

First Collection of Chronicles
of the
Releasable Kingdom

The Indifferent Realms

Satirical tales from a kingdom that keeps
building the wrong things

Stefan Ellersdorfer

published with The Indifferent Press



THE CHRONICLES
OF THE
RELEASABLE
KINGDOM



About this publication



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A Note on Fiction

These chronicles are works of fantasy and satire.

Any resemblance to actual organizations, projects, development teams, meetings, release trains, architecture boards, guilds, or particularly stubborn review processes is, of course, entirely coincidental.

Until it isn't.



AI Transparency

The ideas, stories, characters, metaphors, and editorial decisions are the work of the author.

Generative AI was used as a creative assistant for language refinement, translation, illustration, and the technical preparation of these publications.

Every published work has been initially created, reviewed, curated, and approved by the author.



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About the Author



was born, raised, and continue to live and work in Austria—a small European country that often feels like a hidden jewel. Surrounded by mountains, forests, tradition, and hearty food, Austria is a place that seems to resist the rush of the modern world. We speak a distinctive variety of German, and if you're familiar with Tolkien's Hobbits, you might say we share more than a few similarities: grounded, community-oriented, and lovers of the simple but meaningful things in life.

My journey as a programmer began in 1986, when I received my first computer—a Commodore 64 with a Final Cartridge III extension. Just hearing that name still gives me goosebumps. I spent countless hours trying to make simple sprite animations work, dabbling in BASIC and Assembler. The results were modest, but the spark had caught. I knew then what I wanted to be.

I am a Software Engineer.

I am also a father. With four children ranging in age from 22 years to a two years old, I've been gifted a broad perspective on life's challenges—big and small.

I am also a father. With four children ranging in age from two to twenty-

two, I have had the privilege of experiencing life through very different perspectives. Some people might describe me as cynical. Perhaps that is the price of walking the narrow line between self-irony, critical thinking, and a willingness to question my own convictions at any time. It is precisely this space—between how others perceive me and how I reflect on myself—that allows me to grow largely independent of the opinions of others. Not because those opinions do not matter to me, but because I prefer to treat them as invitations to think rather than as judgments to accept. As long as I remain open to new insights, I hope to continue learning in a way that is both healthy and ethically responsible.

I am also a musician. I play the guitar and sing, not just as a hobby, but with enough dedication to know what practice truly means—especially when it comes to precision and discipline.

Since 2000, I've been working professionally in software development.

Since 2010, I've been my own boss—giving me both the freedom and the responsibility to uphold the values I believe in. I welcome change, but not blindly. I strive to embody the ethics, craftsmanship, and curiosity that define sustainable and professional software practice.

Why I wrote this book

Because people rarely change their minds after reading another technical paper. They sometimes do after laughing at a kingdom that behaves suspiciously like their own organization.

If the stories in this book occasionally remind you of the satirical fantasy of **Terry Pratchett** or the technical storytelling of **Russ Miles**, consider it a tribute rather than an imitation. Their work inspired me to believe that engineering ideas deserve stories as much as specifications.

While The Indifferent Realms sprang from my imagination, their roots lie in countless conversations about software engineering, craftsmanship, and collaboration.

My sincere thanks go to my partners, **Markus Jessenitschnig** and **Stefan Wagner** at **Smarter Software**, who have helped cultivate this culture for many years and encouraged me to share these stories with others.

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The Indifferent Realms



he Indifferent Realms are not a place where evil reigns.

They are far more familiar than that.

They are a world where people are mostly competent, mostly well-intentioned, and almost always too busy to question traditions that no longer serve them. Here, bureaucracy quietly becomes belief, process becomes purpose, and yesterday's solution is treated as tomorrow's law.

Magic exists, but it rarely appears as fireballs or dragons. Instead it manifests as customs, procedures, contracts, committees, reports, check-lists, metrics, and ancient rituals whose original purpose has long since been forgotten. The greatest enchantments are the ones nobody realizes they are under.

Across these realms live guilds, magistrates, librarians, witches, apprentices, engineers, scribes, merchants, inspectors, and increasingly, curious artificial constructs. They all believe they are making the kingdom better. Frequently, they do. Just not always in the way they intended.

Progress therefore comes not from heroes defeating villains, but from ordinary people daring to ask an uncomfortable question:

“*Why do we still do it this way?*”

The stories are gentle satires of modern software engineering, organizational behavior, leadership, product development, artificial intelligence, security, management, and the strange tendency of human institutions to optimize for the preservation of process instead of the creation of value.

Every kingdom, guild, spell, and creature is a metaphor.

None are intended as direct allegory.

Any resemblance to existing organizations, standards, methodologies, certifications, frameworks, or management practices is therefore entirely predictable.

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The Chronicles of the Releasable Kingdom



mong all the lands of the Indifferent Realms, there exists one kingdom that has acquired an unusual reputation.

Its software is not famous because it is perfect.

Its people are not famous because they never make mistakes.

Its engineers are not celebrated because they know more than everyone else.

They are known for something considerably stranger:

They are almost always ready to release.

While neighboring kingdoms accumulate mountains of unfinished work, endless approval rituals, sacred review ceremonies, monumental backlogs, heroic integration campaigns, and emergency stabilization seasons, the Releasable Kingdom quietly delivers another small improvement before anyone notices.

To outsiders this appears suspiciously effortless.

It is anything but.

The kingdom is built upon disciplines that look disappointingly ordinary: keeping work small, testing continuously, integrating relentlessly, listening carefully, simplifying fearlessly, and treating software not as something that is eventually completed, but as something that is continuously becoming.

This way of working constantly collides with the customs of the surrounding realms.

Messengers arrive carrying magnificent plans.

Inspectors demand ceremonies.

Guild masters defend traditions.

Constructs enthusiastically automate misunderstandings.

Magistrates invent ever more elaborate governance.

And somewhere, usually on the edge of the story, an old Witch quietly observes the consequences before explaining why everything happened exactly as it did.

The Chronicles follow these encounters.

Each tale explores one habit, one belief, or one organizational illusion that influences how people build software — and, by extension, how they build organizations.

There are no villains.

Only incentives.

No magic bullets.

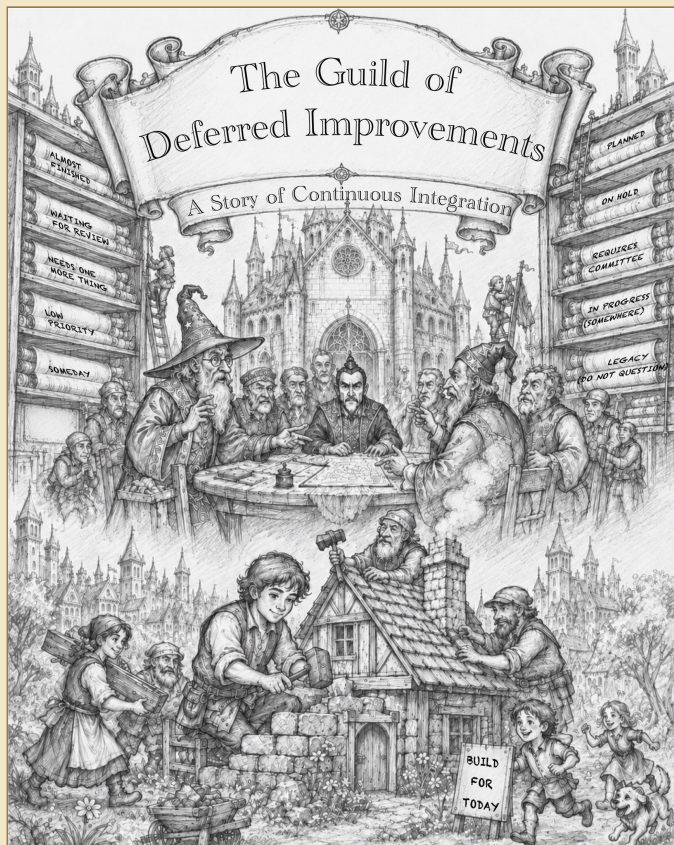
Only trade-offs.

No final victory.

Only the continuous practice of becoming a little better than yesterday.

“Because in the Releasable Kingdom, software is never truly finished.”

It is simply always close enough to help someone today.



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The Guild of Deferred Improvements



n **The Indifferent Realms** , where mountains occasionally decided to settle a few yards to the left, provided nobody was paying particularly close attention, there existed a most peculiar guild.

It was known as the **Guild of Deferred Improvements**.

Its guild hall was enormous.

Not because much was accomplished there.

But because unfinished work was stored there.

Every craftsman joining the guild received a wheelbarrow.

Not for building materials.

For good intentions.

Remarkably, they turned out to be exactly the right size.

It was soon discovered that good intentions were considerably bulkier than bricks.

Inside, endless shelves stretched into the distance, each carefully labelled:

“Almost Finished.”

“Ready for Review.”

“Waiting for Gerald.”

“Just One More Thing.”

“It Should Probably Work.”

The shelves disappeared somewhere into the haze of the hall, so far away that learned scholars seriously debated whether they still occupied the same room or merely represented the natural expansion of human optimism.

Guildmaster Harnock was exceedingly proud of this.

“No one,” he would often proclaim, “examines craftsmanship more thoroughly than we do.”

Visitors were shown magnificent blueprints.

Meticulously detailed drawings.

Exhaustive specifications.

Elegant discussions.

Committees devoted entirely to deciding the appropriate colour of future roof tiles.

Only one thing puzzled the visitors.

There were remarkably few houses standing outside.



One autumn morning, a young apprentice joined the guild.

He possessed little experience.

A perfectly ordinary hammer.

And a most unfortunate habit.

Whenever he finished a brick, he carried it straight to the building site.

Another mason laid the next one.

A carpenter fitted a beam.

The roofer noticed something was crooked.

Someone straightened it.

And the house grew.

The Guild regarded this behaviour with the deepest suspicion.

“You cannot simply bring your work together with everyone else’s immediately!” cried Guildmaster Harnock in horror.

“What if someone discovers a mistake?”

The apprentice blinked.

“That is rather the point.”

The hall fell silent.

An elderly master builder quietly fainted.



The Guild therefore convened a Review Committee.

After lengthy deliberations, the committee concluded that immediate construction was extremely dangerous.

After all, mistakes might become visible.

Mistakes neatly stored away in the warehouse caused considerably less excitement.

Besides, no customer had ever complained about a house that had never been built.



Months passed.

The apprentice's little cottage had long since been finished.

Children played outside.

Smoke rose from the chimney.

The rain remained reliably outdoors.

People lived there.

Meanwhile, the Guild ceremoniously opened the four hundred and seventy-third review of the Perfect House.

It had never seen its first stone laid.

Yet everyone agreed it would become the finest house never built.



Eventually, the town asked an old witch to settle the dispute.

Witches possessed the rather inconvenient habit of ignoring complicated explanations and observing what actually happened instead.

She looked at both master builders.

She looked at the little cottage where people lived.

She looked at the vast warehouse filled with unfinished work.

Then she thoughtfully scratched her chin.

“You know,” she said at last, “houses are rather peculiar things.”

Everyone leaned forward.

“They only tell you they don’t fit together...”

A brief pause.

“... after you’ve tried putting them together.”

She tapped the apprentice’s hammer with one finger.

“Wood doesn’t negotiate with blueprints.”

Then she tapped one of the bricks.

“And stone couldn’t care less how long your committees have been meeting.”

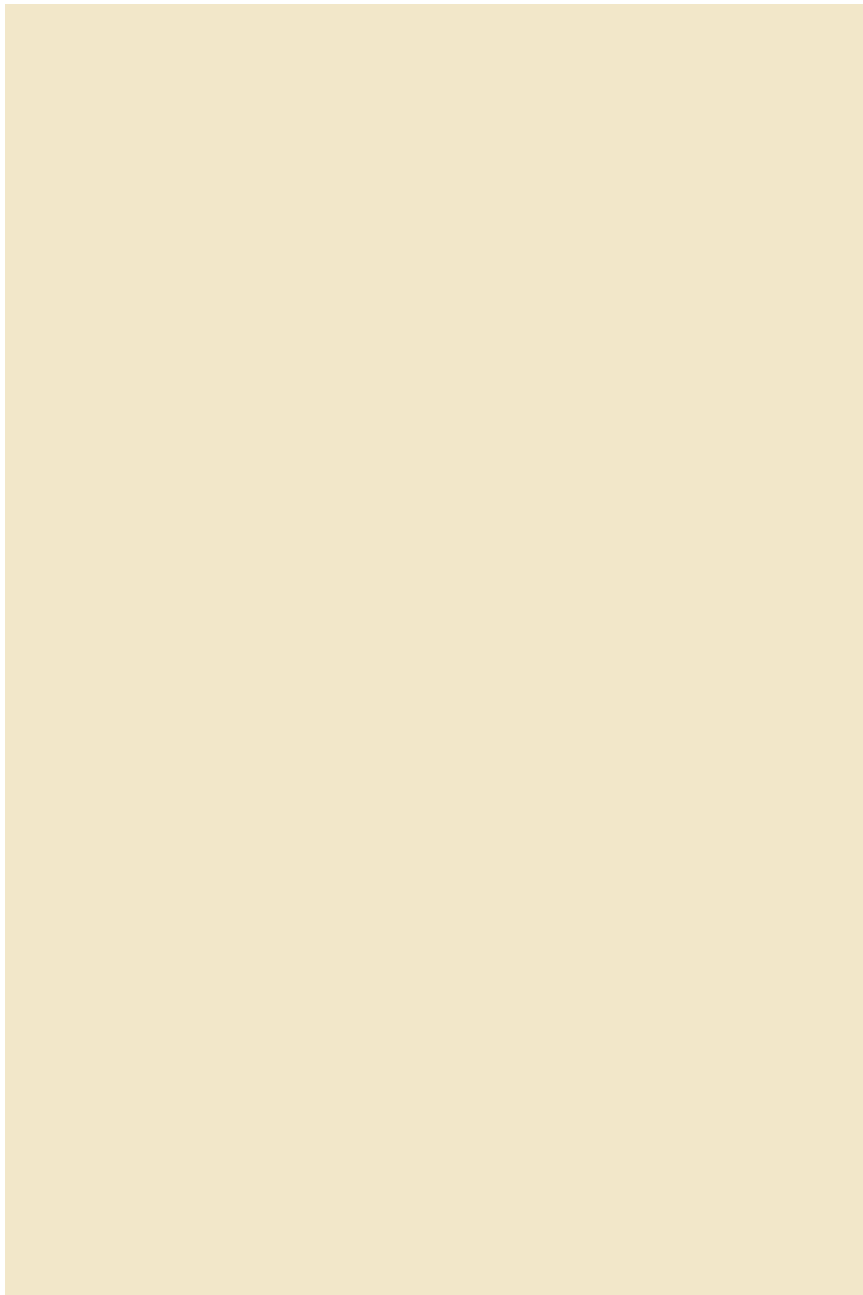
At last she smiled the smile of a woman who had spent an entire lifetime watching exceptionally intelligent people walk straight past remarkably simple truths.

“You never discover whether things belong together by keeping them apart.”

And, as so often happens with the most important lessons, everyone eventually agreed she was obviously right.

At least until the next committee meeting.

The wheelbarrows for the good intentions were already waiting.



The Origins of the Guild of Deferred Improvements

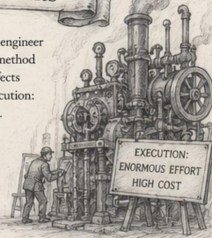


Long ago, running machines was expensive. A single defect could cost weeks of work. Reading was cheaper than execution.



MICHAEL FAGAN
~ 1976

A brilliant engineer created a method to find defects before execution: Inspection.



THE INSPECTION (as taught by Master Harnock and Michael Fagan)

No discussing. No solutions. Only find defects. Fix later.

WHY IT MADE SENSE:

- ✓ Execution expensive
- ✓ Defects found late
- ✓ Tools were slow
- ✓ Testing was hard
- ✓ Every catastrophe very costly

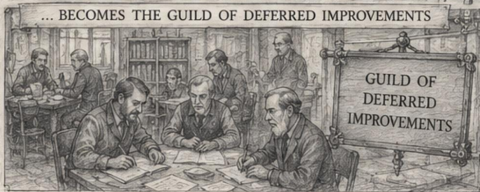


TIMES CHANGE

New tools.
Faster machines.
Automatic tests.
Execution becomes cheap.
Waiting becomes expensive.

GUILD HALL OF INSPECTORS

The intention was good.
The name remained.
The meaning changed.
Slowly.
Almost unnoticed.



... BECOMES THE GUILD OF DEFERRED IMPROVEMENTS

Not out of malice.
Not out of ignorance.
But because the solution was preserved – longer than the problem it was created to solve.



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The Origins of the Guild of Deferred Improvements



mong the oldest scrolls preserved in the libraries of the **Indiffer-**
ent Realms lies a curious account of a man historians cannot
quite agree upon.

Some insist his name was **Michael Fagan**.

Others are equally convinced it was **Master Harnock**.

Scholars have argued over this for generations.

The Witch, naturally, claims they are both correct, though never at the
same time.

What everyone agrees upon is this:

He lived in an age when **executing a machine cost vastly more than**
understanding it.

The great mechanical engines of those days were magnificent, terrifying things. Preparing one for operation required enormous effort. Coal disappeared by the wagonload. Entire workshops stood still while craftsmen adjusted gears measured not merely in teeth, but in optimism.

A single overlooked mistake could consume weeks of work.

Two could empty a treasury.

Three were considered a strong argument for becoming a shepherd instead.

Master Harnock looked upon this situation and reached a conclusion that nobody has seriously disputed in the centuries since.

"If running the machine is expensive," he declared, "then reading the plans first is simply good engineering."

The Witch, who had already been old enough to remember several previous definitions of "modern technology," nodded approvingly.

"Reading," she observed, "is considerably cheaper than rebuilding."

Thus was founded the **Guild of Inspectors**.

Its purpose was remarkably disciplined.

One craftsman explained the design.

Another read every drawing aloud.

Several others searched only for defects.

No one debated solutions.

No one redesigned the machine.

No one discussed architecture.

The Guild sought evidence only of things likely to fail before anyone dared awaken the engine itself.

The method spread across the realms because it worked.

Wonderfully.

Kingdoms saved fortunes.

Catastrophes were avoided.

Master Harnock's inspection became legendary.

Apprentices memorised his First Principle.

When execution is expensive, inspection is wisdom.

For many years, nobody found a better idea.

Not even the Witch.

Then the world quietly changed.

Engineers built miniature proving engines.

Mechanisms that tested themselves.

Small experiments before large experiments.

Automatic measuring devices.

Mechanical guardians that refused to proceed when something looked suspicious.

Soon every component could be proven long before it reached the great engine.

Eventually the great engines themselves became surprisingly inexpensive to awaken.

They started every afternoon.

Then every morning.

Eventually several times before lunch.

Running the machine became almost effortless.

Waiting for permission did not.

The Witch noticed immediately.

“The economics,” she murmured, “have changed.”

She visited the Guild.

“Perhaps,” she suggested gently, “Master Harnock’s wisdom should be applied again.”

The Inspectors were delighted.

They admired Master Harnock tremendously.

They therefore organised a committee dedicated to preserving his teachings exactly as he had intended.

It spent several years reviewing previous interpretations of Master Harnock’s intentions.

Its conclusions were unanimously accepted.

Nothing else happened.

Generations passed.

The rituals remained.

The name remained.

Only the assumptions quietly disappeared.

Young craftsmen continued waiting outside the Guild Hall before every machine could be started—even though each mechanism had already proven itself hundreds of times upon smaller engines.

Curiously, the inspections themselves were no longer without value.

Far from it.

Inspectors became familiar with distant workshops.

They learned new techniques.

They recognised elegant craftsmanship.

They spread knowledge.

They welcomed apprentices into unfamiliar parts of the realm.

Without anyone consciously deciding so, inspection had quietly acquired an entirely different purpose.

It no longer answered the question,

“Will this machine work?”

The machines had become remarkably good at answering that themselves.

Instead, it answered another.

“Do we, together, understand this machine?”

It was an excellent question.

Simply not the one the Guild still believed it was asking.

Language, unfortunately, is much slower to evolve than engineering.

The word **inspection** survived.

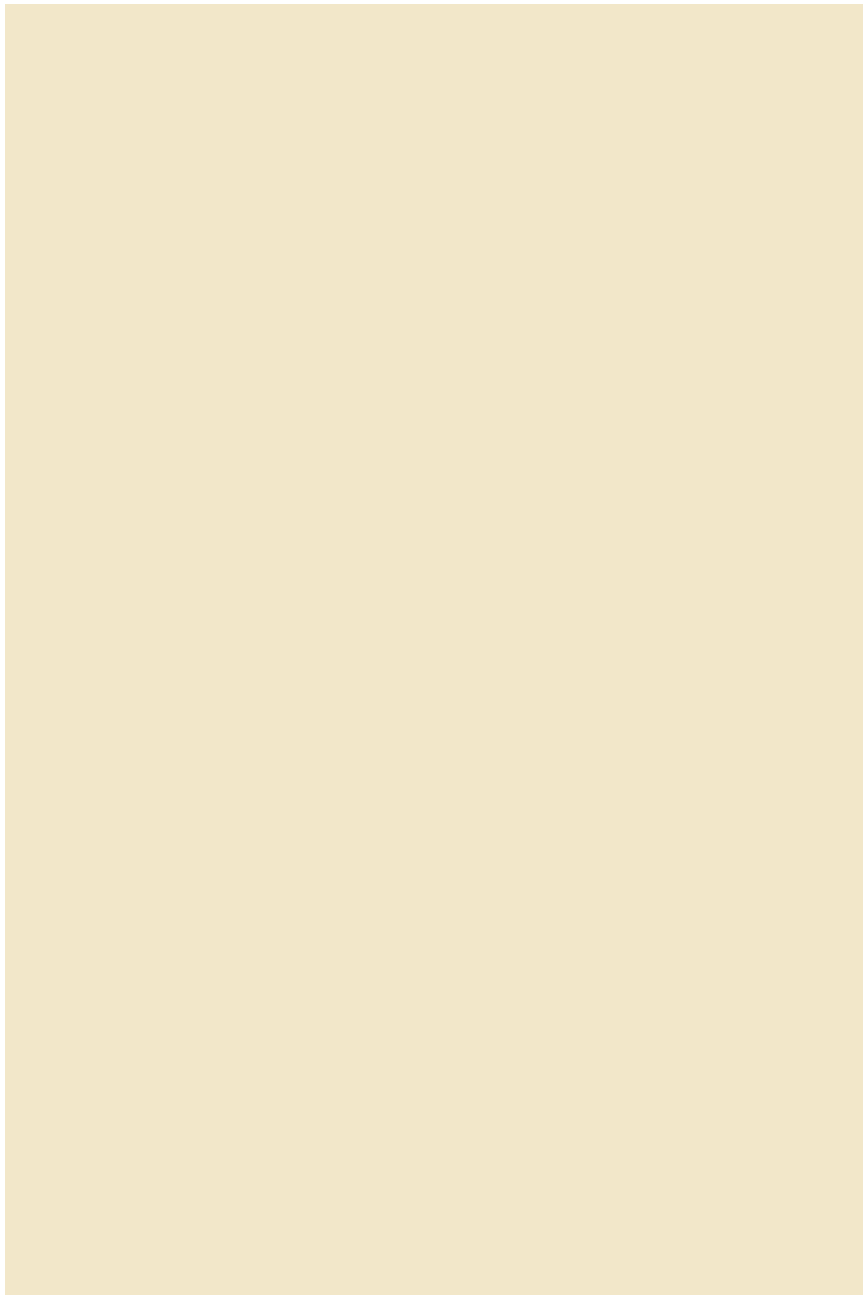
Its meaning slowly wandered elsewhere.

And so, with no villains, no conspiracies and certainly no lack of good intentions, the noble **Guild of Inspectors** , founded upon the genuinely brilliant ideas of Master Harnock—known in some ancient chronicles as Michael Fagan—gradually became known throughout the Indifferent Realms by another name.

The Guild of Deferred Improvements.

Not because its members misunderstood the past.

But because they remembered the method more faithfully than the reason it had been invented.



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The Witch

"The people of the Indifferent Realms feared witches. Mostly because witches had an unfortunate tendency to be right."



he Witch lived far beyond the villages.

Not because she disliked people.

Because people found it considerably easier to ignore inconvenient truths when they had to walk several hours to hear them.

Her cottage stood in the middle of an ancient forest.

Nobody knew how old it was.

The cottage, that is.

The Witch considered questions about her own age to be unnecessarily personal.



She possessed no crystal ball.

Crystal balls, she explained, merely reflected the expectations of whoever looked into them.

Entire kingdoms had been governed that way.

With disappointing results.

Instead she owned something far more dangerous.

A notebook.

It contained observations.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

The villagers believed she could predict the future.

She patiently corrected them every single time.

“I do not predict.”

“I observe.”

“Reality is surprisingly repetitive.”

She knew which herbs cured fever.

Not because the Moon had whispered their names.

Because she had tried the wrong herbs often enough to stop arguing with reality.



She knew which bridges would collapse.

Because she walked across them.



She knew which harvests would fail.

Because she counted insects instead of prayers.



She knew which kings would eventually lose their kingdoms.

Because they had begun believing reports instead of evidence.



Children loved visiting her.

Adults usually did not.

Children asked questions.

Adults preferred answers.

Especially the reassuring kind.

_____  _____

The Witch never claimed certainty.

She merely accumulated evidence until uncertainty became expensive to ignore.

_____  _____

She had an irritating habit.

Whenever someone confidently declared,

“This has always worked.”

she would quietly ask,

“How do you know?”

Entire political careers had ended that way.

_____  _____

Her greatest enemy was not ignorance.

Ignorance could learn.

Her greatest enemy was certainty without evidence.

It looked almost identical to wisdom.

From a safe distance.

Unlike the scholars of the Great Academy, she published no grand theories.

She simply wrote down what happened.

Then she tried again.

Then she changed her mind whenever reality disagreed.

This earned her a rather unfortunate reputation for inconsistency.

She considered it progress.

People called her strange.

Mostly because she was willing to abandon ideas that no longer worked.

Tradition regarded this as suspicious behavior.

Her reputation

Children whispered she could speak with ravens.

She could.

Ravens were excellent observers.

Far better than ministers.



The Guildmasters insisted she practiced dangerous magic.

She insisted they practiced dangerous assumptions.

Neither side entirely trusted the other.

History suggested she had the stronger position.



When someone asked whether she believed in magic, she smiled.

“Of course.”

“But I have yet to meet any that survives careful measurement.”



Her role in the Chronicles

If the Librarian preserves knowledge...

If Master Harnock preserves tradition...

If the Magistrate preserves process...

If the King preserves order...

...then the Witch preserves **reality**.

She cannot be bribed.

She cannot be convinced.

She cannot be promoted.

Reality never promoted anyone.

It merely allowed them to continue being correct.



What she represents

The Witch is the spirit of empirical software engineering.

She represents:

- * Continuous experimentation over opinion.
- * Feedback over prediction.
- * Measurement over reporting.
- * Scientific thinking over authority.
- * Small experiments over grand plans.
- * Curiosity over certainty.

* Learning over being right.

* Reality over narrative.

She is the only recurring character who never argues from status.

She argues from evidence.

Which, in the Indifferent Realms, is considered a rather unsettling form of magic.

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Master Harnock

"Tradition had many guardians. Few guarded it as diligently as Master Harnock."



Master Harnock had led the Guild of Deferred Improvements for thirty-seven years.

Nobody remembered exactly when he had become Guildmaster.

Some believed he had simply always been there.

Like the great oak table.

Or the leak in the roof that everyone had agreed would eventually become someone else's responsibility.

He was a large man.

Not merely in body.

In presence.

When Harnock entered a room, conversations stood up.

His beard had once been black.

It now possessed the distinguished grey of someone who had spent decades being proven correct often enough to stop questioning himself.

He wore the ceremonial apron of the Master Craftsmen.

It contained remarkably few stains.

This was generally considered evidence of great experience.



His greatest virtue

Harnock genuinely cared.

He wanted apprentices to become excellent craftsmen.

He despised sloppy work.

He hated broken promises.

He believed a craftsman should sign every creation with pride.

He had thrown more than one careless journeyman out of the guild for delivering poor workmanship.

Nobody doubted his integrity.

Least of all Harnock himself.



His greatest weakness

He believed certainty could be manufactured.

Whenever uncertainty appeared...

...he demanded another approval.

Another inspection.

Another committee.

Another planning meeting.

Another document.

Another signature.

Another shelf.

He never called this delay.

He called it responsibility.

To him these were indistinguishable.



His philosophy

Master Harnock often said:

*“A masterpiece is not finished when it works.
It is finished when no respectable person can object to it.”*

Unfortunately...

there was always someone respectable.

He firmly believed large undertakings deserved long preparation.

Small changes felt irresponsible.

If something was important...
surely it should take months.

Possibly years.

Otherwise how important could it truly be?

His relationship with progress

Harnock admired innovation.

In principle.

Provided it had first become tradition.

He had once approved a revolutionary new hammer.

Twenty-three years after everyone else had begun using it.

He considered this prudent.



His relationship with apprentices

He was surprisingly patient.

He could teach a novice to sharpen chisels for hours.

He knew every traditional technique.

He could identify poor craftsmanship by sound alone.

Young craftsmen respected him.

Many even loved him.

Until they suggested changing something.



His blind spot

Master Harnock never confused activity with laziness.

He confused activity with progress.

He believed unfinished work accumulated value.

He believed careful planning reduced risk.

He believed large releases demonstrated importance.

He believed quality emerged from inspection.

Not because he was foolish.

Because every success of his youth had appeared to confirm exactly those beliefs.

The world had changed.

His philosophy had not.

His relationship with the Apprentice

The Apprentice fascinated Harnock.

The boy worked differently.

He finished one tiny thing before starting another.

He tested everything immediately.

He carried almost no unfinished work.

He feared complexity more than speed.

Harnock mistook this for impatience.

The Apprentice mistook Harnock's methods for unnecessary ceremony.

Neither considered the other unintelligent.

Only mistaken.

Which made every conversation remarkably polite.

And completely unproductive.



What Harnock represents

Within *The Chronicles of the Releasable Kingdom* , Master Harnock embodies a recurring archetype:

- The honorable traditionalist.
- The experienced manager.
- The protector of process.
- The craftsman who mistakes certainty for quality.
- The leader who believes risk is reduced by delaying decisions.
- The sincere believer that enough review can compensate for a lack of continuous feedback.

He is never malicious.

He is often admirable.

He is usually wrong.

And because he acts from integrity rather than vanity, he remains sympathetic even when his decisions create absurd consequences.

Stefan Ellersdorfer is the author of *The Effective Software Engineer* and a Managing Partner at Smarter Software, a software engineering consultancy specializing in sustainable software delivery, technical excellence, and organizational effectiveness.



Despite his leadership role, Stefan continues to work hands-on with software engineers, architects, and product teams every day. He deliberately stays close to practical software engineering—pair programming, software architecture, facilitating technical decision-making, and supporting teams in real-world software delivery.

This continuous practical involvement ensures that his perspective as an author and consultant is grounded in lived experience rather than theory alone.

His work is strongly influenced by modern engineering practices such as Test-Driven Development, Continuous Delivery, and socio-technical systems thinking.

Drawing on experience from both highly regulated enterprise environments and fast-moving product organizations, Stefan focuses on what enables software teams to build systems that are not only correct, but also easy to change, resilient over time, and enjoyable for the people who build and maintain them.

The Indifferent Realms reflects that perspective through satire: pragmatic, experience-based, and written from within the realities of software engineering—not from a safe distance.

