliver a short talk on the safe urban use of kettle-based weather. We could do with your… pragmatic… practical… field-tested perspective.”

“You want me to tell the University not to be stupid,” Nell summarized.

“Succinctly put,” said Slightly.

Tansy smiled that knife-smile. “Oh, do accept, Nellophelia. And wear your best hat. Do you still have the one that looks like it’s arguing with gravity?”

Nell’s hand touched the brim reflexively. The hat bristled, because it had feelings. “My hat and I will be delighted, if it is understood that I will not improve the University’s manners, only its outcomes.”

Sergeant Resk had been writing this down, and now frowned at the line. “Do outcomes need licenses?” she asked. “Only I’ve got a blank for that.”

“Outcomes,” Nell said, “are like soap. You don’t require a license unless it gets in someone’s eyes.”

The Plaza shook itself the way a dog does after a swim - water flying, but joyfully. The bronze statue of a minor god of lost keys gleamed as if pleased to be included in something at last. People drifted back into the pathways of their lives, damp and satisfied. The little rainbow brooch, having fallen unnoticed by anyone into the cracks between cobbles, shone briefly and then went out. It had had a morning.

They walked back as a group, because that is what you do after you have survived a small adventure together; you move in a clump and tell each other what you think happened until the version you all prefer prevails. Professor Slightly puzzled out loud. Sergeant Resk flagged two more forms for future use. Tansy said nothing, which was uncharacteristic, and regarded Nell from under lashes that had been trained to a fare-thee-well.

At the University gates, the Archchancellor himself put his head out of a window and withdrew it immediately, which is the official academic gesture for “I saw nothing and will defend this decision with my life, or at least with paper.” The Librarian, somewhere in the stacks, shelved a damp book with the resignation of a civil servant who has a mop and is not afraid to use it. The lathe-room reported, via runner, that the apprentice had been sanded gently until the corners wore off and he resumed a roughly humanoid contour. He was, said the runner, smoother than he had started, which might prove advantageous.

On the lawn, a patch of toadstools had sprung up in a circle that suggested somebody had thrown a party and left early.[3] Nell paused to admire them and to make sure they were not plotting to unionize. Her broom nosed her knee with impatience; it did not approve of mushrooms because they occupied the floor, and the floor was where the broom wanted to be whisking any time it wasn’t pretending to be a vehicle.

[3] Mushroom parties are legendary for their quiet, which usually means the gossip is phenomenal later.

Bolin was waiting at the house when she returned, clutching a towel of questionable ancestry. “Well?” he demanded. “Has the weather been sent to its room?”

“It’s had a talking-to,” Nell said, stepping through the sash window because the stairs had temporarily decided to lead to last Tuesday’s spare pantry. “I’ll brew it a cup of tea and let it cool down.”

“Can you brew weather tea?” Bolin asked dubiously.

“You can brew tea for anything if you’re polite enough to pretend it takes milk,” Nell said, hanging up her hat on a peg that had never been there before and would probably go away later. The attic exhaled. Little droplets still pearl-strung the rafters. The kettle was listing on the brazier as if nauseous with ethics.

Nell knelt and patted it. “You did well,” she said. “A few laps round the library and a good cry. We’ve all been there. But next time, plaza means plaza.”

The kettle gave a little hiccup that sounded like remorse and limescale. She fed it a shred of weather from the thimble net - a flake of cloud no larger than a thumbprint - and it settled, dreaming of drizzle.

On the workbench, The Treasury of Useful Intangibles had fallen open to the page she’d used. Dotted in the margin in an ink that was not Nell’s (it had the slight smell of chalk dust and budget meetings) were the words: “Note to self: approach this witch for seminar. Also advise librarian to install gutters indoors.” Professor Slightly’s handwriting crawled like a scholarly insect, but the intention was clear. Nell grinned in spite of herself. Recognition feels exactly like mischief, if you do it right.

She stood, brushed her skirt, and surveyed the holy chaos of her attic: the jars of bad ideas humming softly, the broom pretending to sleep so it wouldn’t be asked to talk about its day, the carpet which had chosen a pattern and was now sulking because no one had complimented it. Outside, Ankh-Morpork was getting on with its business of producing grime, miracles, crimes, and bread in equal quantities. The city did not dislike witches; it merely considered them extremely useful and therefore treated them with the wary affection people reserve for complicated appliances.

There came a knock at the trapdoor - the sort of small, precise knock that implies gloves. When Nell opened it, Tansy Peavey was there, hat immaculate, broom parked at an angle that suggested it had given up on Ever Being Understood.

“I brought you this,” Tansy said, proffering a coil of ribbon like a truce offering. It was the deep night blue that hats love. Hats are shallow like that.

“Oh?” Nell said, taking it. “Are you taking up millinery?”

“Don’t be common,” Tansy replied, but without heat. She came up into the attic as if the steps existed for her convenience. “I simply thought that if you are going to lecture the University, it might as well be while wearing something that will frighten the faculty.”

Nell made a noncommittal noise that could have been thanks or a spell to ward off insincere niceness. Tansy walked the circumference of the chalk circle, inspecting the sigils like a cat making the rounds of a new room.

“Your net work has improved,” Tansy observed.

“And your broom is nearly as snooty as you are now,” Nell said. The broom quivered on its bristles, flattered.

Tansy’s smile went sideways and briefly human. “Be careful with the University,” she said. “If you let them, they’ll clap you between book-ends and label you. They do it to each other. It’s habit. You’ll wake up footnoted.”

“I can be a very unruly chapter,” Nell said.

“Do,” said Tansy, and was gone - so neatly that it took a moment to register she had left no draft on the air, no snide remark trailing to the floor. Only the ribbon in Nell’s fingers, which

the hat tried to steal at once.

Nell tied it around the crown, and the hat stood two inches taller out of sheer satisfaction.

“Well then,” she told the attic. “We’ve got ourselves invited to the party we weren’t sure we wanted to attend, and we cleaned up after ourselves, which is more than can be said for most parties. Let’s have a cup of tea and a biscuit with ambitions.”

The kettle, fully restored to a professional simmer, obliged. The tea tasted like forgiveness and tar. Nell drank it looking into the mirror, where the Plaza of Small Gods showed a smear of rainbow drying on warm stone, and the University’s windows glowed like a mouth ready to argue.

Below, the city practised its endless chorus: the creak of wheels; the six hundred languages of market stallholders; the breathy hiss of fresh bread meeting hungry people; somewhere, the faraway chime of a temple bell trying to keep decent time; and, over it all, the steady, friendly grumble of the River Ankh, which likes to tell itself the same story daily: I have always been here; I will always be here; I bring things; I take things away.

Nell set down her cup. “All right,” she told the day, “you’ve been very fancy. That’ll do.” She lifted the thimble net once more, peered through it like a child through lace at a world she fully intended to meddle with, and began making a list titled: Things To Say To Wizards That Will Sound Like Compliments While Improving Outcomes.

The first item was: You have spectacularly narrow corridors for such large ideas.

The second was: We should put gutters in the library, darling.

The third was simply: Tea.

Because tea is what you have before and after and during. Tea is a boundary and a bridge. Tea is the moment you take hold of the weather, and the weather takes hold of you, and you both agree to behave yourselves in public. And if something small and rainbow-colored twinkles

in the corner of your eye while you drink it, and you think: perhaps the world is slightly mad but in a direction I can work with - well, that’s a chapter worth keeping.

Chapter 3: Perfume, Paperwork, and Other Emergencies

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The city woke up like a nose remembering a word. Ankh-Morpork in the morning was a lexicon of aromas stacked in paragraphs: warm yeast from the bakers (optimistic, with ambitions), a bar-fight of spices arguing outside the Klatchian stalls, chimney-soot deciding to be democratic about where it settled, river-breath that had seen things and was prepared to tell you every single one of them, and, somewhere high above it all, the crisp, comb-teeth scent of dawn as it raked the rooftops into order. The city did not smell good, as such. It smelled accurate, which in many cases was even worse and in a few notable cases much better.

Nell lived in a rental accuracy over an ornamental wheelwright’s that hadn’t seen a real wheel in years but did a roaring trade in pretend ones for theatrical tragedies. Her attic eaves collected those incomplete sentences of morning - whiff, hint, ghost - and kept them in the rafters like punctuation waiting for a sentence to trip. She was twenty in the way a lit match is a minute old: not unwise to its own heat, surprised when things caught anyway. The city called her “witch” in the same tone it used for “cobbler” and “pie-man” and, sometimes, “run.” She had a hat like a concept of upwardness and boots that had survived more puddles than a duck’s memoir.

At present, she was stewing weather in a teapot.

“This wants three stirs widdershins,” she told the room, which was experienced enough to be furniture and therefore took such announcements as part of the natural order. “And a pinch of salt to remind it of the sea.”

“Reminding is extra,” said the kettle. It wasn’t precisely sentient. It was kettle-sentient, which meant it knew about boiling, had opinions about whistling, and an ancestral memory of being hit with a damp cloth when it got too proud of its shine.

Nell stirred, frowned, and leaned over to sniff the steam. One of her eyebrows made a bold attempt at cloud-seeding.

“Laundry-safe drizzle,” she murmured. “With a temper but no thunder. Motivated, yet passive-aggressive.” She sprinkled in three dried dill seeds (for diplomacy) and a green string knotted seven times (“Hold your horses,” explained the string, in case the weather was thinking of going galloping off to the Alchemists’ Guild and marrying a firework). The teapot hiccuped. A small, ingloriously gray cloud drifted up and took stock of its surroundings like a cat considering a chair.

“I’ll call you Mizzle,” Nell said. “You’ll be on laundry rotation for Mrs. Pellock at ten. Dampen, don’t sulk. And if you see a sheet you like, keep your crush to yourself.”

Mizzle trembled with damp purpose.

On the windowsill, Nell’s magical toolkit gleamed and scowled and pretended to be ordinary. There was the egg-spoon that pointed toward nonsense (useful if you needed to find committee minutes), a jar of salt that remembered every shoreline it had visited and got homesick in the presence of gone fish, a pair of cast-iron shears for cutting loopholes (they went blunt on fiscal ones), and the pocket sky folded into a square of blue so precise it looked like the idea of summer had been ironed. She wore the sky pinned at her throat. You couldn’t be too careful with rain, especially the indoors kind.

On the table, a parchment with the municipal irritation of official ink lay with the absolute self-confidence of a summons. “NOTICE TO PERSONS OF AN OMENOUS BENT,” it read, “Re: Olfactory Complaints, Unlicensed Vapor, &c. Attend upon the Office of Small Perils, Sub-Basement B, by the fourth bell.” It was signed with the bureaucratic flourish of someone who knew the joy of stamping things with a red stamp and had the forearms to prove it.

“Office of Small Perils,” Nell said, admiring the phrase. “Imagine the big perils. They probably have nicer chairs.”

The kettle looked pleased. “We’re going out? I shall present my spout.”

“You shall stay here and think about condensation. Remember the puddle incident.”

“The puddle was libel,” said the kettle, primly. “It assembled itself in a spirit of collective damp.”

Nell buckled on her boots, reminded Mizzle about dignity, and went down the narrow stairs, which were a short story about gravity. She stepped into the shouted chorus of the street and folded herself into it as neatly as a page dog-eared for later.

Ankh-Morpork mornings were not for the faintly auditory. The sellers were hawking, the hawks were considering whether they could be sellers, someone was playing a flute with malicious intent, and the Watch were practicing not seeing things they’d have to write down. She passed the Alchemists’ Guild as it tried to remember the exact difference between an experiment and a demonstration.[1] The building coughed a polite flame. Pigeons became theoretical for a moment and then reassembled out of soot and suggestion, offended.

By the time she reached the Unseen University quarter, the architecture was arguing with the laws of physics, which suggested in its defense that it had never signed anything. Wizards drifted between archways with intent that came in several flavors, the main two being “lunch” and “lunch with an underlying theorem.” On the steps of a building that had begun life as a pigeon coop in a previous century and had ambition, Nell collided with a wizardly phenomenon in brown robes with crumbs down the front and spectacles that had a complicated relationship with his nose.

“Miss - ah - witch,” he said, as if he were putting the hat on a sentence after a consultation with its agent. “Albemarle Bumbleshoot, Lecturer in Minor Catastrophes.”

“Catastrophes come in sizes?” Nell asked.

“Only at the start,” said Bumbleshoot, brightening. He held up a sheaf of notes that attempted to throw itself under a passing wheelbarrow. “I’ve calculated the mean radius of mishaps. It’s very mean. Tell me - have you noticed any perturbations among the perfumes?”

“The perfumes are perturbed?” said Nell.

Bumbleshoot ignored the grammar. Wizards often did. “Reports of olfactory anomalies. The sausage smells faintly of violins. River air with tones of horse. Somewhere, someone is boiling thunder. It is quite disruptive. People are having emotions in the wrong places.”

“Has anyone considered not sticking their noses where they - ”

“Everything,” said Bumbleshoot, with the patience of someone explaining gravity to a cat, “is where a wizard’s nose belongs, given sufficient curiosity and a handkerchief. If you encounter anything that looks like a smell, do not inhale it into your personality.”

Nell nodded with the solemnity that adults reserve for the confidence of children and wizards. “I’ve been summoned to the Office of Small Perils,” she said. “Perhaps your perturbations have filed a complaint.”

“Everything files a complaint,” said Bumbleshoot, with love. “Even dust.”

Sub-Basement B was the sort of place that had won arguments with daylight. It was lit by candles that had clearly been given motivational speeches. The Office of Small Perils had a sign that said TRIP HAZARD (it wasn’t labeling; it was greeting). Inside, a queue had become a way of life. It curled around a table to where a clerk in sleeve-garters was making small stacks of paper with such fervor that they nearly had legs and somewhere to be.

“Summons,” Nell announced to the desk, holding up the parchment like a comet’s passport.

“Complaint,” corrected the clerk. “Odors. Vapors. Persuasive steams. The city is up in noses about it. Sit. You will be judged presently.”

“By whom?” asked Nell.

“By a cross-section of responsible smellers,” the clerk said. “We strive for a variety of nasal experiences.”

The tribunal assembled itself with relish and a suspicion that relish was one of the items on the docket. There was Madame Varna from the Guild of Perfumiers, a woman dressed in swoops and hush who wore scent like grammar: you could smell every clause. There was a representative from the Night Watch with a notebook that looked like it had seen everything and had opinions. There was an elderly priest from the Temple of the Nose (yes, really; Ankh-Morpork had never met a phenomenon it didn't consider a deity and then tax), and, to Nell's mixed delight and horror, Professor Bumbleshoot, who had found a biscuit from somewhere and was interrogating it with tea.

Also in attendance was Tansy Nettles, a witch who had perfected the art of helpfulness that came with a measuring spoon. "I'm only here to assist," Tansy said, in the tone of someone sharpening a cake knife for your benefit. "I brought guidelines. And a mop."

"We are convened," intoned the clerk. "We will begin with Exhibit A." He gestured. A junior clerk produced a jar. Inside the jar something the color of ambitious gravy swirled. It had the posture of a rumor.

"That," said Madame Varna, "escaped my atelier when I attempted a cologne expressing 'the morning after the opera.' It has insinuations. It also insists there was a duel."

The jar fogged accusingly at Nell.

Nell looked back the way you do at a cat that's considering making the table part of its lifestyle. "I don't make cologne," she said. "I make weather come down with the sniffles."

"Exhibit B," said the clerk, relentless. This was a pie with the sort of steam that had learned to spell. The steam spelled out the word "Regrets" and then underlined it twice.

"My clientele expects regret," said a mournful baker in the front row. "In moderation! This is pre-seasoned with melancholy. People are coming in to sniff and leave philosophically."

“Witch,” said the Watch representative. “Were you or were you not brewing unlicensed mists on or about six bells last night?”

“No,” said Nell. “I was instructing a drizzle in empathy.”

There was a murmur. That is to say, there was a sound like a lot of people trying to be one person quietly. Madame Varna leaned forward. “And do you possess a License for Persuasions of the Air, Class Two?”

“I possess practical sense and a broom,” Nell said. “I can get them. The license, I mean. The broom is inherited.”

Bumbleshoot stirred his tea, missed, and instructed the tea to find its own way back into the cup by means of encouragement. “If I may,” he said. “We are looking for a hand behind these aromas. They have direction. They have…narratives.”

“Smells don’t have narratives,” said the Watchman, who had always suspected his own socks of having a subplot.

“In a city,” said Bumbleshoot, “everything has a narrative. Especially if you look as if you expect one.”

Before the tribunal could render a decision (something between a caution and a small ceremonial scolding had been warming up its vowels), the room hiccuped. That’s the only way to put it. The candles sighed. A scroll on the wall tried to roll itself into its infancy. From somewhere down the corridor came the sensation of a door opening onto yesterday’s soup.

It arrived like a weather front of memory: a rolling, swelling, swaggering presence that was visible the way a thought is visible, all shimmer and insinuation. People leaned back as it went past, the way wheat leans when the ghost of a scythe remembers. It smelled like riverbank arguments, iron railings at noon, old wine confessing to new, horses telling jokes, cabbage with a secret, and that particular exhilaration that lives on the lip of the city wall where you can see it all and it can see you and everybody is pretending not to be nervous. It was the smell of Ankh-Morpork when it thought nobody was watching.

“It’s a composite,” breathed Madame Varna, eyes widening. “But curated.”

“It’s a rogue bouquet,” said Bumbleshoot, with awe. “Smell congealed. An Aromatheron.”

The Aromatheron, which was roughly the shape of a dog if a dog had been designed by a poet who owed money, snatched the tribunal’s ceremonial pancake (for the breaking of the ice in tense proceedings) and loped toward the corridor, trailing the elegant despair of smoked fish behind it. The Watchman swore, the priest appealed to his deity, who had a cold and was not taking visitors, and Tansy Nettles seized her mop as if she could wring reality out of it.

Nell was already up. “Right,” she said to the room in general. “We’ll need a jar and a lullaby. Professor, try not to name it anything it can grow into.”

“Names are tiny curses,” agreed Bumbleshoot, getting a pen, which was absolutely the last thing anyone needed in the room.

The Aromatheron was fleet. It bounded up stairs that had never recovered from being stairs and past a portrait of a civic dignitary who tried to look like he would have stopped it if he were there, which he wasn’t. Nell chased, skirt hitched, hat pinned, a practical comet with a broom for a tail. The Watch clattered behind. Tansy came too, beaming the way one does when the universe has rolled out a rug and said “after you.” Madame Varna floated, leaving exclamation marks of scent in her wake.

The trail grew stronger toward the streets. Outside, morning had ripened. The market crowd made way the way it always does for things that look officious or on fire. The Aromatheron paused at a corner, sniffed the city it already knew, and plunged down into a grate with the self-confidence of water.

Nell arrived at the grate and breathed through her teeth. “Sewers,” she said.

“Ah,” said Bumbleshoot, who loved a threshold because it promised an inside and an outside and the possibility that neither would behave. “The under-noses.”

They climbed down into a different Ankh-Morpork, where the city’s true voice spoke in trickles and rills and distant arguments with masonry. The light was torchlight, not because anyone had decided but because the place itself only believed in fire attached to sticks. The smell down here was concentrated opinion. It was harsh and private and, in certain corners, philosophical. The Aromatheron was everywhere and nowhere, like a rumor that had found a contractor.

“Listen,” said Nell. In the dark, sound carried like a rumor that had decided to get promoted. She heard water reasoning with gravity, small fish making larger ones an offer, the distant thump of the world upstairs negotiating with boots. And under that, a sigh. It was old. It was patient. It had a lot of time for the exact placement of a brick. The city was exhaling.

“Follow the negative,” Nell said, more to the air than anyone. “Not what we smell. What has stopped smelling.”

The egg-spoon, when consulted, spun three times, pointed directly at her nose, considered this beneath it, and finally aimed down a side tunnel that knew secrets about draft.

They came to a chamber where the walls were slick with the opinion of water and the ceiling had grown stalactites out of mineral patience. In the center, there was a slow whirlpool of dreampour. Not water. Not exactly. The sort of liquid that collects under history. The Aromatheron played around it like smoke investigating an idea.

Madame Varna caught her breath. “The Sumph,” she whispered. “The city’s nose.”

“An aggregate of particulates,” said Bumbleshoot, delighted and damp. “And narrative. Do you see? Stories distill here, aromatically. The city is brewing itself.”

The Watchman, who had a practical mind designed for lists and doors that locked, stared. “And what’s that mean for paperwork?”

“Probably a new form,” Nell said. She stepped forward and unpinned the pocket sky. Summer unfolded with a sigh and lit the cave not with brightness but with the precise smell of laundry brought in from the line before the rain - clean, sun-creased, chalky with soap, warm with the day. The Aromatheron paused, interested. Smells were used to being bossed around by light; it was novel to be bossed around by a smell.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Nell said to it, as one does to horses, steam, and certain kinds of door. “You’re a lot of city to be wandering alone. You’ll get into the Council if you’re not careful.”

Tansy snorted. “And then it would talk like them.”

“It wants a name,” Madame Varna breathed. “Everything that curates itself wants a signature.”

“Careful,” muttered Bumbleshoot, looking as if he had a list of terrible names.

Nell thought. Names were little spells. Names were hats that made people walk differently. Names were also labels and jars and drawers and sometimes very small prisons. She considered the shape of the thing - the doggish shoulders, the swagger, the long tail of alleyway, the bright, guilty eyes in which barges and bakeries and bottle shops and barred windows all lived together and argued and loved it anyway.

“Albert,” she said.

“No!” said Bumbleshoot, at once. “That’s - ”

“Common,” Nell said. “Steady. A man who knows where to get a deal on onions. A strong back. Doesn’t show off. It’s a city name. Not a hero. Those are dangerous.” She put a palm out and the pocket sky pooled in it, blue and linen-sharp. “Albert. Come on home.”

Albert, who had been a candidate for something grande and terrible, discovered the profound relief of being ordinary with dignity. It wagged, which manifested as the rush and settle of fresh bread. It came toward her, the way smoke leans toward a chimney. She reached into her bag and drew out an empty jar. It was a jam jar. The best jars are. They remember sweetness. She unscrewed the lid and offered it to the air.

“You can’t put the city in a jar,” the Watchman began, and then stopped, because Nell was not putting the city in a jar, she was offering it a place to rest. Things that roam also want an address. The Aromatheron shivered, condensed, and poured itself into the jar with the pleased thrum of bees finding geometry. The glass fogged, cleared, fogged again. The label on the jar, which had hitherto read GOOSEBERRY 3 YEARS AGO, wrote itself slowly into ANKH AT NOON.

Tansy made a noise that involved admiration reluctantly conceding that it had lost. Madame Varna dabbed her eyes. Bumbleshoot was scribbling. The priest from the Temple of the Nose, who had arrived sanctimoniously late and damp, took off his hat and admitted to himself that faith was sometimes outpaced by practicality.

“Right,” Nell said, screwing the lid on. “Albert, mind your manners.”

They climbed back to the day, the jar in Nell’s bag humming very softly. The city had not noticed that anything had happened to it, which is how cities choose to survive.

Back in the tribunal room, order fluttered in like a bird doubtful of its reservation. The clerk cleared his throat and produced the voice he used for pronouncements. “Given the…ah… mitigation performed on the premises,” he began, “and acknowledging the ongoing needs of civic nasal harmony…” He shuffled papers. They tried to organize him right back. “It is the determination of the Office that the witch Nell be issued a provisional License for Persuasions of the Air, Class Two, with a caution regarding Mists of Suggestion above head height, and a nominal fee of - ”

“A ha’penny,” said the Watchman, who believed in symbolism. “And a broom inspection.”

Nell paid the coin, endured the broom’s humiliation (it preened), and accepted the license, which bore the city’s seal (a seal which had, against all probability, behaved itself). Madame

Varna glided over and offered a small vial. “For you,” she said. “Sable Nuit. Wear sparingly. It says ‘I have my own reasons.’”

“I usually do,” said Nell.

Bumbleshoot, who smelled faintly of mackeroons and insight, hovered. “Fascinating. Aromatherons! If the city can cohere its olfactory signatures into agents, perhaps there are others. Gustatory avatars. Tactile emissaries. We could catalogue - ”

“We could leave them be,” said Nell, gently. “Things that learn to be themselves don’t take kindly to being filed.”

Tansy Nettles huffed, then regarded the jar in Nell’s bag with the expression of someone who would deny ever being moved. “You’ll keep that in your attic? With your potions? Not safe.”

“I’ll keep it on the sill,” Nell said. “Where it can listen to pigeons and shout at the clock. It won’t want exploding. It’ll want tea.”

“Tea,” said the kettle, from home, in the voice of a professional. “I was mentioned?”

As afternoon tilted into the idea of evening, Nell climbed the gravity-story stairs back to her attic. She set the jar on the windowsill. The city outside leaned into itself, light hitting stone in a way that made both of them remember river, whetstone, coin. Mizzle completed its shift and came home damply proud and smelling of laundry triumph. The kettle coughed to request fuel and consideration.

Nell brewed. The teapot sighed a flavor like late summer seeing the first leaf that doesn’t belong and pretending not to notice. She filled a saucer and set it next to the jar. A filament of scent uncurled inside the glass and tasted the world like a cat licking its paw while looking as if this had been the plan all along. ANKH AT NOON sat contentedly in her attic. It had no ambitions to conquer. It had a hobby now, which was being exactly itself.

Across the street, the ornamental wheelwright painted a wheel crimson and muttered about true circles. On the corner, a boy practiced whistling and failed and succeeded in roughly equal measure. Somewhere deep in the city, a door closed and a life continued and nobody wrote it down and the city loved them for it.

There came a knock at the door that did not belong to the building but to somebody's urgency. Nell opened it to reveal a woman in a shawl the color of last night's regrets. Her eyes had the look of someone whose life had been misfiled.

"My bread sings," the woman said, as if offering a confession. "Not songs people know. Sea shanties. The neighbors have Opinions. And my husband can't stop buying ropes."

Nell glanced at the egg-spoon, which twitched in the direction of nonsense, and at the jar on the sill, which did a small approving fog. "Tea?" she said. "Tell me everything."

As the woman sat, Mizzle nudged the windowpane politely to be let out for a sulk. The kettle hummed. The city breathed. In the pocket of her apron, Nell's new license gently creased itself into a state of having always existed. She would keep the mop Tansy had "forgotten." She would write a little sign for the door: WITCHING, PRACTICAL, REASONABLE RATES, LAUNDRY EXTRA. She would, later that night, balance on the roof and talk to the rooftops about the way the day's heat clung to slate like a rumor that had fallen asleep. She would have, for a while, fewer complaints filed against her and more questions filed aloud. This was the way of cities. They complained, they applauded, often at once. They considered, they forgot, and then, in a sudden warm flood, they remembered you again.

Down in Sub-Basement B, the Office of Small Perils added a new form to its wall. It read, simply: "In Case of Composite Scent, Ask for Nell." The clerk underlined it twice and drew a small, approving nose. The next morning, three petitions arrived: one for the licensing of "light breezes containing advice," one to permit "breads with narrative arcs," and one to investigate "mysterious, possibly illegal, feelings experienced upon passing a certain lamppost." Professor Bumbleshoot began a paper with the working title: "Toward a Taxonomy of Emergent Urban Effluvia." Tansy Nettles bought a new mop and told herself it was not because the old one had been, against all reason and evidence, lucky. Madame Varna slept curled around a bottle that smelled slightly of bite marks, which is to say, truthfulness.

And in an attic, a young witch poured tea into a saucer for a jar with a name in her handwriting and listened while a client told her about the shanties of bread, the ropes of

husbands, the misfiling of lives, and the invisible river that runs through every kitchen and sometimes heads for the door. Nell listened the way good maps do, with roads that rearrange themselves to make sure you get somewhere worth arriving at. She nodded finality afterwards and promised a charm that would teach the dough respect without taking away its ambition. “We like ambition,” she said. “We just don’t want it staging an opera.”

Outside, the city turned the page of itself, noisily and with a satisfying crackle, and prepared to read what happened next.

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[1] A demonstration is an experiment with a schedule. The explosion is punctual.

Chapter 4: In Which a River Remembers Its Name

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The night market didn’t so much arrive as admit that it had always been there, which is how markets like that prefer to behave. This one chose the cobbles three alleys down from the Unseen University because the cobbles were slightly crooked and already used to carrying improbable weights - bales of turnips, wine barrels, aspirant poets - and therefore wouldn’t complain when reality parked sideways. If a map had been watching, it would have coughed politely and drawn an extra lane.

Nell had been asleep on a drift of laundry that had lost track of what it wanted from life and therefore settled on being both sheets and a sweater. She woke because her kettle sighed. The kettle did that when it sensed the world deciding to be interesting. Kettles that belong to witches tend to be sensitive to plot.

“Not now,” Nell murmured, which never alters inevitability in the slightest. Her attic was already tuning itself: the broom flexed like a greyhound in a daydream, jars of dried something felt nervy in a hopeful way, and her spellbook swallowed a moth and pretended it had meant to do that. The smell of smoke on the air was not from a fire; it was the smell of bargains rubbing together.

She sat up, hair in untamed declarations, pulled on a dress that had witnessed courage and gravy, and shoved her feet into boots that measured height from the ground instead of length from the toe. She caught sight of herself in the shard of mirror she kept nailed over a nail (so that nothing was directly responsible for falling off the wall) and performed a face, which made her look like a person who meant to happen to something. Good. Chaos respected intention.

“Something’s set up shop,” she told the kettle. It gurgled, which in kettle was a full sentence.

She went down the stairs that knew more gossip than any living person and kicked open the door into evening, which had arrived early and looked expensive. Lanterns had multiplied in the alley like bright fungi, chalk arrows doodled themselves underfoot, and a string of flags

had discovered the breeze. Someone had hung a sign across the alley’s entrance reading NIGHT MARKET OF MISLAID THINGS. Beneath, in smaller letters: No refunds; only reunions.

“Oh,” said Nell, with that sense of recognition people have for trouble that is precisely their shape. “It’s one of those.”

Mislaid things: not merely lost, because lost is lone and moody and probably involves a hedge. Mislaid is social; it gets under newspapers and behind cupboards and inside the wrong pocket, and it’s very fond of cities. The market peddled the stuff that had slipped sideways out of its rightful place: the first hiss out of a new bottle; a receipt for something you wish you hadn’t bought; a glove that clearly expects its partner to mature; names that had ducked to avoid a responsibility and stayed ducked; time you thought you wasted but someone else could use.

Nell drifted in, hands in her pockets, which were deep and unscrupulous. She smelled fry-oils and ink, old rain and new spice, sweet burnt sugar, river-breath from somewhere it shouldn’t be, and the slightly metallic tang of magic that had decided it could be commerce if it kept its head down.

Stalls assembled from other people’s memories leaned against one another like gossipers. A stall of keys dressed in different centuries jingled with flirtation. A stall of shadows hung them up like coats. A man in a hat whose brim represented the night sky had a crate full of childhood dares; you could tell they were genuine because they smelled faintly of mud and fear.

“Nell!” someone whispered in her ear at a safe distance of six feet. The whisper belonged to Rigby of the University, a wizard of junior rank, meaning his hat held opinions he wasn’t old enough to have. Rigby was bristling with seals and slips bearing the word AUTHORIZATION in a variety of handwriting, which meant he was about to panic officially.

“I’m not buying anything,” said Nell. “I do not need - ” she gestured “ - the other half of a nice pair of shoes for which I own the left and bad decisions for which I own the right.”

“It’s not about purchases!” Rigby said, which in any market is an unpopular opinion. “There’s been a phenomenon. Thaumic leakage. A - look, could you not touch anything?”

Nell had already picked up a small parcel that had wrapped itself in patience. It purred at her knuckles. “What does this one do?”

“It makes you wait the correct amount of time for things,” Rigby said miserably. “People hate it. Give it back.”

She obliged, for now. The parcel trembled, trying to be good.

“Who’s in charge?” Nell asked.

“Of the market? No one admits to organizational oversight, which is how you know there’s a committee,” Rigby said. He darted glances toward an approaching knot of black coats cutting the crowd like a bureaucratic prow. At their point marched a man whose hair had been parted by regulations and whose shoes were so polished you could see the law in them.

“Inspector Crispin Dray,” Rigby breathed. “Clerk of Unsorcery, Bureau of Measurable Phenomena.”

“Unsorcery,” Nell repeated, tasting it. “Like anti-magic?”

“Like paperwork you can’t burn.”

Inspector Dray fixed the market with a gaze that had done a correspondence course in severity and passed with mail-order distinction. “This venue,” he announced, “lacks permits for the spontaneous congregation of anomalies.” He produced a document so properly folded that its edges scared lesser documents into straightening up. “We are empowered to impound irregularities.”

“Ah,” said Nell. “How is one supposed to impound mislaidness? Put it in a lost-and-found? Isn’t that its natural habitat?”

Dray looked at her as if she were an unlicensed sentence. “Name and occupation.”

“Nell,” she said. “Witch.”

He made a clerical mark against the air, which reacted by straightening to a posture of compliance. “Witchcraft is to be declared prior to manifestation in public thoroughfares.”

“Then you’ll want to visit the sky and talk to the moon,” she said. “I understand she’s a terrible repeat offender.”

Rigby made a little desperate sound. “Please,” he said to both of them, which is the sound of a man holding two ends of a rope that belong to three different people. “There’s something else. The river’s been wrong all afternoon. And there’s a rumor that the market has… something of its.”

Nell felt that rumor move through her like a change in weather. Rivers dislike losing things. When a river mislays itself it floods, not out of anger but because it has misplaced where it’s supposed to be. “What would a market want with a river’s anything?”

“Somebody’s selling names,” said a voice like a bell that had learned sarcasm. The voice belonged to Petromella Shanks, Urban White Witch, entrepreneur, wearer of a cape that looked like a threat. Her hair was a portfolio. On her sash in stitched letters: PETROMELLA: CURATES YOUR FATE. “And somebody else is here to make sure it’s sold to the right buyer.”

This last was aimed at Nell with significant eyebrows. The two had a relationship historically measurable in eye-rolls per minute. Petromella’s witchcraft was very clean and had a business plan. Nell’s witchcraft was something like weather trying on a hat.

“If somebody’s peddling a river’s name, it’s not a someone,” said Nell, and then corrected herself because cities enjoyed making pedants suffer. “It’s a someone who thinks they’re a something. Or the other way around.” She breathed. On the tide of scent came clay, reeds, silt, forgotten coins, iron, old stories that had gotten damp. “Which stall?”

“Names?” Rigby swallowed. “Follow me.”

They pushed through a small crowd around a table scattered with white envelopes and labeled jars. The seller wore spectacles that looked as if they were correcting his soul. He held up an envelope against the lantern light; the paper glowed faintly blue, as if remembering a sky it had traveled under.

“Names acquired legally,” the seller intoned. “Names you didn’t know you’d need until you hear them pronounced. Names with credible references. Names suitable for boats, cats, epiphanies, and businesses that have not yet admitted what they are. Payment accepted in coin, favors, viable secrets. No returns on proper nomenclature.”

The customers watched these things glitter in sound. One envelope hummed in a way that made the hairs on Nell’s arm perform a tiny salute. She stepped closer, because witches go toward the sensation everyone else avoids on instinct.

“That one,” she said, pointing. “What’s that?”

The seller’s voice moderated into curatorial piety. “A water-name of uncommon strength. Its vowels do a little work in the throat, you see. It used to belong to a river that outgrew it and forgot to take it along. If you have a mill, marriage, ship, or scandal, you will want this.”

Nell lifted it, ignoring Rigby’s inhale of policy. The envelope was cool and wet at the idea of wetness. When she tilted it, she heard the complicated syllable slosh against its paper. Water is not impressed by paper. But names resist any container with manners.

“It’s not spare,” she said to the seller. “It’s sulking. Someone mislaid it for the river, which is an unforgivable kindness.”

“Mislaid things seek new homes,” said the seller, a little defensive. “We find them families.”

“Do you,” said Inspector Dray, arriving like a stamp. “By what right do you possess - ”

A defective silence fell. It was defective because it had words in it that were not said aloud. The market had breathed in. The river’s name in Nell’s fingers vibrated very slightly, like a warning from geology. She looked down the alley. Through a gap between stalls she could see the city’s river as a black glimmer. It was behaving in a well-mannered way that water adopts when it is thinking hard about mischief.

Dray reached to confiscate. Nell stepped back. Petromella took a step forward because posture is a strategy.

“It wants to go home,” Nell said.

“Everything wants to go somewhere,” Dray returned. “The question is whether it may.”

“Suppose it doesn’t,” said Nell. “Suppose some miller buys this and affixes it to a wheel, and suddenly people’s flour has more to say about them than is polite.”

“That would be very on-brand” - Petromella smiled - “for some of us.”

“Petromella,” Nell said sweetly, “if you sell this, you’ll only have customers once. After that they’ll avoid your work the way cats avoid intricate moral dilemmas.”

“It would be a premium offering,” Petromella said, combs of calculation behind her eyes. “The sort of thing one obtains not because one needs it but because one can.”

“The river will come for it,” Nell said softly enough that it did not sound like a threat, exactly. “And the river has a longer memory than money.”

“Impounding,” said Dray firmly, thrusting his document. “On grounds of unlicensed metaphysical hazard.”

“Try,” said the seller, and for a moment the spectacles belonged to something that wasn’t quite a person - something older, made up of sentiment and opportunity, the personification of market as creature. It looked large behind him, huge and many-armed and very calm. Dray hesitated because even regulation learns - through repeated experience - when to mind its manners.

Nell slipped the envelope into her pocket. It didn’t so much go as set up a temporary embassy. She moved, and the market closed behind her because that is what markets do when they approve of a choice - offer cover with the subtlety of a magician’s flourish. Rigby followed, trying to commit no offenses and therefore committing several minor ones. Petromella came too, not out of solidarity but because competition hates to be left out of its own victory. Dray discovered that crowds are made of elbows and that his authority was not water-soluble but could be diluted.

Nell moved toward the river. As she went, the market displayed temptations at the edges of her vision the way a comedian displays props; perhaps a broom that swept rooms into conversation, a hat that remembered everyone’s name (dangerous), a jar of perfectly timed ripostes (fatal). She kept her hands in her pockets, which kept her hands on the river’s name, which kept her head where it needed to be.

At the alley’s mouth the city unfolded. Night had been pulled taut over roofs, and a thousand small lights stitched the darkness into something almost wearable. Up the street a trio of musicians tried to sell a chord progression to passing feet. Down the street the river slid along, pretending it had always been there. It had, in fairness. If the city was a story, the river was the reread paragraph everyone pretended to skim but secretly checked for changes.

On the embankment a knot of people stared down. Riverwatchers, you might call them, except they were not watching on purpose. They were people who had arrived at the end of their day and then failed to leave because the water had that look: of someone in the doorway about to say something important.

“What’s wrong with it?” someone asked the group at large, which is always present in a city if you look sideways. “It’s behaving.”

“It’s remembering,” said Nell. The river’s surface twinged at the word like a muscle at an old injury.

“How do you fix water?” Rigby whispered, conscience and curiosity disputing an expense account in his throat.

“You don’t,” Nell said. “You let it fix itself and tell it you noticed.”

The river recognized her. Witches are hard to ignore, and even harder when they are twenty and moving fast. Nell knelt on the stone where it had smoothed by a century of elbows. She put her hand on the air just above the surface, as if warming her palm over a quiet fire. The envelope in her pocket thrummed.

“I have something of yours,” she said, and didn’t raise her voice because shouting is for people who suspect they aren’t being heard. The water lifted itself to meet her hand with a soft sound like agreement. It smelled of iron and laundry and the old path through a field that has since become argument. When she returned it, the river shivered, as if flexing a memory back into place. Its current sighed against the stones in a tone suspiciously like gratitude. Witches do not require thanks, but cities remember kindness the way bricks remember scaffolding. The water flowed on, steadier now, and everyone who heard it pretended they had not.

Petromella folded her arms. “There are better venues for restitution,” she murmured to Rigby, because hearing was a form of possession. “With witnesses and proper branding.”

“Shh,” said Rigby, because even a wizard knows when to imitate a sign that says QUIET PLEASE, MAGIC.

Nell slid the envelope out. The paper was damp with anticipation that hadn’t yet happened. She unsealed it. It felt wrong to tear it; names prefer you to open them like letters, which they are.

The syllables inside didn’t pour, exactly. They stretched like a yawn after church. They made no sound anyone could write down, but everyone present suddenly knew how to say something they had forgotten. Once, the river had been called by a name that was more feeling than word, the feeling of stepping down and finding the next stone with your feet, the feeling of cool on a hot day, the feeling of something too big to own and too old to be impressed.

The name hung on the air, then sank into the water like a promise resuming itself. The river shuddered in relief, which sent a ripple along the quay and tripped two loafers who’d been leaning insouciant. The lamps shook their reflections into confetti.

Nell leaned forward, wet her fingers in the surface, and drew a small mark on the stone where hands had worn it smooth. She told the river, in her head, in the witch way that isn’t words: We saw you. We brought it back. Don’t be cruel about payment.

The water breathed out. Something old in the channel sat back down. On the far bank, three rats changed their minds about a destination the way sensible people change their socks. Upstream, a barge that had been sulking revised its schedule. Downstream, a fisherman discovered that the one that got away had, in fact, not.

There was clapping, because humans clap when they are afraid something important will slip again if they don’t put their hands together and hold the moment shut. Dray arrived to put a stop to it, then decided against and converted the gesture into a cough.

“Unlicensed ritual,” he said, but softly.

“Licensed river,” Nell returned. “It precedes legislation.”

Petromella looked at her as if assessing a competitor’s publicity. “You do fine work for someone with no overhead,” she said.

Nell thought of her attic and its leaning gravity, of the kettle that would be smug for a week, of the broom’s opinions, of her rent in the currency of happening to things on purpose. “Overhead is a roof,” she said. “I have a very fine roof.”

The market, which had draped itself along the quay as if it had always been a long scarf, sighed. Stalls rearranged themselves to be more flattering in the moonlight. The seller of names peered toward the water and, for the briefest moment, tipped his hat: acknowledgment, not apology. Then he was just a man again, selling envelopes to people who wished to be introduced to themselves.

Dray opened his perfect document and discovered, to his private annoyance, that some of the clauses had been smudged by damp. “There will need to be a report,” he said, as if reports were rain and he was only the clouds.

“Write it nicely,” Nell said. “Make the river look good.”

He made another mark in the air, and this one complied resignedly. “The Bureau requests,” he said to her in a lower tone now that the crowd was thinking about sausages again, “notice should further unsanctioned anomalies manifest in your vicinity.”

“They always manifest in my vicinity,” Nell said. “My vicinity is notorious for it.” She patted his sleeve in a way that made the sleeve forgive her. “I’ll tell you when I need someone to measure something. Mostly, I need someone to hold a corner.”

He blinked. “A corner of what?”

“Reality,” she said. “It’s a big blanket, and it gets heavy in the wind.”

Rigby, who had been breathing like someone practicing, finally exhaled. “That was very - well, that was that,” he said, which for a wizard was practically poetry. “Soup?” he added, because soup is what you say when the world has been large and you would like to be small for a bit.

They left the river smoothing itself, the market unstitching from the night and migrating alley-ward with the tidy bustle of a circus breaking camp. Nell walked back along cobbles that had decided to be grateful. Behind her, the city uncoiled a little, becoming once more the daily animal it knew how to be. Ahead, the kettle was hungry for being boiled and congratulated.

Petromella fell into step beside her. “You didn’t keep a single jar of those ripostes, did you,” she said, laden with accusation disguised as chat.

“I prefer my mistakes home-grown,” Nell said.

“One day,” Petromella said airily, “you’ll have to scale. Systems, delegations, documented processes.”

Nell looked up. Above them the moon was investigating a cloud with genuine curiosity. “I’ll get an extra chair,” she said. “That’s scaling.”

Back in the alley the market’s sign had turned shy and pretended to be laundry. The stall of keys packed itself into the shape of a memory you would remember if you needed to. Crisps of sugar and spice came off griddles. The stall of shadows rehearsed generational trauma. Whoever was in charge of the market had never once admitted to being in charge and was therefore doing an exquisite job of it.

Nell’s kettle greeted her with a stern burble that suggested she had kept it from important tea. She fed it water, which is love in kettle language, and set it on the stove, which was a metal confidence trick with ambitions. The broom had clearly rearranged the furniture in her absence to better observe the city through the attic’s blunt window. Her spellbook had chewed the moth into grammar, which would make for fluttery, overpunctuated spells in the morning.

There was a knock. She opened the door to find Inspector Dray, hat in hand, which is the only hand that looks like apology without actually holding one.

“I require,” he said, then corrected himself to something less like a warrant. “I would like to file a…statement of observations, with your…assistance clarifying the…witchy bits.”

“That’s the technical term,” Nell said gravely. “Come in. Mind the chair. It minds back.”

He entered with the care of a man at a museum full of increasingly life-like statues. He sat. The chair considered disapproval and then generously postponed it. Dray took out a pen that had a nib like a threat and looked at her the way a conscientious student looks at a blackboard that has started giving advice.

“Your role,” he said, “in returning an item to the river.”

“Ah, see, that’s where a category error creeps in,” Nell said, pouring two mismatched cups. “It wasn’t an item. It was a you. The trick is to treat every mislaid thing as if it had been looking for you all along, because it has. People misplace bits of themselves in the city like breadcrumbs in a maze they never intend to rewalk. Sometimes the bits misplace people. You find each other. Then you write down how much it cost.”

Dray’s pen paused over “cost.” “In what currency.”

“Gratitude, mostly,” Nell said. “And the occasional pie. You can invoice the universe for money, but it pays late and in experiences.”

He made a sound that might have been a laugh if he hadn’t trained it out of himself. Then he sniffed. “Is that…river?” he asked, because the city had a way of lingering in noses that did not belong to it.

“It gets everywhere,” Nell said. “That’s water for you. You can regulate it, but you never really manage it.”

He wrote that down, and she let him, because some things look better as lines of ink. He asked her structured questions about outcomes. She gave him descriptive answers about

consequences. By the time the kettle whistled he had a page of notes and a gently disheveled soul.

“Thank you,” he said, standing, hat restored. “The Bureau appreciates the cooperation of… artisan practitioners.”

“Tell your Bureau to eat,” she said. “Bureaus skip meals and then we all suffer.”

He paused on the stair, swallowed, and said, “Soup.”

“Exactly.”

When the door shut, the attic gathered itself around her like a cat that has decided to forgive you. Nell leaned against the wall and let the day dip out of her bones. The market’s after-smells hung in the rafters: paper, wax, starched myth, fried dough, ambition. She poured a cup and drank what the city offered: hot water flavored by everything she had done with it.

The kettle, having achieved relevance, settled into smugness. The broom pointed itself at the window like a promise. Nell went to the sill and looked out over the rooflines that behaved like a thought in mid-sentence. The river lay through them, neither sleeping nor performing. It had its name back and, like anyone reconciled, it had gone quiet in a way that suggested humming.

Behind her, on the table, the little parcel of patience she had not bought - it had crept into her pocket anyway because patience always does - wriggled. It was wrapped in brown paper that had forgotten to be plain and tied with string that remembered everything. She considered it. The night was young in that way only cities with breakfast policies can be. Somewhere beyond her alley, someone would misplace a moment and need it found.

Nell untied the parcel carefully, as if it could bruise. Inside lay a small hourglass filled with sand that did not flow when rude. It moved only when watched kindly. She turned it over and watched the top grain decide, without hurry, to lead. She felt her breath fall into pace with it and knew that she would entirely misuse this gift for good.

“A market with sense,” she told the room. “That’s a headline.”

The broom shrugged. The spellbook rustled punctuation. The city arranged itself as a lullaby for loud people. Outside, footsteps negotiated with cobbles. The moon cleared its throat.

Nell put the hourglass where she could see it and where it could see her. Then she drank her tea while it was still being tea and, as she did, she wrote a list on the back of yesterday: things the city had mislaid today - three brooms, two brothers, the end of a conversation, the beginning of one, a hat with an idea in it, an argument that wanted to be a song, an inspector who remembered to laugh. She underlined the river and added a heart, which is not regulation and therefore right.

The night market packed itself away into pockets and cracks and shabby dreams you remember in the morning as excitement. It left behind a dusting of cinnamon, an invoice for coincidence, and the faint chalk line of an arrow pointing toward whatever came next. Nell closed her eyes, just for a moment, which is where sleep lives waiting to be welcomed, and the city, satisfied that someone was minding it, eased its shoulders and let the stars eavesdrop.

Chapter 5: In Which the City Refuses to Behave, Tea Defies Meteorology, and a Great Many Forms Are Filled Incorrectly on Purpose

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In Which the City Refuses to Behave, Tea Defies Meteorology, and a Great Many Forms Are Filled Incorrectly on Purpose

Dawn dragged itself up the alleys like a tired cat with a burlap sack of weather in its teeth. The river rolled over and changed sides. Bread rose, pigeons considered ethics, and the city - being so very used to mornings that happened to it - happened right back. The sky was the bruised color of an excuse, the streets sweated yesterday’s cabbage, and someone was frying something that sounded crispy in a pan that sounded resentful.

In the attic under the eaves that never agreed on where “down” was, Nell sat in the middle of a chalk circle that had been drawn with good intentions and a slightly blunt box of laundry blue. She looked twenty in the way a lit match looks a moment old: full of brightness with opinions about oxygen. Her hat had once been a respectable cone, but time, weather, and personality had married in it and spawned a dangerously jaunty brim.

On the floor: a kettle, a jam jar with air bubbles that wouldn’t leave, a spool of municipal red tape (self-knitting), a teaspoon that insisted it was a wand, three small storms in paper bags, and a manual titled Local Miracles and Contingency Planning, Third Revised and Immediately Obsolete Edition.

The kettle - Mr. Scree - hummed a scale in sympathetic boil, though he wasn’t near the stove. He liked to hum before big events. Kettles are narwhals in the seas of anxiety; you can tell the size of the wave by the keening.

“Right,” Nell told the kettle. “Today we fix the city.”

Mr. Scree’s lid chattered a phrase that could have been “again.”

“Don’t start,” she said, and pinned her hair with a safety pin that had a temper. “If the Enumerators finish their census of improbabilities, they’ll file the place into an index card. No one wants to live on an index card. No windows.”

Enumerators - pinched little metaphysical creatures in brittle suits with clipboards made of the seconds you drop between words - had been seen lately, ticking off birds, checking the height of puddles, verifying if dogs that looked like their owners counted as a single civic entity. They smelled faintly of eraser shavings. They smiled in ways that encouraged you to stop doing whatever you were doing forever.

It had started (officially) three days ago when Nell, attempting to register a Minor Public Blessing (the pigeons stopped aiming; it was transformative), had accidentally requested a Preliminary City-Wide Rationalization under the Bureau of Plausibility. The form for Blessing, as anyone knows, sits immediately next to Rationalization because of the way filing clerks think vowels are garnish. She had tried to withdraw it. The counter had said “Stamp received; the wheels are turning,” and when the wheels turn you hear them in your bones.

The first day, everyone’s laundry dried in alphabetical order.

The second day, the fishmongers got organized and fish began turning up with labels like “phlogiston-adjacent - Not For Stews,” which was helpful until customers asked what “phlogiston” meant and the fish had opinions.

Today was day three, and the thirteenth chime was rumored. Not the extra hour the city keeps for itself in case of emergencies - no, the thirteenth chime, the one that tidies your past until it fits in a single line and leaves your future with a “see appendix.”[1]

Nell got up and smoothed her skirt, which tried to wrinkle itself into a map to places that sold buns. “Plan,” she said. “We need a jam of civic contradictions. We need help. We need the sort of noise you can’t put on a form.” She pocketed the teaspoon wand (it sulked, but spoons are adaptable), slung Mr. Scree into a basket lined with potholders knitted by someone with a grudge against corners, and grabbed the three paper-bag storms. Never know when you’ll need a breeze.

She opened the attic hatch and stepped into a morning that smelled of toast, damp brick, and poetry written by someone with cold hands.

Down the ladder, across the hallway with the plaster cracks shaped like advice, out onto the street where the stones glistened with last night’s apologies. The city was awake: cart wheels muttering philosophy, hawkers hawking, watchmen watching, and the unblinking bureaucratic eye trying to blink. Already she could see one of the Enumerators at the corner attempting to measure the distance between “here” and “there” with a ruler that sobbed. It ticked in a pen made of disciplined wind.

“Good morning,” Nell told it. Always parley with reality before you pickpocket it.

“Is it?” said the Enumerator, not looking up. Ticks escaped the nib, ran down the page, and dried in tidy rows. “Define.”

“Not today,” said Nell, and walked on before the definition could happen to her.

She cut through Scuttle Lane, which had never managed to be wide enough, being too full of itself, and arrived at the market. It had made an effort. Stalls lined up as if auditioning for a parade. Signs were spelled correctly, even the ones that didn’t want to be. Eel-on-a-stick vendors wore matching aprons that said Eel, Singular, and the eels, in their tubs, pretended to be unrelated.

At the corner, Gravel the traffic troll stood with his little red-and-green flags. Gravel was the color of old bread, with a smile that made children decide to be policemen when they grew up and then decide not to when they met a policeman and preferred Gravel. His cap - polite, square - sat very seriously on his head. He liked rules; he liked them the way a gardener likes fences: not to stop things so much as to keep them from wandering off and getting eaten by goats.

“Morning, Nell,” Gravel rumbled. “You look like trouble dressed up as a solution.” He tried to smile; a flint sparked; a pigeon blessed him and flew away swearing.

“I need a parade,” she said. “A parade that is also a protest but looks like a picnic. We’re going to swarm the bell tower before it chimes.”

Gravel twitched his green flag. “Permits?”

“I’ll have a permit,” said Nell, “as long as no one checks it closely or from any angle.”

“Ah,” said Gravel. “A civic mayfly.” He squinted past her at the market where a man was selling jars of sunlight (“Yesterday’s, Unopened”). “You’ll be wanting Tess,” he added.

Tess ran things that didn’t want to be run and unionized things that didn’t know they were working. She had hair like a broom and opinions like doors. Right now she sat on a barrel that had been requisitioned by sitting on it, surrounded by a delegation of seamstresses, fishwives, and a woman who sold under-the-counter sausages that were so over-the-counter you could smell them in the next street. Tess’s eyes swept the stall fronts and came back with change.

“Nell,” she said. “I’ve had three Enumerators try to classify my left hand as a contraband counting device. If this is because you ticked a box that looked friendly, say so.”

“I ticked with vigor,” Nell admitted. “But I’ve got a fix.”

“Does it involve fire?”

“Only symbolically,” said Nell, then glanced at the paper-bag storms in her basket. “Mostly.”

“We don’t do symbolic fire,” said Tess. “We tried it once. The fire unionized.”

“Look,” Nell said, “they want the city to be sensible. We’re going to give it sense so overflowing it gives up. We bring contradictions. We bring noise. We bring everything that can’t be totaled. I need musicians who can’t agree on a key, a baker who decorates with opinions, a choir that hums on purpose, and somebody who can argue with a clock and win.”

“Clocksmith Jory,” Tess said. “He bit time once. Time apologized.”

“Good,” said Nell. “And we’ll need the wizards.”

There was a collective exhale that smelled of pickles and “oh no, them.”

“Not because they’ll help,” Nell rushed on. “Because they’ll get in the way very colorfully, and that’s useful. Also someone has to catch whatever falls off the tower.”

Gravel nodded. “I’ll hold the street,” he said. “My flags are ready to be unhelpful in the right direction.”

“Parade in ten,” Tess announced, at which a hundred women who had not been waiting for instructions began to move in ways that suggested they had expected instructions all their lives and now that they had them, the city would experience efficient destiny.

From the archway of a nearby bakery stumbled two familiar academics: one brandishing an umbrella indoors as though it were a doctorate (Professor Slightly), the other coaxing a biscuit into orderly collapse with tea (Professor Bumbleshoot).

“We’re supervising,” Slightly declared.

“We’re documenting,” said Bumbleshoot, ink already smudged across his spectacles.

Wizards always join parades. They just refuse to admit that’s what they’re doing.

Nell piped across the market toward the university with two notes and a hope. The wizards, in their pointy hats and pointier opinions, were bunched under the arch discussing an equation that wanted to be an anecdote when it grew up, in front of a sign that politely requested No Thaumic Littering. A junior wizard with hair like a startled theory spotted her: Pelham, Lecturer In Something With Diagrams. He had a face built to argue with footnotes.

“Oh no,” Pelham said, as if she were a weather system he had read about in a cautionary paper. “You.” He pointed a finger that tried to be authoritative and came off enthusiastic. “We have the situation under almost-qualified assessment. The Chancellor has convened a subcommittee.”

“Brilliant,” said Nell. “You can form a line and look important behind it. We’re going to the bell tower.”

“The thirteenth chime,” Pelham said, eyes gleaming like someone who wanted to publish it, “is a harmonic artifact of the temporal belfry. If we can capture it in a jar - ”

“If anyone brings a jar,” Nell said, “it will be for biscuits. Come on.” She shooed him with her hat brim. Junior wizards, if handled briskly, stay buoyant.

The parade happened because people needed an excuse to walk loudly, and Nell provided one. Musicians boiled up - fiddles in argument with drums, a flute that had learned breathing from geese. Out of a drain on the corner came Chairman Sawtooth and a contingent of rats. Each carried a scrap of paper that declared FAIR BAIT FOR ALL in handwriting too small for humans but very clear to rats. They marched in neat lines, tails flicking percussion against the cobbles. Rats are excellent at parades: they know when to scatter and when to swarm, and they never miss a beat. Bakers brought trays of sugar sculptures shaped like things that couldn’t be eaten but wanted to be admired. The choir hummed in a key that was in hiding from the other keys. Somewhere between the fiddlers and bakers, a rogue bouquet trotted happily: the Aromatheron, still smelling of regret, onions, and riverbanks. It had acquired a garland of frying-oil smoke and a secondhand carnation from a passing stall. No one stopped it; it was too well-scented to argue with, and besides, it looked as if it had unionized with the street vendors. Gravel held up his green flag to stop the flow and his red flag to start it because, frankly, the flags had their own ideas and he wasn’t about to argue.

As they went, the city tried to shuffle them into columns and failed, and that failure was precisely the point. Enumerators hovered like correction fluid. They asked for receipts. They got crumbs. They balanced pencils on their lips and invented sighs of new shapes.

At Widders Square, Nell paused. Legends paused here too, sometimes for breath; the square lent air to big moments for a small fee. The clock tower loomed at the far end, its face wearing the smug look of things that know where they’ll be in a minute. The thirteenth bell sat high up and invisible, the way all the persuasive bells do.

“Listen,” Nell said, and people did, because people listen to someone who is about to break a rule for them. “The city’s made of favors and feuds, bits of string, river fog, and a recipe no one wrote down correctly. The Enumerators are trying to make it correct. We do not allow that. We remind the city it is not an index card. We make the air so thick with uncountables that counting gets embarrassed and goes home.”

A hum went through the crowd, the sort that started in the chest, wandered into the throat, and came out as brisk laughter.

“On three,” Nell said, and then didn’t say three, because she was the sort of person who knew that chaos arrived when invited and also when it wasn’t, and so she took off in a run instead.

Up the tower steps, spiral and argumentative, the parade climbed after her, shedding crumbs, opinions, and a small number of proprieties. The steps complained about feet that had more purpose than they were built for. Mr. Scree rattled in his basket, whistling a panicked tea-song.

Halfway up, they met an Enumerator, this one taller and narrower, wearing a sash that said Senior Tangibility Auditor. It held out a palm.

“Permit,” it said, a word with a thousand silent letters.

Nell reached into her pocket and produced a piece of paper with stamps that looked official from a distance and broke into a joke up close. The Enumerator peered. Its eyes were the color of subtraction.

“No,” it said.

“Ah,” said Nell, and flicked open one of the paper-bag storms. A gust of fresh confusion tore the sash at a strictly ninety-degree angle. The Enumerator’s pencil snapped in dismay. People surged past like the future.

At the next bend in the stairwell, Petromella Shanks appeared, her cape disciplining the draft into sharp corners. She joined the climb without asking, broom at the ready.

“Only because chaos is dreadful for repeat business,” she told Nell, voice dry enough to sand furniture.

Nell smiled sweetly, which in witch meant I heard you, I won’t thank you, and therefore we’re even.

On the landing, Goodwife Prill waited with arms like furniture. She was a village witch who had moved into the city reluctantly and had met Nell the way you meet falling pianos: suddenly and with feelings. She valued order. Nell valued orders of buns. Their meetings achieved a certain balance.

“You brought a mob,” Prill said.

“They brought themselves,” Nell said.

Prill’s eyes took in the kettle, the storms, the flustered wizard trying to straighten his hat without removing it from his head. “You’re going to do something theatrical,” she said flatly.

“Yes,” said Nell.

Prill sniffed. “Good. Sensible is a disease. We’ll inoculate.” She had a broom. It had learned to be a spear in its off hours.

They reached the top. The bell - vast, brass, certain of its job - hung above, the city sprawled below like an open brief. In the streets, Enumerators gathered as white as bleached sunlight. The air tightened with an invisible click as the tower’s gearworks ran a finger down the spine of the hour.

Pelham fussed a little chalk out of his sleeve and drew symbols that tried to form a committee and failed. “We can counter-resonate,” he said, “apply a sequenced - ”

“No,” said Nell. “We’re not fighting the chime. We’re embarrassing it.”

Below, the Enumerators shuffled their papers in dismay. Their rulers bent; their clipboards leaked seconds. Finally they sighed, stamped one another for closure, and reclassified Ankh-Morpork under Unclassifiable: See Miscellaneous. Then they folded themselves into their own filing cabinets and trundled away, smelling faintly of eraser shavings and defeat. The city breathed out, untidy and triumphant.

“Embarrassing,” Pelham repeated, in the tone of a man introduced to a new field of mathematics that involved blushes.

Nell upended her basket. Out clinked the teaspoon, Mr. Scree, the storms, and a bag of a dozen peppermints because you never know. She placed the kettle at the tower’s edge, facing the city. “You are going to boil,” she told Mr. Scree, “at a carefully irresponsible moment. When you do, whistle like an opera house falling into a tailor’s shop.”

Mr. Scree quivered. He liked directions.

Nell tossed the teaspoon into the air. It glinted, spun, and landed on its back with the stubborn grace of objects that refuse to be elegant even when watched. She clapped her palms. “All right! Musicians, wrong tune! Choir, hum whatever you had for breakfast! Bakers, declare your buns tax-exempt! Wizards, argue about terminology! Gravel - wave both flags! Tess - organize disorder!”

“What are you doing?” Pelham asked. He always asked just before he learned. It was a gift.

“Creating a civic chorus,” Nell said. “Against a single note.”

The city inhaled. You could feel the lungful of it in your soles.

Down below, people forgot to be tall or short and were just people. Market stalls shrugged and scooted an inch to the left, either because of wind or defiance. Dogs chose names. A woman arguing with a price tag threw the tag out. The river, fickle thing, decided to be generous and carried back a dozen hats. The sun, which had been under obligations to shine at a measurable rate, flickered in a way that delighted tomatoes.

The Enumerators frowned and fanned themselves with blank forms. Their numbers - beautiful, sharp - began to look like the teeth of a comb that had combed a storm.

Nell unrolled the spool of municipal red tape. It writhed, sought a bureaucracy to belong to, and, finding none fulfilling, tied itself around the bell clapper in a very official knot. She grinned up at it. “Permit denied,” she told the bell.

Pelham drew breath for a protest. Prill swatted him with the broom so gently that only his dignity spilled.

“Positions!” Tess called, because if there was one thing she loved more than a plan it was the moment the plan admitted it had to improvise. The choir swelled. The fiddles quarreled. Drums pounded in hungover solidarity. Gravel’s flags blurred.

Nell popped the second paper-bag storm and sprinkled it into the wind. It smelled like the seaside a hundred miles from any sea, like the promises of summer you made to yourself and kept because someone had to. The third storm she held, trembling, in both hands.

“Mr. Scree,” she whispered. “Now.”

The kettle whistled.

It was not a sound made by metal and water. It was a sound made by a city remembering. It was prams and weddings and a bread oven first used; it was alley laughter and the first time

you got away with something and decided to use your power responsibly later, maybe, probably; it was two hands lifting a table together and finding it lighter. It filled the tower and sloshed down the stairs and slipped under doors to ask cats to move.

The bell tried to chime.

The red tape refused to let the clapper behave.

The thirteenth note hit the tape like a very well-written law meeting a cake and became, with surprising speed, a thirteenish noise: not a tone but a tangle. It skittered around looking for the tidy resonance it had been promised, found instead a market arguing amiably with itself, and - to its faint credit - attempted to adapt.

Nell threw the last storm into the bell mouth.

Wind surged through the tower. It grabbed the awkward not-quite-chime and ran away with it, taking it across rooftops where laundry smacked its hands like applause, past chimneys that coughed and pretended they hadn’t, through the labyrinthine court where decisions go to change their shoes, and out over the river. The noise tried to become a rule. The river laughed - rivers are unsympathetic to rules - and swallowed it whole, then hiccuped.

Down below, the Enumerators, faced with a chime that could not be documented, tallied, or made to behave, ran through their procedures with increasing despair. At last, they gathered themselves, produced a very large form labeled Surrender to the Indeterminate, stamped it a hundred times with a stamp that read Pending, and faded like very polite fog.

The bell - confused, handsome - settled back into being a bell. It chimed twelve, then, unable to resist, chimed a half. Half a chime sounds like a wink.

The city exhaled. A child dropped a toffee and caught it before it hit the ground and later told everyone this had been magic and it was. Bakers raised spatulas. Dogs forgot their names and remembered who they were. Market stalls leaned into the sun. The smell of cabbage decided to be cheerful and achieved it.

“Is that it?” Pelham asked, dazed. “Did we - was that - ?”

“That,” said Prill, “was a recipe. She salted it with people.” Her broom, unable to resist the mood, wagged its straw.

Nell stared out over the rooftops and felt the way you feel after a storm: lighter and damp and a bit suspicious of skies. She put a hand on Mr. Scree, whose whistle wound down into a satisfied mutter. “We’ll have to fill forms about this,” she said, with the air of someone who knows a debt when it arrives.

“Let’s fill them wrong,” said Tess, who had clambered up with a dozen women in skirts designed to create updrafts. She set a tray of buns on the parapet as if that were what parapets were for. “We’ll file the city under ‘Full of Itself and We Like It That Way.’”

“You can’t file like under way,” Pelham said, purely out of habit, and then grinned with all the teeth he usually saved for lectures. “I retract that. File it under buns.”

Gravel appeared, modestly enormous, carrying three children, a goat, and a traffic cone like a bouquet. “No injuries,” he reported with pride. “Except to the cone, who regrets nothing.”

There was, of course, the matter of consequences. There are always consequences. They trickle in after triumph like distant relatives who heard there was cake. The Bureau of Plausibility sent a letter in triplicate that said, in sum, Don’t do that, and included a helpful pamphlet on the dangers of civic whimsy. The pamphlet made fine kindling and then, unexpectedly, excellent jam pot labels. The Enumerators were spotted, days later, trying to classify clouds and being gently bullied into nap time by weather.

Nell went home by the long way that took her past “her” streets - the ones that tipped their hats as she passed, the alleys that cracked their knuckles at danger and then offered it a sandwich, the stoops that held little piles of this and that with tags reading “Take if you need, return if you can.” The city was itself again, which is to say: it was itself for the first time since breakfast and would be again by lunch.

Her attic, when she climbed into it, smelled of hot dust and kettle metal and the particular satisfaction of objects that have been used properly and then forgiven for being themselves. She set Mr. Scree on his shelf. He sighed like a poem that had found its last stanza.

On the table lay a letter written on paper that had a watermark of a very serious goose. Nell opened it. The handwriting was crisp and apologetic.

Dear Citizen,

In recognition of your role in preventing a catastrophic over-application of Sense, the Office of Bells, Whistles, and Consequence-Management hereby fines you one (1) minor transgression for Disturbing the Chime and grants you one (1) Major Citywide Favor to be redeemed at your discretion in matters affecting the common good. Please sign below if you agree that you agree.

P.S. Your permit application for a Minor Public Blessing has been approved retroactively. Please accept, on behalf of the city, a basket of very polite pigeons.

There was, in fact, a basket. It cooed apologetically. The pigeons wore little tags that read Corrected Behavior and were practicing not doing things on statues.

Nell frowned at the letter. Major favors were dangerous, like wishes wearing suits. She didn’t trust them. On the other hand, she thought of streets that flooded when it rained sideways, roofs that leaked in syllables, the meat pie seller on Candle Row who had a limp and a knife for a tongue, and she thought: favors, carefully, could be spent like candles.

She signed. The paper purred and folded itself into a hat for the nearest pigeon, who accepted it gravely.

The door creaked.

“Enter,” Nell called, and a head popped in. Pelham again, hair in negotiations with gravity, hat clutched like a confession.

“I brought biscuits,” he said, “because every theory is improved by biscuits.” He set a tin on the table. “Also, the Chancellor wishes to know how you did that.”

“Tell him,” said Nell, opening the tin (biscuits: the wheel reinvented, but better), “that I read the manual.”

Pelham peered at the manual on the table and read the title, lips moving. “Local Miracles and Contingency Planning, Third Revised and Immediately Obsolete Edition.”

“Not that one,” Nell said. She tapped her chest. “This one.”

Pelham - bless him - took that seriously. “That edition,” he said, “comes out different every time.”

“Exactly,” she said.

He looked around. The attic was a mess of the sort that categorizes itself by ambient impertinence. He looked down. He looked up. “So,” he said, “would you like a job?”

“I have a job,” Nell said. “It involves preventing people from doing what they shouldn’t do unless they should do it but carefully.”

“A title, then,” he said, eager. “Titles help the university understand why it pays for biscuits.”

“Hmm,” Nell said, eating a biscuit to consult the crumbs. “Consulting Nonconformist.”

Pelham’s grin cracked wider. “Done,” he said, as if the university were something that could be persuaded with words like that, which it was, especially if you added biscuits.

He left. The kettle hummed. The pigeons practiced virtue. Nell leaned back in her chair. The city leaned with her, subtly, because witches and cities have arrangements no one puts on signs. She used the Major Favor, not then but over the next week, here and there, a brick at a time: a drain unclogged that no one owned, a widow’s stair fixed at midnight so it stopped counting her misses, a lantern in the alley that made shadows behave.

She went back to market days with Tess and tea with Prill and arguments with Pelham in which he lost face and gained friends. Gravel, resplendent, taught her to wave flags upside down on purpose. The Enumerators, when they appeared, kept an embarrassed distance and checked their clipboards for onions.

The bell tower, at noon, chimed twelve and a little more, just enough to remind people they had time to be ridiculous. The river complained and consented. The city did not behave. If you asked someone what had happened on the day the thirteenth chime failed, they would tell you the kettle story, and then they would tell you about buns, and then they would tell you about everything else but you would understand.

One evening, as summer ran low and late light got caught on the nails of roofs, Nell sat on her windowsill. The pigeons had been returned to normal (they had asked; virtue tired them), the kettle behaved (mostly), and the manual stayed purposely obsolete (on principle). The wind brought up a sound from below: argument, reconciliation, frying. From somewhere, faintly, laughter tossed like coins into a fountain.

“Right, then,” she said to the sky. “Who’s next?”

The city shivered in agreeable anticipation. It would be somebody. It always was.

Nell set her hat on the sill, watched it decide not to fall, and laughed. You cannot put that on a form however many copies you make.

And that, as any local will tell you, is the point.

That evening, Nell’s attic exhaled like a cat settling into sleep. The broom collapsed into its cushion with a noise of scandalized relief, the frying pan sang a shanty half a note too proud of itself, and Mr. Scree the kettle hummed lullabies to nobody in particular. Outside, the city sulked in its ordinary way - alive, argumentative, defiantly uncountable. For now, that was victory enough.

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[1] No one who has ever filed an appendix has checked if it was attached to anything.

Chapter 6: In Which Loose Ends Refuse to Stay Tied, but Look Decorative Anyway

Epilogue
In Which Loose Ends Refuse to Stay Tied, but Look Decorative Anyway

When the city had finished not being sensible (to great applause), life resumed in the way cities always resume: noisily, sideways, and with receipts.

The ghost at Tuttle & Son Bakery eventually learned to hum only on alternate Thursdays. The widow sold more buns than ever, because customers swore the crusts contained “a certain warmth,” which was true in a strictly haunting sense. Nell visited sometimes, partly for bread, partly to remind him that moving on could be respectable, but also optional.

The ledger now lived on a strict routine of sums by day and ducks by midnight. Its accountant, far less haunted, had taken to nodding at it in gratitude, as if to a clerk who had survived bad management.

The bottle of moods sat on a shelf in the attic, carefully labeled “Tuesday Afternoon Oh No.” It hummed occasionally when the weather was confused. Nell would pat it fondly and say, “Yes, we all know.”

Professors Slightly and Bumbleshoot co-authored a report on the Thirteenth Chime, which began as a scholarly article and ended as an argument between the footnotes. The University awarded them a commendation for “keeping calamity occupied.” Both considered this tenure in all but name.

The rats’ union continued negotiations with flair. Chairman Sawtooth secured a landmark agreement: raisins of quality and, more importantly, respect. The Watch grumbled about “organized rodents,” but their complaints were drowned out by the sound of tails keeping parade-time.

The Aromatheron, no longer rogue, became something of a mascot. It was seen trotting through markets leaving faint trails of onions and poetry. People began to call it “ours,” which is how cities adopt things they can’t get rid of.

Petromella Shanks rebranded her services as “Chaos-Resistant Witchery” and attracted a clientele who wanted magic without metaphors. It worked, in the sense that her customers always felt safer afterward, though most still kept Nell’s flyer pinned somewhere nearby. Petromella considered this marketing synergy and let it stand.

The river, once sulky, had its name back. It rolled with the swagger of someone who remembered exactly who they were and dared anyone to forget it. On hot afternoons, it flicked a cool breeze at Nell as she crossed the bridge, which in river-language was a thank-you note.

Inspector Dray wrote a forty-page report condemning everything that had happened as “unlicensed phenomena.” Unfortunately, the report was accidentally filed under “F” for “Festivities” and used to wrap sausages. He has been seen since, still inspecting, still dray-like, still convinced he will one day catch reality without its paperwork.

As for the Enumerators, they were last spotted attempting to measure the exact distance between a promise and a lie. They have not been heard from since, though some claim you can hear faint scratching in bureaucratic sub-basements where arithmetic goes to sulk.

Tansy Nettles, having filed no fewer than nine separate recommendations on the handling of Aromatherons, discovered that none of them had been read, let alone stamped. She retired in triumph, declaring that if bureaucracy would not listen, at least it could be improved upon indefinitely in theory. Her mop was last seen supervising a bucket in Sub-Basement B.

Goodwife Prill resumed her campaign for sensible witching within city limits. She disapproved of Nell, but only in the way that rain disapproves of umbrellas - regularly, with great vigor, and while secretly admitting the other was useful. They were seen together once at a bun-stall, buying different things and agreeing to disagree over crumbs.

And Nell? She returned to her attic, her kettle, her broom, her storm jars, her mismatched furniture, and her city. She pinned up a new flyer:

WITCH FOR HIRE

Chaotic Services Rendered, Receipts Negotiable.

Ducks Upon Request.

The kettle sighed contentedly. The broom sat down. The city, still smug about having survived itself, leaned in through the rafters to see what she’d do next.

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