The Colour of Magic

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PROLOGUE

In a distant and second-hand set of dimensions, in an astral plane that was never meant to fly, the curling star-mists waver and part . . .

See . . .

Great A'Tuin the turtle comes, swimming slowly through the interstellar gulf, hydrogen frost on his ponderous limbs, his huge and ancient shell pocked With meteor craters. Through sea-sized eyes that are crusted with rheum and asteroid dust He stares fixedly at the Destination.

In a brain bigger than a city, with geological Slowness, He thinks only of the Weight.

Most of the weight is of course accounted for by Berilia, Tubul, Great T'Phon and Jerakeen, the four giant elephants upon whose broad and startanned shoulders the disc of the World rests, garlanded by the long waterfall at its vast circumference and domed by the baby-blue vault of Heaven.

Astropsychology has been, as yet, unable to establish what they think about.

The Great Turtle was a mere hypothesis until the day the small and secretive kingdom of Krull, whose rim-most mountains project out over the Rimfall, built a gantry 'and pulley arrangement at the tip of the most precipitous crag and lowered several oBservers over the Edge in a quartzwindowed brass vessel to peer through the mist veils.

The early astrozoologists, hauled back from theiR long dangle by enormous teams of slaves, were able to bring back much information about the

shape and nature of A'Tuin and the elephants but this did not resolve fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of the universe.

For example, what was Atuin's actual sex? This vital question, said the Astrozoologists with mounting authority, would not be answered until a larger and more powerful gantry was constructed for a deep-space vessel. In the meantime they could only speculate about the revealed cosmos.

There was, for example, the theory that A'Tuin had come from nowhere and would continue at a uniform crawl, or steady gait, into nowhere, for all time. This theory was popular among academics.

An alternative, favoured by those of a religiOUS persuasion, was that A'Tuin was crawling from the Birthplace to the Time of Mating, as were all the stars in the sky which were, obviously, also carried by giant turtles. When they arrived they would briefly and passionately mate, for the first and only time, and from that fiery union new turtles would be born to carry a new pattern of worlds. This was known as the Big Bang hypothesis.

Thus it was that a young cosmochelonian of the Steady Gait faction, testing a new telescope with which he hoped to make measurements of the precise albedo of Great A'Tuin's right eye, was on this eventful evening the first outsider to see the smoke rise hubward from the burning of the oldeSt city in the world.

Later that night he became so engrossed in his studies he completely forgot about it. Nevertheless, he was the first.

There were others . . .

THE COLOUR OF MAGIC

Fire roared through the bifurcated city of AnkhMorpork. Where it licked the Wizards' Quarter it burned blue and green and was even laced with strange sparks of the eighth

colour, octarine; where its outriders found their way into the vats and oil stores all along Merchants Street it progressed in a serieS of blazing fountainS and explosions; in the Streets of the perfume blenders it burned with a sweetness; where it touched bundles of rare and dry herbs in the storerooms of the drugmasters it made men go mad and talk to God.

By now' the whole of downtown Morpork was alight, and the richer and worthier citizens of Ankh on the far bank were bravely responding to the situation by feverishly demolishing the bridges.

But already the ships in the Morpork docks - laden with grain, cotton and timber, and coated with tar - were blazing merrily and, their moorings burnt to ashes, were breasting the river Ankh on the ebb tide, igniting riverside palaces and bowers as they drifted like drowning fireflies towards the sea. In any case, sparks were riding the breeze and touching down far across the river in hidden gardens and remote rickyards. The smoke from the merry burning rose miles high, in a wind-sculpted black column 'that could be seen across the whole of the discworld.

It was certainly impressive from the cool, dark hilltop a few leagues away, where two figures were watching with considerable interest.

The taller of the pair was chewing on a chicken leg and leaning on a sword that was only Marginally shorter than the average man. If it wasn't for the air of wary intelligence about him it might have been supposed that he was a barbarian from the hubland wastes.

His partner was much shorter and wrapped from head to toe in a brown cloak. Later, when he has occasion to move, it will be seen that he moves lightly, cat-like.

The two had barely exchanged a word in the last twenty minutes except for a short and inconclusive argument as to whether a particularly powerful explosion had been the oil bond store or the workshop of Kerible the Enchanter. Money hinged on the fact.

Now the big man finished gnawing at the bone and tossed it into the grass, smiling ruefully.

"There go all those little alleyways,' he said. "I liked them.' "All the treasure houses,' said the small man. He added thoughtfully, "Do gems burn, I wonder? 'Tis said they're kin to coal.' "All the gold, melting and running down the gutters,' said the big one, ignoring him. "And all the wine, boiling in the barrels.' "There were rats,' said his brown companion.

"Rats, I'll grant you.' 'it was no place to be in high summer.' "That, too. One can't help feeling, though, a well, a momentary-' He trailed off, then brightened. "We owed old Fredor at the Crimson Leech eight silver pieces,' he added. The little man nodded.

They were silent for a while as a whole new series of explosions carved a red line across a hitherto dark section of the greatest city in the world. Then the big man stirred "Weasel?' "Yes?' "I wonder who started it?' The small swordsman known as the Weasel said nothing. He was watching the road in the ruddy light. Few had come that way since the widershins gate had been one of the first to colapse in a shower of white-hot embers.

But two were coming up it now. The Weasel's eyes always at their sharpest in gloom and halflight, made out the shapes of two mounted men and some sort of low beast behind them. Doubtless a rich merchant escaping with as much treasure as he could lay frantic hands on. The Weasel said as much to his companion, who sighed.

"The status of footpad ill suits us,' said the barbarian, "but as you say, times are hard and there are no soft beds tonight.' He shifted his grip on his sword and, as the leading rider drew near, stepped out onto the road with a hand held up and his face set in a grin nicely calculated to reassure yet threaten.

"Your pardon, sir-' he began.

The rider reined in his horse and drew back his hood. The big man looked into a face blotched with superficial burns and punctuated by tufts of singed beard. Even the eyebrows had gone.

"Bugger off,' said the face. "You're Bravd the Hublander, aren't you?' *The shape and cosmology of the disc system are perhaps worthy of note at this point.

There are, of course, two major directions on the diSC: Hubward and Rimward. But since the disc itself revolves at the rate of once every eight hundred days (in order to distribute the weight fairly upon its supportive pachyderms, according to Reforgule of Krull) there are also two lesser directions, which are Turnwise and Widdershins.

Since the disc's tiny orbiting sunlet maintains a fixed orbit while the majestic disc turns slowly beneath it, it will be readily deduced that a disc year consists of not four but eight seasons. The summers are those times when the sun rises or sets at the nearest point on the Rim, the winters those occasions when it rises or sets at a point around ninety degrees along the circumference.

Thus, in the lands around the Circle Sea, the year begins on Hogs' Watch Night, progresses through a Spring Prime to its first midsummer (Small Gods' Eve) which is followed by Autumn Prime and, straddling the half-year point of Crueltide, Winter Secundus (also known as the Spindlewinter, since at this time the sun rises in the direction of spin). Then comes Secundus Spring with Summer Two on its heels, the three quarter mark of the year being the night of Alls Fallow - the one night of the year, according to legend, when witches and warlocks stay in bed. Then drifting leaves and frosty nights drag on towards Backspindlewinter and a new Hogs' Watch Night nestling like a frozen jewel at its heart.

Since the Hub is never closely warmed by the weak sun the lands there are locked in permafrost. The Rim, on the other hand, is a region of sunny islands and balmy days There are, of course, eight days in a disc week and eight colours in its light spectrum.

Eight is a number of some considerable occult significance on the disc and must never, ever, be spoken by a wizard.

Precisely why all the above should be so is not clear, but goes some way to explain why, on the disc, the Gods are not so much worshipped as blamed.

Bravd became aware that he had fumbled the initiatiVe.

"Just go away, will you?' said the rider. 'I just haven't got time for you, do you understand?' He looked around and added: "That goes for your shadow-loving fleabag partner too, wherever he's hiding.' The Weasel stepped up to the horse and peered at the dishevelled figure.

'Why, it's Rincewind the wizard, isn't it?' he said in tones of delight, meanwhile filing the wizard's description of him in his memory for leisurely vengeance. 'I thought I recognized the voice.' Bravd spat and sheathed his sword. It was seldom worth tangling with wizards, they so rarely had any treasure worth speaking of.

"he talks pretty big for a gutter wizard,' he muttered.

"You don't understand at all,' said the wizard wearily. "I'm so scared of you my spine has turned to jelly, it's just that I'm suffering from an overdose of terror right now. I mean, when I've got over that then I'll have time to be decently frightened of you.' The Weasel pointed towards the burning city.

'You've been through that?' he asked.

The wizard rubbed a red'-raw hand across his eyes. 'i was there when it started. See him? Back there?' He pointed back down the road to where his travelling companion was still approaching, having adopted a method of riding that involved falling out of the saddle every few seconds.

'Well?' said Weasel.

"he started it,' said Rincewind simply.

Bravd and Weasel looked at the figure, now hopping across the road with one foot in a stirrup.

"Fire-raiser, is he?' said Bravd at last.

'No,' said Rincewind. "Not precisely. Let's just say that if complete and utter chaos was lightning, then he'd be the sort to stand on a hilltop in a thunderstorm wearing wet copper armour and Shouting "All gods are bastards". Got any food?' "There's some chicken,' said Weasel. "in exchange for a story.' "What's his name?' said Bravd, who tended to lag behind in conversations.

' Twoflower . ' "Twoflower?' said Bravd. "What a funny name.' `You,' said' Rincewind, dismounting, "do not know the half of it. Chicken, you say?' "Devilled,' said Weasel. The wizard groaned.

'That reminds me,' added the Weasel, snapping hiS fingers, "there was a really big explosion about, oh, half an hour ago' 'That was the oil bond store going up,' said Rincewind, wincing at the memory of the burning rain.

Weasel turned and grinned expectantly at his companion, who grunted and handed over a coin from his pouch. Then there was a Scream from the roadway, cut off abruptly. Rincewind did not look up from his chicken.

"one of the things he can't do, he can't ride a horse,' he said. Then he stiffened as if sandbagged by a sudden recollection, gave a small yelp of terror and dashed into the gloom. When he returned, the being called Twoflower was hanging limply over his

shoulder. It was small and skinny, and dressed very oddly in a pair of knee length britches and a shirt in such a violent and vivid conflict of colours that Weasel's fastidious eye was offended even in the half-light.

"No bones broken, by the feel of things,' said Rincewind. He was breathing heavily. Bravd winked at the Weasel and went to investigate the shape that they assumed was a pack animal.

'You'd be wise to forget it,' said the wizard, without looking up from his examination of the unconscious Twoflower. "Believe me. A power protects it.' "A spell?' said Weasel, squatting down.

'No-oo. 'But magic of a kind, I think. Not the usual sort. I mean, it can turn gold into copper while at the same time it is still gold, it makes men rich by destroying their possessions, it allows the weak to walk fearlessly among thieves, it passes through the strongest doors to leach the most protected treasuries. Even now it has me enslaved - so that I must follow this madman willynilly and protect him from harm. It's stronger than you, Bravd. It is, I think, more cunning even than you, Weasel.' "What is it called then, this mighty magic?' Rincewind shrugged. "in our tongue it is reflected-sound-as-of-underground-spirits. Is there any wine?' "You must know that I am not without artifice where magic is concerned,' said Weasel. "only last year did i- assisted by my friend there - part the notoriously powerful Archmage of Ymitury from his staff, his belt of moon jewels and his life, in that approximate order. I do not fear this reflectedsound-of-underground-spirits of which you speak.

However,' he added, "you engage my interest.

Perhaps you would care to tell me more?' Bravd looked at the shape on the road. It was closer now, and clearer in the pre-dawn light. It looked for all the world like a"A box on legs?' he said.

"i'll tell you about it,' said Rincewind. "if there's any wine, that is.' Down in the valley there was a roar and a hiss.

Someone more thoughtful than the rest had ordered to be shut the big river gates that were at the point where the Ankh flowed out of the twin city. Denied its usual egress, the river had burst its banks and was pouring down the fire-ravaged streets. Soon the continent of flame became a series of islands, each one growing smaller as the dark tide rose.

And up from the city of fumes and smoke rose a broiling cloud of steam, covering the stars. Weasel thought that it looked like some dark fungus or mushroom.

The twin city of proud Ankh and pestilent Morpork, of which all the other cities of time and space are, as it were, mere reflections, has stood many asSaults in its long and crowded history and has always risen to flourish again. So the fire and its Subsequent flood, which destroyed everything left that was not flammable and added a particularly noisome flux to the survivors' problems, did not mark its end. Rather it was a fiery punctuation mark, a coal-like comma, or salamander semicolon, in a continuing story.

Several days before these events a ship came up the Ankh on the dawn tide and fetched up, among many others, in the maze of wharves and docks on the Morpork shore. It carried a cargo of pink pearls, milk-nuts, pumice, some official letters for the Patrician of Ankh, and a man.

It was the man who engaged the attention of Blind Hugh, one of the beggars on early duty at Pearl Dock. He nudged Cripple Wa in the ribs, and pointed wordlessly.

Now the stranger was standing on the quayside watching several straining seamen carry a large brass-bound chest down the gangplank. Another man, obviously the captain, was standing beside him. There was about the seaman - every nerve in Blind Hugh's body,

which tended to vibrate in the presence of even a small amount of impure gold at fifty paces, screamed into his brain - the air of one anticipating imminent enrichment.

Sure enough, when the chest had been deposited on the cobbles, the stranger reached into a pouch and there was the flash of a coin. Several coins Gold. Blind Hugh, his body twanging like a hazel rod in the presence of water, whistled to himself.

Then he nudged Wa again, and sent him scurrying off down a nearby alley into the heart of the city.

When the captain walked back onto his ship, leaving the newcomer looking faintly bewildered on the quayside, Blind Hugh snatched up his begging cup and made his way across the street with an ingratiating leer. At the sight of him the stranger started to fumble urgently with his money pouch.

"Good day to thee, sire,' Blind Hugh began, and found himself looking up into a face with four eyes in it. He turned to run! "!' said the stranger, and grabbed his arm. Hugh was aware that the sailors lining the rail of the ship were laughing at him. At the same time his specialised senses detected an overpowering impression of money. He froze. The stranger let go and quickly thumbed through a small black book he had taken from his belt. Then he said "Hallo.' "What?' said Hugh. The man looked blank.

"Hallo?' he repeated, rather louder than necessary and so carefully that Hugh could hear the vowels tinkling into place.

"Hallo yourself,' Hugh riposted. The stranger smiled widely fumbled yet again in the pouch. This time his hand came out holding a large gold coin. It was in fact slightly larger than an 8,000-dollar Ankhian crown and the design on it was unfamiliar, but it spoke inside Hugh's mind in a language he understood perfectly. My current owner, it said, is in need of succour and assistance; why not give it to him, so you and me can go

off somewhere and enjoy ourselves? Subtle changes in the beggar's posture made the stranger feel more at ease. He consulted the small book again.

"i wish to be directed to an hotel, tavern, lodging house, inn, hospice, caravanserai,' he said.

'What, all of them?' said Hugh, taken aback.

"?' said the stranger.

Hugh was aware that a small crowd of fishwives, shellfish diggers and freelance gawpers were watching them with interest.

"look,' he said, "i know a good tavern, is that enough?' He shuddered to think of the gold coin escaping from his life. He'd keep that one, even if Ymor confiscated all the rest. And the big chest that comprised most of the newcomer's luggage looked to be full of gold, Hugh decided.

The four-eyed man looked at his book.

I would like to be directed to an hotel, place of repose, tavern, a-' "yes, all right. Come on then,' said Hugh hurriedly.

He picked up one of the bundles and walked away quickly. The stranger, after a moment's hesitation, strolled after him.

A train of thought shunted its way through Hugh's mind. Getting the newcomer to the Broken Drum so easily was a stroke of luck, no doubt of it, and Ymor would probably reward him. But for all his new acquaintance's mildness there was something about him that made Hugh uneasy, and for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it was.

Not the two extra eyes, odd though they were.

There was something else. He glanced back.

The little man was ambling along in the middle of the street, looking around him with an expression of keen interest.

Something else Hugh saw nearly made him gibber.

The massive wooden chest, which he had last seen resting solidly on the quayside, was following on its master's heels with a gentle rocking gait.

Slowly, in case a sudden movement on his part might break his fragile control over his own legs, Hugh bent slightly so that he could see under the chest.

There were lots and lots of little legs.

Very deliberately, Hugh turned around and walked very carefully towards the Broken Drum.

"Odd,' said Ymor.

"He had this big wooden chest,' added Cripple Wa.

'He'd have to be a merchant or a spy,' said Ymor.

He pulled a scrap of meat from the cutlet in his hand and tossed it into the air. It hadn't reached the zenith of its arc ,before a black shape detached itself from the shadows in the corner of the room and swooped down, taking the morsel in mid-air.

"A merchant or a spy,' repeated Ymor. "i'd prefer a spy. A spy pays for himself twice, because there's always the reward when we turn him in. What do you think, Withel?' Opposite Ymor the second greatest thief in Ankhmorpork half-closed his one eye and shrugged.

"i've checked on the ship,' he said. "it's a freelance trader. Does the occasional run to the Brown islands. People there are just savages. They don't understand about spies and I expect they eat merchants . ' "He looked a bit like a merchant,' volunteered Wa. "Except he wasn't fat.' There was a flutter of wings at the window. Ymor shifted his bulk out of the chair and crossed the room, coming back with a large raven. After he'd unfastened the message capsule from its leg it flew to join its fellows lurking among the rafters.

Withel regarded it without love. Ymor's ravens were notoriously loyal to their master, to the extent that Withel's one attempt to promote himself to the rank of greatest thief in Ankh-Morpork had cost their master's right hand man his left eye. But not his life, however. Ymor never grudged a man hiS ambitions.

"Gc?,' said Ymor, tossing the little phial aside and unrolling the tiny scroll within.

"Gorrin the Cat,' said Withel automatically. "On station up in the gong tower at the Temple of Small GodS.' he says Hugh has taken our stranger to the Broken Drum. Well, that's good enough. Broadman is a - friend of ours, isn't he?' 'Aye,' said Withel. "if he knows what's good for trade.' "Among his customers has been your man Gorrin,' said Ymor pleasantly, "for he writes here about a box on legs, if i read this scrawl correctly.' He looked at Withel over the top of the paper.

Withel looked away. 'He will be disciplined,' he said flatly. Wa looked at the man leaning back in his chair, his black-clad frame resting as nonchalantly as a Rimland puma on a jungle branch, and decided that Gorrin atop Small Gods temple would soon be joining those little deities in the multifold dimensions of Beyond. And he owed Wa three copper pieces.

Ymor crumpled the note and tossed it into a corner. "i think we'll wander along to the Drum later on, Withel. Perhaps, too, we may try this beer that your men find so tempting.' Withel said nothing. Being Ymor's right-hand man was like being gently flogged to death with scented bootlaces.

The twin city of Ankh-Morpork, foremost of all the cities bounding the Circle Sea, was as a matter of course the home of a large number of gangs, thieves' guilds, syndicates and similar organisations. This was one of the reasons for its wealth. Most of the humbler folk on the widdershin side of the river, in Morpork's mazy alleys, supplemented their meagre incomes by filling some small role for one or other of the competing gangs. So it was that by the time Hugh and Twoflower entered the courtyard of the Broken Drum the leaders of a number of them were aware that someone had arrived in the city who appeared to have much treasure. Some reports from the more observant spies included details about a book that told the stranger what to say, and a box that walked by itself. These facts were immediately discounted. No magician capable of such enchantments ever came within a mile of Morpork docks.

It still being that hour when most of the city was just rising or about to go to bed there were few people in the Drum to watch Twoflower descend the stairs. When the Luggage appeared behind him and started to lurch confidently down the steps the customers at the rough wooden tables, as one man, looked suspiciously at their drinks.

Broadman was browbeating the small troll who swept the bar when the trio walked past him. "What in hell's that?' he said.

"Just don't talk about it,' hissed Hugh. Twoflower was already thumbing through his book.

'What's he doing?' said Broadman, arms akimbo.

"it tells him what to say. I know it sounds ridiculous,' muttered Hugh.

"How can a book tell a man what to say?' "i wish for an accommodation, a room, lodgings, the lodging house, full board, are your rooms clean, a room with a view, what is your rate for one night?' said Twoflower in one breath.

Broadman looked at Hugh. The beggar shrugged.

"He's got plenty money,' he said.

"Tell him it's three copper pieces, then. And that Thing will have to go in the stable.' "?' said the stranger. Broadman held up three thick red fingers and the man's face was suddenly a sunny display of comprehension. He reached into his pouch and laid three large gold pieces on Broadman's palm.

Broadman stared at them. They represented about four times the worth of the Broken Drum, Staff included. He looked at Hugh. There was no help there. He looked at the stranger. He swallowed.

"Yes,' he said, in an unnaturally high voice. "And then there's meals, o'course. Uh. You understand, yes? Food. You eat. No?' He made the appropriate motions.

"Fut?' said the little man.

'Yes,' said Broadman, beginning to sweat. "Have a look in your little book, I should.' The man opened the book and ran a finger down one page. Broadman, who could read after a fashion, peered over the top of the volume. What he saw made no sense.

'Fooood,' said the stranger. "Yes. Cutlet, hash chop, stew, ragout, fricassee, mince, collops, souffle, dumpling, blancmange, sorbet, gruel, sausage, not to have a sausage, beans, without a hear, kickshaws, .jelly, jam. Giblets.' He beamed at Broadman.

"All that?' said the innkeeper weakly.

"it's just the way he talks,' said Hugh, "Don't ask me why. He just does.' All eyes in the room were watching the strangerexcept for a pair belonging to Rincewind the wizard, who was sitting in the darkest corner nursing a mug of very small beer.

He was watching the Luggage.

Watch Rincewind.

Look at him. Scrawny, like most wizards, and clad in a dark red robe on which a few mystic sigils were embroidered in tarnished sequins. Some might have taken him for a mere apprentice enchanter who had run away from his master out of defiance, boredom, fear and a lingering taste for heterosexuality. Yet around his neck was a chain bearing the bronze octagon that marked him as an alumnus of Unseen University, the high school of magic whose time-and-space transcendent campus is never precisely Here or There. Graduates were usually destined for mageship at least, but Rincewind - after an unfortunate event - had left him knowing only one spell and made a living of sorts around the town by capitalising on an innate gift for languages. He avoided work as a rule, but had a quickness of wit that put his acquaintances in mind of a bright rodent. And he knew sapient pearwood when he saw it. He was seeing it now, and didn't quite believe it.

An archmage, by dint of great effort and much expenditure of time, might eventually obtain a small staff made from the timber of the sapient peartree. It grew only on the sites of ancient magic there were probably no more than two such staffs in all the cities of the circle sea. A large chest of it . . . Rincewind tried to work it out, and decided that even if the box were crammed with star opals and sticks of auricholatum the contents would not be worth one-tenth the price of the container. A vein started to throb in his forehead.

He stood up and made his way to the triO.

"May I be of assistance?' he ventured.

"Shove off, Rincewind,' snarled Broadman.

"i only thought it might be useful to address this gentleman in his own tongue,' said the wizard gently. 'He's doing all right on his own,' said the innkeeper, but took a few steps backward.

Rincewind smiled politely at the stranger and tried a few words of Chimeran. He prided himself on his fluency in the tongue, but the stranger only looked bemused.

"it won't work,' said Hugh knowledgeably. "it's the book, you see. It tells him what to say. Magic.' Rincewind switched to High Borogravian, to Vanglemesht, Sumtri and even Black Oroogu, the language with no nouns and only one adjective, which is obscene. Each was met with polite incomprehension. In desperation he tried heathen Trob, and the little man's face split into a delighted grin.

'At last! ' he said. "My good sir! This is remarkable! ' (Although in Trob the last word in fact became "a thing which may happen but once in' the usable lifetime of a canoe hollowed diligently by axe and fire from the tallest diamondwood tree that grows in the noted diamondwood forests on the lower Slopes of Mount Awayawa, home of the firegods or so it is said.').

"What was all that?' said Broadman suspiciously.

"What did the innkeeper say?' said the little man.

Rincewind swallowed. Broadman,' he said. "Two mugs of your best ale, please.' "You can understand him?' "Oh, sure.' "Tell him tell him he's very welcome. Tell him breakfast is - uh - one gold piece.' For a moment Broadman's face looked as though some vast

internal struggle was going on, and then he added with a burst of generosity. "i'll throw in yours, too.' "Stranger,' said Rincewind levelly. "if you stay here you will be knifed or poisoned by nightfall. But don't stop smiling, or so will I.' "Oh, come now,' said the stranger, looking around.

"This looks like a delightful place. A genuine Morporkean tavern. I've heard so much about them, you know. All these quaint old beams. And so reasonable, too.' Rincewind glanced around quickly, in case some leakage of enchantment from the Magician's Quarter across the river had momentarily transported them to some other place. No - this was still the interior of the Drum, its walls stained with smoke, its floor a compost of old rushes and nameless beetles, its sour beer not so much purchased as merely hired for a while. He tried to fit the image around the word "quaint', or rather the nearest Trob equivalent, which was "that pleasant oddity of design found in the little coral houses of the sponge-eating pigmies on the Orohai peninsular'.

His mind reeled back from the effort. The visitor went on, "My name is Twoflower,' and extended his hand. Instinctively, the other three looked down to see if there was a coin in it.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Rincewind. "i'm Rincewind. Look, I wasn't joking. This is a tough place.' "GoodE Exactly what I wanted!' "Eh?' "What is this stuff in the mugs?' "This? Beer. Thanks, Broadman. Yes. Beer. You know. Beer.' "Ah. the so-typical drink. A small gold piece will be sufficient payment, do you think? I do not want to cause offense.' It was already half out of his purse.

"Yarrt,' croaked Rincewind. "i mean, no, it won't cause OffenSe.' 'Good. You say this is a tough place. Frequented, you mean, by heroes and men of adventure?' Rincewind considered this. "Yes?' he managed.

"Excellent. I would like to meet some.' An explanation occurred to the wizard. 'Ah,' he said. "You've come to hire mercenaries ('warriors who fight for the tribe with most

milknut-meal')?' "Oh no. I just want to meet them. So that when I get home I can say that I did it.' Rincewind thought that a meeting with most of the Drum's clientele would mean that Twoflower never went home again, unless he lived downriver and happened to float paSt.

"Where is your home?' he inquired. "broadman had slipped away into some back room, he noticed.

Hugh was watching them suspiciously from a nearby table.

"Have you heard of the city of Des Palargic?' 'Well, I didn't spend much time in Trob. I was just passing through, you know-' "Oh, it's not in Trob. I speak Trob because there are many beTrobi sailors in our ports. Des Palargic iS the major seaport of the Agatean Empire.' 'Never heard of it, I'm afraid.' Twoflower raised his eyebrows. "No? It is quite big. You sail turnwise from the Brown Islands for about a week and there it is. Are you all right?' He hurried around the table and patted the wizard on the back. Rincewind choked on his beer The Counterweight Continent! Three streets away an old man dropped a coin into a saucer of acid and swirled it gently. Broadman waited impatiently, ill at ease in a room made noisome by vats and bubbling beakers and lined with shelves containing shadowy shapes suggestive of skulls and stuffed impossibilities.

"Well?' he demanded.

"one cannot hurry these things,' said the old alchemist peevishly. "Assaying takes time. Ah.' He prodded the saucer, where the coin now lay in a SWirl of green colour. He made some calculations on a scrap of parchment.

"Exceptionally interesting,' he said at last.

"is it genuine?' The old man pursed his lips. "it depends on how you define the term,' he said. "if you mean: is thiS coin the same as, say, a fifty-dollar piece, then the answer is no.' "i knew' it,' screamed the innkeeper, and started towards the door.

"i'm not sure that I'm making myself clear,' said the alchemist. Broadman turned round angrily.

"What do you mean?' "Well, you see, what with one thing and another our coinage has been somewhat watered, over the years. The gold content of the average coin is barely four parts in twelve, the balance being made up of silver, copper-' "What of it?' "i said this coin isn't like ours. It is pure gold.' After Broadman had left, at a run, the alchemist spent some time staring at the ceiling. Then he drew out a very small piece of thin parchment, rummaged for a pen amongst the debris on his workbench, and wrote a very short, small, message. Then he went over to his cages of white doves, black cockerels and other laboratory animals. From one cage he removed a glossy coated rat, rolled the parchment into the phial attached to a hind leg, and let the animal go.

It sniffed around the floor for a moment, then disappeared down a hole in the far wall. , At about this time a hitherto unsucceSSful fortune-teller living on the other side of the block chanced to glance into her scrying bowl, gave a small scream and, within the hour, had sold her jewellery, various magical accoutrements, most of her clothes and almost all her other possessions that could not be conveniently carried on the fastest horse she could buy. The fact that later on, when her house collapsed in flames, she herself died in a freak landslide in the Morpork Mountains, proves that Death, too, has a sense of humour.

Also at about the same moment as the homing rat disappeared into the maze of runs under the city, scurrying along in faultless obedience to an ancient instinct, the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork picked up the letters delivered that morning by albatross. He looked pensively at the topmost one again, and summoned his chief of spies.

And in the Broken Drum Rincewind was listening open-mouthed as Twoflower talked.

'So I decided to see for myself,' the little man was saying. 'Eight years' saving up, this has cost me.

But worth every half-rhinu. I mean, here I am. In ancmorpork. Famed in song and story, I mean.

In the streets that have known the tread of Hemic Whiteblade. Hrun the Barbarian, and Bravd" the Hublander and the Weasel . . . It's all just like I imagined, you know.' Rincewind's face was a mask of fascinated horror.

"i just couldn't stand it any more back in Des Pelargic,' Twoflower went on blithely, "sitting at a desk all day, just adding up columns of figures, just a pension to look forward to at the end of it . . . where's the romance in that? Twoflower, I thought, it's now or never. You don't just have to listen to stories. You can go there. Now's the time to stop hanging around the docks listening to sailors' tales. So I compiled a phrase book and bought a passage on the next ship to the Brown Islands.' "No guards?' murmured Rincewind.

"No. Why? What have I got that's worth stealing?" Rincewind coughed. "You have, uh, gold,' he said.

"Barely two thousand rhinu. Hardly enough to keep a man alive for more than a month or two. At home, that is. I imagine they might stretch a bit further here.' "Would a rhinu be one of those big gold coins?' said Rincewind.

"Yes.' Twoflower looked worriedly at the wizard over the top of his strange seeing-lenses. 'Will two thousand be sufficient, do you think?' 'Yarrrt,' croaked Rincewind. "i mean, yes sufficient . ' 'Good.' "Um. Is everyone in the Agatean Empire as rich as you?' "Me? Rich? Bless you, whatever put that idea into your head? 'i am but a poor clerk! Did I pay the innkeeper too much, do you think?' Twoflower added.

"Uh. He might have settled for less,' Rincewind conceded.

"Ah. I shall know better next time. I can see I have a lot to learn. An idea occurs to me. Rincewind would you perhaps consent to be employed as a, I don't know, perhaps the word "guide" would fit the circumstances? I think I could afford to pay you a rhinu a day.' Rincewind opened his mouth to reply but felt the words huddle together in his throat, reluctant to emerge in a world that was rapidly going mad.

Twoflower blushed.

'i have offended you,' he said. it was an impertinent request to make of a professional man such as yourself. Doubtless you have many projects you wish to return to- some works of high magic, no doubt . . .' "no,' said Rincewind faintly. 'Not just at present.

A rhinu, you say? One a day. Every day?' "i think perhaps in the circumstances I should make it one and one-half rhinu per day. Plus any out-of-pocket expenses, of course.' The wizard rallied magnificently. "That will be fine,' he Said. "Great.' Twoflower reached into his pouch and took out a large round gold object, glanced at it for a moment, and slipped it back. Rincewind didn't get a chance tO see it properly.

"i think,' said the tourist, "that I would like a little sleep now. It was a long crossing. And then perhaps you would care to call back at noon and we can take a look at the city.' "Sure.' "Then please be good enough to ask the innkeeper tO Show me to my room.' Rincewind did so, and watched the nervous Broadman, who had arrived at a gallop from some back room, lead the way up the wooden steps behind the bar. After a few seconds the luggage got up and pattered across the floor after them.

Then the wizard looked down at the six big coins in his hand. Twoflower had insisted on paying his first four days' wages in advance.

Hugh nodded and smiled encouragingly. Rincewind snarled at him.

As a student wizard Rincewind had never achieved high marks in precognition, but now unused circuits in his brain were throbbing and the future might as well have been engraved in bright colours on his eyeballs. The space between his shoulder blades began to itch. The sensible thing to do, he knew, was to buy a horse. It would have to be a faSt one, and expensive - offhand, RinCeWind couldn't think of any horse-dealer he knew who was rich enough to give' change out of almost a whole ounce of gold.

And then, of course, the other five coins would help him set up a useful practice at some safe distance, say two hundred miles. That would be the sensible thing.

But what would happen to Twoflower, all alone in a city where even the cockroaches had an unerring instinct for gold? A man would have to be a real heel to leave him.

The Patrician of Ankh-Morpork smiled, but with his mouth only.

"The Hub Gate, you say?' he murmured.

The guard captain saluted smartly. "Aye, lord. We had to shoot the horse before he would stop.' 'Which, by a fairly direct route, brings you here,' said the Patrician, looking down at Rincewind.

"And what have you got to say for yourself?' It was rumoured that an entire wing of the Patrician's palace was filled with clerks who spent their days collating and updating all the information collected by their maSter's exquisitely organized spy system. Rincewind didn't doubt it. He' glanced towards the balcony that ran down one side of the audience room. A sudden run, a nimble jump - a sudden hail of crossbow quarrels. He shuddered.

The Patrician cradled his chins in a beringed hand, and regarded the wizard with eyes as small and hard as beads.

"Let me see,' he said. "Oathbreaking, the theft of a horse, uttering false coinage - yes, I think it's the Arena for you, Rincewind.' This was too much.

"i didn't steal the horse! I bought it fairly!' "But with false coinage. Technical theft, you see.' "But those rhinu are solid gold!' "Rhinu?' The Patrician rolled one of them around in his thick fingers. "is that what they are called? How interesting. But, as you point out, they are not very similar to dollars . . .' .Well, of course they're not-' 'Ah you admit it, then?' Rincewind opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and shut it again.

.Quite so. And on top of these there is, of course, the moral obloquy attendant on the cowardly betrayal of a visitor to this shore. For shame, Rincewind! ' The Patrician waved a hand vaguely. The guards behind Rincewind backed away, and their captain took a few paces to the right. Rincewind suddenly felt very alone.

It is said that when a wizard is about to die Death himself turns up to claim him (instead of delegating the task to a subordinate, such as Disease or Famine, as is usually the case). Rincewind looked around nervously for a tall figure in black(wizards, even failed wizards, have in addition to rods and cones in their eyeballs the tiny octagons that enable them to see into the far octarine, the basic colour of which all other colours are merely pale shadows impinging on normal four-dimensional space. It is said to be a sort of fluorescent greenish-yellow purple).

Was that a flickering shadow in the corner? 'Of course,' said the Patrician, "i could be merciful.' The shadow disappeared. Rincewind looked up an expression of insane hope on his face.

'Yes?' he said.

The Patrician waved a hand again. Rincewind saw the guards leave the chamber. Alone with the "lord of the twin cities, he almost wished they would come back.

"Come hither, Rincewind,' said the Patrician. He indicated a bowl of savouries on a low onyx table by the throne. "Would you care for a crystallised jellyfish? No'. "Um ' said RinceWind, "Now I want you to listen very carefully to what I am about to say,' said the Patrician amiably, 'otherwise you will die. In an interesting fashion.

Over a period. Please stop fidgetting like that.

"Since you are a wizard of sorts, you are of course aware that we live upon a world shaped, as it were, like a disc? And that there is said to exist, towards the far rim, a continent which though small is equal in weight to all the mighty landmasses in this hemicircle? And that this, according to ancient legend, is because it is largely made of gold?' Rincewind nodded. Who hadn't heard of the Counterweight Continent? Some sailors even believed the childhood tales and sailed in search of it.

Of course, they returned either empty handed or not at all. Probably eaten by giant turtles, in the opinion of more serious mariners. Because, of course, the Counterweight Continent was nothing more than a solar myth.

"it does, of course, exist,' said the Patrician "Although it is not made of gold, it is true that gold is a very common metal there. Most of the mass is made up by vast deposits of octiron deep within the crust. Now it will be obvious to an incisive mind like yours that the existence of the Counterweight Continent poses a deadly threat to our people here' he paused, looking at Rincewind's open mouth. He sighed. He said, do you by some chance fail to follow me?' "Yarrg, said Rincewind. He swallowed, and licked his lips. "i mean, no. I mean - well, gold . . .' "i see,' said the Patrician sweetly. "You feel, perhaps, that it would be a marvellous thing to go to the Counterweight Continent and bring back a shipload of gold?' Rincewind had a feeling that some sort of trap was being set.

"Yes?' he ventured.

'And if' every man on the shores of the Circle Sea had a mountain of gold of his own? Would that be a good thing? What would happen? think carefully.' Rincewind's brow furrowed. He thought. "We'd all be rich?' The way the temperature fell at his remark told him that it was not the correct one.

"i may as well tell you, Rincewind, that there is some contact between the Lords of the Circle Sea and the Emperor of the Agatean Empire, as it is Styled,' the Patrician went on. it is only very slight There is little common ground between us. We have nothing they want, and they have nothing we can afford. It is an old Empire, Rincewind. Old and cunning and cruel and very, very rich. So we exchange fraternal greetings by albatross mail. At infrequent intervals.

"one such letter arrived this morning. A subject of the Emperor appears to have taken it into his head to visit our city. It appears he wishes to look at it.

Only a madman would possibly undergo all the privationS of crossing the Turnwise Ocean in order to merely look at anything. However.

he landed this morning. He might have met a great hero, or the cunningest of thieves, or some wise and great sage. He met you. He has employed you as a guide. You will be a guide, Rincewind, to thiS looker, this Twoflower. You will see that' he returns home with a good report of our little homeland. What do you say to that?' "Er. Thank you, lord,' said Rincewind miserably.

"There iS another point, of course. It would be a tragedy should anything untoward happen to our little visitor. It would be dreadful if he were to die, for example. Dreadful for the whole of our land, because the Agatean Emperor looks after his own and could certainly extinguish us at a nod. A mere nod. And that would be dreadful for you, Rincewind, because in the weeks that remained before the Empire's huge mercenary fleet arrived certain of my servants would occupy themselves about your person in the hope that the avenging captains, on their arrival, might find their anger tempered by the sight

of your still-living body. There are certain spells that can prevent the life departing from a body,be it never so abused, and- i see by your face that understanding dawns?' 'Yarrg.' "I beg your pardon?' "Yes, lord. I'll, er, see to it, I mean, I'll endeavour to see, I mean, well, I'll try to look after him and see he comes to no harm.' And after that I'll get a job juggling snowballs through Hell, he added bitterly in the privacy of his own skull.

"Capital! I gather already that you and Twoflower are on the best of terms. An excellent beginning When he returns safely to his homeland you will not find me ungrateful. I shall probably even dismiss the charges against you. Thank you, Rincewind.

You may go.' Rincewind decided not to ask for the return of his five remaining rhinu. He backed away, cautiously.

"oh, and there is one other thing,' the Patrician said, as the wizard groped for the door handles.

"Yes, lord?' he replied, with a sinking heart.

"i'm sure you won't dream of trying to escape from your obligations by fleeing the city. I judge you to be a born city person. But you may be sure that the lords of the other cities will be appraised of these conditions by nightfall.' "i assure you the thought never even crossed my mind, lord.' "indeed? Then if I were you I'd sue my face for slander Rincewind reached the Broken Drum at a dead run and was just in time to collide with a man who came out backwards, fast. The stranger's haste was in part accounted for by the spear in his chest. He bubbled noisily and dropped dead at the wizard's feet. Rincewind peered around the doorframe and jerked back as a heavy throwing axe whirred past like a partridge. It was probably a lucky throw, a second cautious glance told him. The dark interior of the Drum was a broil of fighting men, quite a number of them - a third and longer glance confirmed - in bits.

Rincewind swayed back as a wildly thrown stool sailed past and smashed on the far side of the street.

Then he dived in.

He was wearing a dark robe, made darker by constant wear and irregular washings. In the raging gloom no-one appeared to notice a shadowy shape that shuffled desperately from table to table.

At one point a fighter, staggering back, trod on what felt like fingers. A number of what felt like teeth bit his ankle. He yelped shrilly and dropped hiS guard just sufficiently for a sword, swung by a surpriSed opponent, to skewer him.

Rincewind reached the stairway, sucking his bruised hand and running with a curious, bent-over gait. A crossbow quarrel thunked into the banister rail above him, and he gave a whimper.

He made the stairs in one breathless rush, expecting at any moment another, more accurate shot.

In the corridor above he stood upright, gasping and saw the floor in front of him scattered with bodies. A big black-bearded man, with a bloody sword in one hand, was trying a door handle.

'Hey!' screamed Rincewind. The man looked around and then, almost absent-mindedly, drew a short throwing knife from his bandolier and hurled it. Rincewind ducked. There was a brief scream behind him as the crossbow man, sighting down his weapon, dropped it and clutched at his throat.

The big man was already reaching for another knife. Rincewind looked around wildly, and then with wild improvisation drew himself up into a wizardly pose.

His hand was flung back. "Asoniti! Kyoruchal Beazleblor! ' The man hesitated, his eyes flicking nervously from side to side as he waited for the magic. The conclusion that there was not going to be any hit him at the same time as Rincewind, whirring wildly down the passage, kicked him sharply in the groin.

As he screamed and clutched at himself the wizard dragged open the door, sprang inside, slammed it behind him and threw his body against it, panting.

It was quiet in here. There was Twoflower, sleeping peacefully on the bed. And there, at the foot of the bed, was the Luggage.

Rincewind took a few steps forward, cupidity moving him as easily as if he were on little wheels.

The chest was open. There were bags inside, and in one of them he caught the gleam of gold. For a moment greed overcame caution, and he reached out gingerly . . . but what was the use? He'd never live to enjoy it. Reluctantly he drew his hand back, and was surprised to see a slight tremor in the chest's open lid. Hadn't it shifted slightly, as though rocked by the wind? Rincewind looked at his fingers, and then at the lid. It looked heavy, and was bound with brass bands. It was quite still now.

What wind? "Rincewind! ' Twoflower sprang off the bed. The wizard jumped back, wrenching his features into a smile.

"My dear chap, right on time! We'll just have lunch, and then I'm sure you've got a wonderful programme lined up for this afternoon." "That's great,' Rincewind took a deep breath. "look,' he said desperately, "let's eat somewhere else. There's been a bit of a fight down below.

"a tavern brawl? Why didn't you wake me up?' "Well, you see, I - what?' "i thought I made myself clear this morning, Rincewind. I want to see genuine Morporkian life the slave market, the Whore Pits, the Temple of Small Gods, the Beggars' Guild . . . and a genuine tavern brawl.' A faint note of suspicion entered Twoflower's voice. "You do have them, don't you? You know, people swinging on chandeliers, swordfightS over the table, the sort of thing Hrun the Barbarian and the Weasel are always getting involved in. You know - excitement.' Rincewind sat down heavily on the bed.

"You want to see a fight?' he said.

"Yes. What's wrong with that?' "for a Start, people get hurt.' "oh, I wasn't suggesting we get involved. I just want to see one, that's all. And some of your famous heroes. You do have some, don't you? It's not all dockSide talk?' And now, to the wizard's astonishment, Twoflower was almost pleading.

"Oh, yeah. We have them all right,' said Rincewind hurriedly. He pictured them in his mind, and recoiled from the thought.

All the heroes of the Circle Sea passed through the gates of Ankh-Morpork sooner or later. Most of them were from the barbaric tribes nearer the frozen Hub, which had a sort of export trade in heroes AlmoSt all of them had crude magic swords, whose Unsuppressed harmonics on the astral plane played hell with any delicate experiments in applied sorcery for miles around, but Rincewind didn't object to them on that score. He knew himself to be a magical dropout, so it didn't bother him that the mere appearance of a hero at the city gates was enough to cause retorts to explode and demons to materialise all through the Magical Quarter. No, what he didn't like about heroes was that they were usually suicidally gloomy when sober and homicidally insane when drunk. There were too many of them, too. Some of the most notable questing grounds near the city were a veritable hubbub in the season. There was talk of organizing a rota.

He rubbed his nose. The only heroes he had much time for were Bravd and the Weasel, who were out of town at the moment, and Hrun the Barbarian, who was practically an academic by Hub standards in that he could think without moving his lips. Hrun was said to be roving somewhere Turnwise.

"Look,' he said at last. "have you ever met a barbarian?" Twoflower shook his head.

"i was afraid of that,' said Rincewind. "Well.

they're' There was a clatter of running feet in the street outside and a fresh uproar from downstairs. It was followed by a commotion on the stairs. The door was flung open before Rincewind could collect himself sufficiently to make a dash for the,window.

But instead of the greed-crazed madman he expected, he found himself looking into the round red face of a Sergeant of the Watch. He breathed again. Of course. The Watch were always careful not to intervene too soon in any brawl where the odds were not heavily stacked in their favour. The job carried a pension, and attracted a cautious, thoughtful kind of man.

The Sergeant glowered at Rincewind, and then peered at Twoflower with interest.

"Everything all right here, then?' he said.

"Oh, fine,' said Rincewind. "got held up, did you?' The sergeant ignored him. "This the foreigner?" he"" inquired.

"we" were just leaving,' said Rincewind quickly, and switched to Trob. "Twoflower, I think we ought to get lunch somewhere else. i know some places.' He marched out into the corridor with as much aplomb as he could muster. Twoflower followed, and a few seconds later there was a strangling sound from the sergeant as the luggage closed its lid with a snap, stood up, stretched, and marched after them.

Watchmen were dragging bodies out of the room downstairs. There were no survivors. The Watch had ensured this by giving them ample time to escape via the back door, a neat compromise between caution and justice that benefited all parties.

"Who are all these men?' said Twoflower.

"oh, you know. Just men,' said Rincewind. And before he could stop himself some part of his brain that had nothing to do took control of his mouth and added, "Heroes, in fact.' "Really?' When one foot is stuck in the Grey Miasma of krull it is much easier to step right in and sink rather than prolong the struggle. Rincewind let himself go.

"Yes, that one over there is Frig Stronginthearm, over there is Black Zenell-' "is Hrun the Barbarian here?' said Twoflower, looking around eagerly. Rincewind took a deep breath.

"That's him behind us,' he said.

The enormity of this lie was so great that its ripples did in fact spread out one of the lower astral planes as far as the Magical Quarter across the river, where it picked up tremendous velocity from the huge standing wave of power that always hovered there and bounced wildly across the Circle Sea. A harmonic got as far as Hrun himself, currently fighting a couple of gnolls on a crumbling ledge high in the Caderack Mountains, and caused him a moment's unexplained discomfort.

Twoflower, meanwhile, had thrown back the lid of the Luggage and was hastily pulling out a heavy black cube.

"This is fantastic, ' he said . "They're never going to believe this at home. ' "What's he going on about?.' said the sergeant doubtfully.

"He's pleased you rescued us,' said Rincewind. He looked sidelong at the black box, half-expecting it to explode or emit strange musical tones.

"Ah,' said the sergeant. He was staring at the box, too Twoflower smiled brightly at them.

'i'd like a record of the event,' he said. "Do you think you could ask them all to stand over by the window, please? This won't take a moment. And, er, Rincewind? ' "Yes?' Twoflower stood on tiptoe to whisper.

"i expect you know what this is, don't you?' Rincewind stared down at the box. It had a round glass eye protruding from the centre of one face, and a lever at the back.

"Not wholly, ' he said.

"it's a device for making pictures quickly,' said Twoflower. "Quite a new invention. I'm rather proud of it but, look, I don't think these gentlemen would - well, I mean they might be - sort of apprehensive? Could you explain it to them? I'll reimburse them for their time, of course.' "He's got a box with a demon in it that draws pictures,' said Rincewind shortly. "do what the madman says and he will give you gold.' The Watch smiled nervously.

'i'd like you in the picture, Rincewind. That's fine.' Twoflower took out the golden disc that Rincewind had noticed before, squinted at its unseen face for a moment, muttered "Thirty seconds should about do it,' and said brightly, "Smile please! ' "Smile,' rasped Rincewind. There was a whirr from the box.

"Right.' high above the disc the second albatross soared; so high in fact that its tiny mad orange eyes could see the whole of the world and the great, glittering, girdling Circle Sea. There was a yellow message capsule strapped to one leg. Far below it, unseen in the clouds, the bird that had brought the earlier message to the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork flapped gently back to its home.

Rincewind looked at the tiny square of glass in astonishment. There he was, all right - a tinY figure, in perfect colour, standing in front of a group of Watchmen whose faces were each frozen in a terrified rictus. A buzz of wordless terror went up from the men around him as they craned over his shoulder to look.

Grinning, Twoflower produced a handful of the Smaller coins Rincewind now recognized as quarter-rhinu. He winked at the wizard.

"i had similar problems when I stopped over in the Brown Islands,' he said. "They thought the iconograph steals a bit of their souls. Laughable, isn't it? ' "Yarg,' said Rincewind and then, because some how that was hardly enough to keep up his side of the conversation, added, "i don't think it looks "er\ like me, though.' "it's easy to operate,' said Twoflower, ignoring him. "Look, all you have to do is press this button.

The iconograph does the rest. Now, I'll just stand over here next to Hrun, and you can take the picture.' The coins quietened the men's agitation in the way that gold can, and Rincewind was amazed to find, half a minute later, that he was holding a little glass portrait of Twoflower wielding a huge notched sword and smiling as though all his dreams had come true.

They lunched at a small eating-house near the Brass Bridge, with the luggage nestling under the table. The food and wine, both far superior to Rincewind's normal fare, did much to relax him.

Things weren't going to be too bad, he decided. A bit of invention and some quick thinking, that was all that was needed.

Twoflower seemed to be thinking too. Looking reflectively into his wine cup he said, "Tavern fights are pretty common around here, I expect?' "Oh, fairly.' 'No doubt fixtures and fittings get damaged?' "Fixt - oh, I see. You mean like benches and whatnot. Yes, I

suppose so.' 'That must be upsetting for the innkeepers.' "i've never really thought about it. I suppose it must be one of the risks of the job.' Twoflower regarded him thoughtfully.

"i might be able to help there.' he said. "Risks are my business. I say, this food is a bit greasy, isn't it?' "You did say you wanted to try some typical Morporkean food,' said Rincewind. "What was that about risks?' "Oh, I know all about risks. They're my business.' "i thought that's what you said. I didn't believe it the first time either.' "oh, I don't take risks. About the most exciting thing that happened to me was knocking some ink over. I assess risks. Day after day. Do you know what the odds are against a house catching fire in the Red Triangle district of des Pelargic? Five hundred and thirty-eight to one. I calculated that,' he added with a trace of pride.

.What"what for? Rincewind tried to suppress a burp Scuse me.' He helped himself to some more wine twoflower paused. "i can't say it in Trob,' I don't think the beTrobi have a word for it.

in our language we call it-' he said a collection of syllables.

ensowrants,' repeated Rincewind. "That's a funny word . Wossit mean?' well suppose you have a ship loaded with, say, gold bars.

it might run into storms or be taken by pirates. You don't want that to happen, so you take out an ensewer-ants-pally-sey . I work out the odds of the cargo being lost, based on weather and piracy records for the last twenty years, then I add on a bit, then you pay me some money based on those odds-" "and' the bit-' Rincewind said, waggling a finger solemnly.

then, if the cargo is lost, I reimburse you.' "reeburs?" "pay you the value of your cargo,' said Twoflower patiently.

oh I get it. It's like a bet, right?' "a wager? In a way, I suppose,' "and you make money at this inn-sewer-ants? "it offers a return on investment, certainly.' wrapped in the warm yellow glow of the wine, rincewind tried to think of inn-sewer-ants in circle sea terms.

"I don't think I unnerstan' this inn-sewer-ants,' he said firmly, idly watching the world spin by, "magic now. Magic I unnerstan'.' Twoflower grinned. 'Magic is one thing, and reflected-sound-of-underground-spirits is another, he said.' "whah?" what!" "that funny word you used,' said Rincewind impationtly.

"Reflected-sound-of-underground-spirits? "Never heard of it.' Twoflower tried to explain.

Rincewind tried to understand In the long afternoon they toured the city Turn wise of the river. Twoflower led the way, with the strange picture-box slung on a strap round his neck, Rincewind trailed behind, whimpering at intervals and checking to see that his head was still there.

A few others followed, too. In a city where public executions, duels, fights, magical feuds and strange events regularly punctuated the daily round the inhabitants had brought the profession of interested bystander to a peak of perfection. They were, to a man, highly skilled yawpers. In any case, Twoflower was delightedly taking picture after picture of people engaged in what he described as typical activities, and since a quarter-rhinu would subsequently change hands "for their trouble' a tail of bemused and happy nouveux-riches was soon following him in case this madman exploded in a shower of gold.

At the Temple of the Seven-Handed Sek a hasty convocation of priests and ritual heart-transplant artisans agreed that the hundred-span high statue of Sek was altogether too holy to be made into a magic picture, but a payment of two rhinu left them astoundedly agreeing that perhaps He wasn't as holy as all that.

A prolonged session at the Whore Pits produced a number of colourful and instructive pictures, a number of which Rincewind concealed about his person for detailed perusal in

private. As the fumes cleared from his brain he began to speculate Seriously as to how the iconograph worked.

Even a failed wizard knew that some substances were sensitive to light. Perhaps the glass plates were treated by some arcane process that froze the light, that passed through them: or Something like that, anyway. Rincewind often suspected that there was Something, somewhere, that was better than magic. He was usually disappointed.

However, he soon took every opportunity to operate the box. Twoflower was only too pleased to allow this, since that enabled the little man to appear in his own pictures. It was at this point that Rincewind noticed something strange. Possession of the box conferred a kind of power on the wielder which was that anyone, confronted with the hypnotic glass eye, would submissively obey the most 'peremptory orders about stance and expression. It was while he was thus engaged in the Plaza of Broken Moons that disaster struck.

Twoflower had posed alongside a bewildered charm-seller, his crowd of new-found admirers watching him with interest in case he did something humorously lunatic.

Rincewind got down on one knee, the better to arrange the picture, and pressed the enchanted lever.

The box said, "It's no good. I've run out of pink.' A hitherto unnoticed door opened in front of his eyeS. A small, green and hideously warty humanoid figure leaned out, pointed at a colour-encrusted palette in one clawed hand, and screamed at him.

'No pink, See?' screeched the homunculus."No good you going on pressing the lever when there's no pink, is there? If you wanted pink you shouldn't of took all those pictures of young ladies, should you? It's monochrome from now on, friend. Alright? ' "Alright. Yeah, Sure,' said Rincewind. In one dim corner of the little box he thought he could see an easle, and a tiny unmade bed. He hoped he couldn't.

"So long as that's understood,' said the imp, and shut the door. Rincewind thought he could hear the muffled sound of grumbling and the scrape of a stool being dragged across the floor.

"Twoflower-' he began, and looked up.

Twoflower had vanished. As Rincewind stared at the crowd, with sensations of prickly horror traveling up his spine, there came a gentle prod in the small of his back.

"turn without haste,' said a voice like black silk.

'Or kiss your kidneys goodbye.' The crowd watched with interest. It was turning out to be quite a good day.

Rincewind turned slowly, feeling the point of the sword scrape along his ribs. At the other end of the blade he recognized Siren Withel - thief, cruel swordsman, disgruntled contender for the title of worst man in the world.

" Hi , ' he said weakly . A few yards away he noticed a couple of unsympathetic men raising the lid of the Luggage and pointing excitedly at the bags of gold.

Withel smiled. It made an unnerving effect on his scar-crossed face.

'I know you,' he said. "a gutter wizard. What is that thing?' Rincewind became aware that the lid of the Luggage was trembling slightly, although there was no wind. And he was still holding the picture-box.

"This? It makes pictures, ' he said brightly. "Hey.

just hold that smile, will you?' He backed away quickly and pointed the box.

For a moment Withel hesitated. "What? he said.

'That's fine, hold it just like that . . .' said Rincewind.

The thief paused, then growled and swung his sword back.

There was a snap, and a duet of horrible screams Rincewind did not glance around for fear of the terrible things he might see, and by the time Withel looked for him again he was on the other side of the plaza and still accelerating.

The albatross descended in wide, slow sweeps that ended in an undignified flurry of feathers and a thump as it landed heavily on its platform in the Patrician's bird garden.

The custodian of the birds, dozing in the sun and hardly expecting a long-distance message so soon after this morning's arrival, jerked to his feet and looked up. A few moments later he was scuttling through the palace's corridors holding the message capsule and -sucking at the nasty beak wound on the back of his hand owing to carelessness brought on by surpriSe Rincewind pounded down an alley, paying no heed to the screams of rage coming from the picture box and cleared a high wall with his frayed robe flapping around him like the feathers of a dishevelled jackdaw. He landed in the forecourt of a carpet shop, scattering the merchandise and customers dived through its rear exit trailing apologies skidded down another alley and stopped, teetering dangerously, just as he was about to plunge unthinkingly into the Ankh.

There are said to be some mystic rivers one drop of which can steal a man's life away. After its turbid paSsage through the twin cities the Ankh could have been one of them.

In the distance the cries of rage took on a shrill note of terror. Rincewind looked around desperately for a boat, or a handhold up the sheer walls on either Side of him.

He was trapped.

Unbidden, the Spell welled up in his mind. It was perhaps untrue to say that he had learned it; it had learned him. The episode had led to his expulsion from Unseen University, because, for a bet, he had dared to open the pages of the last remaining copy of the creators own grimOire, The Octavo, while the University librarian was otherwise engaged.. The spell had leapt out of the page and instantly burrowed deeply into his mind, from whence even the combined talents of the Faculty of Medicine had been unable to coax it. Precisely which one it was they were also unable to ascertain, except that it was one of the eight basic spells that were intricately interwoven with the very fabric of time and space itself.

Since then it had been showing a worrying tendency, when Rincewind was feeling rundown or especially threatened, to try to get itself said.

He clenched his teeth together but the first syllable forced itself around the corner of his mouth. His left hand raised involuntarily and, as the magical force whirled him round, began to give off octarine sparks . . .

The Luggage hurtled around the corner, its several hundred knees moving like pistons.

Rincewind gaped. The spell died, unsaid.

The box didn't appear to be hampered in any way by the ornamental rug draped roguishly over it, nor by the thief hanging by one arm from the lid. It was in a very real sense, a dead weight. Further along the lid were the remains of two fingers, owner unknown.

The Luggage halted a few feet from the wizard and, after a moment, retracted its legs. It had no eyes that Rincewind could see, but he was never theless sure that it was staring at him. Expectantly.

"Shoo,' he said weakly. It didn't budge, but the lid creaked open, releasing the dead thief.

Rincewind remembered about the gold. Presumably the box had to have a master. In the absence of Twoflower, had it adopted him? The tide was turning and he could see debris drifting downstream in the yellow afternoon light towards the river gate, a mere hundred yards downstream. It was the work of a moment to let the dead thief join them. Even if it was found later it would hardly cause comment. And the sharks in the Ankh were used to solid, regular meals.

Rincewind watched the body drift away, and considered his next move. The Luggage would probably float. All he had to do was wait until dusk, and then go out with the tide. There were plenty of wild places downstream where he could wade ashore, and then - well, if the Patrician really had sent out word about him then a change of clothing and a shave should take care of that. In any case, there were other lands and he had a facility for languages. Let him but get to Chimera or Gonim or Ecalpon and half a dozen armies couldn't bring him back. And then - wealth, comfort, security . . .

There was, of course, the problem of Twoflower.

Rincewind allowed himself a moment's sadness.

'it could be worse,' he said by way of farewell. "it could be me.' It was when he tried to move that he found hiS robe was caught on some obstruction.

By craning his neck he found that the edge of it was being gripped firmly by the Luggage's lid.

"Ah, Gorphal,' said the Patrician pleasantly. Come in. Sit down. Can I press you to a candied starfish?' "i am yours to command, master,' said the old man calmly. "save, perhaps, in the matter of preserved echinoderms . ' The Patrician shrugged, and indicated the scroll on the table.

"Read that,' he said.

Gorphal picked up the parchment and raised one eyebrow slightly when he saw the familiar ideograms of the Golden Empire. He read in silence for perhaps a minute, and then turned the scroll over to examine minutely the seal on the obverse.

"you are faimed as a student of empire affairs," said the Patrician. "Can you explain this?" 'Knowledge in the matter of the Empire lies less in noting particular events than in studying a certain cast of mind,' said the old diplomat. "The message is curious, yes, but not surprising.' "This morning the Emperor instructed,' the Patrician allowed himself the luxury of a scowl, "instructed me, Gorphal, to protect this Two Flower person. Now it seems I must have him killed. You don't find that surprising?' "No. The Emperor is no more than a boy. He is idealiStic. Keen. A god to his people. Whereas this afternoon's letter is, unless I am very much mistaken, from Nine Turning mirrors, the Grand Vizier. He has grown old in the service of several Emperors. He regards them as a necessary but tiresome ingredient in the successful running of the Empire. He does not like things out of place. The Empire was not built by allowing things to get out of place. That is his vieW.' 'I begin to see' said the Patrician.

"quite so.' Gorphal smiled into his beard. "This tourist is a thing that is out of place. After acceding to his master's wishes Nine Turning Mirrors would, I am quite sure, make his own arrangements with a view to ensuring that one wanderer would not be allowed to return home bringing, perhaps, the disease of dissatisfaction. The Empire likes people to stay where it puts them. So much more convenient, then, if this Two Flower disappears for good in the barbarian lands. meaning here, master.' "And your advice?' said the Patrician.

Gorphal shrugged.

"Merely that you should do nothing. Matters will undoubtedly resolve themselves. However,' he scratched an ear thoughtfully, 'perhaps the Assassins' Guild . . . ?' "Ah yes,' said the Patrician. "The Assassins guild. Who is their president at the moment?" "Zlorf flannelfoot, master." "have a word with him, will you?' 'Quite so, master.' The Patrician nodded. It was all rather a relief.

He agreed with Nine Turning Mirrors - life was difficult enough; People ought to stay where they were put.

Brilliant constellations shone down on the discworld. One by one the traders shuttered their shops.

One by one the gonophs, thieves, finewirers, whores, illusionists, backsliders and second-storey men awoke and breakfasted. Wizards went about their polydimensional affairs. Tonight saw the conjunction of two powerful planets, and already the air over the Magical Quarter was hazy with early spells.

"look,' Said Rincewind, "this isn't getting us anywhere.' He inched sideways. The Luggage followed faithfully, lid half open and menacing.

Rincewind briefly considered making a desperate leap to safety. The lid smacked in anticipation.

In any case, he told himself with sinking heart, the damn thing would only follow him again. It had that dogged look about it. Even if he managed to get to a horse, he had a nasty suspicion that it would follow him at its own pace. Endlessly. Swimming rivers and oceans. Gaining slowly every night, while he had to stop to sleep. And then one day, in some exotic city and years hence, he'd hear the sound of hundreds of tiny feet accelerating down the road behind him . . .

'You've got the wrong man!' he moaned. "it's not my fault! I didn't kidnap him!' The box moved forward slightly. Now there was just a narrow strip of greasy jetty between rincewind's heels and the river. A flash of precognition told him that the box would be able to swim faster than he could. he tried not to imagine what it would be like to drown in the Ankh.

'it won't stop until you give in, you know,' said a small voice conversationally.

Rincewind looked down at the iconograph, still hanging around his neck. Its trapdoor was open and the homunculus was leaning against the trap, smoking a pipe and watching the proceedings with amusement.

"i'll take you in with me, at least,' said RinCeWind through gritted teeth.

The imp took the pipe out of his mouth. "What did you say?' he said.

"i said i'll take you in with me, dammit!' "Suit yourself.' The imp tapped the side of the box meaningfully. "We'll see who sinks first.' The luggage yawned, and moved forward a fraction of an inch.

"oh all right,' said Rincewind irritably. "But you'll have to give me time to think.' The luggage backed off slowly. Rincewind edged his way back onto reasonably safe land and sat down with his back against a wall. Across the river the lights of Ankh city glowed.

"You're a wizard,' said the picture imp. "You'll think of some way to find him.' "Not much of a wizard, I'm afraid.' "You can just jump down on everyone and turn them into worms,' the imp added encouragingly, ignoring his last remark.

"No. Turning To Animals is an Eighth Level spell. I never even completed my training. I only know one spell.' "Well, that'll do.' "i doubt it,' said Rincewind hopelessly "What does it do, then?' "Can't tell you. Don't really want to talk about it.

But frankly,' he sighed , "no spells are much good . It takes three months to commit even a simple one to memory, and then once you've used it, pow it's gone. that's what's so stupid about the whole magic thing, You know. You spend twenty Years learning the spell that makes nude virgins appear in your bedroom, and then you're so poisoned by quicksilver fumes and half-blind from reading old grimoires that you can't remember what happens next.' 'I never thought of it like that,' said the imp.

'Hey, look - this is all wrong. When Twoflower said they'd got better kind of magic in the empire I thought- I thought . . .' The imp looked at him expectantly. Rincewind cursed to himself.

"Well, if you must know, I thought he didn't mean magic. Not as such.' "What else is there, then?' Rincewind began to feel really wretched. "I don't know,' he said. "A better way of doing things, I suppose. Something with a bit of sense in it.

Harnessing - harnessing the lightning, or something.

The imp gave him a kind but pitying look.

"Lightning is the spears hurled by the thunder giants when they fight,' it said gently. "Established meteorological fact. You can't harness it.' "I know,' said Rincewind miserably. That's the flaw in the argument, of course.' The imp nodded. and disappeared into the depths of the iconograph .' A few moments later Rincewind smelled bacon frying. He waited until his stomach couldn't Stand the strain any more, and rapped on the box. The imp reappeared.

"I've been thinking about what you said," it said even before Rincewind could open his mouth. "And even if you could get a harness on it, how could you get it to pull a cart?' 'What the hell are you talking about?' 'Lightning. It just goes up and down.'You'd want it to go along, not up and down. Anyway, it'd probably burn through the harnesS.' "I don't

care about the lightning! How can I think on an empty stomach?' "Eat something, then. That's logic.' ' How? Every time I move that damn box flexes itS hinges at mei' The luggage, on cue, gaped widely.

"See?' "it's not trying to bite you,' said the imp. "There's food in there. You're no use to it starved.' Rincewind peered into the dark recesses of the Luggage. There were indeed, among the chaos of boxes and bags of gold, several bottles and packages in oiled paper. He gave a cynical laugh, mooched around the abandoned jetty until he found a piece of wood about the right length, wedged it as politely as poSSible in the gap between the lid and the box, and pulled out one of the flat packages.

It held biscuits that turned out to be as hard as diamond-wood.

'bloody hell he muttered, nursing his teeth.

"Captain Eightpanther's Travellers' Digestives them,' said the imp from the doorway to his box "Saved many a life at sea, they have.' 'Oh, sure. Do you use them as a raft, or just throw them to the sharks and sort of watch them sink? What's in the bottles? Poison?' "Water.' "But there's water everywhere! Why'd he want to bring water?' "Trust.' "Trust?' 'Yes. That's what he didn't, the water here. See? Rincewind opened a bottle. The liquid inside might have been water. It had a flat, empty flavour, with no trace of life. 'Neither taste nor smell.' he grumbled The luggage gave a little creak, attracting his attention. With a lazy air of calculated menace it shut its lid slowly, grinding Rincewind's impromptu wedge like a dry loaf.

"All right, all right,' he said. "i'm thinking.' Ymor's headquarters were in the leaning Tower at the junction of Rime Street and Frost Alley. At midnight the solitary guard leaning in the shadows looked up at the conjoining planets and wondered idlly what change in his fortunes they might herald.

There was the faintest of sounds, as of a gnat yawning. The guard glanced down the deserted street, and now caught the glimmer of moonlight on something lying in the mud a few yards away. He picked it up.

The lunar light gleamed on gold, and his intake of breath was almost loud enough to echo down the alleyway. There was a slight sound again, and another coin rolled into the gutter on the other side of the street.

By the time he had picked it up there was another one, a little way off and still spinning. Gold was, he remembered, said to be formed from the crystallized light of stars. Until now he had never believed it to be true, that something as heavy as gold could fall naturally from the sky.

As he drew level with the opposite alley mouth some more fell. It was still in its bag, there was an awful lot of it, and Rincewind brought it down heavily onto his head.

When the guard came to he found himself looking up into the wild-eyed face of a wizard, who was menacing his throat with a sword. In the' darkness tOO, Something was gripping his leg.

It was the disconcerting sort of grip that suggested that the gripper could grip a whole lot harder, if he wanted to.

"Where is he, the rich foreigner?" hissed the wizard. "Quickly!' "What's holding my leg?' said the man, with a note of terror in his voice. 'He tried to wriggle free.

The pressure increased "You wouldn't want to know,' said Rincewind "Pay attention, please. Where's the foreigner?' "Not here. They've got him at Broadman's place.

"everyone's looking for him! You're Rincewind aren't you? The box - the box that bites people ononono . : . pleasssse . . .' Rincewind had gone. The guard felt the unseen leg-

gripper release his - or, as he was beginning to fear,it's- hold. Then, as he tried to pull himself to his feet, something big and heavy and square cannoned into him out of the dark and plunged off after the wizard. Something with hundreds of tiny feet.

With only his home-made phrase book to help him Twoflower was trying to explain the mysteries of in-sour-ants to Broadman . The fat innkeeper was listening intently, his little black eyes glittering.

From the other end of the table Ymor watched with mild amusement, occasionally feeding one oF his ravens with scraps from his plate. Beside him Withel paced up and down.

"You fret too much,' said Ymor, without taking his eyes from the two men opposite him. "i can feel it Siren. Who would dare attack us' here? And the gutter wizard will come. He's too much of a coward not to. And he'll try to bargain. And we shall have him. And the gold. And the chest.' Withel's one eye glared, and he made a fist into the palm of a black-gloved hand.

"Who would have thought there was so much sapient pearwood in the whole of the disc?' he said.

'How could we have known?' "You fret too much, Siren. I'm sure you can do better this time,' said Ymor pleasantly.

The lieutenant snorted in disgust, and strode off around the room to bully his men. Ymor carried on watching the tourist.

It was strange, but the little man didn't seem to realise the seriousness of his position. Ymer had on several occasions seen him look around the room With an expression of deep satisfaction.

he had also been talking for ages to broadman and Ymer had seen a piece of paper change hands and Broadman had given the foreigner some coins. It was strange.

When Broadman got up and waddled past Ymer's chair the thiefmasters arm shot out like a steel spring and grabbed the fat man by his apron.

"What was that all about friend?" asked ymer quietly. oh-nothing, Ymor. Just private business, like.' "There are no secrets between friends, Broadman.

"Yan. Well, I'm not sure about it myself, really. It's a sort of bet, see?' said the innkeeper nervously "inn-sewer-ans, it's called. It's like a bet that the Broken Drum won't get burned down.' Ymor held the man's gaze until Broadman twitched in fear and embarrassment. Then the thiefmaster laughed.

'This worm-eaten old tinder pile?' he said. "The man must be mad! ' "Yes, but mad with money. He says now he's got the - can't remember the word, begins with a P, it's what you might call the stake money- the people he workS for in the Agatean Empire will pay up. If the Broken Drum burns down. Not that I hope it does.

Burn down. The Broken Drum, I mean. I mean, it's like a home to me, is the Drum . . .' "Not entirely stupid, are you?' said Ymor, and pushed the innkeeper away.

The door slammed back on its hinges and thudded into the wall.

"Hey, that's my door. ' screamed Broadman . Then he realised who was standing at the top of the steps, and ducked behind the table a mere shaving of time before a short black dart sped across the room and thunked into the woodwork.

Ymor moved his hand carefully, and poured out another flagon of beer.

"Won't you join me, Zlorf?' he said levelly. "and put that sword away , Siren. Zlorf Flannelfoot is our friend ' The president of the Assassins' Guild spun his short blowgun dexterously and slotted it into its holster in one smooth movement.

'Siren!' said Ymor.

The black-clad thief hissed, and sheathed his sword. But he kept his hand on the hilt, and his eyes on the assassin.

That wasn't easy. Promotion in the Assassins' Guild was by competitive examination, the Practical being the most important - indeed, the only - part Thus Zlorf's broad, honest face was a welter of scar tissue, the result of many a close encounter. It probably hadn't been all that good-looking in any case- it was said that Zlorf had chosen a profession in which dark hoods, cloaks and nocturnal prowlings figured largely because there was a day-fearing trollish streak in his parentage. People who said this in earshot of Zlorf tended to carry their ears home in their hats.

He strolled down the stairs, followed by a number of assassins. When he was directly in front of Ymor he said: "i've come for the tourist.' is it any of Your business, Zlorf?' "Yes. Gringo, Urmond - take him.' Two of the assassins stepped forward. Then Siren was in front of them, his sword appearing to materialise an inch from their throats without having to pass through the intervening aiR.

"Possibly I could only kill one of you,' he murmured, "but I suggest you ask yourselves which one?' "Look up, Zlorf,' said Ymor.

A row of yellow, baleful eyes looked down from the darkness among the rafters.

"one step more and you'll leave here with fewer eyes than you came with So sit downn and have a drink Said the thiefmaster.

, Zlorf, and let's talk about thiS Sensibly. I thought we had an agreement.

You don't rob- I don't kill. Not for payment, that is,' he added after a pause.

Zlorf took the proffered beer.

.So?' he said. "i'll kill him. Then you rob him. Is he that funny looking one over there?' "Yes.' Zlorf Stared at Twoflower, who grinned at him.

He shrugged. He seldom wasted time wondering why people wanted other people dead. It was just a living. "Who is your client, may I ask?' said Ymor.

Zlorf held up a hand. "Please!' he protested.

"Professional etiquette.' "of course. By the way-' "Yes?' 'I believe I have a couple of guards outside' "Had.' "And some others in the doorway across the street- " "Formerly.' "and two bowmen on the roof.' A flicker of doubt passed across Zlorfs face, like the last shaft of sunlight over a badly ploughed field.

The door flew open, badly damaging the assassin who was standing beside it.

'Stop doing that!' shrieked Broadman, from under his table.

Zlorf and Ymor stared up at the figure on the threShold. It was short, fat and richly dressed. Very richly dreSSed. There were a number of tall, big shapes looming behind it. Very big, threatening shapes.

'Who's that?' said Zlorf.

"I know him,' said Ymor. "His name's Rerpf. He runS the Groaning Platter tavern down by Brass Bridge. Siren - remove him.' Rerpf held up a beringed hand. Siren Withel

hesitated halfway to the door as several very large trolls ducked under the doorway and stood on either side of the fat man, blinking in the light. Muscles the size of melons bulged in forearms like flour sacks. Each troll held a double-headed axe. Between thumb and forefinger.

Broadman erupted from cover, his face Suffused with rage.

"out!' he screamed. "Get those trolls out of here!' No-one moved. The room was suddenly quiet.

Broadman looked around quickly. It began to dawn on him just what he had said, and to whom. A whimper escaped from hiS lips, glad to be free.

He reached the doorway to his cellars just as one of the trolls, with a lazy flick of one ham-sized hand, sent his axe whirling across the room. The slam of the door and its subsequent splitting as the axe hit it merged into one sound.

"Bloody hell!' exclaimed Zlorf Flannelfoot.

"What do you want?' said Ymor.

"I am here on behalf of the Guild of Merchants and Traders,' said Rerpf evenly. "to protect our interests, you might say. Meaning the little man.' Ymor wrinkled his brows.

"i'm sorry,' he said. "i thought I heard you say the Guild of Merchants?' "And traders,' agreed Rerpf. Behind him now, in addition to more trolls, were several humans that Ymor vaguely recognized. He had seen them, maybe, behind counters and bars. Shadowy figures, usually - easily ignored, easily forgotten. At the back of his mind a bad feeling began to grow. He thought about how it might be to be, say, a fox confronted with an angry sheep. A sheep, moreover, that could afford to employ wolves.

'How long has this - Guild - been in existence, may I ask?' he said.

"Since this afternoon,' said Rerpf. "I'm viceguildmaster in charge of tourism, you know.' "What is this touriSm of which you Speak?' .Uh - we are not quite sure . . .' said Rerpf. An old beaded man poked his head over the guildmaster's shoulder and cackled, 'Speaking on behalf of the winesellers of Morpork, Tourism means Business See?' "Well?' said Ymor coldly.

"Well,' said Rerpf, "we're protecting our interests, like I said.' "Thieves OUT, Thieves OUT! ' cackled his elderly companion. Several others took up the chant. Zlorf grinned. "and assassins,' chanted the old man.

Zlorf growled.

"Stands to reason,' said Rerpf. 'People robbing and murdering all over the place, what sort of impression are visitors going to take away? You come all the way to see our fine city with its many points of historical and civic interest, also many quaint customS, and you wake up dead in some back alley or as it might be floating down the Ankh, how are you going to tell all your friends what a great time you're having? Let's face it, you've got to move with the timeS.' Zlorf and Ymor met each other's gaze.

"We have, have we?' said Ymor.

"Then let us move,'brother,' agreed Zlorf. In one movement he brought his blowgun to his mouth and sent a dart hissing towards the nearest troll. It spun around, hurling its axe, which whirred over the assassin's head and buried itself in a luckless thief behind him.

Rerpf ducked, allowing a troll behind him to raise itS huge iron crossbow and fire a spear-length quarrel into the nearest assassin. That was the start . . .

It has been remarked before that those who are sensitive to radiations in the far octarine - the eighth colour, the pigment of the imagination- can see things that others cannot.

Thus it was that Rincewind, hurrying through the crowded, flare-lit evening bazaars of Morpork With the luggage trundling behind him, jostled a tall dark figure, turned to deliver a few suitable curses, and beheld Death.

It had to be Death. No-one else went around with empty eye sockets and, of course, the scythe over one shoulder was another clue. As Rincewind stared in horror a courting couple, laughing at some private joke, walked straight through the apparition without appearing to notice it.

Death, insofar as it was possible in a face with no movable features, looked surprised.

RINCEWIND? Death said, in tones as deep and heavy as the slamming of leaden doors, far underground.

"Um,' said Rincewind, trying to back away from that eyeless stare.

BUT WHY ARE YOU HERE? (Boom, boom went crypt lids, in the worm-haunted fastnesses under old mountains . . .) "Um, why not?' said Rincewind. "Anyway, I'm sure you've got lots to do, so if you'll just-' I WAS SURPRISED THAT YOU JOSTLED ME,, RINCe WIND. FOR I HAVE AN APPOINTMENT WITH THEE THIS VERY NIGHT.

"oh no, not-' OF COURSE, WHAT'S SO BLOODY VEXING ABOUT THE WHOlE BUSINESS IS THAT I WAS EXPECTING TO MEET THEE IN PSUDOPOLIS.

"But that's five hundred miles away!' YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL ME, THE WHOLE SYSTeM'S GOT SCREWED UP AGAIN. I CAN SEE THAT. LOOK THERE'S NO CHANCE OF YOU-? Rincewind backed away, hands spread protectively in front of him. The dried fish salesman on a nearby stall watched this madman with interest.

"I COULD LEND YOU A VERY FAST HORSE.

IT WON'T HURT A BIT." 'No!' Rincewind turned and ran. Death watched him go and shrugged bitterly.

SOD YOU, THEN, Death said. He turned, and noticed the fish salesman. With a snarl Death reached out a bony finger and stopped the man's heart, but he didn't take much pride in it.

Then death remembered what was due to happen later that night. It would not be true to say that death smiled, because in any case His features were perforce frozen in a calcareous grin. But He hummed a little tune, cheery as a plague pit, and pausing only to extract the life from a passing mayfly, and one-ninth of the lives from a cat cowering under the fish stall (all cats can see into the octarine) - Death turned on His heel and set off towards the Broken Drum.

ShortStreet,Morpork, is in fact one of the longest in the city. Filigree Street crosses its turnwise end in the manner of the crosspiece of a T, and the Broken Drum is so placed that it looks down the full length of the street.

At the furthermost end of Short Street a dark oblong rose on hundreds of tiny legs, and started to run. At first it moved at no more than a lumbering trot, but by the time it was halfway up the street it was moving arrow-fast . . .

A darker shadow inched its way along one of the walls of the Drum, a few yards from the two trolls who were guarding the door. Rincewind was sweating. If they heard the faint clinking of the specially-prepared bags at his belt . . .

One of the trolls tapped his colleague on the Shoulder, producing a noise like two pebbles being knocked together. He pointed down the starlit street . . .

Rincewind darted from his hiding place, turned, and hurled his burden through the Drum's nearest window Withel saw it arrive. The bag arced across the room, turning slowly in the air, and burst on the edge of a table. A moment later gold coins were rolling across the floor, spinning, glittering.

The room was suddenly silent, save for the tiny noises of gold and the whimpers of the wounded With a curse Withel despatched the assassin he had been fighting. "it's a trick!' he screamed. "No-one mov Three score men and a dozen trolls froze in mid-grope.

Then, for the third time, the door burst open. Two trolls hurried through it, slammed it behind them dropped the heavy bar across it and fled down the stairs.

Outside there was a sudden crescendo of running feet. And, for the last time, the door opened. In fact it exploded, the great wooden bar being hurled far across the room and the frame itself giving way.

Door and frame landed on a table, which flew into splinters. It was then that the frozen fighters noticed that there was something else in the pile of wood. It was a box, shaking itself madly to free itself of the smashed timber around it.

Rincewind appeared in the ruined doorway hurling another of his gold grenades. It Smashed into a wall, showering coins.

Down in the cellar Broadman looked up, muttered to himself, and carried on with his work. His entire spindlewinter's supply of candles had already been strewn on the floor, mixed with his store of kindling wood. Now he was attacking a barrel of lamp oil.

'innsewer-ants' he muttered. Oil gushed out and swirled around his feet.

Withel stormed across the floor, his face a mask of rage. Rincewind took careful aim and caught the thief full in the chest with a bag of gold.

But now Ymor was shouting, and pointing an accusing finger. A raven swooped down from its perch in the rafters and dived at the wizard, talons open and gleaming.

It didn't make it. At about the halfway point the Luggage leapt from its bed of splinters, gaped briefly in mid-air, and snapped shut.

It landed lightly. Rincewind saw its lid open again, slightly. Just far enough for a tongue, large as a palm leaf, red as mahogany, to lick up a few errant feathers.

At the same moment the giant candlewheel fell from the ceiling, plunging the room into gloom.

Rincewind, coiling himself like a spring, gave a Standing jump and grasped a beam, swinging himself up into the relative safety of the roof with a strength that amazed him.

"Exciting, isn't it?' said a voice by his ear.

Down below, thieves, assassins, trolls and merchants all realised at about the same moment that they were in a room made treacherous of foothold by gold coins and containing something, among the Suddenly menacing shapes in the semi-darkness, that waS absolutely horrible. As one they made for the door, but had two dozen different recollections of its exact position.

High above the chaos Rincewind stared at Twoflower.

"Did you cut the lights down?' he hissed.

'Yes.' 'How come you're up here?' 'I thought I'd better not get in everyone's way Rincewind considered this. There didn't seem to be much he could say. Twoflower added: "A real brawl! Better than anything I'd imagined! Do you think I ought to thank them? Or did you arrange it? ' Rincewind looked at him blankly. "i think we ought to be getting down now,' he said hollowly.

'Everyone's gone.' He dragged Twoflower across the littered floor and up the steps. They burst out into the tail end of the night. There were still a few stars but the moon was down, and there was a faint grey glow to rimward. Most important, the street was empty.

Rincewind sniffed.

"Can you smell oil?' he said.

Then Withel stepped out of the shadows and tripped him up.

At the top of the cellar steps Broadman knelt down and fumbled in his tinderbox. It turned out to be damp.

"i'll kill that bloody cat,' he muttered, and groped for the spare box that was normally on the ledge by the door. It was missing. Broadman said a bad word.

A lighted taper appeared in mid-air, right beside him.

HERE, TAKE THIS.

"Thanks,' said Broadman DON'T MENTION IT.

Broadman went to throw the taper down the steps. His hand paused in mid-air. He looked at the taper, his brow furrowing. Then he turned around and held the taper up to illuminate the scene. It didn't shed much light, but it did give the darkness a shape . . .

"Oh, no' he breathed.

BUTT YES, said Death.

Rincewind rolled.

for a moment he thought Withel was going to spit him where he lay. But it was worse than that. He was waiting for him to get up.

'I see you have a sword, wizard,' he said quietly. "I suggest you rise, and we shall see how well you use it.' Rincewind Stood up as slowly as he dared, and drew from his belt the short sword he had taken from the guard a few hours and a hundred years ago. It was a short blunt affair compared to Withel 's hair-thin rapier.

"But I don't know how to use a sword,' he wailed.

"Good.' 'You know that wizards can't be killed by edged weapons?' Said Rincewind desperately.

Withel smiled coldly. "So I have heard,' he said. "i look forward to putting it to the test.' He lunged.

Rincewind caught the thrust by sheer luck, jerked his hand away in Shock, deflected the second stroke by coincidence, and took the third one through his robe at heart-height.

There was a clink.

Withel's Snarl of triumph died in his throat. He drew the sword out and prodded again at the wizard, who was rigid with terror and guilt. There was another clink, and gold coins began to drop out of the hem of the wizard's robe.

"So you bleed gold, do you?' hissed Withel. can't have you got gold concealed in that raggedy beard, you little' As his Sword went back for his final sweep the sullen glow that had been growing in the doorway of the Broken Drum flickered, dimmed, and erupted into a roaring fireball that sent the walls billowing outward and carried the roof a hundred feet into the air before bursting through it, in a gout of red-hot tiles.

Withel stared at the boiling flames, unnerved.

And Rincewind leapt. He ducked under the thief's sword arm and brought his own blade around in an arc so incompetently misjudged that it hit the man flat-first and jolted out of the wizard's hand. Sparks and droplets of flaming oil rained down as Withel reached out with both gauntleted hands and grabbed Rincewind's neck, forcing him down.

"You did this!' he screamed. "You and your box of triCkery. ' His thumb found Rincewind's windpipe. This is it, the wizard thought. Wherever I'm going, it can't be worse than here . . .

"Excuse me,' said Twoflower.

Rincewind felt the grip lessen. And now Withel was slowly getting up, a look of absolute hatred on his face.

A glowing ember landed on the wizard. He brushed it off hurriedly, and scrambled to his feet.

Twoflower was behind Withel, holding the man's own needle-sharp sword with the point resting in the small of the thiefs back. Rincewind's eyes narrowed. He reached into his robe, then withdrew his hand bunched into a fist.

"Don't move,' he said.

"Am I doing this right?' asked Twoflower anxiously.

'He says he'll skewer your liver if you move,' Rincewind translated freely.

"i doubt it,' said Withel.

"Bet?' "no!." As Withel tensed himself to turn on the tourist Rincewind lashed out and caught the thief on the jaw. Withel stared at him in amazement for a moment, and then quietly toppled into the mud.

The wizard uncurled his stinging fist and the roll of gold coins slipped between his throbbing fingers.

He looked down at the recumbent thief.

"Good grief,' he gasped.

He looked up and yelled as another ember landed on his neck. Flames were racing along the rooftops on the other side of the street. All around him people were hurling possessions from windows and dragging horses from smoking stables. Another explosion in the white-hot volcano that was the Drum sent a whole marble mantelpiece scything overhead.

'The Widdershin Gate's the nearest!' Rincewind shouted above the crackle of collapsing rafters.

"come on!' He grabbed Twoflower's reluctant arm and dragged him down the street.

"my luggage!' "blast your luggage. Stay here much longer and you'll go where you don't need luggage. Come on!' screamed rincewind.

They jogged on through the crowd of frightened people leaving the area, while the wizard took great mouthfuls of cool dawn air. Something was puzzling him.

"I'm sure all the candles went out,' he said. "So how did the Drum catch fire?' "i don't know,' moaned Twoflower. "it's terrible, Rincewind. We were getting along so well, too.' Rincewind stopped in astonishment, so that another refugee cannoned into him and spun away with an oath.

"Getting on?' "Yes, a great bunch of fellows, I thought language was a bit of a problem, but they were so keen for me to join their party, they just wouldn't take' no for an answer - really friendly people, I thought . . .' Rincewind started to correct him, then realised he didn't know how to begin.

"it'll be a blow for old Broadman,' Twoflower continued. "Still, he was wise. I've still got the rhinu he paid as his first premium.' Rincewind didn't know the meaning of the word premium, but his mind was working fast.

"You inn-soered the Drum?' he said. "You bet Broadman it wouldn't catch fire?' 'Oh yes. Standard valuation. Two hundred rhinu, Why do you ask?' Rincewind turned and stared at the flames racing towards them, and wondered how much of Ankh Morpork could be bought for two hundred rhinu.

Quite a large piece, he decided. Only not now, not the way those flames were moving . . .

He glanced down at the tourist.

"You-' he began, and searched his memory for the worst word in the Trob tongue; the happy little beTrobi didn't really know how to swear properly.

"You,' he repeated. Another hurrying figure bumped into him, narrowly missing him with the blade over its shoulder. Rincewind's tortured temper exploded.

"You little (such a one who, while wearing a copper nose ring, stands in a footbath atop Mount Raruaruaha during a heavy thunderstorm and shouts that Alohura, Goddess of Lightning, has the facial features of a diseased uloruaha root.' JUST DOING MY JOB, said the figure, stalking off.

Every word fell as heavily as slabs of marble; moreover, Rincewind was certain that he was the only one who heard them.

He grabbed Twoflower again.

"Let's get out of here!' he suggested.

One interesting side effect of the fire in AnkhMorpork concerns the inn-sewer-ants policy, which left the city through the ravaged roof of the Broken Drum, was wafted high into the discworld's atmosphere on the ensuing thermal, and came to earth several days and a few thousand miles away on an uloruaha bush in the beTrobi islands. The simple, laughing islanders subsequently worshipped it as a god, much to the amusement of their more sophisticated neighbours. Strangely enough the rainfall and harvests in the next few years were almost .supernaturally abundant, and this led to a research team being despatched to the islands by the Minor Religions faculty of Unseen University. Their verdict was that it only went to show.

The fire, driven by the wind, spread out from the Drum faster than a man could walk. The timbers of the Widdershin Gate were already on fire when Rincewind, his face blistered and reddened from the flames, reached them. By now he and Twoflower were on horseback - mounts hadn't been that hard to obtain. A wily merchant had asked fifty times their worth, and had been left gaping when one thousand times their worth had been pressed into hiS hands.

They rode through just before the first of the big gate timbers descended in an explosion of sparks Morpork was already a cauldron of flame.

As they galloped up the red-lit road Rincewind glanced sideways at his travelling companion currently trying hard to learn to ride a horse.

"Bloody hell,' he thought. "He's alive! Me too.

Who'd have thought it? Perhaps there is something in this reflected-sound-of-underground-spirits?' It was a cumbersome phrase. Rincewind tried to get his tongue round the thick syllables that were the word in Twoflower's own language.

"Ecornoex?'he tried. "Ecro-gnothics? Echo-gnomicS? That would do. That sounded about right.

Several hundred yards downriver from the last smouldering suburb of the city a strangely rectangular and apparently heavily-waterlogged object touched the mud on the widdershin bank. Immediately it sprouted numerous legs and scrabbled for a purchase.

Hauling itself to the top of the bank the Luggage-Streaked with soot, stained with water and very very angry - shook itself and took its bearings.

Then it moved away at a brisk trot, the small and incredibly ugly imp that was perching on its lid watching the scenery with interest.

Bravd looked at the Weasel and raised his eyebrows.

"And that's it,' said Rincewind, "The Luggage caught up with us, don't ask me how. Is there any more wine?' The Weasel picked up the empty wineskin.

"i think you have had just about enough wine this night,' he said.

Bravd's forehead wrinkled.

'Gold is gold,' he said finally. 'How can a man with plenty of gold consider himself poor? You're either poor or rich. It stands to reason Rincewind hiccupped. He was finding Reason rather difficult to hold on to. "Well,' he said, "what I think is, the point is, well, you know octiron?' The two adventurers nodded. The strange iridescent metal was almost as highly valued in the lands around the Circle Sea as sapient pearwood, and was about as rare. A man who owned a needle made of octiron would never lose his way, since it always pointed to the Hub of the discworld, being acutely sensitive to the disc's magical field; it would also miraculously darn his socks.

'Well, my point is, you see, that gold also has its sort of magical field. Sort of financial wizardry.

Echo-gnomics.' Rincewind giggled.

The Weasel stood up and stretched. The sun was well up now, and the city below them was wreathed in mists and full of foul vapours. Also gold, he decided. Even a citizen of Morpork would, at the very point of death, desert his treasure to save his skin. Time to move.

The little man called Twoflower appeared to be asleep' the Weasel looked down at him and shook his head. 'The city awaits, such as it is,' he said . "Thank you for a pleasant tale, Wizard. What will you do now?' He eyed the Luggage, which immediately backed away and snapped its lid at him.

"Well, there are no ships leaving the city now,' giggled Rincewind. "I suppose we'll take the coast road to Quirm. I've got to look after him, you see.

But look, I didn't make it-' "Sure, sure,' said the Weasel soothingly. He turned away and swung himself into the saddle of the horse that Bravd was holding. A few moments later the two heroes were just specks under a cloud of dust, heading down towards the charcoal city.

Rincewind stared muzzily at the recumbent tourist. At two recumbent tourists. In his somewhat defenceless state a stray thought, wandering through the dimensions in search of a mind to harbour it, slid into his brain.

"Here's another fine mess you've got me into,' he moaned, and slumped backwards.

'Mad,' said the Weasel. Bravd, galloping along a few feet away, nodded.

"All wizards get like that,' he said. "it's the quicksilver fumes. Rots their brains. Mushrooms, too ' HHowever-' said the brown-clad one. He reached into his tunic and took out a golden disc on a short chain. Bravd raised his eyebrows.

"The wizard said that the little man had some sort of golden disc that told him the time,' said the Weasel.

'ArouSing your cupidity, little friend? You always were an expert thief, Weasel.' "Aye,' agreed the Weasel modestly. He touched the knob at the disc's rim, and it flipped open.

The very small demon imprisoned within looked up from its tiny abacus and scowled. 'it lacks but ten minutes to eight of the clock,' it snarled. The lid slammed shut, almost trapping the Weasel's fingers With an oath the Weasel hurled the time-teller far out into the heather, where it possibly hit a stone.

Something, in any event, caused the case to split'.

there was a vivid octarine flash and a whiff of brimstone as the time being vanished into whatever demonic dimension it called home.

"What did you do that for?' said Bravd, who hadn't been close enough to hear the words.

"do what?' said the Weasel. "i didn't do anything Nothing happened at all. Come on - we're wasting opportunities! ' Bravd nodded. Together they turned their steeds and galloped towards ancient Ankh, and honest enchantments.

tHE SENDING OF EIGHT PROLOGUE The discworld offers sights far more impressive than those found in universes built by Creators with less imagination but more mechanical aptitude.

Although the disc's sun is but an orbiting moonlet, its prominences hardly bigger than croquet hoops, this slight drawback must be set against the tremendous sight of Great A'Tuin the Turtle, upon Whose ancient and meteor-riddled shell the disc ultimately rests. Sometimes, in His slow journey acroSS the shores of infinity, He moves His countrysized head to Snap at a passing comet.

But perhaps the most impressive sight of all - if only because most brains, when faced with the Sheer galactic enormity of A'Tuin, refuse to believe it- is the endless Rimfall, where the seas of the disc boil ceaselessly over the Edge into space. Or perhapS it is the Rimbow, the eight-coloured, worldgirdling rainbow that hovers in the mist-laden air over the Fall. The eighth colour is octarine, caused by the scatter-effect of strong sunlight on an intense magical field.

Or perhaps, again, the most magnificent sight is the Hub. There, a spire of green ice ten miles high rises through the clouds and supports at its peak the realm of Dunmanifestin, the abode of the disc gods.

The disc gods themselves, despite the splendour of the world below them, are seldom satisfied. It is embarrassing to know that one is a god of a world that only exists because every improbability curve must have its far end; especially when one can peer into other dimensions at worlds whose Creators had more mechanical aptitude than imagination No wonder, then, that the disc gods spend more time in bickering than in omnicognizance.

On this particular day Blind Io, by dint oF constant vigilance the chief of the gods, sat with his chin on his hand and looked at the gaming board on the red marble table in front of him. Blind Io had got his name because, where his eye sockets should have been, there were nothing but two areas of blank skin. His eyes, of which he had an impressively large number, led a semi-independent life of their own. Several were currently hovering above' the table.

The gaming board was a carefully-carved map of the disc world, overprinted with squares. A number of beautifully modelled playing pieces were now occupying some of the squares. A human onlooker would, for example, have recognized in two of them the likenesses of Bravd and the Weasel. Others represented yet more heroes and champions, of which the disc had a more than adequate supply. Still in the game were Io, Offler the Crocodile God, Zephyrus the god of slight breezes, Fate, and the lady'. There was an air of concentration around the board now that the lesser players had been removed from the Game. Chance had been an early casualty, running her hero into a full house of armed gnolls (the result of a lucky throw by Offler) and shortly afterwards Night had cashed his chips, pleading an" appointment with Destiny. Several minor deitieS had drifted up and were kibitzing over the shoulders of the players.

Side bets were made that the Lady would be the next to leave the board. Her last champion of any standing was now a pinch of potash in the ruins of still-smoking Ankh-Morpork. and there were hardly any pieces that she could promote to first rank.

Blind Io took up the dice-box, which was a skull various orifices had been stoppered with rubies, and with several of his eyes on the lady he rolled three fives.

She smiled This was the nature of the Lady's eyes: they were bright green, lacking iris or pupil, and they glowed from within.

The room was silent as she scrabbled in her box of pieces and, from the very bottom, produced a couple that she set down on the board with two decisive clicks. The rest of the playerS, as one God, craned forward to peer at them.

"A wenegad wiffard and tome fort of clerk,' said Offler the Crocodile God, hindered as usual by hiS tuskS. 'Well, weally! ' With one claw he pushed a pile of bone-white tokens into the centre of the table.

The Lady nodded slightly. She picked up the dicecup and held it as steady as a rock, yet all the Gods could hear the three cubes rattling about inside.

And then She sent them bouncing across the table.

A six. A three. A five.

Something was happening to the five, however.

Battered by the chance collision of several billion molecules, the die flipped onto a point, spun gently and came down a seven.

Blind Io picked up the cube and counted the sides. cCome on,' he said wearily play fair.' THE SENDING OF EIGHT The road from Ankh-Morpork to Quirm is high, white and winding, a thirty-league stretch of potholes and half-buried rocks that spirals around mountains and dips into cool green valleys of citrus trees, crosses liana-webbed gorges on creaking rope bridges and is generally more picturesque than Picturesque. That was a new word to Rincewind the wizard (Being Unseen University failed.) It was one of a number he had picked up since leaving the charred ruins of Ankh-Morpork. Quaint was

another one. Picturesque meant - he decided after careful observation of the scenery that inspired Twoflower to use the word - that the landscape was horribly precipitous. Quaint, when used to describe the occasional village through which they passed, meant fever-ridden and tumbledown.

Twoflower was a tourist, the first ever seen on the discworld. Tourist, Rincewind had decided, meant 'idiot'.

As they rode leisurely through the thyme-scented bee-humming air, Rincewind pondered on the experiences of the last few days. While the little foreigner was obviously insane, he was also generous and considerably less lethal than half the people the wizard had mixed with in the city Rincewind rather liked him. Disliking him would have been like kicking a puppy.

Currently Twoflower was showing a great interest in the theory and practice of magic.

"it all seems, well, rather useless to me,' he said. 'I always thought that, you know, a wizard just said the magic words and that was that. Not all this dioqe memorising.

Rincewind agreed moodily. He tried to explain that magic had indeed once been wild and lawless, but had been tamed back in the mists of time by the Olden Ones, who had bound it to obey among other things the Law of Conservation of Reality; this demanded that the effort needed to achieve a goal should be the same regardless of the means used . In practical terms this meant that, say, creating the illuSion of a glass of wine was relatively easy, since it involved merely the subtle shifting of light patterns. On the other hand, lifting a genuine wineglass a few feet in the air by sheer mental energY required several hours of systematic preparation if the wizard wished to prevent the simple principle of leverage flicking his brain out through his ears.

He went on to add that some of the ancient magic could still be found in its raw state, recognisable- to the initiated - by the eightfold shape it made in the crystalline Structure

of space-time. There was the metal octiron, for example, and the gas octogen Both radiated dangerous amounts of raw enchantment.

"it's all very depressing,' he finished.

"Depressing?" rincewind turned in his saddle and glanced at Twoflower's Luggage, which was currently ambling along on itS little legs, occasionally snapping its lid at butterflies. He sighed.

'Rincewind thinks he ought to be able to harness the lightning,' said the picture-imp, who was observing the passing scene from the tiny doorway of the box slung around Twoflower's neck. He had Spent the morning painting picturesque views and quaint SceneS for his master, and had been allowed to knock off for a smoke.

'When I said harness I didn't mean harness, snapped Rincewind. 'I meant, well I just meant that - I dunno,I just can't think of the right words. I just think the world ought to be more sort of organised.' "That's just fantasy,' said Twoflower.

"i know. That's the trouble.' Rincewind sighed again. It was all very well going on about pure logic and how the universe was ruled by logic and the harmony of numbers, but the plain fact of the matter was that the disc was manifestly traversing space on the back of a giant turtle and the gods had a habit of going round to atheists' houses and smashing their windows.

There was a faint sound, hardly louder than the noise of the bees in the rosemary by the road. It had a curiously bony quality, as of rolling skulls or a whirling dicebox. Rincewind peered around. There was no-one nearby.

For some reason that worried him.

Then came a slight breeze, that grew and went in the space of a few heartbeats. It left the world unchanged save in a few interesting particulars.

There was now, for example, a five-metre tall mountain troll standing in the road. It was exceptionally angry. This was partly because trolls generally are, in any case, but it was exacerbated by the fact that the sudden and instantaneous teleportation from its lair in the Rammerorck Mountains three thousand miles away and a thousand yards closer to the Rim had raised its internal temperature to a dangerous level, in accordance with the laws of conservation of energy.

So it bared its fangs and charged.

"What a strange creature,' Twoflower remarked, 'is it dangerous?' "Only to people!' shouted Rincewind. He drew his sword and, with a smooth overarm throw, completely failed to hit the troll. The blade plunged on into the heather at the side of the track There was the faintest of sounds, like the rattle of old teeth. The sword struck a boulder concealed in the heather - concealed, a watcher might have considered, so artfully that a moment before it had not appeared to be there at all. It sprang up like a leaping Salmon and in mid-ricochet plunged deeply 'into the back of the troll's grey neck.

The creature grunted, and with one swipe of a claw gouged a wound in the flank of Twoflower's horse, which screamed and bolted into the trees at the roadside. The troll spun around and made a grab for Rincewind.

Then its sluggish nervous system brought it the message that it was dead. It looked surprised for a moment, and then toppled over and shattered into gravel (trolls being silicaceous lifeforms, their bodies reverted instantly to stone at the moment of death).

'Aaargh,' thought Rincewind as his horse reared in terror. He hung on desperately as it staggered two-legged across the road and then, screaming, turned and galloped into the woods.

The sound of hoofbeats died away, leaving the air to the hum of bees and the occasional rustle of butterfly wingS. There was another sound, too, a strange noiSe for the bright time of noonday.

It sounded like dice.

"Rincewind?' The long aiSles of trees threw Twoflower's voice from side to side and eventually tossed it back to him, unheeded. He sat down on a rock and tried to think.

FirStly, he was lost. That was vexing, but it did not worry him unduly. The forest looked quite interesting and probably held elves or gnomes, perhaps both. In fact on a couple of occasions he had thought he had seen strange green faces peering down at him from the branches. Twoflower had always wanted to meet an elf. In fact what he really wanted to meet was a dragon, but an elf would do. Or a real goblin.

His Luggage was missing, and that was annoying. It was also starting to rain. He squirmed uncomfortably on the damp stone, and tried to look on the bright side. for example, during its mad dash his plunging horse had burst through some rushes and disturbed a she-bear with her cubs, but had gone on before the bear could react. Then it had suddenly been galloping over the sleeping bodies of a large wolf pack and, again, its mad speed had been such that the furious yelping had been left far behind. Nevertheless, the day was wearing on and perhaps it would be a good idea - Twoflower thought - not to hang about, in the open. Perhaps there was a...he racked his brains trying to remember what sort of accommodation forests traditionally offered . . . perhaps there was a ginger bread house or something? The stone really was uncomfortable. Twoflower looked down and, for the first time, noticed the strange carving.

It looked like a spider. Or was it a squid? Moss and lichens rather blurred the precise details. But they didn't blur the runes carved below it. Twoflower could read them clearly, and they said: Traveller the hospitable temple of Bel-Shamharoth lies one

thousand paces Hubwards. Now this was strange, Twoflower realized, because although he could read the message the actual letters were completely unknown to him. Somehow the message was arriving in his brain without the tedious necessity of passing through his eyes.

He stood up and untied his now-riddable horse from a sapling. He wasn't sure which way the Hub lay. but there seemed to be an old track of sorts leading away between the trees. This Bel-Shamharoth seemed prepared to go out of his way to help stranded travellers. In any case, it was that or the wolves. Twoflower nodded decisively.

It is interesting to note that, several hours later, a couple of wolves who were following Twoflower's scent arrived in the glade. Their green eyes fell on the strange eight-legged carving - which may indeed have been a spider, or an octopus, or may yet again have been something altogether more strange - and they immediately decided that they weren't so hungry, at that.

About three miles away a failed wizard was hanging by his hands from a high branch in a beech tree.

This was the end result of five minutes of crowded activity. First, an enraged she-bear had barged through the undergrowth and taken the throat out of his horse with one swipe of her paw. Then, as Rincewind had fled the carnage, he had run into a glade in which a number of irate wolves were milling about. His instructors at Unseen University, who had despaired of Rincewind's inability to maSter levitation, would have then been amazed at the speed with which he reached and climbed the nearest tree, without apparently touching it.

Now there was just the matter of the snake. ' It waS large and green, and wound itself along the branch with reptilian patience. Rincewind wondered if it was poisonous, then chided himself for aSking Such a silly question. Of course it would be poiSonous.

"What are you grinning for?' he asked the figure on the next branch.

I CAN'T HELP IT, said Death. NOW WOULD YOU BE SO KIND AS TO LET GO? I CAN'T HANG AROUND AlL DAY.

"i can,' said Rincewind defiantly.

The wolves clustered around the base of the tree looked up with interest at their next meal talking to himself.

IT WON'T HURT, said Death. If words had weight, a single sentence from Death would have anchored a ship.

Rincewind's arms screamed their agony at him.

He scowled at the vulture-like, slightly transparent figure.

"Won't hurt? ' he said. ' Being torn apart by wolves won't hurt?' He noticed another branch crossing his dangerously narrowing one a few feet away. If he coUld just reach it . . .

He swung himself forward, one hand outstretched.

The branch, already bending, did not break. It simply made a wet little sound and twisted.

Rincewind found that he was now hanging on to the end of a tongue of bark and fibre, lengthening aS it peeled away from the tree. He looked down, and with a sort of fatal satisfaction realized that he would land right on the biggest wolf.

Now he was moving slowly as the bark peeled back in a longer and longer strip. The snake watched him thoughtfully.

But the growing length of bark held. Rincewind began to congratulate himself until, looking up, he saw what he had hitherto not noticed. There was the largest hornets' nest he had ever seen, hanging right in his path.

He shut his eyes tightly.

Why the troll? he asked himself. Everything else is just my usual luck, but why the troll? What the hell is going on? Click. It may have been a twig snapping, except that the sound appeared to be inside Rincewind's head. Click, click. And a breeze that failed to set a single leaf atremble.

.The hornets' nest was ripped from the branch as the strip passed by. It shot past the wizard's head and he watched it grow smaller as it plummeted towards the circle of upturned muzzles.

The circle suddenly closed.

The circle suddenly expanded.

The concerted yelp of pain as the pack fought to escape the furious cloud echoed among the trees.

Rincewind grinned inanely.

Rincewind's elbow nudged something. It was the tree trunk. The strip had carried him right to the end of the branch. But there were no other branches.

The smooth bark beside him offered no handholds.

It offered hands, though. Two were even now thrusting through the mossy bark beside him; slim hands, green as young leaves. Then a shapely arm followed, and then the hamadryad leaned right out and graSped the astonished wizard firmly and, with that vegetable strength that can send roots queSting into rock, drew him into the tree. The solid bark parted like a mist, closed like a clam.

Death watched impassively.

He glanced at the cloud of mayflies that were dancing their joyful zigzags near His skull. He snapped His fingers. The insects fell .out of the air.

But, Somehow, it wasn't quite the same.

Blind Io pushed his stack of chips across the table, glowered through such of his eyes that were currently in the room, and strode out. A few demigods tittered. At least Offler had taken the loss of a perfectly good troll with precise, if somewhat reptilian, grace.

The Lady's last opponent shifted his seat until he faced her across the board.

"lord,' She said, politely.

"Lady,' he acknowledged. Their eyes met.

He was a taciturn god. It was said that he had arrived in the Discworld after some terrible and mysterious incident in another Eventuality. It iS Of course the pri vilege of gods to control their apparent outward form, even to other gods; the Fate of the discworld was currently a kindly man in late middle age, greying hair brushed neatly around features that a maiden would confidently proffer a glass of small beer to, should they appear at her back door. It was a face a kindly youth would gladly help over a stile. Except for his eyes, of course.

No deity can disguise the manner and nature of his eyes. The nature of the two eyes of the Fate of the discworld was this: that while at a mere glance they were simply dark, a closer look would reveal - too late! - that they were but holes opening on to a blackness so remote, so deep that the watcher would feel himself inexorably drawn into the twin pools of infinite night and their terrible, wheeling stars . . .

The lady coughed politely, and laid twenty-one white chips on the table. Then from her robe she took another chip, silvery and translucent and twice the size of the others. The soul of a true Hero always finds a better rate of exchange, and is valued highly by the gods.

Fate raised an eyebrow.

"And no cheating, Lady.' he said.

'But who could cheat Fate?' she asked. He shrugged.

"No-one. Yet everyone tries.' "And yet, again, I believe I felt you giving me a little assistance against the others?' "But of course. So that the endgame could be the sweeter, lady. And now . . .' He reached into his gaming box and brought forth a piece, setting it down on the board with a satisfied air. The watching deities gave a collective Sigh. Even the Lady was momentarily taken aback.

it was certainly ugly. The carving was uncertain, as if the craftsman's hands were shaking in horror of the thing taking shape under his reluctant fingers. It seemed to be all suckers and tentacles.

And mandibles, the lady observed. And one great eye.

"I thought such as He died out at the beginnings of Time,' she said.

"Mayhap our necrotic friend was loathe even to go near this one,' laughed Fate. He was enjoying himself.

"it should never have been spawned.' "Nevertheless,' said Fate gnomically. He scooped the dice into their unusual box, and then glanced up at her.

"Unless,' he added, "you wish to resign She shook her head.

"Play,' she said.

"You can match my stake Rincewind knew what was inside trees: wood, sap, posSibly squirrels. Not a palace.

Still- the cushions underneath him were definitely softer than wood, the wine in the wooden cup beside him was much tastier than sap, and there could be absolutely no comparison between a squirrel and the girl sitting before him, clasping her knees and watching him thoughtfully, unless mention was made of certain hints of furriness.

The room was high, wide and lit with a soft yellow light which came from no particular source that Rincewind could identify. Through gnarled and knotted archways he could see other rooms, and what looked like a very large winding staircase.

And it had looked a perfectly normal tree from the OUtSide, too.

The girl was green- flesh green. Rincewind could be absolutely certain about that, because all she was wearing was a medallion around her neck. Her long hair had a faintly mossy look about it. Her eyes had no pupils and were a luminous green. Rincewind wished he had paid more attention to anthropology lectures at University.

She had said nothing. Apart from indicating the couch and offering him the wine she had done no more than sit watching him, occasionally rubbing a deep scratch on her arm.

Rincewind hurriedly recalled that a dryad was so linked to her tree that she suffered wounds in sympathy"Sorry about that,' he said quickly. "it was just an accident. I mean, there were these wolves, and-' "You had to climb my tree, and I rescued you,' said the dryad smoothly. "How lucky for you. And for your friend, perhaps?' 'Friend?' "The little man with the magic box,' said the dryad.

"Oh, sure, him,' said Rincewind vaguely. "Yeah hope he's okay.' "He needs your help.' "He usually does. Did he make it to a tree too?' "He made it to the Temple of Bel-Shamharoth.' Rincewind choked on his wine. His ears tried to crawl into his head in terror of the syllables they had just heard. The Soul Eater before he could stop them the memories came galloping back. Once, while a student of practical magic at Unseen University, and for a bet, he'd slipped into the little room off the main library - the room with walls covered in protective lead pentagrams, the room no-one was allowed to occupy for more than four minutes and thirty-two seconds, which was a figure arrived at after two hundred years of cautious experimentation He had gingerly opened the Book, which was chained to the octiron pedestal in the middle of the rune-strewn floor not lest someone steal it, but lest it escape for it was the Octavo, so full of magic that it had its own vague sentience. One spell had indeed leapt from the crackling pageS and lodged itself in the dark recesses of his brain. And, apart from knowing that it was one of the Eight Great Spells, no-one would know which one until he said it. Even Rincewind did not. But he could feel it sometimes, sidling out of sight behind his Ego, biding itS time . . .

On the front of the Octavo had been a representation of Bel-Shamharoth. He was not Evil, for even EVIl has a certain vitality - Bel-Shamharoth was the,flip Side of the coin of which Good and evil are but one side.

"The Soul Eater. His number lyeth between seven and nine; it is twice four,' Rincewind quoted, his mind frozen with fear. "Oh no. Where's the Temple?' "Hubwards, towards the centre of the forest,' said the dryad. "it is very old.' "But who would be so stupid as to

worship Belhim? I mean, devils yes, but he's the Soul Eater-' 'There were - certain advantages. And the race that used to live in these parts had strange notions.' 'What happened to them, then?' "i did 'say they used to live in these parts."the dryad stood up and stretched out her hand. "Come. I am Druellae. Come with me and watch your friend's fate. It should be interesting.' "i'm not sure that-' began Rincewind.

The dryad turned her green eyes on him.

"do you believe you have a choice?' she asked A staircaSe broad as a major highwaY wound up through the tree, with vast rooms leading off at every landing. The sourceless yellow light was everywhere. There was also a sound like - Rincewind concentrated, trying to identify it- like far off thunder, or a distant waterfall.

"it's the tree,' said the dryad shortly.

"What's it doing?' said Rincewind.

"Living.' " I wondered about that. I mean, are we really in a tree? Have I been reduced in size? From outside it looked narrow enough for me to put my arms around.' "it iS.' "Um, but here I am inside it? 'You are.' "I'm,' said Rincewind.

Druellae laughed.

"i can see into your mind, false wizard! am I not a dryad? Do you not know that, what you belittle by the name tree is but the mere four-dimensional analogue of a whole multidimensional universe which - no, I can see you do not. I should have realised that you weren't a real wizard when I saw you didn't have a staff.' "Lost it in a fire,' lied Rincewind automatically "No hat with magic sigils embroidered on it.

it blew off.' no familiar.

"it died. Look, thanks for rescuing me, but if you don't mind I think I ought to be going. If you could show me the way out-' Something in her expression made him turn around. There were three he-dryads behind him.

They were as naked as the woman, and unarmed.

That last fact was irrelevant, however. They didn't look as though they would need weapons to fight Rincewind. They , looked as though they could shoulder their way through solid rock and beat up a regiment of trolls into the bargain. The three handsome giants looked down at him with wooden menace.' Their Skins were the colour of walnut husks, and under it muscles bulged like sacks of melons. He turned around again and grinned weakly at Druellae. Life was beginning to take on a familiar shape again. 'i'm not rescued, am I?' he said. 'i'm captured, right?' "Of course.' "And you're not letting me go?' It was a statement. Druellae shook her head. "You hurt the Tree. But you are lucky. Your friend is going to meet BelShamharoth. You will only die.' From behind two hands gripped his shoulders in much the same way that an old tree root coils relentlessly around a pebble.

"With a certain amount of ceremony, of course,' the dryad went on. "After the Sender of Eight has finished with your friend.' All Rincewind could manage to say was, "You know, I never imagined there were he-dryads. Not even in an oak tree.' One of the giants grinned at him.

Druellae snorted. "Stupid! Where do you think acorns come from?' There was a vast empty space like a hall, its roof loSt in the golden haze. The endless stair ran right through it.

Several hundred dryads were clustered at the other end of the hall. They parted respectfully when Druellae approached, and stared through Rincewind as he was propelled firmly along behind.

Most of them were females, although there were a few of the giant males among them. They stood like god-shaped statues among the small, intelligent females. Insects, thought Rincewind. The Tree is like a hive.

But why were there dryads at all? As far as he could recall, the tree people had died out centuries before. They had been out-evolved by humans, like most of the other Twilight Peoples. only elves and trolls had survived the coming of Man to the discworld; the elves because they were altogether too clever by half, and the troller-folk because they were at least as good as humans at being nasty, spiteful and greedy. Dryads were supposed to have died out, along with gnomes and pixies.

The background roar was louder here. Sometimes a pulsing golden glow would race up the translucent walls until it was lost in the haze overhead. Some power in the air made it vibrate.

"now incompetent wizard,' said Druellae, "see some magic. Not your weasel-faced tame magic, but root and -branch magic, the old magic. Wild magic.

Watch.' Fifty or so of the females formed a tight cluster, joined hands and walked backwards until they formed the circumference of a large circle. The rest of the dryads began a low chant. Then, at a nod from Druellae, the circle began to spin widderShinS.

As the pace began to quicken and the complicated threads of the chant began to rise Rincewind found himself watching fascinated. He had heard about the Old Magic at University, although it was forbidden to wizards. He knew that when the circle was spinning fast enough against the standing magical field of the discworld itself in its slow turning, the resulting astral friction would build up a vast potential difference which would earth itSelf in a vast discharge of the Elemental Magical Force, the circle was a blur now, and the walls of the Tree rang with the echoes of the chantRincewind felt the familiar sticky prickling in the scalp that indicated the build-up of a heavy charge of raw enchantment in the vicinity, and so he was not utterly amazed when, a few seconds later,

a shaft of vivid octarine light speared down from the invisible ceiling and focused, crackling, in the centre of the circle.

There it formed an image of a storm-swept, treegirt hill with a temple on its crest. Its shape did unpleasant things to the eye. Rincewind knew that if it was a temple to Bel-Shamharoth it would have eight sides. (Eight was also the Number of BelShamharoth, which was why a sensible wizard would never mention the number if he could avoid it. Or you'll be eight alive, apprentices were jocularly warned. Bel-Shamharoth was especially attracted to dabblers in magic who, by being as it were beachcombers on the shores of the unnatural were already half-enmeshed in his nets. Rincewind's room number in his hall of residence had been 7a. He hadn't been surprised).

Rain streamed off the black walls of the temple. The only sign of life was the horse tethered outside, and it wasn't Twoflower's horse. For one thing, it was too big. It was a white charger with hooves the size of meat dishes and leather harness aglitter with ostentatious gold ornamentation. It was currently enjoying a nosebag. There was something familiar about it. Rince wind tried to remember where he had seen it before.

It looked as though it was capable of a fair turn of speed,' anyway. A speed which, once it had lumbered up to it, it could maintain for a long time.

All Rincewind had to do was shake off his guards, fight his way out of the Tree. find the temple and Steal the horse out from under whateVer it was that Belshamharoth used for a nose.

'The Sender of "'eight has two for dinner, it seems.' said Druellae, looking hard at Rincewind. 'Who does that steed belong to, false wizard?' "I've no idea.' "No? Well, it does not matter. We shall see soon enough.' She waved a hand. The focus of the image moved inwards, darted through a great octagonal arch way and sped along the corridor within.

There was a figure there, sidling along stealthily with its back against one wall. Rincewind saw the gleam of gold and bronze.

There was no mistaking that shape. He'd seen it many times. The wide chest, the neck like a treetrunk, the surprisingly small head under its wild thatch of black hair looking like a tomato on a coffin . . . he could put a name to the creeping figure, and that name was Hrun the Barbarian.

Hrun was one of the Circle Sea's more durable heroes: a fighter of dragons, a despoiler of temples, a hired sword, the kingpost of every street brawl, He could even - and unlike many heroes of Rincewind's acquaintance - speak words of more than two syllables, if given time and maybe a hint or two.

There was a sound on the edge of Rincewind's hearing. It sounded like several skulls bouncing down the steps of some distant dungeon. He looked sideways at his guards to see if they had heard it.

They had all their limited attention focused on Hrun, who was admittedly built on the same lines as themselves. Their hands were resting lightly on the wizard's shoulders.

Rincewind ducked, jerked backwards like a tumbler, and came up running. Behind him he heard Druellae shout, and he redoubled his speed.

Something caught the hood of his robe, which tore off. A he-dryad waiting at the stairs spread his arms.

hurtling towards him. Without breaking his stride Rincewind ducked again, so low that his chin was on a level with his knees, while a fist like a log sizzled through the air by his ear.

Ahead of him a whole spinney of the tree men awaited. He spun around, dodged another blow from the puzzled guard, and sped back towards the circle, passing on the way the dryads who were pursuing him and leaving them as disorganized as a set of skittles.

But there were still more in front, pushing their way through the crowds of females and smacking their fists into the horny palms of their hands with anticipatory concentration.

"Stand still, false wizard,' said Druellae, stepping forward. Behind her the enchanted dancers spun on, the focus of the circle was now drifting along a violet-lit corridor.

Rincewind cracked.

"Will you knock that off ' he snarled . " "let's just get this Straight, right? I am, a real wizard! ' He stamped a foot petulantly. ' 'indeed?' said the dryad. "Then let us see you pass a Spell.' "uh-' began Rincewind. The fact was that, since the ancient and mysterious spell had squatted in his mind, he had been unable to remember even the Simplest cantrap for, say, killing cockroaches 'or Scratching the small of his back without using his hands. The mages at Unseen University had tried to explain this by suggesting that the involuntary memorising of the spell had, as it were, tied up all his spell-retention cells. In his darker moments Rincewind had come up with his own explanation as to why even minor Spells refused to stay in hiS head for more than a few seconds.

They were scared, he decided.

"Um-' he repeated.

'A small one would do,' said Druellae, watching him curl his lips in A frenzy of anger and emberrassment. She signalled, and a couple of he-dryads closed in.

The Spell chose that moment to vault into the temporarily-abandoned saddle of Rincewind's conSCiousness. He felt it sitting there, leering defiantly at him.

"i do know a spell,' he said wearily.

"Yes? Pray tell,' said Druellae.

Rincewind wasn't sure that he dared, although the Spell was trying to take control of his tongue. He fought it.

'You sed you could read my mind,' he said indistinctly. "Read it.' She stepped forward, looking mockingly into his eyes.

Her smile froze. Her hands raised protectively, she crouched back. From her throat came a sound of pure terror.

Rincewind looked around. The rest of the dryads were also backing away. What had he done? Something terrible, apparently.

But in his experience it was only a matter of time before the normal balance of the universe restored itself and started doing the usual terrible things to him. He backed away, ducked between the stillspinning dryads who were creating the magic circle, and watched to see what Druellae would do next.

"Grab him,' she screamed. "Take him a long way from the Tree and kill him!' Rincewind turned and bolted.

Across the focus of the circle.

There was a brilliant flash.

There was a sudden darkness.

There was a vaguely Rincewind-shaped violet shadow, dwindling to a point and winking out.

, There was nothing at all.

Hrun the Barbarian crept soundlessly along the corridors, which were lit with a light so violet that it was almost black. His earlier confusion was gone. ThiS was obviously a magical temple, and that explained everything.

It explained why, earlier in the afternoon, he had espied a chest by the side of the track while riding through this benighted forest. Its top was invitingly open, displaying much gold. But when he had leapt off hiS horse to approach it the cheSt had sprouted legs and had gone trotting off into the foreSt, stopping again a few hundred yards away.

Now, after several hours of teasing pursuit, he had lost it in these hell-lit tunnels. On the whole, the unpleasant carvings and occasional disjointed skeletons he paSSed held no fears for Hrun. This was partly because he was not exceptionally bright while being at the Same time exceptionally unimaginative, but it was also because odd carvings and perilous tunnels were all in a day's work. He Spent a great deal of time in similar Situations, seeking gold or demons or distressed virgins and relieving them respectively of their owners, their lives and at least one cause of their distress.

Observe Hrun, as he leaps cat-footed across a sUspicious tunnel mouth. Even in thiS violet light hiS Skin gleams coppery. There is much gold about hiS person, in the form of anklets and wristlets, but otherwise he is naked except for a leopardskin loincloth. He took that in the steaming forests of Howondaland, after killing its owner with his teeth. In hiS right hand he carried the magical black sword Kring, which was forged from a thunderbolt and haD a soul but suffers no scabbard. Hrun had stolen it only three days before from the impregnable palace of the Archmandrite of Be Ituni, and he was already regretting it. It was beginning to get on his nerves.

"i tell you it went down that last passage on the right,' hissed Kring in a voice like the scrape of a blade over stone.

"Be silent, ' "All I said was"Shut up!' And Twoflower . .

He was lost, he knew that. Either the building was much bigger than it looked, or he was now on some wide underground level without having gone down any steps, or - as he was beginning to suspect - the inner dimensions of the place disobeyed a fairly basic rule of architecture by being bigger than the outside. And why all these strange lights? They were eight-sided crystals set at regular intervals in the walls and ceiling, and they shed a rather unpleasant glow that didn't so much illuminate as outline the darkness.

And whoever had done those carvings on the wall, Twoflower thought charitably, had probably been drinking too much. For years.

On the other hand, it was certainly a fascinating building. Its builders had been obsessed with the number eight. The floor was a continuous mosaic of eight-sided tiles, the corridor walls and ceilings were angled to give the corridors eight sides if the walls and ceilings were counted and, in those places where part of the masonry had fallen in Twoflower noticed that even the stones themselves had eight sides.

"i don't like it,' said the picture imp, from his box around Twoflower's neck.

'Why not?' inquired Twoflower.

"it's weird.

'.but you're a demon. Demons can't call things weird.'I mean, what's weird to a demon? ' "oh, you know,' said the demon cautiously, glancing around nervously and shifting from claw to claw. "Things. Stuff.' Twoflower looked at him sternly. "What things?' The demon coughed nervously (demons do not breathe, however, every intelligent being,

whether it breathes or not, coughs nervously at some time in its life. And this was one of them as far as the demon was concerned).

.Oh, things,' it said wretchedly. "Evil things.

Things we don't talk about is the point I'm broadly trying to get across, master.' Twoflower shook his head wearily. "I wish Rincewind was here,' he said. "He'd know what to do.' 'Him?' sneered the demon. "Can't see a wizard coming' here. They can't have anything to do with the number eight.' The demon slapped a hand across hiS mouth guiltily.

Twoflower looked up at the ceiling.

"What was that?' he asked. "Didn't you hear something?' "Me? Hear? No! not a thing,' the demon insisted It jerked back into its box and slammed the door Twoflower tapped on it. The door opened a crack.

"it sounded like a stone moving,' he explained The door banged shut. Twoflower shrugged. "The place is probably falling to bits,' he said to himself. He stood up.

'I say!' he Shouted. Is anyone there?' AIR, Air, air, replied the dark tunnels.

'Hullo?' he tried. lo, Lo, lo.

"I know there's someone here, I just heard you playing dice! ' ICE, Ice, ice.

"Look, I had just-' Twoflower stopped. The reason for this was the bright point of light that had popped into existence a few feet from his eyes. It grew rapidly, and after a few seconds was the tiny bright shape of a man. At this stage it began to make a noise, or, rather Twoflower started to hear the noise it had been making all along. It sounded like a sliver of a Scream, caught in one long instant of time. The iridescent man was doll-sized

now, a tortured shape tumbling in slow motion while hanging in mid-air. Twoflower wondered why he had thought of the phrase "a sliver of a scream' . .

and began to wish he hadn't.

It was beginning to look like Rincewind. The wizard's mouth was open, and his face was brilliantly lit by the light of - what? Strange suns, Twoflower found himself thinking.'Suns men don't usually see. He shivered.

Now the turning wizard was half man-size. At that point the growth was faster, there was a sudden crowded moment, a rush of air, and an explosion of sound. Rincewind tumbled out of the air, screaming. He hit the floor hard, choked, then rolled over with his head cradled in hiS arms and his body curled up tightly.

When the dust had settled Twoflower reached out gingerly and tapped the wizard on the shoulder.

The human ball rolled up tighter.

"it's me,' explained Twoflower helpfully. The wizard unrolled a fraction.

"What?' he said.

"Me." In one movement Rincewind unrolled and bounced up in front of the little man, his hands gripping his shoulders desperately. His eyes were wild and wide.

"Don't say it!' he hissed. "Don't say it and we might get out! ' .Get out? How did you get in? Don't you know'Don't say it!' Twoflower backed away from thiS madman 'Don't say it!' 'Don't say what?' "the number.' "Number?' said Twoflower. "ey, Rincewind-' 'Yes, number! Between seven and nine. Four plus four' "What, ei-' Rincewind's hands clapped over the man's mouth. "Say it and we're doomed. Just don't think about, right. Trust me! '

"I don't understand,' wailed Twoflower. Rincewind relaxed slightly; which was to say that he Still made a violin string look like a bowl of jelly.

"Come on,' he said. "Let's try and get out. And I'll try and tell you.' After the first Age of Magic the disposal of grimoires began to become a severe problem on the discworld. A spell is still a spell even when imprisoned temporarily in parchment and ink. It has potency. This is not a problem while the book's owner still lives, but on hiS death the Spell book becomes a source of uncontrolled power that cannot eaSily be defused.

In short, spell books leak magic. Various solutions have been tried. Countries near the Rim simply loaded down the books of dead mages with leaden pentagrams and threw them over the Edge.

Near the Hub leSs satisfactory alternativeS were available. Inserting the offending books in canisters of negatively polarized octiron and sinking them in the fathomless depths of the sea was one (burial in deep caves on land was earlier ruled out after some districts complained of walking trees and five-headed cats) but before long the magic seeped out and eventually fishermen complained of shoals of invisible fish or psychic clams.

A temporary solution was the construction, in various centres of magical lore, of large rooms made of denatured octiron, which is impervious to most forms of magic. Here the more critical grimoires could be stored until their potency had attenuated.

That was how there came to be at Unseen University the Octavo, greatest of all grimoires, formerly owned by the Creator of the Universe. It was this book that Rincewind had once opened for a bet. He had only a second to stare at a page before setting off various alarm spells, but that was time enough for one spell to leap from it and settle in his memory like a toad in a stone.

"Then what?' said Twoflower.

"oh, they' dragged me out. Thrashed me, of course.' "And no-one knows what the spell does?' Rincewind shook his head.

"it'd vanished from the page,' he said. 'No-one will know until I say it. Or until I die, of course.

Then it will sort of say itSelf. For all I know it stops the universe, or ends Time, or anything.' Twoflower patted him on the shoulder.

"No sense in brooding,' he Said cheerfully. "Let's have another look for a way out.' Rincewind shook his head. All the terror had been spent now. He had broken through the terror barrier, perhaps, and was in the dead calm state of mind that lies on the other side. Anyway, he had ceased to gibber.

"We're doomed,' he stated. 'We've been walking around all night. I tell you, this place is a spiderweb. It doesn't matter which way we go, we're heading twoards the centre.' 'it was very kind of you to come looking for me, said Twoflower. "How did you manage it it was very impreSSive.' 'well,' began the wizard awkwardly. "I just couldn't leave old Twoflower there" and"So what we've got to do now is find this Bel Shamharoth person and explain things to him and perhaps he'll let us out,' said Twoflower.

Rincewind ran a finger around his ear.

'it must be the funny echoes in here, ' he said. "I thought I heard you use words like find and explain.

'That's right.' Rincewind glared at him in the hellish purple glow. 'Find Bel-Shamharoth?' he said.

"Yes. We don't have to get involved.' "Find the Soul Render and not get involved? Just give him a nod, I suppose, and ask the way to the exit? explain things to the Sender of

Eignnnngh,' Rincewind bit off the end of the word just in time and finished, "You're insane. Hey! Come back!' He darted down the passage after Twoflower, and after a few moments came to a halt with a groan.

The violet light was intenSe here, giving everything new and unpleasant colours. This wasn't a paSSage, it was a wide room with walls to a number that Rincewind didn't dare to contemplate, and 7a pasSageS radiating from it.

Rincewind saw, a little way off, a low altar with the Same number of sides as four times two. It didn't occupy the centre of the room, however. The centre was occupied by a huge stone slab with twice as many sides as a square. It looked masSive.

In the Strange light it appeared to be slightly tilted with one edge standing proud of the slabs around it.

Twoflower waS standing on it.

"Hey. Rincewind! Look what's here! The Luggage came ambling down one of the other passages that radiated from the room.

"That's great,' said Rincewind. 'Fine. It can lead us out of here. Now.' Twoflower was already rummaging in the chest "Yes,' he said. "After I've taken a few pictures Just let me fit the attachment-' 'I said now-' Rincewind stopped. Hrun the Barbarian was standing in the passage mouth directly opposite him, a great black sword held in one ham-sized fist.

"You?' said Hrun uncertainly.

"Ahaha. Yes,' said Rincewind. "Hrun, isn't it? Long time no see. What brings you here?' Hrun pointed to the luggage.

"That,' he said. This much conversation seemed to exhaust Hrun. Then he added, in a tone that combined statement, claim, threat and ultimatum: 'Mine.' "It belongs to Twoflower here,' said Rincewind.

"Here's a tip. Don't touch it.' It dawned on him that this was precisely the wrong thing to say, but Hrun had already pushed Twoflower away and was reaching for the Luggage . . . which sprouted legs, backed away, and raised its lid threateningly. In the uncertain light Rincewind thought he could see rows of enormous teeth, white as bleached beechwood.

"Hrun,' he said quickly, "there's something I ought to tell you.' Hrun turned a puzzled face to him.

"What?' he said.

"it's about numbers. Look, you know if you add seven and one, or three and five, or take two from ten. You get a number. While you're here don't say it and we might all stand a chance of getting out of here alive. Or merely just dead.' "Who is he?' asked Twoflower. He was holding a cage in his hands, dredged from the bottom-most depths of the Luggage. It appeared to be full of sulking pink lizardS.

'I am Hrun,' said Hrun proudly. Then he looked at Rincewind.

"What?' he said.

"Just don't say it, okay?' said Rincewind.

He looked at the sword in Hrun's hand. It was black, the sort of black that is leSs a colour than a graveyard of colours, and there was a highlyornate runic inscription up the blade. More noticeable still was the faint octarine glow that surrounded it. The sword must have noticed him, too, because it suddenly spoke in a voice like a claw being scraped across glass.

"Strange,' it Said. "Why can't he say eight?' EIGHT, hate, ate said the echoes. There was the faintest of grinding noises, deep under the earth.

And the echoes, although they became softer, refused to die away. They bounced from wall to wall, crossing and recrossing, and the violet light flickered in time with the sound.

"You did it!' sCreamed Rincewind. "i said you shouldn't say eight!' He Stopped, appalled at himself. But the word was out now, and joined its colleagues in the general BUBBuration.

Rincewind turned to run, but the air suddenly Seemed to be thicker than treacle. A charge of magic bigger than he had ever seen was building up; when he moved, in painful slow motion, his limbs left trails of golden sparks that traced their shape in the air.

Behind him there was a rumble as the great octagonal slab rose into the air, hung for a moment on one edge, and crashed down on the floor.

Something thin and black snaked out of the pit and wrapped itself around his ankle. He screamed as he landed heavily on the vibrating flagstones.

The tentacle started to pull him across the floor.

Then Twoflower was in front of him, reaching out for hiS hands. He grasped the little man's arms desperately and they lay looking into each other's faces. Rincewind slid on, even so.

"What's holding you?' he gasped.

"N-nothing!' said Twoflower. "What's happening?' "i'm being dragged into this pit, what do you think?' "Oh Rincewind, I'm sorry-' "You're sorry-' There was a noise like a singing

saw and the pressure on Rincewind's legs abruptly ceased. He turned his head and saw Hrun crouched by the pit, his sword a blur as it hacked at the tentacles racing out towards him.

Twoflower helped the wizard to his feet and they crouched by the altar stone, watching the manic figure as it battled the questing arms.

"it won't work,' said Rincewind. "The Sender can materialise tentacles. What are you doing?' Twoflower was feverishly attaching the cage of subdued lizards to the picture box, which he had mounted on a tripod.

"i've just got to get a picture of this,' he muttered.

"It's stupendous! Can you hear me, imp?' The picture imp opened his tiny hatch, glanced momentarily at the scene around the pit, and vanished into the box. Rincewind jumped as something touched his leg, and brought his heel down on a questing tentacle.

cCome on,' he said. "Time to go zoom.' He grabbed Twoflower's arm, but the tourist reSisted.

run away and leave Hrun with that thing?' he Said. Rincewind looked blank. 'Why not?' he said. "it's his job.' "But it'll kill him,' "It could be worse,' said Rincewind.

"What?' 'it could be us,' Rincewind pointed out logically.

cCome on!' Twoflower pointed. "Hey' he said. "It's got my Luggage! ' Before Rincewind could restrain him Twoflower ran around the edge of the pit to the box, which was being dragged across the floor while its lid snapped ineffectually at the tentacle that held it.

The little man began to kick at the tentacle in fury.

Another one snapped out of the melee around Hrun and caught him around the waist. Hrun himself was already an indistinct shape amid the tightening coilS. Even as Rincewind stared in horor the Hero's sword was wrenched from his graSp and hurled against a wall.

"Your spell!' shouted Twoflower.

Rincewind' did not move. He was looking at the Thing rising out of the pit. It was an enormous eye, and it was staring directly at him. He whimpered as a tentacle fastened itself around his waiSt.

The words of the spell rose unbidden in his throat. He opened his mouth as in a dream, shaping it around the first barbaric syllable.

Another tentacle shot out like a whip and coiled around his throat, choking him. Staggering and gaSping, Rincewind was dragged across the floor.

One flailing arm caught Twoflower's picture box as it skittered past on its tripod. He snatched it up instinctively, as hiS ancestors might have snatched up a stone when faced with a marauding tiger. If only he could get enough room to swing it against . . . the Eye filled the whole universe in front of him. Rincewind felt his will draining away like water from a sieve.

In front of him the torpid lizards stirred in their cage on the picture box. Irrationally, as a man about to be beheaded notices every scratch and stain on the executioner's block, Rincewind saw that they had overlarge tails that were bluishwhite and, he realized, throbbing alarmingly.

As he was drawn towards the Eye the terrorstruck Rincewind raised the box protectively, and at the same time heard the picture imp say "They're about ripe now, can't hold them

any longer. Everyone smile, please.' There was a flash of light so white and so brightit didn't seem like light at all.

Bel-Shamharoth screamed, a sound that started in the far ultrasonic and finished somewhere in Rincewind's bowels. The tentacles went momentarily as stiff as rods, hurling their various cargoes around the room, before bunching up protectively in front of the abused Eye. The whole mass dropped into the pit and a moment later the big slab was snatched up by several dozen tentacles and slammed into place, leaving a number of thrashing limbs trapped around the edge.

Hrun landed rolling, bounced off a wall and came up on his feet. He found his sword and started to chop methodically at the doomed arms Rincewind lay on the floor, concentrating on not going mad. A hollow wooden noise made him turn his head.

The Luggage had landed on its curved lid. Now it was rocking angrily and kicking its little legs in the air.

Warily, Rincewind looked around for Twoflower The little man was in a crumpled heap against the wall, but at least he was groaning.

The wizard pulled himself across the floor painfully, and whispered, "What the hell was that? "Why were they so bright?' muttered Twoflower "God, my head . . .' "Too bright?' said Rincewind. He looked across the floor to the cage on the picture box. The lizards inside, now noticeably thinner, were watching him with intereSt.

"The salamanders,' moaned Twoflower. "The picture'll be over-exposed, I know it . . .' "They're salamanders?' asked Rincewind incredulously.

"Of course. Standard attachment.' Rincewind staggered across to' the box and picked it up. He'd seen salamanders before, of course, but they had been small specimens. They

had also been floating in a jar of pickle in the curiobiological museum down in the cellars of Unseen University, since live salamanders were extinct around the Circle Sea.

He tried to remember the little he knew about them. They were magical creatures. They also had no mouths, since they subsisted entirely on the nourishing quality of the octarine wavelength in the discworld's sunlight, which they absorbed through their skins. Of course, they also absorbed the rest of the sunlight as well, storing it in a Special sac until it was excreted in the normal way.

A deSert inhabited by discworld salamanders was a veritable lighthouse at night.

Rincewind put them down and nodded grimly.

With all the octarine light in this magical place the creatures had been gorging themselves, and then nature had taken its course.

The picture box sidled away on its tripod.

Rincewind aimed a kick at it, and missed. He was beginning to diSlike Sapient pearwood.

Something small stung his cheek. He brushed it away irritably.

He looked around at a sudden grinding noise, and a voice like a carving knife cutting through silk said, "This is very undignified.' "Shuddup,' Said Hrun. He was using Kring to lever the top off the altar. He looked up at Rincewind and grinned. Rincewind hoped that rictus-strung grimace was a grin.

"Mighty magic,' commented the barbarian, pushing down heavily on the complaining blade with a hand the size of a ham. "Now we share the treasure eh?' Rincewind grunted as something small and hard struck his ear. There was a gust of wind, hardly felt.

"How do you know there's treasure in there?' he said.

Hrun heaved, and managed to hook his fingers under the stone. "You find chokeapples under a chokeapple tree,' he said. "You find treasure under altars. Logic.' He gritted his teeth. The stone swung up and landed heavily on the floor.

This time something struck Rincewind's hand heavily. He clawed at the air and looked at the thing he had caught. It was a piece of Stone with five-plus-three sides. He looked up at the ceiling Should it be sagging like that? Hrun hummed a little tune as he began to pull crumbling leather from the desecrated altar.

The air crackled, fluoresced, hummed. Intangible winds gripped the wizard's robe, flapping it out in eddies of blue and green sparks. Around Rincewind's head mad, half-formed Spirits howled and gibbered as they were sucked past.

He 'tried raising a hand. It was immediately surrounded by a glowing 'octarine corona as the rising magical wind roared past. The gale raced through the room without stirring one iota of dust, yet it was blowing Rincewind's eyelids inside out.

It screamed along the tunnels, its banshee-wail bouncing madly from stone to stone.

Twoflower staggered up, bent double in the teeth of the astral gale.

"What the hell is this?' he shouted.

Rincewind half-turned. Immediately the howling wind caught him, nearly pitching him over.

Poltergeist eddies, spinning in the rushing air, snatched at his feet.

Hrun's arm Shot out and caught him. A moment later he and Twoflower had been dragged into the lee of the ravaged altar, and lay panting on the floor. Beside them the talking sword Kring sparkled, its magical field boosted a hundredfold by the storm.

"Hold on!' screamed Rincewind.

"The wind!' shouted Twoflower. "Where's it coming from? Where's it blowing to?' He looked into Rincewind's mask of sheer terror, which made him redouble his own grip on the stones.

'We're doomed,' murmured Rincewind, while overhead the roof cracked and shifted. 'Where do ShadowS come from? That's where the wind is blowing. ' What was in fact happening, as the wizard knew, was that as the abused spirit of Bel-Shamharoth sank through the deeper chthonic planes his brooding spirit was being sucked out of the very stones into the region which, according to the discworld's moSt reliable prieSts, was both under the ground and Somewhere Else. In consequence his temple was being abandoned to the ravages of Time, who for thousands of shamefaced years had been reluctant to go near the place. Now the suddenly released, accumulated weight of all those pent-up seconds was bearing down heavily on the unbraced stones.

Hrun glanced up at the widening cracks and sighed. Then he put two fingers into his mouth and whistled.

Strangely the real sound rang out loudly over the pseudosound of the widening astral whirlpool that was forming in the middle of the great octagonal slab. It was followed by a hollow echo which sounded, he fancied, strangely like the bouncing of strange bones. Then came a noise with no hint of strangeness. it was hollow hoofbeats.

Hrun's warhorse cantered through a creaking archway and reared up by its master, its mane streaming in the gale. The barbarian pulled himself to his feet and slung his treasure bags into a sack that hung from the saddle, then hauled himSelf onto the beast's back. He

reached down and grabbed Twoflower by the scruff of his neck dragging him acroSs the saddle tree. As the horse turned around Rincewind took a desperate leap and landed behind Hrun, who raised no objection.

The horse pounded surefooted along the tunnels leaping sudden slides of rubble and adroitly side stepping huge stones as they thundered down from the straining roof. Rincewind, clinging on grimly looked behind them.

No wonder the horse was moving so swiftly Close behind, speeding through the flickering violet light, were a large ominous-looking chest and a picture box that skittered along dangerously on its three legs. So great was the ability of sapient pearwood to follow its master anywhere, the grave goods of dead emperors had traditionally been made of it...

They reached the outer air a moment before the octagonal arch finally broke and smashed into the flags.

The sun waS rising. Behind them a column of dust rose as the temple collapsed in on itself, but they did not look back. That was a shame, because Twoflower might have been able to obtain pictures unusual even by discworld standards.

There was movement in the smoking ruins. They seemed to be growing a green carpet. Then an oak tree spiralled up, branching out like an exploding green rocket, and was in the middle of a venerable copse even before the tips of its aged branches had stopped quivering. A beech burst out like a fungus, matured, rotted, and fell in a cloud of tinder dust amid its struggling offspring. Already the temple Was a half-buried heap of mossy stones.

But Time, having initially gone for the throat, Was now setting out to complete the job. The boiling interface between decaying magic and ascendant entropy roared down the hill and overtook the galloping horse, whose riders, being themselves creatures of Time,

completely failed to notice it. But it lashed into the enchanted forest with the whip of centuries.

"impressive, isn't it?' observed a voice by Rincewind's knee as the horse cantered through the haze of decaying timber and falling leaves.

The voice had an eerie metallic ring to it.

Rincewind looked down at Kring the sword. It had a couple of rubies set in the pommel. He got the impression they were watching him.

From the moorland rimwards of the wood they watched the battle between the trees and Time, which could only have one ending. It was a sort of cabaret to the main business of the halt, which Was the consumption of quite a lot of a bear which had incautiously come within bowshot of Hrun.

Rincewind watched Hrun over the top of his slab of greaSy meat. Hrun going about the business of being a hero, he realised, was quite different to the wine-bibbing, carousing Hrun who occasionally came to Ankh-Morpork. He was cat-cautious, lithe as a panther, and thoroughly at home.

And I've survived Bel-Shamharoth, Rincewind reminded himself. Fantastic.

Twoflower was helping the hero sort through the treasure stolen from the temple. It was mostly silver set with unpleasant purple stones. Representations of spiders, octopi and the tree-dwelling octarsier of the hubland wastes figured largely in the heap.

Rincewind tried to shut his ears to the grating voice beside him. It was no use.

" and then I belonged to the Pasha of Re'durat and played a prominent part in the battle of the Great Nef, which is where I received the slight nick you may have noticed some two-

thirds of the way up my blade,' Kring was saying from its temporary home in a tussock. "Some infidel was wearing an octiron collar, most unsporting, and of course I was a lot sharper in those days and my maSter used to use me to cut silk handkerchiefs in mid-air and - am I boring you?' 'Huh? Oh, no, no, not at all. It's all very interesting,' said Rincewind, with his eyes still on Hrun. How trustworthy would he be? Here they were, out in the wilds, there were trolls about . . .

"I could see you were a cultured person,' Kring went on. " seldom do I get to meet really interesting people, for any length of time, anyway.

What I'd really like is a nice mantelpiece to hang over, somewhere nice and quiet. I spent a couple of hundred years on the bottom of a lake once.' "That must have been fun,' said Rincewind absently.

"Not really,' said Kring.

"No, I suppose not.' "What I'd really like is to be a ploughshare. I don't know what that is, but it sounds like an existence with some point to it.

Twoflower hurried over to the wizard "I had a great idea,' he burbled.

"Why don't we 'Yah,' said Rincewind, wearily.

get Hrun to accompany us to Quirm?' Twoflower looked amazed. "How did you know?' he said. "I just thought you'd think it,' said Rincewind.

Hrun ceased stuffing silverware into his saddlebagS and grinned encouragingly at them. Then his eyeS Strayed back to the Luggage.

.if we had him with us, who'd attack us?' said Twoflower.

Rincewind scratched his chin. "Hrun?' he suggested.

"But we saved his life in the Temple!' .Well, if by attack you mean kill," said Rincewind, "i don't think he'd do that. He's not that sort.

He'd just rob us and tie us up and leave us for the wolves, I expect.' "Oh, come on.' "Look, this is real life,' snapped Rincewind. 'I mean, here you are, carrying around a box full of gold, don't you think anyone in their right minds would jump at the chance of pinching it?' I would he added mentally - if I hadn't seen what the Luggage does to prying fingers.

Then the answer hit him. He looked from Hrun to the picture box. The picture imp was doing itS laundry in a tiny tub, while the salamanders dozed in their cage.

"I've got an idea,' he said. "i mean, what is it heroeS really want?' 'Gold?' said Twoflower.

gNo. I mean really want.' Twoflower frowned. "i don't quite understand he Said. Rincewind picked up the picture box.

"Hrun,' he Said. cCome over here, will you? The dayS passed peacefully. True, a small band of bridge trolls tried to ambush them on one occasion, and a party of brigands nearly caught them unawares one night (but unwisely tried to investigate the Luggage before slaughtering the sleepers). Hrun demanded, and got, double pay for both occasions.

"if any harm comes to us,' said Rincewind, "then there will be no-one to operate the magic box. No more pictures of Hrun, you understand?' Hrun nodded, his eyes fixed on the latest picture.

It showed Hrun striking a heroic pose, with one foot on a heap of slain trolls.

"Me and you and little friend Two Flowers, we all get on hokay,' he said. "Also tomorrow, may we get a better profile, hokay?' He carefully wrapped the picture in trollskin and stowed it in his saddlebag, along with the others.

'it seems to be working,' said Twoflower admiringly, as Hrun rode ahead to scout the road.

"Sure,' said Rincewind. "What heroes like best is themselves . ' "You're getting quite good at using the picture box, you know that?' "Yar' "So you might like to have this.' Twoflower held out a picture.

"What is it?' asked Rincewind.

"oh, just the picture you took in.the temple.' Rincewind looked in horror. There, bordered by a few glimpses of tentacle, was a huge, whorled, calloused, potion-stained and unfocused thumb.

'That's the story of my life,' he said wearily.

"You win,' said Fate, pushing the heap of souls across the gaming table. The assembled gods relaxed. "There will be other games,' he added.

The Lady smiled into two eyes that were like holes in the universe.

and then there was nothing but the ruin of the forests 'and a cloud of dust on the horizon, which drifted away on the breeze. And, sitting on a pitted and mosS-grown milestone, a black and raggedy figure. His was the air of one who is unjustly put upon, who is dreaded and feared, yet who is the only friend of the poor and the best doctor for the !mortally wounded.

Death, although of course completely eyeless, watched Rincewind disappearing with what would, had His face possessed any mobility at all, have been a frown. Death, although exceptionally busy at all times, decided that He now had a hobby There was something about the wizard that irked Him beyond measure. He didn't keep appointments for one thing.

I'LL GET YOU YET, CULLY. said Death, in the voice like the slamming of leaden coffin lids.

THE LURE OF THE WYRM It was called the Wyrmberg and it rose almost one half of a mile above the green valley; a mountain huge, grey and upside down.

At its base it was a mere score of yards across.

Then it rose through clinging cloud, curving gracefully outward like an upturned trumpet until it was truncated by a plateau fully a quarter of a mile across. There was a tiny forest up there, its greenery cascading over the lip. There were buildings. There was even a small river, tumbling over the edge in a waterfall so wind-whipped that it reached the ground as rain.

There were also a number of cave mouths, a few yards below the plateau. They had a crudely-carved, regular look about them, so that on this crisp autumn morning the Wyrmberg hung over the clouds like a giant's dovecote.

This would mean that the "doves' had a wingspan slightly in excess of forty yards.

'I knew it,' said Rincewind. "We're in a strong magical field.' Twoflower and Hrun looked around the little hollow where they had made their noonday halt.

Then they looked at each other.

The horses were quietly cropping the rich grass by the stream. Yellow butterflies skittered among the bushes. There was a smell of thyme and a buzzing of bees. The wild pigs on the spit sizzled gently.

Hrun shrugged and went back to oiling his biceps. They gleamed.

"Looks alright to me,' he said.

"Try tossing a coin,' said Rincewind.

."what? Go on. Toss a coin.' "Hokay,' Said Hrun. "if it gives you any pleasure.' He reached into hiS pouch and withdrew a handful of loose change plundered from a dozen realms.

With Some care he selected a Zchloty leaden quarter-iotum and balanced it on a purple thumb "You call,' he said. "Heads or-' he inspected the obverse with an air of intense concentration, "some sort of a fish with legs.' "When it's in the air,' said Rincewind. Hrun grinned and flicked his thumb.

The iotum rose, spinning.

"Edge,' Said Rincewind, without looking at it.

Magic never dies. It merely fades away.

Nowhere was this more evident on the wide blue expanse of the discworld than in those areas that had been the scene of the great battles of the Mage Wars, which had happened very shortly after Creation. In those days magic in its raw state had been widely available, and had been eagerly utilized by the First Men in their war against the Gods.

The precise origins of the Mage Wars have been lost in the fogS of Time, but disc philosophers agree that the First Men, shortly after their creation, understandably lost their temper. And great and pyrotechnic were the battles that followed - the sun wheeled across the sky, the seas boiled, weird Storms ravaged the land, small white pigeons mysteriously appeared in people's clothing, and the very Stability of the disc (carried as it was through space on the backs of four giant turtle-riding elephants) was threatened. This resulted in Stern action by the Old High Ones, to whom even the Gods themselves are answerable. The Gods were banished to high places, men were re-created a good deal smaller, and much of the old wild magic was sucked out of the earth.

That did not solve the problem of those places on the disc which, during the wars, had suffered a direct hit by a spell. The magic faded away slowly, over the millenia, releasing as it decayed myriads of sub-astral particles that severely distorted the reality around it . . .

Rincewind, Twoflower and Hrun stared at the coin.

"Edge it is,' said Hrun. 'Well, you're a wizard. So what?' "i don't do - that sort of spell.

"You mean you can't.' Rincewind ignored this, because it was true. "Try it again,' he suggested.

Hrun pulled out a fistful of coins.

The first two landed in the usual manner. So did the fourth. The third landed on its edge and balanced there. The fifth turned into a small yellow caterpillar and crawled away. The sixth, upon reaching its zenith, vanished with a sharp "spang!' A moment later there was a small thunder clap.

"Hey, that one was silver,' exclaimed Hrun, rising to his feet and staring upwards. "Bring it "i don't know where it's gone, said Rincewind wearily. "it's probably still accelerating.

The ones I tried this morning didn't come down, anyway.' Hrun was still staring into the sky.

"What?' said Twoflower.

Rincewind sighed. He had been dreading this.

'We've strayed into a zone with a high magical index,' he said. "Don't ask me how. Once upon a time a really powerful magic field must have been generated here, and we're feeling the after-effects.' "precisely,' said a passing bush hruns head jerked down.

"You mean this is one of those places?' he asked.

'Let's get out of here!' "Right,' agreed Rincewind. "if we retrace our steps we might make it. We can stop every mile or so and toss a coin.' He stood up urgently and started stuffing things into his saddlebags.

"What?' Said Twoflower.

Rincewind stopped. "look,' he snapped. "Just don't argue' . Come on.' "It looks alright,' said Twoflower. "Just a bit underpopulated that's all . . .' 'Yes,' said Rincewind. "odd, isn't it? Come on!' There was a noise high above them, like a strip of leather being slapped on a wet rock. Something glaSSy and indiStinct passed over Rincewind's head, throwing up a cloud of ashes from the fire, and the pig carcass took off from the spit and rocketed into the sky.

It banked to avoid a clump of trees, righted itself, roared around in a tight circle, and headed hubwards leaving a trail of hot pork-fat droplets.

'What are they doing now?' asked the old man.

The young woman glanced at the scrying glass.

"Heading rimwards at speed,' she reported. "By the way - they've still got that box on legs.' The old man chuckled, an oddly disturbing sound in the dark and dusty crypt. 'Sapient pearwood,' he said. "Remarkable. Yes, I think we will have that. Please see to it, my dear - before they go beyond your power, perhaps?' "Silence! Or-' "or what, Liesa?' said the old man (in this dim light there was something odd about the way he was Slumped in the stone chair). "You killed me once already, remember?' She snorted and stood up, tossing back her hair scornfully. It was red, flecked with gold. Erect, Liessa Wyrmbidder was entirely a magnificent sight. She was also almost naked, except for a couple of mere scraps of the lightest chain mail and riding boots of iridescent dragonhide. In one boot was thrust a riding crop, unusual in that it was as long as a spear and tipped with tiny steel barbs.

"My power will be quite sufficient,' she said The indistinct figure appeared to nod, or at least to wobble.""so you keep assuring me,' he said.

Liessa snorted, and strode out of the hall.

Her father did not bother to watch her go. One reason for this was, of course, that since he had been dead for three months his eyes were in any case not in the best of condition. The other was that as a wizard - even a dead wizard of the fifteenth grade, his optic nerves had long since become attuned to seeing into levels and dimensions far removed from common reality, and were therefore somewhat inefficient at observing the merely mundane. (During his life they had appeared to others to be eight-faceted and eerily insectile.) Besides, since he was now suspended in the narrow space between the living world and the dark shadow-world of Death he could survey the whole of Causality itself. That was why, apart from a mild hope that this time his wretched daughter would get herself killed, he did not devote his considerable powers to learning more about the three travellers galloping desperately out of his realm Several hundred yards away, Liessa was in a strange humour as she strode down the worn steps that led into the hollow heart of

the Wyrmberg followed by half a dozen Riders. Would this be the opportunity? Perhaps here was the key to break the deadlock, the key to the throne of the Wyrmberg. It was rightfully hers, of course; but tradition said that only a man could rule the Wyrmberg. That irked Liesa, and when she was angry the Power flowed stronger and the dragons were especially big and ugly.

If she had a man, things would be different Someone who, for preference, was a big strapping lad but short on brains. Someone who would do what he was told.

The biggest of the three now fleeing the dragonlands might do. And if it turned out that he wouldn't, then dragons were always hungry and needed to be fed regularly. She could see to it that they got ugly.

Uglier than usual, anyway , The stairway passed through a stone arch and ended in a narrow ledge near the roof of the great cavern where the Wyrms roosted.

Sunbeams from the myriad entrances around the walls cries-crossed the dusty gloom like amber rods in which a million golden insects had been preserved. Below, they revealed nothing but a thin haze. Above . . .

The walking rings started so close to Liessa's head that she could reach up and touch one. They stretched away in their thousands across the upturned acres of the cavern roof. It had taken a Score of masons a score of years to hammer the pitonS for all those, hanging from their work as they progressed. Yet they were as nothing compared to the eighty-eight major rings that clustered near the apex of the dome. A further fifty had been lost in the old days, as they were swung into place by teams of sweating slaves (and there had been SlaveS aplenty, in the first days of the Power) and the great rings had gone crashing into the depths, dragging their unfortunate manipulators with them.

But eighty-eight had been installed, huge as rainbows, rusty as blood. From them .

The dragons sense Liessa's presence. Air swishes around the cavern as eighty-eight pairs of wings unfold like a complicated puzzle. Great heads with green, multi-faceted eyes peer down at her.

The beasts were still faintly transparent. While the men around her take their hookboots from the rack.

Liessa bends her mind to the task of full visualisation; about her in the musty air the dragons become fully visible, bronze scales dully reflecting the sunbeam shafts. Her mind throbs, but now that the Power is flowing fully she can, with barely a wnuer of concentration, think of other things.

Now she too buckles on the hookboots and turns a graceful cartwheel to bring their hooks, with a faint clung, against a couple of the walking rings in the ceiling.

Only now it is the floor. The world has changed.

Now she is standing on the edge of a deep bowl or crater, floored with the little rings across which the dragonriders are already strolling with a pendulum grit. In the centre of the bowl their huge mounts wait among the herd. Far above are the distant rocks of the cavern floor, discoloured by centuries of dragon droppings.

Moving with the easy gliding movement that is second nature Liessa sets off towards her own dragon, Lnolith, who turns his great horsey head towards' her. His jowls are greasy with pork fat.

It was very enjoyable, he says in her mind.

'I thought I said there were to be no unaccompanied flights?' she snaps.

I was hungry' , Liessa.

'Curb your hunger. Soon there will be horses to eat. ' The reins stick in our teeth. Are there any warriors? We like warriors.

Liessa swings down the mounting ladder and lands with her legs locked around Lnolith's leathery neck.

"The warrior is mine. There are a couple of others you can have. One appears to be a wizard of sorts, she adds by way of encouragement.

Oh, you know how it is with wizards. Half an hour afterwards you could do with another one, the dragon grumbles.

He spreads his wings and drops.

"They're gaining.' screamed Rincewind. He bent even lower over his horse's neck and groaned.

Twoflower was trying to keep up while at the same time craning round to look at the flying beasts.

"You don't underStand!' screamed the tourist, above the terrible noise of the wingbeats. "All my life I've wanted to see dragons!' "From the inSide?' shouted Rincewind. "Shut up and ride!' He whipped at his horse with the reins and stared at the wood ahead, trying to drag it closer by Sheer willpower. Under those trees they'd be safe. Under thoSe trees no' dragons could fly . . .

He heard the clap of wingS before shadows folded around him. Instinctively he rolled in the saddle and felt the white-hot stab of pain as something Sharp scored a line across his shoulderS.

Behind him Hrun screamed, but it sounded more like a bellow of rage than a cry of pain. The barbarian had vaulted down into the heather and had drawn the black sword, Kring. He flourished it as one of the dragons curved in for another low % "No bloody lizard does that to me! ' he roared Rincewind leaned over and grabbed Twoflower's reins.

"Come on,' he hissed.

"But, the dragons-' said Twoflower, entranced.

'Blast the-' began the wizard, and froze.

Another dragon had peeled off from the circling dots overhead and was gliding towards them.

Rincewind let go of Twoflower's horse, swore bitterly, and spurred his own mount towards the trees, alone. He didn't look back at the sudden commotion behind him and, when a shadow passed over him, merely gibbered weakly and tried to burrow into the horse's mane.

Then, instead of the searing, piercing pain he had expected, there was a series of stinging blows as the terrified animal passed under the eaves of the wood. The wizard tried to hang on but another low branch, stouter than the others, knocked him out of the saddle. The last thing he heard before the flashing blue lights of unconsciousness closed in was a high reptilian scream of frustration, and the thrashing of talons in the treetops.

When he awoke a dragon was watching him; at least, it was staring in his general direction.

Rincewind groaned and tried to dig his way into the moss with his shoulderblades, then gasped as the pain hit him.

Through the mists of agony and fear he looked back at the dragon.

The creature was hanging from a branch of a large dead oak tree, several hundred feet away. Its bronze-gold wings were tightly wrapped around its body but the long equine head turned this way and that at the end of a remarkably prehensile neck. It was scanning the forest.

It was also semi-tranSparent. Although the sun glinted off its scales, Rincewind could clearly make out the outlines of the branches behind it.

On one' of them a man was sitting, dwarfed by the hanging reptile. He appeared to be naked except for a pair of high boots, a tiny leather holdall in the region of his groin, and a high-crested helmet. He was swinging a short sword back and forth idly, and stared out across the tree tops with the air of one carrying out a tedious and unglamorous aSSignment.

A beetle began to crawl laboriously up Rincewind's leg.

The wizard wondered how much damage a half solid dragon could do. Would it only half-kill him? He decided not to stay and find out.

Moving on heels, fingertips and shoulder muscles, Rincewind wriggled sideways until foliage masked the oak and its occupants. Then he scrambled to his feet and hared off between the trees.

He had no destination in mind, no provisions, and no horse'. But while he still had legs he could run. Ferns and brambles whipped at him, but he didn't feel them at all.

When ,he had put about a mile between him and the dragon he Stopped and collapsed against a tree, which then spoke to him.

"PSst,' it said.

Dreading what he might see, Rincewind let his gaze slide upwards. It tried to fasten on innocuous bits of bark and leaf, but the scourge of curiosity forced it to leave them behind. Finally it fixed on a black sword thrust straight through the branch above Rincewind's head.

"Don't just Stand there,' said the sword (in a voice like the sound of a finger dragged around the rim of a large empty wine glass). "Pull me out.' "What?' said Rincewind, his chest still heaving.

"Pull me out,' repeated Kring. "It's either that or I'll be spending the next million years in a coal measure. Did I ever tell you about the time I was thrown into a lake up in th-' "What happened to the others?' said Rincewind, still clutching the tree desperately.

"Oh, the dragons got them. And the horses. And that box thing. Me too, except that Hrun dropped me. What a stroke of luck for you.' "Well-' began Rincewind. Kring ignored him.

"I expect you'll be in a hurry to rescue them, it added.

"Yes, well-' "So if you'll just pull me out we can be off.' Rincewind squinted up at the sword. A rescue attempt had hitherto been so far at the back of his mind that, if some advanced speculations on the nature and shape of the many-dimensioned multiplexity of the universe were correct, it was right at the front; but a magic sword was a valuable item . . .

And it would be a long trek back home, wherever that was . . .

He scrambled up the tree and inched along the branch. Kring was buried very firmly in the wood.

He gripped the pommel and heaved until lights flashed in front of his eyes.

"Try again,' said the sword encouragingly.

Rincewind groaned and gritted his teeth.

'Could be worse,' said Kring. "This could have been an anvil.' "Yaargh,' hissed the wizard, fearing for the future of his groin.

'I have had a multidimensional existence,' said the sword.

"Ungh?' "I have had many names, you know.' "Amazing,' said Rincewind. He swayed backwards as the blade slid free. It felt strangely light.

back on the ground again he decided to break the news. "I really don't think rescue is a good idea,' he said. "I think we'd better head back to a city, you know. To raise a search party.' "The dragons headed hubwards,' said Kring.

"However, I Suggest we start with the one in the trees over there.' .Sorry, but-' "You can't leave them to their fate!' Rincewind looked surprised. "I can't?' he said.

"No. You can't. Look, I'll be frank. 'i've worked with better material than you, but it's either that or have you ever spent a million years in a coal meaSUre?' 'Look,I-'"So if you don't stop arguing I'll chop your head off. Rincewind saw his own arm snap up until the shimmering blade was humming a mere inch from his throat. He tried to force his fingers to let go.

They wouldn't.

"I don't know how to be a hero!' he shouted "I propose to teach you.' Bronze Psepha rumbled deep in his throat.

Kfedra the dragonrider leaned forward andsquinted across the clearing. "I see him,' he Said. He swung himself down easily from branch to branch and landed lightly on the tusSocky grass, drawing his sword.

He took a long look at the approaching man, who waS obviously not keen on leaving the shelter of the trees. He was armed, but the dragonrider observed with some interest the strange way in which the man held the sword in front of him at arm's length, as though embarrassed to be seen in itS company.

Kfedra hefted his own sword and grinned expansively as the wizard shuffled towards him. Then he leapt.

Later, he remembered only two things about the fight. He recalled the uncanny way in which the wizard's sword curved up and caught his own blade with a shock that jerked it out of his grip.

The other thing - and it was this, he averred, that led to his downfall - was that the wizard was covering his eyes with one hand.

Ksedra jumped back to avoid another thrust and fell 'full length on the turf. With a snarl Psepha unfolded his great wings and launched himself from his tree.

A moment later the wizard was standing over him, shouting, "Tell it that if it singes me I'll let the sword go. I will. I'll let it go! So tell it! ' the tip of the black sword was hovering over Kisdra's throat, What was odd was that the wizard was obviously struggling with it, and it appeared to be singing to itself.

"Psepha!' K'sdra shouted.

The dragon roared in defiance, but pulled out of the dive that would have removed Rincewind's head, and flapped ponderously back to the tree.

"Talk!' screamed Rincewind.

Ksdra squinted at him up the length of the sword.

"What would you like me to say?' he asked.

'What?' "I said what would you like me to say?' "Where are my friends? The barbarian and the little man is what I mean.' "I expect they have been taken back to the Wyrmberg.' Rincewind tugged desperately against the surge of the sword, trying to shut his mind to Kring's %bloodthirsty humming.

r~k st'8 e Wy home. "And I suppose you were waiting to take me there, eh? Ktsdra gulped involuntarily as the tip of the sword pued a bead of blood from his adam's apple. "Don't want people to know you've got dragons here, eh? snarled Rincewind. The dragonrider forgot himself enough to nod, and came within a quarter-inch of cutting his own throat.

Rincewind looked around desperately, and realized that this was Something he was really going to have to go through with.

'Right then,' he said as diffidently as he could manage.

"you'd better take me to this Wyrmberg of yours, hadn't you?' 'I was supposed to take you in dead,' muttered Ksdra sullenly.

'Rincewind looked down at him and grinned slowly. It was a wide, manic and utterly humourless rictus that was the sort of grin that is normally accompanied by small riverside birds wandering in and out picking scraps out of the teeth.

"Alive will do,' said Rincewind. "if we're talking about anyone being dead, remember whose sword iS in which hand.' "If you kill me nothing will prevent Psepha killing you Shouted the prone dragonrider.

"So what I'll do is, I'll chop bits off,' agreed the wizard. He tried the effect of the grin again.

"Oh, all right,' said K'sdra sulkily. "Do you think I've got an imagination?' He wrigled out from under the sword and waved at the dragon, which took wing again and glided in towards them. Rincewind swallowed.

'You mean we've got to go on that?' he said.

Wyrmberg?' he said.

mberg. There is only one. It is DragonK! sdra looked at him scornfully, the point of Kring still aimed at his neck.

"How else would anyone get to the Wyrmberg?' 'I don't know,' said Rincewind. "How else?' "I mean, there is no other way. It's flying or nothing.' Rincewind looked again at the dragon before him. He could quite clearly see through it to the crushed grass on which it lay but, when he gingerly touched a scale that was a mere golden sheen on thin air, it felt solid enough. Either dragons should exist' completely or fail to exist at all, he felt. A dragon only half-existing was worse than the extremes.

"i didn't know dragons could be seen through,' he said.

He swung himself astride the dragon awkwardly, K!sdra shrugged. "Didn't you?' he said.

because Rincewind was hanging on to his belt.

Once uncomfortably aboard the wizard moved his white-knuckle grip to a convenient piece of harness and prodded k'sdra lightly with the sword.

"Have you ever flown before?' said the dragonrider, without looking round.

"Not as such, no.' "Would you like something to suck?' Rincewind gazed at the back of the man's head, then dropped to the bag of red and yellow sweets that was being proffered.

"Is it necessary?' he asked.

"it is traditional,' said K!sdra. "Please yourself.' The dragon stood up, lumbered heavily across the meadow, and fluttered into the air.

Rincewind occasionally had nightmares about teetering on some intangible but enormously high place, and seeing a blue-distanced, cloud-punctuated landscape reeling away below him (this usually woke him up with his ankles sweating; he would have been even more worried had he known that the nightmare was not, as he thought, just the . usual discworld vertigo. It was a backwards memory of an event in his future so terrifying that it had generated harmonics of fear all the way along his lifeline).

This was not that event, but it was good practise for it. Psepha clawed its way into the air with a series of vertebrae-shattering bounds. At the top of its last leap the wide wings unfolded with a snap and spread out with a thump which shook the trees.

Then the ground was gone, dropping away in a Series of gentle jerks. Psepha was suddenly rising gracefully, the afternoon sunlight gleaming off wings that were still no more than a golden film.

Rincewind made the mistake of glancing downwards, and found himself looking through the dragon to the treetops below. Far below. His Stomach Shrank at the sight.

Closing his eyes wasn't much better, because it gave his imagination full rein. He compromised by gazing fixedly into the middle distance, where moorland and forest drifted by and could be contemplated almost casually.

Wind Snatched at him. K!sdra half turned and shouted into his ear.

"Behold the Wyrmberg!' Rincewind turned his head slowly, taking care to keep Kring resting lightly on the dragon's back.

His streaming eyes saw the impossibly inverted mountain rearing out of the deep forested valley like a trumpet in a tub of nose. Even at this distance he could make out the faint octarine glow in the air that must be indicating a stable magic aura of at least - he gasped - several milliPrime? At least 'Oh no,' he said Even looking at the ground was better than that.

He averted his eyes quickly, and realized that he could now no longer see the ground through the dragon. As they glided around in a wide circle towards the Wyrmberg it was definitely taking on a more solid form, as if the creature's body was filling with a gold mist. By the time the Wyrmberg was in front of them, swinging wildly across the sky, the dragon was as real as a rock.

Rincewind thought he could see a faint streak in the air, as if something from the mountain had reached out and touched the beast. He got the strange feeling that the dragon was being made more genuine.

Ahead of it the Wyrmberg turned from a distant toy to several billion tons of rock poised between heaven and earth. He could see small fields, woods and a lake up there, and from the lake a river spilled out and over the edge . . .

He made the mistake of following the thread of foaming water with his eyes, and jerked himself back just in time.

The flared plateau of the upturned mountain drifted towards them. The dragon didn't even slow.

As the mountain loomed over Rincewind like the biggest fly-swatter in the universe he saw a cave mouth. Psepha skimmed towards it, shoulder muscles pumping.

The wizard screamed as the dark spread and enfolded him. There was a brief vision of rock flashing past, blurred by speed. Then the dragon was in the open again.

It was inside a cave, but bigger than any cave had a right to be. The dragon, gliding across its vast emptiness, was a mere gilded fly in a banqueting hall.

There were other dragons - gold, silver, black, white - flapping across the sun-shafted air on erands of their own or perched on outcrops of rock. high in the domed roof of the cavern scores of others hung from huge rings, their wings wrapped bat-like around their bodies. There were men up there, too. Rincewind swallowed hard when he saw them, because they were walking on that broad expanse of ceiling like flies.

Then he made out the thousands of tiny rings that studded the ceiling. A number of inverted men were watching Psepha's flight with interest. rincewind swallowed again. For the life of him he couldn't think of what to do next.

"Well?' he asked, in a whisper. "Any suggestions? "Obviously you attack,' said Kring scornfully.

'Why didn't I think of that?' said Rincewind .Could it be because they all have crossbows?' 'You're a defeatist.' "Defeatist? That's because I'm going to be defeated! ' "You're your own worst enemy, Rincewind,' said the sword.

Rincewind looked up at grinning men.

"Bet?' he said wearily.

Before Kring could reply Psepha reared in midair and alighted on one of the large rings, which rocked alarmingly.

"Would you like to die now, or surrender first?' asked Kfsdra calmly.

Men were converging on the ring from "all directions, walking with a swaying motion as their hooked boots engaged the ceiling rings.

There were more boots on a rack that hung in a Small platform built on the side of the perch-ring.

Before Rincewind could stop him the dragonrider had leapt from the creature's back to land on the platform, where he stood grinning at the wizard's diScomfiture.

There waS a small expressive sound made by a number of crossbows being cocked. Rincewind looked up at a number of impassive, upside down faces. The dragonfolk's taste in clothing didn't run to anything much more imaginative than a leather harness, studded with bronze ornaments. Knives and sword sheaths were worn inverted. Those who were not wearing helmets let their hair flow freely, so that it moved like seaweed in the ventilation breeze near the roof. There were several women among them. The inversion did strange things to their anatomy. Rincewind stared.

"Surrender,' said K!sdra again.

Rincewind opened' his mouth to do so. Kring hummed a warning, and agonising waves of pain shot up his arm. "Never,' he squeaked. The pain stopped.

"Of course he won't!' boomed an expansive voice behind him. "He's a hero, isn't he?' Rincewind turned and looked into a pair of hairy nostrils. They belonged to a heavily built young' man, hanging nonchalantly from the ceiling by his boots.

"What is your name, hero?' said the man. 'So that we know who you were.' Agony shot up Rincewind's arm. "I-I'm Rincewind of Ankh,' he managed to gasp.

"And I am Liofrt Dragonlord,' said the hanging man, pronouncing the word with the harsh click in the back of the throat that Rincewind could only think of as a kind of integral punctuation. "You have come to challenge me in mortal combat.' "Well, no, I didn't-' "You are mistaken. Kfsdra, help our hero into a pair of hookboots. I am sure he is anxious to get started.' "No, look, I just came here to find my friends. I'm sure there's no-' Rincewind began, as the dragonrider guided him firmly onto the platform, pushed him onto a seat, and proceeded to strap hookboots to his feet.

"Hurry up, K!sdra. We mustn't keep our hero from his destiny,' said Lie!tt.

'Look, I expect my friends are happy enough here, so if you could just, you know, set me down somewhere "You will see your friends soon enough,' said the dragonlord airily. "If you are religious, I mean.

None who enter the Wyrmberg ever leave again.

Except metaphorically, of course. Show him how to reach the rings, Kfsdra.' "Look what you've got me into!' Rincewind hissed.

Kring vibrated in his hand. "Remember that I am a magic sword,' it hummed.

"How can I forget?' 'Climb the ladder and grab a ring,' said the dragonrider, "then bring your feet up until the hooks catch.' He helped the protesting wizard climb until he was hanging upside down, robe tucked into his britches, Kring dangling from one hand. At this angle the dragonfolk looked reasonably bearable but the dragons themselves, hanging from their perches, loomed over the scene like immense gargoyles. Their eyes glowed with interest.

'Attention, please,' said Lie!tt. A dragonrider handed him a long shape, wrapped in red silk.

'We fight to the death,' he said. 'Yours "And I Suppose I earn my freedom if I win?' said Rincewind, without much hope.

Lie!tt indicated the assembled dragonriders with a tilt of hiS head.

%'Don't be naive, he said.

Rincewind took a deep breath "I suppose I should warn you,' he said, his voice hardly quavering at all, "that this is a magic sword.' Lie!tt let the red silk wrapping drop away into the gloom and flourished a jet-black blade. Runes rudder night of frosty Stars, it swung two-handed b' 1 h glowed on its surface.

"What a coincidence,' he said, and lunged.

Rincewind went rigid with fright, but his arm swung out as Kring shot forward. The swords met in an explosion of octarine light.

Lie!tt swung himself backwards, his eyes narrowing . Crring leapt past his guard and, although the dragonlord's sword jerked up to deflect most of the force, the result was a thin red line across its master's torso.

With a growl he launched himself at the wizard boots clattering as he slid from ring to ring. The swords met again in another violent discharge of magic and, at the same time, Lio'rt brought his other hand down against Rincewind's head, jarring him so hard that one foot jerked out of its ring and flailed desperately.

Rincewind knew himself to be almost certainly the worst wizard on the discworld since he knew but one spell; yet for all that he was still a wizard, and thus by the inexorable laws of magic this meant that upon his demise it would be Death himself who appeared to claim him (instead of sending one of his numerous servants, as is usually the case).

Thus it was that, as a grinning Lie!tt swung back and brought his sword around in a lazy arc, time ran into treacle.

To Rincewind's eyes the world was suddenly lit by a flickering octarine light, tinged with violet as photons impacted on the sudden magical aura.

Inside it the dragonlord was a ghastly-hued statue, his sword moving at a snail's pace in the glow.

Beside Liofrt was another figure, visible only to those who can see into the extra four dimensions of magic. It was tall and dark and thin and, against a %mud I a Boy h6 of proverbial sharpness . . .

Rincewind ducked. The blade hissed coldly through the air beSide his head and entered the rock of the cavern roof without slowing. Death screamed a curse in his cold crypt voice. The scene vanished. What passed for reality on the discworld reasserted itself with a rush of sound. Lio'rt gasped at the sudden turn of speed with which the wizard had dodged his killing stroke and, with that desperation only available to the really terrified, Rincewind uncoiled like a snake and launched himself across the space between them. He locked both hands around the dragonlord's sword arm, and wrenched.

It was at that moment that Rincewind's one remaining ring, already overburdened, slid out of the rock with a nasty little metal sound.

He plunged down, swung wildly, and ended up dangling over a bone-splintering death with his hands gripping the dragonlord's arm so tightly that the man screamed.

Lio'rt looked up at his feet. Small flakes of rock were dropping out of the roof around the ring pitons.

"Let go, damn you.' he screamed. "Or we'll both die! ' Rincewind said nothing. He was concentrating on maintaining his grip and keeping his mind closed to the pressing images of his fate on the rockS below.

"Shoot him!' bellowed Liotrt.

Out of the corner of his eye Rincewind saw several crossbows levelled at him. Lie!tt chose that moment to flail down with his free hand, and a fistful of rings stabbed into the wizard's fingers.

He let go.

Twoflower grabbed the bars and pulled himself up.

"See anything?' said Hrun, from the region of his feet.

"Just clouds.' Hrun lifted him down again, and sat on the edge of one of the wooden beds that were the only furnishings in the cell. "Bloody hell,' he said.

"Don't despair,' said Twoflower.

"I'm not despairing.' "I expect it's all some sort of misunderstanding. I expect they'll release us soon. They seem very civilised . ' Hrun stared at him from under bushy eyebrows.

He started to say something, then appeared to think better of it. He sighed instead.

"And when we get back we can say we've seen dragons,' Twoflower continued. 'What about that, eh?' "Dragons don't exist,' said Hrun flatly. 'Codice of Chimeria killed the last one two hundred years ago. I don't know what we're seeing, but they aren't dragons.' "But they carried us up in the air! In that hall there must have been hundreds-' "I expect it was just magic,' said Hrun, dismissivly." 'Well, they looked like dragons,' said Twoflower, an air of defiance about him. "I always wanted to see dragons, ever since I was a little lad. Dragons flying around in the sky, breathing flames . . .' "They just used to crawl around in swamps and stuff, and all they breathed was stink,' said Hrun lying down in the bunk. "They weren't very big either. They used to collect firewood.' "I heard they used to collect treasure,' said Twoflower.

"And firewood. Hey,' Hrun added, brightening 'did you notice all those rooms they brought us throUgh? Pretty impressive, I thought. Lot of good stuff about, plus some of those tapestries have got to be worth a fortune.' He scratched his chin thoughtfully, making a noise like a porcupine shouldering its way through gorse.

"What happens next?' asked Twoflower.

Hrun screwed a finger in his ear and inspected it absently. .Oh,' he said, "I expect in a minute the door will be flung back and I'll be dragged off to some sort of temple arena where I'll fight maybe a couple of giant spiders and an eight-foot slave from the jungles of Klatch and then I'll rescue some kind of a princess from the altar and then kill off a few guards or whatever and then this girl will show me the secret passage out of the place and we'll liberate a couple of horses and escape with the treasure.' Hrun leaned his head back on his hands and looked at the ceiling, whistling tunelessly.

"All that?' said Twoflower.

"Usually: ' Twoflower sat down on his bunk and tried to think. This proved difficult, because his mind was awaSh with dragons.

Dragons! Ever Since he was two years old he had been captivated by the pictures of the fiery beasts in The Octarine Fairy Book. His sister had told him they didn't really exist, and he recalled the bitter disappointment. If the world didn't contain those beautiful creatures, he'd decided, it wasn't half the world it ought to be. And then later he had been bound apprentice to Ninereeds the Masteraccount, who in hiS grey-mindedness was everything that dragons were not, and there was no time for dreaming.

But there was something wrong with these dragons. They were too small and sleek, compared to the ones in his mind's eye. Dragons ought to be big and green and clawed and exotic and firebreathing - big and green with long sharp . . .

Something moved at the edge of his vision, in the furthest, darkest corner of the dungeon. When he turned his head it vanished, although he thought he heard the faintest of noises that might have been made by claws scrabbling on stone.

"Hrun?' he said.

There was a snore from the other bunk.

Twoflower padded over to the corner, peering gingerly at the stones in case there was a secret panel. At that moment the door was flung back thumping against the wall. Half a dozen guards hurtled through it, spread out and flung them selves down on one knee. Their weapons were aimed exclusively at Hrun. When he thought about this later, Twoflower felt quite offended.

Hrun snored.

A woman strode into the room. Not many women can stride convincingly, but she managed it. She glanced briefly at Twoflower, as one might look at a piece of furniture, then glared down at the man on the bed.

She was wearing the same sort of leather harness that the dragonriders had been wearing but in her case it was much briefer. That, and the magnificent mane of chestnut-red hair that fell to her waist, was her only concession to what even on the discworld passed for decency. She was also wearing a thoughtful expression.

Hrun made a glubbing noise, turned over, and slept on.

With a careful movement, as though handling some instrument of rare delicacy, the woman drew a slim black dagger from her belt and stabbed downward.

before it was halfway through its arc Hrun's right hand moved so fast that it appeared to travel between two points in space without at any time occupying the intervening air. It closed around the .woman's wrist with a dull smack. His other hand groped feverishly for a sword that wasn't there . . .

Hrun awoke.

'Gngh?' he said, looking up at the woman with a puzzled 'frown. Then he caught sight of the bowmen.

"Let go,' said the woman, in a voice that was calm and quiet and edged with diamonds. Hrun released his grip slowly.

She stepped back, massaging her wrist and looking at Hrun in much the same way that a cat watches a mousehole.

"So,' she said at last. "You pass the first test.

What is your name, barbarian?' "Who are you calling a barbarian?' snarled Hrun.

"That is what I want to know.' Hrun counted the bowmen slowly and made a brief calculation. His shoulders relaxed "I am Hrun of Chimeria. And you?' "Lieasa Dragonlady.' "You are the lord of this place?' "That remains to be seen. You have the look about you of a hired sword, Hrun of Chimeria. I could use you - if you pass the tests, of course.

There are three of them. You have passed the first.' 'What are the other-' Hrun paused, his lips moved soundlessly and then he hazarded, "two?' "Perilous.' 'And the fee?' "Valuable.' 'Excuse me,' said Twoflower 'And if I fail these tests?' said Hrun, ignoring him. The air between Hrun and Liessa crackled with small explosions of charisma as their gazes sought for a hold.

'if you had failed the first test you would now be dead. This may be considered a typical penalty.' "Um, look,' began Twoflower. Liessa spared him a brief glance, and appeared actually to notice him for the first time.

'Take that away,' she said calmly, and turned back to Hrun. Two of the guards shouldered their bows, grasped Twoflower by the elbows and lifted him off the ground. Then they trotted smartly through the doorway.

"Hey,' said Twoflower, as they hurried down the corridor outside, "where' (as they stopped in front of another door) "is my' (as they dragged the door open) ""Luggage?' He landed in a heap of what might once have been straw. The door banged shut, its echoes punctuated by the sound of bolts being slammed home.

In the other cell Hrun had barely blinked.

"okay,' he said, "what is the second test?' "You must kill my two brothers.' Hrun considered thiS.

"Both at the same time, or one after the other?' he said.

cConsecutively or concurrently,' she assured him "What?' "Just kill them,' she said sharply "Good fighters, are they?' 'Renowned.' "So in return for all this...?' ""You will wed me and become Lord of the Wyrmberg.' There was a long pause. Hrun's eyebrows twisted themselves in unaccustomed calculation.

"I get you and this mountain?' he said at last.

'Yes.' She looked him squarely in the eye, and her lips twitched. "The fee is worthwhile, I assure you." "Hrun dropped his gaze to the rings on her hand The stones were large, being the incredibly rare blue milk diamonds from the clay basins of sithoe. When he managed to turn his eyes from them he saw Liessa glaring down at him in fury.

"So calculating? ' she rasped . Hrun the Barbarian who would boldly walk into the jaws of Death Himself' Hrun shrugged. "Sure,' he said, "the only reason for walking into the jaws of Death is so's you can steal His gold teeth.' He brought one arm around expansively, and the wooden bunk was at the end of it. It cannoned into the bowmen and Hrun followed it joyously, felling one man with a blow and snatching the weapon from another. A moment later it was all over.

Liessa had not moved.

"Well?' she said.

"Well what?' said Hrun, from the carnage "Do you intend to kill me?' "What? Oh no. No, this is just, you know, kind of a habit.' Just keeping in practice. So where are these brothers?' He grinned.

Twoflower sat on his straw and stared into the darkneSS. He wondered how long he had been there. Hours, at least. Days, probably. He speculated that perhaps it had been years, and he had Simply forgotten.

No, that sort of thinking wouldn't do. He tried to think of something else - grass, trees, fresh air, dragons. Dragons . . .

There was the faintest of scrabblings in the darkneSs. Twoflower felt the sweat prickle on his forehead.

Something was in the cell with him. Something that made small noises, but even in the pitch blackness gave the impression of hugeness. He felt the air move.

When he lifted his arm there was the greasy feel and faint shower of sparks that betokened a localised magical field. Twoflower found himself fervently wishing for light.

A gout of flame rolled past his head and struck the far wall. As the rocks flashed into furnace heat he looked up at the dragon that now occupied more than half the cell.

"I obay, lord said a voice in his head.

By the glow of the crackling, spitting stone Twoflower looked into his own reflection in two enormous green eyes. Beyond them the dragon was as multi-hued, horned, spiked and lithe as the one in his memory - a real dragon. Its folded wings were nevertheless still wide enough to scrape the wall on both sides of the room. It lay with him between its talons.

"obey?' he said, his voice vibrating with terror and delight.

%CJfrcrur~9e, lord.

The glow faded away. Twoflower pointed a trembling finger at where he remembered the door to be and said, 'Open it!' The dragon raised its huge head. Again the ball of flame rolled out but this time, as the dragon's neck muscles contracted, its colour faded from orange to yellow, from yellow to white, and finally to the faintest of blues. By that time the flame was also very thin, and where it touched the wall the molten rock spat and ran. When it reached the door the metal exploded into a shower of hot droplets.

Black shadows arced and jiggered over the walls.

The metal bubbled for an eye-aching moment, and then the door fell in two pieces in the passage beyond. The flame winked out with a suddenness that was almost as startling as its arrival.

Twoflower stepped gingerly over the cooling door and looked up and down the corridor. It was empty.

the dragon followed. The heavy door frame caused it some minor difficulty, which it overcame with a swing of its shoulders that tore the timber out and tossed it to one side. The creature looked expectantly at Twoflower, its skin rippling and twitching as it sought to open its wings in the confines of the passage.

'How did you get in there?' said Twoflower. You summoned me, master.

'I don't remember doing that.' In your mind. You. Called me up, in, your mind thought the dragon, patiently.

"You mean I just thought of you and there You were?' Yes .

'it was magic?' Yes.

"But I've thought about dragons all my life.' In this place the frontier between thought and reality is probably a little confused. All I know' is that once I was not, and then you thought of me, and then I was. Therefore, of course, I am yours to command.

" Good grief' Half a dozen guards chose that moment to turn the bend in the corridor. They stopped, openmouthed. Then one remembered himself sufficiently to raiSe his crossbow and fire.

The dragon's chest heaved. The quarrel exploded into flaming fragments in mid-air. The guards scurried out of sight. A fraction of a second later a Wash of flame played over the stones where they had been standing.

Twoflower looked up in admiration cCan you fly too?' he said.

Of course.

Twoflower glanced up and down the corridor, and decided against following the guards. Since he knew himself to be totally lost already, any direction was probably an improvement. He edged past the dragon and hurried away, the huge Least turning with difficulty to follow him.

They padded down- a series of passages that cries-crossed like a maze. At one point Twoflower thought he heard shouts, a long way behind them but they soon faded away. Sometimes the dark arch of a crumbling doorway loomed past them in the gloom. Light filtered through dimly from various shafts and, here and there, bounced off big mirrors that had been mortared into angles of the passage. Sometimes there was a brighter glow from a distant light-well.

What was odd, thought Twoflower as he strolled down a wide flight of stairs and kicked up billowing clouds of silver dust motes, was that the tunnels here were much wider. And better con structed, too. There were statues in niches set in the walls, and here and there faded but interesting tapestries had been hung. They mainly showed dragons - dragons by the hundreds in flight or hanging from their perch rings, dragons with men on their backs hunting down deer and, sometimes other men. Twoflower touched one tapestry gingerly. The fabric crumbled instantly in the hot dry air, leaving only a dangling mesh where some threads had been plaited with fine gold wire.

"I wonder why they left all this?' he said.

I don't know said a polite voice in his head.

He turned and looked up into the scaley horse face above him.

"What is your name, dragon?' said Twoflower.

I don't know.

"I think I shall call you Ninereeds.

That is my name, then .

They waded through the all-encroaching dust %fU aerie-s of huge, dark-pillared halls which had been delved out of the solid rock. With some cunning too, from floor to ceiling the walls were a mass of statues, gargoyles, bas-reliefs and fluted columns that cast weirdly-moving shadows when the dragon gave an obliging illumination at Twoflower's request. They crossed the lengthy galleries and vast carven amphitheatres, all awash with deep soft dust and completely uninhabited. No-one had come to these dead caverns in centurieS.

Then he saw the path, leading away into yet another dark tunnel mouth. Someone had been using it regularly, and recently. It was a deep narrow trail in the grey blanket.

Twoflower followed it. It led through still more lofty halls and winding corridors quite big enough for a dragon (and dragons had come this way once, it Seemed; there was a room full of rotting harness, dragon-giTed, and another room containing plate and chain mail big enough for elephants). They ended in a pair of green bronze doors, each so high that they disappeared into the gloom. In front of Twoflower, at chest height, was a small handle shaped like a brass dragon.

When he touched it the doors swung open instantlY and with a disconcerting noiselessness.

Instantly sparks crackled in Twoflower's hair and there was a sudden gust of hot dry wind that didn't disturb the dust in the way that ordinary wind should but, instead, whipped it up momentarily into unpleasantly half-living shapes before it settled again. In Twoflower's ears came the Strange shrill twittering of the Things locked in the distant dungeon Dimensions, out beyond the fragile lattice of time and space. Shadows appeared where there was nothing to cause them. The air buzzed like a hive.

In short, there was a vast discharge of magic going on around him.

The chamber beyond the door was lit by a pale green glow. Stacked around the walls, each on its own marble shelf, were tier upon tier of coffins. In the centre of the room was a stone chair on a raised dais, and it contained a slumped figure which did not move but said, in a brittle old voice, "Come in, young man.' Twoflower stepped forward. The figure in the seat was human, as far as he could make out in the murky light, but there was something about the awkward way it was sprawled in the chair that made him glad he couldn't see it any clearer.

"I'm dead, you know,' came a voice from what Twoflower fervently hoped was a head, in conversational tones. "I expect you can tell.' "Um,' said Twoflower. "Yes.' He began to back away.

'Obvious, isn't it?' agreed the voice. 'You'd be Twoflower, wouldn't you? Or is that later?' 'later?' said Twoflower. "Later than what?' He stopped.' Well,' said the voice. "You see, one of the disadvantages of being dead is that one is released as it were from the bonds of time and therefore I can see everything that has happened or will happen, all at the same time except that of course I now know that Time does not, for all practical purposes, exist.' "That doesn't sound like a disadvantage,' said" Twoflower.

'You don't think so? Imagine every moment being at one and the same time a distant memory and a nasty surprise and you'll see what I mean.

Anyway, I now recall what it was I am about to tell you. Or have I already done so? That's a fine looking dragon, by the way. Or don't I say that, yet?" "It is rather good. It just turned up,' said twOflower. 'It turned up?' said the voice. "You summoned it! 'Yes, well, all I did-' 'You have the Power! ' "All I did was think of it.' "That's what the Power is. Have I already told you that I am Greicha the First? Or is that next? i'm Sorry, but I haven't had too much experience oF transcendence. Anyway, yes - the Power. It summons dragons, you know.' "I think you already told me that,' said Twoflower. "Did I? I certainly intended to,' said the dead man. 'But how does it? I've been thinking about dragons all my life, 'but this is the first time one has turned up.' "oh well, you see, the truth of the matter is that dragons have never existed as you (and, until I was poiSoned some three months ago,) I understand existence. I'm talking about the true dragon, draconis nobilis, you understand; the swamp dragon, draconis vulgaris, is a base creature and not worth our consideration. The true dragon, on the other hand, is a creature of such refinement of spirit that they can only take on form in this world if they are conceived by the most skilled imagination. And even then the said imagination must be in some place heavily impregnated with magic which helps to weaken the walls between the world of the seen and unseen. Then the dragons pop through, as it were, and impress their form' on

this world's possibility matrix. I was very good at it when I was alive. I could imagine up to, oh, five hundred dragons at a time. Now liessa, the most Skilled of my children, can barely imagine fifty rather nondescript creatures. So much for a progreSSive education. She doesn't really believe in them. That's why her dragons are rather boring while yours,' said the voice of Greicha, "is almost as good as some of mine used to be. A sight for sore eyes, not that I have any to speak of now.' Twoflower said hurriedly, "You keep saying you're dead . . .' "Well?' "Well, the dead, er, they, you know, don't talk much. As a rule.' "I used to be an exceptionally powerful wizard.

My daughter poisoned me, of course. It is the generally accepted method of succession in our family, but,' the corpse sighed, or at 'least a sigh came from the air a few feet above it, "it soon became obvious that none of my three children is sufficiently powerful to wrest the lordship of the Wyrmberg from the other two. A most unsatis factory arrangement. A kingdom like ours has to have one ruler. So I resolved to remain alive in an unofficial capacity, which of course annoys them all immensely. I won't give my children the satisfaction of burying me until there is only one of them left to perform the ceremony.' There was a nasty wheezing noise. Twoflower decided that it was meant to be a chuckle.

"So it was one of them that kidnapped us?' said Twoflower.

"liesa,' said the dead wizard's voice. "My daughter. Her power is strongest, you know. My' sons' dragons are incapable of flying more than a few miles before they fade.' "Fade? I did notice that we could see through the one that brought us here,' said Twoflower. 'I thought that was a bit odd.' "Of course,' said Greicha. "The Power only works near the Wyrmberg. It's the inverse square law you know. At least, I think it is. As the dragons fly further away they begin to dwindle. Otherwise my" little Liesaa would be ruling the whole world by now, if I know anything about it. But I can see I mUStn't keep you. I expect you'll be wanting to rescue your friend.' Twoflower gaped. "Hrun?' he said.

"not him. The skinny wizard. My son T)iofrt is trying to hack him to pieces. I admired the way' you reScued him. Will, I mean.' Twoflower drew himself up to his full height,

an easy task. "Where is he?' he said, heading towards the door with what he hoped was an heroic stride.

"Just follow the pathway in the dust,' said the voice. "Liessa comes to see me sometimes. She still comes to see her old dad, my little girl. She was the only one with the strength of character to murder me. A chip off the old block. Good luck, by the way.

I seem to recall I said that. Will say it now, I mean.' The rambling voice got lost in a maze of tenses as Twoflower ran along the dead tunnels, with the dragon loping along easily behind him. But soon he was leaning against a pillar, completely out of breath. It seemed ages since he'd had anything to eat.

Why 'don't you fly? said Ninereeds, inside his head. The dragon spread its wings and gave an experimental flap, which lifted it momentarily off the ground. Twoflower stared for a moment, then ran forward and clambered quickly on to the beast's neck. Soon they were airborne, the dragon skimming along easily a few feet from the floor and leaving a billowing cloud of dust in its wake.

Twoflower hung on as best he could as Ninereeds swooped through a succession of caverns and soared around a spiral staircase that could easily have accommodated a retreating army. At the top they emerged into the more inhabited regions, the mirrors at every corridor corner brightly polished and reflecting a pale light.

I .smell other dragon's.

The wings became a blur and Twoflower was jerked back as the dragon veered and sped off down a side corridor like a gnat-crazed swallow.

Another sharp turn sent them soaring out of a tunnel mouth in the side of a vast cavern. There were rocks far below, and up above were broad shafts of light from great holes near the roof. A lot of activity on the ceiling, too . . . as Ninereeds hovered, thumping the

air with his wings, two flower peered up at the shapes of roosting beastS and tiny men-shaped dots that were somehow walking upside down.

This is a roosting hall, said the dragon in a satisfied tone.

As Twoflower watched, one of the shapes far above detached itself from the roof and began to grow larger . , Rincewind watched as I,io'rt's pale face dropped away from him. This is funny, gibbered a small part of his mind, why am I rising? Then he began to tumble in the air and reality took over. He was dropping to the distant, guano"speckled rocks.

His brain reeled with the thought. The words of the Spell picked just that moment to surface from the depths of his mind, as they always did in time of crisis. Why not say us, they seemed to urge.

What have you got to lose? Rincewind waved a hand in the gathering slipstream.

"Ashonai,' he called. The word formed in front of him in a cold blue flame that streamed in the wind.

He waved the other hand, drunk with terror and magic.

"Ehiris,' he intoned. The sound froze into a flickering orange word that hung beside its companion. ,,""Urshoring, Kvanti. Pythan. N'gurad. Ferin gomalee.' As the words blazed their rainbow colours around him he flung his hands back and prepared to say the eighth and final word that would appear in corruscating octarine and seal the spell. The imminent rocks were forgotten.

The breath was knocked out of him, the spell ' he began, scattered and snuffed out. A pair of arms locked around hiS waist and the whole world jerked sideways as the dragon rose

out of its long dive claws grazing just for a moment the topmost rock on the Wyrmberg's noisome floor. Twoflower laughed triumphantly.

"Got him!' .And the dragon, curving gracefully at the trip of his hight, gave a lazy flip of his wings and soared through a cavemouth into the morning air.

At noon, in a wide green meadow on the lush tableland that was the top of the impossibly-balanced Wyrmberg, the dragons and their riders formed a wide circle. There was room beyond them for a rabble of servants and slaves and others who scratched a living here on the roof of the world, and they were all watching the figures clustered in the centre of the grassy arena. The group contained a number of senior dragon lords, and among them were Lie!tt and his brother LiarteB. The former was still rubbing his legs, with Small grimaces of pain. Slightly to one side stood Liessa and Hrun, with some of the woman's own followerS. Between the two factions stood the Wyrmberg's hereditary Loremaster.

"As you know,' he said uncertainly, "the not-fully-late Lord of the Wyrmberg, Greicha the First, has stipulated that there will be no succession until one of his children feels himself - or as it might be, herself - powerful enough to challenge and defeat his or her siblings in mortal combat.' "Yes', yes, we know all that. Get on with it,' said a thin peevish voice from the air beside him.

The loremaster swallowed. He had never come to terms with his former master's failure to expire properly. Is the old buzzard dead or isn't he? he wondered.

"It is not certain,' he quavered, "whether it is allowable to issue a challenge by proxy-' "It is, it is,' snapped Greicha's disembodied voice.

'It shows intelligence. Don't take all day about it.' 'I challenge you,' said Hrun, glaring at the brothers, "both at once.' Lie!tt and Liartes exchanged looks.

"You'll fight us both together?' said l'iartes, a tall, wiry man with long black hair.

"Yah.' "That's pretty uneven odds, isn't it? "Yah. I outnumber you one to two.' Liofrt scowled. "You arrogant barbarian-' "That just about does it,' growled Hrun. "I'll-' The Loremaster put out a blue-veined hand to restrain him.

"It is forbidden to fight on the Killing Ground,' he said, and paused while he considered the sense of this. "You know what I mean, anyway,' he hazarded, giving up, and added "As the challenged parties my lords Lie!tt and Liartes have choice of weapons.' "Dragons,' they said together. Liessa snorted.

"Dragons can be used offensively, therefore they are weapons,' said Lie!tt firmly. 'if you disagree we can fight over it.' "Yah,' said his brother, nodding at Hrun.

The Loremaster felt a ghostly finger prod him in the chest 'Don't stand there with your mouth open,' said Greicha's graveyard voice. "Just hurry up, will you?" Hrun stepped back, shaking his head.

"oh no,' he said. 'Once was enough. I'd rather be dead than fight on one of those things.' "Die, then,' said the Loremaster, as kindly as he could manage.

Lie!tt and Liartes were already striding back across the turf to where the servants stood waiting with their mounts. Hrun 'turned to Liessa. She Shrugged. "don't I even get a sword?' he pleaded. "A knife, even?' "No,' she said. "I didn't expect this.' She suddenly looked smaller, all defiance gone. 'i'm sorry.' "You're sorry?' "Yes. I'm sorry.' "Yes, I thought you said you're sorry.' 'Don't glare at me like that! I can imagine you the finest dragon to ride' "NO!' The Loremaster wiped his nose on a handkerchief, held the little silken square aloft for a moment, then let it fall.

A boom of wings made Hrun spin around.

Liofrt's dragon was already airborne and circling around towards them. As it swooped low over the turf a billow of flame shot from its mouth, scoring a black Streak across the grass that rushed towards Hrun.

At the last minute he pushed Liessa aside, and felt the wild pain of the flame on his arm as he dived for Safety. He rolled as he hit the ground, and flipped on to his feet again while he looked around frantically for the other dragon. It came in from one side, and Hrun was forced to take a badly-judged standing jump to escape the flame. The dragon's tail whipped around as it passed and caught him a stinging blow across the forehead.

He pushed himself upright, shaking his head to maKe the wheeling stars go away. His blistered back screamed pain at him.

Lio'rt came in for a second run, but slower this time to allow for the big man's unexpected agility.

As the ground drifted up he saw the barbarian standing stock still, chest heaving, arms hanging loosely by his sides. An easy target.

As his dragon swooped away Lio'rt turned his head, expecting to see a dreadfully big cinder.

There was nothing there. Puzzled, Lie!tt turned back.

Hrun, heaving himself over the dragon's shoulder scales with one hand and beating out his flaming hair with the other, presented himself to his view.

Lie!rt's hand flew to his dagger, but pain had sharpened Hrun's normally excellent reflexes to needle point. A backhand blow hammered into the dragonlord's wrist, sending the dagger arcing away towards the ground, and another caught the man full on the chin.

The dragon, carrying the weight of two men, was only a few yards above the grass. This turned out to be fortunate, because at the moment Lie!tt lost consciousness the dragon winked out of existence.

Liessa hurried across the grass and helped Hrun stagger to his feet. He blinked at her.

"What happened? What happened?' he said thickly.

'That was really fantastic,' she said. "The way you turned that somersault in mid-air and everything.' "Yah, but what happened?' "it's rather difficult to explain-' Hrun peered up at the sky. Liartes by far the most cautious of the two brothers, was circling high above them.

"Well, you've got about ten seconds to try,' he said "The dragons-' 'Yah?' "They're imaginary.' "Like all these imaginary burns on my arm, you mean?' "Yes. No!' she shook her head violently. "I'll have to tell you later! ' 'Fine, if you can find a really good medium, snapped Hrun. He glared up at Liartes, who was beginning to descend in wide sweeps.

"Just listen, will you? Unless my brother is conscious his dragon can't exist, it's got no pathway through to this-' 'Run!' shouted Hrun. He threw her away from him and flung himself flat on the ground as Liartes' dragon thundered by, leaving another smoking scar across the turf.

While the creature sought height for another Sweep Hrun scrambled to his feet and set off at a dead run for the woods at the edge of the arena.

They were sparse, little more than a wide and overgrown hedge, but at least no dragon would be able to fly through them.

It didn't try. Liartes brought his mount in to land on the turf a few yards away and dismounted casually. The dragon folded its wings and poked its head in among the greenery, while its master leaned against a tree and whistled tunelessly.

"I can burn you out,' said Liartes, after a while.

The bushes remained motionless.

'Perhaps you're in that holly bush over there?' The holly buSh became a waxy ball of flame.

"I'm sure I can see movement in those ferns.' The ferns became mere skeletons of white ash.

"You're only prolonging it, barbarian. Why not give in now? I've burned lots of people; it doesn't hurt a bit,' said L)iartes, looking sideways at the bushes.

The dragon continued through the spinney, incinerating every likely-looking bush and clump of ferns. L)iartes drew his sword and waited.

Hrun dropped from a tree and landed running.

Behind him the dragon roared and crashed through the bushes as it tried to turn around, but Hrun was running, running, with his gaze fixed on Liartes and a dead branch in his hands.

It is a little known but true fact that a two legged creature can usually beat a four legged creature over a short distance, simply because of the time it takes the quadruped to get its legs sorted out. Hrun heard the scrabble of claws behind him and then an ominous thump. The dragon had half-opened its wings and was trying to fly.

As Hrun bore down on the dragonlord Liartes' sword came up wickedly, to be caught on the branch. Then Hrun cannoned into him and the two men sprawled on the ground.

The dragon roared.

liartes screamed as Hrun brought a knee upwards with anatomical precision, but managed a wild blow that rebroke the barbarian's nose for him.

Hrun kicked away and scrambled to his feet, to find himself looking up into the wild horse-face of the dragon, its nostrils distended.

He lashed out with a foot and caught Liartes, who was trying to stand up, on the side of his head.

The man slumped.

The dragon vanished. The ball of fire that was billowing towards Hrun faded until, when it reached him, it was no more than a puff of warm air. Then there was no sound but the crackle of burning bushes , , Hrun slung the unconscious dragonlord over his shoulder and set off at a trot back to the arena.

Halfway there he found IJio!tt sprawled on the ground, one leg bent awkwardly. He stooped and, with a grunt, hoisted the man on to his vacant shoulder.

Liessa and the Loremaster were waiting on a raised dais at one end of the meadow. The dragonwoman had quite recovered her composure now, and looked levelly at Hrun as he threw the two men down on the steps before her. The people around her were standing in deferential poses, like a court.

cKill them,' she said.

'I kill in my own time,' he said. "In any case, killing unconscious people isn't right.' "I can't think of a more opportune time,' said the Loremaster. Liessa snorted.

"Then I shall banish them,' she said. "Once they are beyond the reach of the Wyrmberg's magic then they'll have no Power. They'll be simply brigands. Will that satisfy you?' "Yes.' "I am surprised that you are so merciful, haHrun.' Hrun shrugged. "A man in my position, he can't afford to be anything else, he's got to consider his image.' He looked around. "Where's the next teSt, then?' "I warn you that it is perilous. If you wish, you may leave now. If you pass the test, however, you will become lord of the Wyrmberg and, of course, my lawful husband.' Hrun met her gaze. He thought about his life, to date. It suddenly seemed to him to have been full of long damp nights sleeping under the stars, desperate fights with trolls, city guards, countless bandits and evil priests and, on at least' three occasions, actual demigods - and for what? Well, for quite a lot of treasure, he had to admit - but where had it all gone? Rescuing beleagured maidens had a certain passing reward, but most of the time he'd finished up by setting them up in some city somewhere with a handsome dowry, because after a while even the most agreeable exmaiden became possessive and had scant sympathy for his efforts to rescue her sister sufferers. In short, life had really left him with little more than a reputation and a network of scars. Being a lord might be fun. Hrun grinned. With a base like this, all these dragons and a good bunch of fighting men, a man could really be a contender.

Besides, the wench was not uncomely.

"The third test?' she said.

"Am I to be weaponless again?' said Hrun.

Liessa reached up and removed her helmet letting the coils of red hair tumble out. Then she unfastened the brooch of her robe. Underneath, she was naked.

As Hrun's gaze swept over her his mind began to operate two notional counting machines. One assessed the gold in her bangles, the tiger-rubies that ornamented her toe-rings, the diamond spangle that adorned her navel, and two highly individual whirligigs of silver filigree. The other was plugged straight into his libido. Both produced tallies that pleased him mightily.

As she raised a hand and proffered a glass of wine she smiled, and said, "I think not.' 'He didn't attempt to rescue you,' Rincewind pointed out as a last resort.

He clung desperately to Twoflower's waist as the dragon circled slowly, tilting the world at a dangerous angle. The new knowledge that the scaley back he was astride only existed as a sort of threedimensional daydream did not, he had soon realised, do anything at all for his ankle-wrenching sensations of vertigo. His mind kept straying towards the posSible results of Twoflower losing his concentration.

"Not even Hrun could have prevailed against those crossbows,' said Twoflower stoutly.

As the dragon rose higher above the patch of woodland, where the three of them had slept a damp and uneasy sleep, the sun rose over the edge of the disc. Instantly the gloomy blues and greys of pre-dawn were transformed into a bright bronze river that flowed across the world, flaring into gold where it struck ice or water or a light-dam. (Owing to the denSity of the magical field surrounding the disc, light itself moved at sub-sonic speeds; this interesting property was well utilized by the Sorca people of the Great Nef, for example, who over the centuries had constructed intricate and delicate dams, and valleys walled with polished silica, to catch the slow sunlight and sort of store it. The Scintillating reservoirs of the Nef, overflowing after several weeks of uninterrupted sunlight, were a truly magnificent sight from the air and it is therefore unfortunate that Twoflower and Rincewind did not happen to glance in that direction.) In front of them the billion-ton impossibility that was the magic-wrought Wyrmberg hung against the sky and that was not too bad, until Rincewind turned his head and saw the mountain's shadow Slowly unroll itself across the cloudscape of the world . . .

'What can you see?' said Twoflower to the dragon.

I see fighting on the top of the mountain came the gentle reply. 'See?' said Twoflower. "Hrun's probably fighting for his life at this very moment.' Rincewind was silent. After a moment Twoflower looked around. The wizard was staring intently at nothing at all, his lips moving soundlessly.

"Rincewind?.' The wizard made a small croaking noise.

"I'm sorry,' said Twoflower. 'What did you say?' all the way . . . the great fall . . . muttered Rincewind, His eyes focused, looked puzzled for a moment, then widened in terror. He made the mistake of looking down.

"Aargh,' he opined, and began to slide. Twoflower grabbed him.

"What's the matter?' Rincewind tried shutting his eyes, but there were no eyelids to his imagination and it was staring widely.

"Don't you get scared of heights?' he managed to say.

Twoflower looked down at the tiny landscape, mottled with cloud shadows. The thought of fear hadn't actually occurred to him.

"No,' he said. "Why should I? You're just as dead if you fall from forty feet as you are from four thousand fathoms, that's what I say.' Rincewind tried to consider this dispassionately, but couldn't see the logic of it. It wasn't the actual falling, it was the hitting he . . .

Twoflower grabbed him quickly.

"Steady on,' he said cheerfully. "We're nearly there ' 'I wish I was back in the city,' moaned Rincewind. "I wish I was back on the ground.' 'I wonder if dragons can fly all the way to the stars?' mused Twoflower. 'Now that would be something . .

'you're mad,' said Rincewind flatly. There was no reply from the tourist, and when the wizard craned around he was horrified to see Twoflower looking up at the paling stars with an odd smile on his face.

"Don't" you even think about it,' added rincewind, menacingly.

the man you seek is talking to the dragon-woman said the dragon.

'Hmm?' said Twoflower, still looking at the paling stars.

"What?' said Rincewind urgently.

"Oh yes. Hrun,' said Twoflower. "i hope we're in time. Dive now. "go low.' Rincewind opened his eyes as the wind increased to a whistling gale. Perhaps they were blown open - the wind certainly made them impossible to shut.

The flat summit of the Wyrmberg rose up at them, lurched alarmingly, then somersaulted into a green blur that flashed by on either side. Tiny WOods and fields blurred into a rushing patchwork.

A brief silvery flash in the landscape may have been the little river that overflowed into the air at the plateau's rim. Rincewind tried to force the memory out of his mind , but it was rather enjoying itself there, terrorizing the other occupants and kicking over the furniture.

"I think not,' said Liessa.

Hrun took the wine cup, slowly. He grinned like a pumpkin.

Around the arena the dragons started to bay.

Their riders looked up. And something like a green blur flashed across the arena, and Hrun had gone.

The winecup hung momentarily in the air, then crashed down on the steps. Only then did a single drop spill.

This was because, in the instant of enfolding Hrun gently in his claws, Ninereeds the dragon had momentarily synchronized their bodily rhythms.

Since the dimension of the imagination is much more complex than those of time and space, which are very junior dimensions indeed, the effect of this was to instantly transform a stationary and priapic Hrun into a Hrun moving sideways at eighty miles an hour with no ill-effects whatsoever, except for a few wasted mouthfuls of wine. Another effect was to cause Liessa to scream with rage and summon her dragon. As the gold beast materialised in front of her she leapt astride it, still naked, and snatched a crossbow from one of the guards. Then she was airborne, while the other dragonriders swarmed towards their own beasts.

The Loremaster, watching from the pillar he had prudently slid behind in the mad scramble happened at that moment to catch the cross dimensional echoes of a theory being at the same instant hatched in the mind of an early psychiatrist in an adjacent universe, possibly because the dimension-leak was flowing both ways, and for a moment the psychiatrist saw the -girl on the dragon. The loremaster smiled.

"Want to bet that she won't catch him?' said Greicha, in a voice of worms and sepulchres, right by his ear.

The loremaster shut his eyes and swallowed hard.

"i thought that my Lord would now be residing fully in the Dread Land,' he managed.

"I am a wizard,' said Greicha. "Death Himself must claim a wizard. And, aha, He doesn't appear to be in the neighbourhood . . .' SHAL WE GO? asked Death.

He was on a white horse, a horse of flesh and blood but red of eye and fiery of nostril, and He stretched out a bony hand and took Greicha's soul out of the air and rolled it up until it was a point of painful light, and then He swallowed it.

Then He clapped spurs to his steed and it sprang into the air, sparks corruscating from its hooves.

"Lord Greicha!' whispered the old Loremaster, as the universe flickered around him.

'That was a mean trick,' came the wizard's voiCe, a mere speck of sound disappearing into the infinite black dimensions.

"My Lord . . . what is "death 'like?' called the old man tremulously.

"When I have investigated it fully, I will let you know,' came the faintest of modulations on the breeze.

"Yes,' murmured the loremaster. A thought Struck him. "During daylight, please,' he added.

'You clowns,' screamed Hrun, from his perch on Ninereed's foreclaws.

"What did he say?' roared Rincewind, as the dragon ripped its way through the air in the race for the heights.

"Didn't hear.' bellowed Twoflower, his voice torn away by the gale. As the dragon banked slightly he looked down at the little toy spinning top that was the mighty Wyrmberg and saw the swarm of creatures rising in pursuit. Ninereed's wings pounded and flicked the air away contemptuously.

Thinner air, too. Twoflower's ear popped for the third time.

Ahead of the swarm, he noticed, was a golden dragon. Someone on it, too.

"Hey, are you all right?' said Rincewind urgently.

He had to drink in several lungfuls of the strangely distilled air in order to get the words out.

"i could have been a lord, and you clowns had to go and-' Hrun gasped. as the chill thin air drew the life even out of his mighty chest "Wass happnin to the air?' muttered Rincewind Blue lights appeared in front of his eyes.

"Unk,' said Twoflower, and passed out.

The dragon vanished.

For a few seconds the three men continued upwards. Twoflower and the wizard presenting an odd picture as they sat one in front of the other with their legs astride something that wasn't there, Then what passed for gravity on the Disc recovered from the surprise, and claimed them.

At that moment Liassa's dragon flashed by, and Hrun landed heavily across its neck. Liassa leaned over and kissed him.

This detail was lost to Rincewind as he dropped away, with his arms still clasped around Twoflower's waist. The disc was a little round map pinned against the sky. It didn't appear to be moving, but Rincewind knew that it was. The whole world was coming towards him like a giant custard pie.

"Wake up!' he shouted, above the roar of the wind. "Dragons! Think of dragons!' There was a flurry of wings as they plummeted through the host of pursuing creatures, which fell away and up. Dragons screamed and wheeled across the sky.

No answer came from Twoflower. Rincewind's robe whipped around him, but he did not wake.

Dragons, thought Rincewind in a panic. He tried to concentrate his mind, tried to envisage a really lifelike dragon. If he can do it, he thought, then so can I. But nothing happened.

The disc was bigger now, a cloud-swirled circle rising gently underneath them.

Rincewind tried again, screwing up his eyes and straining every nerve in his body. A dragon. HiS imagination, a somewhat battered and over-used %Srpn, reached out for a dragon . . . any dragon.

IT WON'T WORK, laughed a voice like the dull tolling of a funereal bell, YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN THEM.

rincewind looked at the terrible mounted apparition grinning at him, and his mind bolted in terror.

There was a brilliant flash .

There was utter darkness.

There was a soft floor under Rincewind's feet, a pink light around him, and the sudden shocked cries of many people.

He looked around wildly. He was standing in some kind of tunnel, which was mostly filled with seats in which outlandishly-dressed people had been strapped. They were all shouting at him.

'Wake up,' he hissed. "Help me!' Dragging the still-unconscious tourist with him he backed away from the mob until his free hand found an oddly-Shaped door handle. He twisted it and ducked through, then slammed it hard.

He stared around the new room in which he found himself and met the terrified gaze of a young woman who dropped the tray she was holding and Screamed.

It sounded like the sort of scream that brings muscular help. Rincewind, awash with fear-distilled adrenalin, turned and barged past her. There were more seats here, and the people in them ducked as he dragged Twoflower urgently along the central gangway. Beyond the rows of seats were little windows. Beyond the windows, against a background of fleecy clouds, was a dragon's wing. It Was silver.

I've been eaten by a dragon, he thought. That's ridiculous, he replied, you can't see out of dragons.

Then hiS shoulder hit the door at the far end of the tunnel, and he followed it through into a cone-shaped room that was even stranger than the tunnel.

It was full of tiny glittering lights. Among the lights, in contoured chairs, were four men who were now staring at him open-mouthed. As he stared back he saw their gazes dart sideways.

Rincewind turned slowly. Beside him was a fifth man - youngish, bearded, as swarthy as the nomad folk of the Great Nef.

"Where am I?' said the wizard. "in the belly of a dragon?' The young man crouched back and shoved a small black box in the wizard's face. The men in the chairs ducked down.

"What is it?' said Rincewind. 'A picture box?' He reached out and took it, a movement which appeared to surprise the swarthy man, who shouted and tried to snatch it back. There was another shout, this time from one of the men in the chairs. Only now he wasn't sitting. He was standing up, pointing something small and metallic at the young man.

It had an amazing effect. The man crouched back with his hands in the air.

"Please give me the bomb, sir,' said the man with the metallic thing. 'Carefully, please.' "This thing?' said Rincewind. "You have it' I don't want it!' the man took it very carefully and put it on the floor. The seated men relaxed, and one of them started speaking urgently to the wall. The wizard watched him in amazement.

"Don't move.' snapped the man with the metal an amulet, Rincewind decided, it must be an amulet. The swarthy man backed into the corner.

"That was a very brave thing you did,' said Amulet-holder to Rincewind. 'You know that? "What?' "What's the matter with your friend 'friend?' rincewind looked down at Twoflower, who was still slumbering peacefully. That was no surprise.

What was really surprising was that 'twoflower was wearing new clothes. Strange clothes. His britches now ended just above his knees. Above that he wore some sort of vest of brightly-striped material. On his head was a ridiculous little straw hat. With a feather in it.

An awkward feeling around the leg regions made Rincewind look down. His clothes had changed too. Instead of the comfortable old robe, so marvellously well-adapted for speed into action in all poSSible contingencies, his legs were encased in cloth tubes. He was wearing a jacket of the same grey material . . .

Until now he'd never heard the language the man with the amulet was using. It was uncouth and vaguely Hublandish - so why could he understand every word? .Let's see, they'd suddenly appeared in this dragon after, they'd materialised in this drag, they'd sudd, they'd, they'd - they had struck 'up a conversation in the airport so naturally they had chosen to sit together on the plane, and he'd promised to show Jack zueiblumen around when they got back to the States. Yes, that was it. And then Jack had been taken ill and he'd panicked and come through here and surprised this hijacker.

Of course. What on earth was "Hublandish'? Dr Rjinswand rubbed his forehead. What he could do with was a drink.

Ripples of paradox spread out across the sea of causality.

PoSsibly the most important point that would have to be borne in mind by anyone outside the sum totality of the multiverse was that although the wizard and the tourist had indeed only recently appeared in an aircraft in mid-air, they had also at one and the same time been riding on that aeroplane in the normal course of things. That is to say: 'while it was true that they had just appeared in this particular set of dimensions, it was also true that they had been living in them all along. It is at this point that normal language gives up, and goes and has a drink.

The point is that several quintillion atoms had just materialized (however, they had not. See below) in a universe where they should not strictly have been. The usual upshot of this sort of thing iS a vast explosion but, since universes are fairly resilient things, this particular universe had saved itself by instantaneously unravelling its spacetime continuum back to a point where the surplus atoms could safely be accommodated and

then rapidly rewinding back to that circle of firelight which for want of a better term its inhabitants were wont to call The Present. This had of course changed history - there had been a few less wars, a few extra dinosaurs and so on - but on the whole the episode passed remarkably quietly.

Outside of this particular universe, however, the repercussions of the sudden double-take bounced to and fro across the face of The Sum of Things, bending whole dimensions and sinking galaxies without a trace.

All this was however totally lost on Dr Rjinswand, 35, a bachelor, born in Sweden, raised in New Jersey, and a specialist in the breakaway oxidation phenomena of certain nuclear reactors.

Anyway, he probably would not have believed any of it.

Zweiblumen still seemed to be unconscious. The stewardess, who had helped Rjinswand to his seat to the applause of the rest of the passengers, was bering over him anxiously.

i radioed ahead,' she told Rjinswand "there'll be an ambulance waiting when we land Uh, it says on the passenger list that you're a doctor' "I don't know what's wrong with him,' said Rincewand hurriedly. it might be a different matter if he was a Magnox reactor of course. Is it shock of some kind?' "I've never' Her sentence terminated in a tremendous crash from the rear of the plane. Several passengers screamed. A sudden gale of air swept every loose magazine and newspaper into a screaming whirlwind that twisted madly down the aisle.

Something else was coming up the aisle. Something big and oblong and wooden and brassbound. It had hundreds of legs. If it was what it seemed - a walking chest of the kind that appeared in pirate stories brim full of ill-gotten gold and jewels - then what would have been its lid suddenly gaped open.

There were no jewels. But there were lots of big square teeth, white as sycamore, and a pulsating tongue, red as mahogany.

An ancient suitcase was coming to eat him.

Rjinswand clutched at the unconscious Zweiblumen for what little comfort there was there, and gibbered. He wished fervently that he was somewhere else . . .

There was a sudden darkness.

There was a brilliant flash.

The sudden departure of several quintillion atoms from a universe that they had no right to be in anyway caused a wild imbalance in the harmony of the Sum Totality which it tried frantically to retrieve, wiping out a number of subrealities in the process. Huge surges of raw magiC boiled uncontrolled around the very foundations of the multiverse itself, welling up through every crevice into hitherto peaceful dimensions and causing novas, supernovas, stellar collisions, wild flights of geese and drowning of imaginary continents. Worlds as far away as the other end of time experienced brilliant sunsets of corruscating octarine as highly-charged magical particles roared through the atmosphere. In the cometary hBlo around the fabled Ice System of Zeret a noble comet died as a prince flamed across the sky.

All this was however lost on Rincewind as, clutching the inert Twoflower around the waist, he plunged towards the Disc's sea several hundred feet below. Not even the convulsions of all the dimensions could break the iron Law of the Conservation of Energy, and Rjinswand's brief journey in the plane had sufficed to carry him several hundred miles horizontally and seven thousand feet vertically.

The word "plane' flamed and died in Rincewind's mind.

Was that a ship down there? The cold waters of the Circle Sea roared up at him and sucked him down into their green, suffocating embrace. A moment later there was another splash as the luggage, still bearing a label carrying the powerful travelling rune TWA, also hit the sea.

Later on, they used it as a raft.

CLOSE TO THE EDGE It had been a long time in the making. Now it was almost' completed, and the slaves hacked away at the last clay remnants of the mantle.

Where other slaves were industriously rubbing its metal flanks with silver sand it was already beginning to gleam in the sun with the silken organic sheen of young bronze. It was still warm even after a week of cooling in the casting pit.

The Arch-astronomer of Krull motioned lightly with his hand and his bearers set the throne down in the .shadow of the hull.

Like a fiSh, he thought. A great flying fish. And of what seas? "it is indeed magnificent,' he whispered. "A work of true art.' "Craft,' said the thickset man by his side. The Arch-astronomer turned slowly and looked up at the man's impassive face. It isn't particularly hard for a face to look impassive-when there are two golden 'Spheres where the eyes should be. They glowed disconcertingly.

"Craft, indeed,' said the astronomer, and smiled "I would imagine that there is no greater craftsman on the entire disc than you, Goldeneyes. Would I be right?' The craftsman paused, his naked body - naked at least, were it not for a toolbelt, a wrist abacus and a deep tan - tensing as he considered the implicationS of this last remark. The golden eyes appeared to be looking into some other world.

"The anSwer is both yes and no,' he said at last Some of the lesser astronomers behind the throne gasped at this lack of etiquette, but the Arch astronomer appeared not to have noticed it.

cContinue,' he said "There are some essential skills that I lack. Yet I am Goldeneyes Silverhand Dactylos,' said the craftsman. "I made the Metal Warriors that guard the Tomb of Pitchiu, I designed the Light Dams of the Great Nef, I built the Palace of the Seven Deserts. And yet-' he reached up and tapped one of his eyes, which rang faintly, 'when I built the golem army for Pitchiu he loaded me down with gold and then, so that I would create no other work to rival my work for him, he had my eyes put out.' "Wise but cruel,' said the Arch-astronomer sym pathetically.

"Yah. So I learned to hear the temper of metals and to see with my fingers. I learned how to distinguish ores by taste and smell. I made these eyes, but I cannot make them see.

"Next I was summoned to build the Palace of the Seven Deserts, as a result of which the Emir showered me with silver and then, not entirely to my surprise, had my right hand cut off.' "A grave hindrance in your line of business,' nodded the Arch-astronomer.

"I used some of the silver to make myself this new hand, putting to use my unrivalled knowledge of levers and fulcrums. It suffices. After I created the first great Light Dam, which had a capacity of ,r)0,000 daylight hours, the tribal councils of the Nef loaded me down with fine silks and then hamstrung me so that I could not escape. As a result I was put to some inconvenience to use the silk and some bamboo to build a flying machine from which I could launch myself from the top-most turret of my prison.' "Bringing you, by various diversions, to Krull,' said the Arch-astronomer. "And one cannot help feeling that some alternative occupation - lettuce farming, say - would offer somewhat less of a risk of being put to death by instalments. Why do you continue in it? Goldeneyes Dactylos shrugged.

"I'm good at it,' he said.

The Arch-astronomer looked up again bronze fish, shining now like a gong in the noontime sun.

"Such beauty,' he murmured. "And unique. Come, Dactylos. Recall to me what it was that I promised should be your reward?' 'You asked me to design a fish that would swim through the seas of space that lie between the worlds,' intoned the master craftsman. "In return for which - in return-' 'Yes? My memory is not what it used to be,' purred the Arch-astronomer, stroking the warm bronze.

"in return,' continued Dactylos, without much apparent hope, "you would set me free, and refrain from chopping off any appendages. I require no treasure.' "Ah, yes. I recall now.' The old man raised a blueveined hand, and added, "I lied.' There waS the merest whisper of sound, and the goldeneyed man rocked on his feet. Then he looked down at the arrowhead protruding from his chest, and nodded wearily. A speck of blood bloomed on his lips.

There was no sound in the entire square (save for the buzzing of a few expectant flies) as his silver hand came up, very slowly, and fingered the arrowhead.

Dactylos grunted.

'Sloppy workmanship,' he said, and toppled backwards.

The Arch-astronomer prodded the body with his toe, and sighed.

'There will be a short period of mourning, as befits a master craftsman,' he said. He watched a bluebottle alight on one golden eye and fly away puzzled . . . "That would seem to be long enough,' said the Arch-astronomer, and beckoned a couple of slaves to carry the corpse away.

"Are the chelonauts ready?' he asked.

The master launchcontroller hustled forward.

"indeed, your prominence,' he said.

"The correct prayers are being intoned? "quite so, your prominence.' "How long to the doorway?' "The launch window,' corrected the master launchcontroller carefully. "Three days, your prominence. Great A'Tuin's tail will be in an unmatched position.' 'Then all that remains,' concluded the Arch-astronomer, "is to find the appropriate sacrifiCe.' The master launchcontroller bowed.

"The ocean shall provide,' he said.

The old man smiled. it always does,' he said "if only you could navigate' "if only you could steer-' A wave washed over the deck. Rincewind and Twoflower looked at each other. "keep bailing!' they screamed in unison, and reached for the buckets.

After a while Twoflower's peevish voice filtered up from the waterlogged cabin.

"I don't see how it's my fault,' he said. He handed up another bucket, which the wizard tipped over the side.

"You were supposed to be on watch,' snapped Rincewind.

'I saved us from the slavers, remember,' said Twoflower.

'i'd rather be a slave than a corpse,' replied the wizard. He straightened up and looked out to sea.

He appeared puzzled.

He was a somewhat different Rincewind from the one that escaped the fire of Ankh-Morpork six months before. More scarred, for one thing. And much more travelled. He had visited the ,Hublands, discovered the curious folkways of many colourful peoples - invariably obtaining more scars in the process - and had even, for a never-to-be-forgotten few days, sailed on the legendary Dehydrated Ocean at the heart of the incredibly dry desert known as the Great Nef. On a colder and wetter sea he had seen floating mountains of ice. He had ridden on an imaginary dragon. He had very nearly said the most powerful spell on the disc. He had-there was definitely less horizon than there ought to be.

'Hmm' Said Rincewind.

'I said nothing's worse than slavery,' said Twoflower. His mouth opened as the wizard flung his bucket far out to sea and sat down heavily on the waterlogged deck, his face a grey mask.

"look, I'm sorry I steered us into the reef, but this boat doesn't seem to want to sink and we're bound to strike land sooner or later,' said Twoflower comfortingly. 'This current must go somewhere.' 'Look at the horizon,' Said Rincewind, in a monotone.

Twoflower squinted.

"it looks all right,' he said after a while.

'Admittedly, there seems to be less than there usually is, but-' 'That's because of the Rimfall,' said Rincewind.

'We're being carried over the edge of the world.' There was a long silence, broken only by the lapping of the waves as the foundering ship spun slowly in the current. It was already quite strong.

'That'S probably why we hit that reef,' Rincewind added. "we got pulled off course during the night.' "Would you like something to eat?' asked Twoflower. He began to rummage through the bundle that he had tied to the rail, out of the damp.

'Don't you understand?' snarled Rincewind. "We are going over the Edge, 'godsdammit!' "Can't we do anything about it?' 'No!' "Then I can't see the sense in panicking,' said Twoflower calmly.

"I knew we shouldn't have come this far Edgewise,' complained Rincewind to the skye 'I wish-' "I wish I had my picture-box,' said Twoflower, 'but it's back on that slaver ship with the rest of the Luggage and-' "You won't need luggage where we're going,' said Rincewind. He sagged, and stared moodily at a distant whale that had carelessly strayed into the rimward current and was now struggling against it.

There was a line of white on the foreshortened horizon, and the wizard fancied he could hear a distant roaring.

"What happens after a ship goes over the Rim fall?' said Twoflower.

"Who knows?' "Well, in that case perhaps we'll just sail on through space and land on another world.' A faraway look came into the little man's eyes. "i'd like that,' he said.

Rincewind snorted.

The sun rose in the sky, looking noticeably bigger this close to the Edge. They stood with their backs against the mast, busy with their own thoughts. Every so often one or other would pick up a bucket and do a bit of desultory bailing, for no very intelligent reason.

The sea around them seemed to be getting crowded. Rincewind noticed several tree trunks keeping station with them, and just below the surface the water was alive with fish

of all Sorts. Of the, current must be teeming with food washed "from the continents near the Hub. He wondered what kind of life it would be, having to keep swimming all the time to stay exactly in the same place. Pretty similar to his own, he decided.

He spotted a small green frog which was paddling desperately in the grip of the inexorable current. To Twoflower's amazement he found a paddle and carefully extended it towards the little amphibian, which scrambled onto it gratefully. A moment later a pair of jaws broke the water and snapped impotently at the spot where it had been swimming.

The frog looked up at Rincewind from the cradle of his hands, and then bit him thoughtfully on the thumb. Twoflower giggled. Rincewind tucked the frog away in a pocket, and pretended he hadn't heard.

'All very humanitarian, but why?' said TwoflOWer. "it'll all be the same in an hour.' 'Because,' Said Rincewind vaguely, and did a bit of bailing. Spray was being thrown up now and the current waS sO Strong that waves were forming and breaking all around them. It all seemed unnaturally warm. There was a hot golden haze on the sea.

The roaring waS louder now. A squid bigger than anything Rincewind had seen before broke the sUrfaCe a few hundred yards away and thrashed madly with itS tentacles before sinking away.

Something else that was large and fortunately unidentifiable howled in the mist. A whole squadron of flying fish tumbled up in a cloud of rainbowedged droplets and managed to gain a few yards before dropping back and being swept in an eddy.

They were running out of world. Rincewind dropped hiS bucket and snatched at the mast as the roaring, final end of everything raced towards them.

"I must see this' said Twoflower, half falling and half diving towards the prow.

Something hard and unyielding smacked into the hull, which spun ninety degrees and came side on to the invisible obstacle. Then it stopped suddenly and a wash of cold sea foam cascaded over the' deck, so that for a few seconds Rincewind was under several feet of boiling green water. He began to scream and then the underwater world became the deep clanging purple colour of fading consciousness , because it was at about this point that Rincewind started to drown.

He awoke with his mouth full of burning liquid and, when he swallowed, the searing pain in his throat jerked him into full consciousness.

The boards of a boat pressed into his back and Twoflower was looking down at him with an expression of deep concern. Rincewind groaned and sat up.

This turned out to be a mistake. The edge of the world was a few feet away.

Beyond it, at a level just below that of the lip of the endless Rimfall, was something altogether magical.

Some seventy miles away, and well beyond the tug of the rim current, a scow with the red sails typical of a freelance slaver drifted aimlessly through the velvety twilight. The crew - such as remained were clustered on the foredeck, surrounding the men working feverishly on the raft.

The captain, a thickset man who wore the elbowturbans typical of a Great Nef tribesman, was much travelled and had seen many strange peoples and curious things, many of which he had subsequently enslaved or stolen. He had begun his career as a sailor on the Dehydrated Ocean in the heart of the disc's driest desert. (Water on the disc has an uncommon fourth state, caused by intense magic combined with the strange desiccating effects of octarine light') it dehydrates, leaving a silvery mildue like free-flowing sand through which a welldesigned hull can glide with ease. The Dehydrated Ocean is a

strange place, but not so strange as its fish.) The captain had never before been really frightened. Now he was terrified.

'I can't hear anything,' he muttered to the fiRSt mate. The mate peered into the gloom.

gPerhaps it fell overboard?' he suggested hopefully. As if in answer there came a furious pounding from the oar deck below their feet, and the sound of splintering wood. The crewmen drew together fearfully, brandishing axes and torches.

They probably wouldn't dare to use them, even if the Monster came rushing towards them. Before its terrible nature had 'been truly understood several men had attacked it with axes, whereupon it had turned aside from its single-minded searching of the ship and had either chased them overboard or had - eaten them? The captain was not quite certain. The Thing looked like an ordinary wooden sea chest. A bit larger than usual, maybe, but not SUSpiciously so. But while it sometimes seemed to contain things like .old socks and miscellaneous luggage, at other times - and he shuddered - it seemed to be, seemed to have . . . He tried not to think about it. It was just that the men who Had been drowned overboard had probably been more fortunate than those it had caught. He tried not to think about it. There had been teeth, teeth like white wooden gravestones, and a tongue red as mahogany . . .

He tried not to think about it. It didn't work.

But he thought bitterly about one thing. This was going to be the last time he rescued ungrateful drowning men in mysterious circumstances. Slavery was better than Sharks, wasn't it? And then they had escaped and when his sailors had investigated their big chest - how had they appeared in the middle of an untroubled ocean sitting on a big chest, anyway? - and it had bitt . . . He tried not to think about it again, but he found himself wondering what would happen when the damned thing realized that its owner wasn't on hoard any longer . . .

"Raft's ready, lord,' said the first mate.

"Into the water with it,' shouted the captain, and cGet aboard, and cFire the ship!' After all, another ship wouldn't be too hard to come by, he philosophised, but a man might have to wait a long time in that Paradise the mullahs advertised before he was granted another life. Let the magical box eat lobsters.

Some pirates achieved immortality by great deeds of cruelty or derring-do. Some achieved immortality by amassing great wealth. But the captain had long ago decided that he would, on the whole, prefer to achieve immortality by not dying.

"What the hell is that?' demanded Rincewind.

"It's beautiful,' said Twoflower beatifically. ' "I'll decide about that when I know what it is, said the wizard.

"It is the Rimbow,' said a voice immediately behind his left ear, "And you are fortunate indeed to be looking at it. From above, at any rate.' and The voice was accompanied by a gust of cold and fishy breath, Rincewind sat quite still.

"Twoflower?' he said.

"YeS?' "If I turn around, what will I see?' "His name is Tethis. He says he's a sea troll. This is his boat. He rescued us,' explained Twoflower 'Will you look around now?' cNot just at the moment,, thank you. So why aren't we going over the Edge, then?' asked rIncewind with glassy calmness.

"Because your boat hit the Circumfence,' said the voice behind him (in tones that made Rincewind imagine Submarine chasms and lurking Things in coral reefs).

"the Circumfence?' he repeated.

'Yes. It runs along the edge of the world,' said the unseen troll. Above the roar of the waterfall Rincewind thought he could make out the splash of oars. He hoped they were oars.

'Ah. You mean the circumference,' said Rincewind. "The circumference makes the edge of things." "So does the Circumfence,' said the troll.

"He means this,' said Twoflower, pointing down Rincewind's eyes followed the finger, dreading what they might see . . .

Hubwards of the boat was a rope suspended a few feet above the surface of the white water. The boat was attached to it, moored yet mobile, by a complicated arrangement of pulleys and little wooden wheels. They ran along the rope as the unseen rower propelled the craft along the very lip of the Rimfall. That explained one mystery - but what Supported the rope? Rincewind peered along its length and saw a stout wooden post sticking up out of the water a few yards ahead. As he watched the boat neared it and then passed it, the little wheels clacking neatly around it in a groove obviously cut for the purpose.

Rincewind also noticed that smaller ropes hung down from the main rope at intervals of a yard or sO.

He turned back to Twoflower.

"I can see what it is,' he said, "But what is it?' Twoflower shrugged. Behind Rincewind the sea troll said, "Up ahead is my house. We will talk more when we are there. Now I must row.' Rincewind found that looking ahead meant that he would have to turn and find out what a sea troll actually looked like, and he wasn't sure he wanted to do that yet. He looked at the Rimbow instead.

It hung in the mists a few lengths beyond the edge of the world, appearing only at morning and evening when the light of the Disc's little orbiting sun shone past the massive bulk of Great A'tuin the World Turtle and struck the Disc's magical field at exactly the right angle.

A double rainbow corruscated into being. Close into the lip of the Rimfall were the seven lesser colours, sparkling and dancing in the spray of the dying seas.

But they were pale in comparison to the wider band that floated beyond them, not deigning to share the same spectrum.

It was the King Colour, of which all the lesser colours are merely partial and wishy-washy reflections . It was octarine, the colour of magic. It was alive and glowing and vibrant and it was the undisputed pigment of the imagination, because wherever it appeared it was a sign that mere matter was a servant of the powers of the magical mind. It was enchantment itself.

But Rincewind always thought it looked a sort of greenish-purple.

After a while a small speck on the rim of the world resolved itself into a eyot or crag, so perilously perched that the waters of the fall swirled around it at the start of their long drop. A driftwood shanty had been built on it, and Rincewind saw that the top rope of the Circumfence climbed over the rocky island on a number of iron stakes and actually passed through the shack by a small round window. He learned later that this was so that the troll could be alerted to the arrival of any salvage on his stretch of the Circumfence by means of a series of small bronze bells, balanced delicately on al'rOpea A'cif e floating stockade had been built out of rerrSh timber on the hubward side of the island. It contained one or two hulks and quite a large amount of floating wood in the form of planks, baulks and even whole natural tree trunks, some still sporting green leaves. This close to the Edge the disc's magical field was so intense that a hazy corona flickered across everything as raw illusion spontaneously discharged itself.

With a last few squeaky jerks the boat slid up against a small driftwood jetty. As it grounded itself and formed a circuit Rincewind felt all the familiar senSations of a huge occult aura - oily, bluish-tasting, and smelling of tin. All around them pure, unffocused magic was sleeting soundlessly into the world.

The wizard and Twoflower scrambled onto the planking and for the first time Rincewind saw the troll.

It wasn't half so dreadful as he had imagined.

Umm, said his imagination after a while.

It wasn't that' the troll was horrifying. Instead of the rotting, betentacled monstrosity he had been expecting Rincewind found himself looking at a rather Squat but not particularly ugly old man who would quite easily have passed for normal on any city street, always provided that other people on the Street were used to seeing old men who were apparently composed of water and very little else.

It was as if the ocean had decided to create life without going through all that tedious business of evolution, and had Simply formed a part of itself into a biped and sent it walking squishily up the beach. The troll was a pleasant translucent blue colour. As Rincewind stared a small shoal of silver fish flashed across its chest.

'It'sB rude to stare,' said the troll. Its mouth opened with a little creSt of foam, and shut again in exactly the same way that water closes over a stone.

"Is it? Why?' asked Rincewind. How does he hold himselb together, his mind screamed at him. Why doesn't he spill? "If you will follow me to my house I will find you food and a change of clothing,' said the troll solemnly. He set off over the rocks without turning to see if they would follow him. After all, where else could they go? It was getting dark, and

a chilly damp breeze was blowing over the edge of the world. Already the transient Rimbow had faded and the mists above the waterfall were beginning tO thin.

"Come on,' said Rincewind, grabbing Twoflower's elbow. But the tourist didn't appear to want to move.

"Come on,' the wizard repeated.

'When it gets really dark, do you think we'll be able to look down and see Great A'tuin the World Turtle?' asked Twoflower, staring at the rolling clouds.

"I hope not,' said Rincewind, "I really do. Now let's go, shall we?' Twoflower followed him reluctantly into the shack. The troll had lit a couple of lamps and was sitting comfortably in a rocking chair. He got to his feet as they entered and poured two cups of a green liquid from a tall pitcher. In the dim light he appeared to phosphoresce, in the manner of warm seas on velvety summer nights. Just to add a baroque gloss to Rincewind's dull terror he seemed to be several inches taller, too.

Most of the furniture in the room appeared to be boxes.

cUh. Really great place you've got here,' said Rincewind. "Ethnic.' He reached for a cup and looked at the green pool shimmering inside it. It'd better be drinkable. he thought.' Because I'm going to drink it. He swallowed. It was the same stuff Twoflower had given him in the rowing boat but, at the time, his mind had ignored it because there were more pressing matters. Now it had the leisure to savour the taste.

Rincewind's mouth twisted. He whimpered a little. One of his legs came up convulsively and caught him painfully in the chest.

Twoflower swirled his own drink thoughtfully while he considered the flavour.

"Ghlen Livid,' he said. "The fermented vul nut drink they freeze-distil in my home country. A certain smokey quality . . . Piquant. From the western plantationS in, ah, Rehigreed Province, yes? Next year's harvest, I fancy, from the colour. May' I ask how you came by it?' (Plants on the disc, while including the categories known commonly as annuals, which were sown this year to come up later this year, rieanuals, sown this year to grow next year, and perennials, sown this year to grow until further notice, also included a few rare re-annuals which, because of an unusual four-dimenSional twist in their genes, could be planted thiS year to come up last year. The Vul nut vine was particularly exceptional in that it could flourish as many as eight years prior to its seed actually being sown. Vul nut wine was reputed to give certain drinkers an insight into the future which was, from the nut's point of view, the past.

Strange but true.) "All things drift into the Circumfence in time,' said the troll, gnomically, gently rocking in his chair. 'My job iS to recover the flotsam. Timber, of course, and ships. Barrels of wine. Bales of cloth.

You.' Light dawned inside Rincewind's head.

'It's a net, isn't it? You've got a net right on the edge of the Sea! ' "The circumfence,' nodded the troll. Ripples radiating across his chest.

Rincewind looked out into the phosphorescent darkness that surrounded the island, and grinned inanely.

"Of course,' he said. "Amazing! You could sink piles and attach it to reefs and - good grief The net would have to be very Strong.' "It is,' Said TethiS.

"It could be extended for a couple of miles, if you found enough rocks and things,' said the wizard.

'Ten thousands of miles. I just patrol this length,' "That's a third of the way around the disC!. ' Tethis sloshed a little as he nodded again. While the two men helped themselves to some more of the green wine, he told them about the Circumfence, the great effort that had been made to build it, and the ancient and wise Kingdom of Krull which had constructed it several centuries before, and the seven navies that patrolled it constantly to keep it in repair and bring its salvage back to Krull, and the manner in which Krull had become a land of leisure ruled by the most learned seekers after knowledge, and the way in which they sought constantly to understand in every possible particular the wondrous complexity of the universe, and the way in which sailors marooned on the Circumfence were turned into slaves, and usually had their tongues cut out. After some interjections at this point he spoke, in a friendly way, on the futility of force, the impossibility of escaping from the island except by boat to one of the other three hundred and eighty isles that lay between the island and Krull itself, or by leaping over the Edge and the high merit of muteness in comparison to for' example, death.

There was a pause. The muted night-roar of the Rimfall only served to give the silence a heavier texture.

the rocking chair started to creak again.

Tethis Seemed to have grown alarmingly during the monologue. "there iS nothing personal in all this,' he added.

"I'too am' a Slave. If you try to overpower me I shall have to kill you, of course, but I won't take any particular pleasure in it.' Rincewind looked at the shimmering fists that rested lightly in the troll's lap. He suspected they could strike with all the force of a tsunami.

"I don't think you understand,' explained Twoflower. "I am a citizen of the "golden Empire. I'm sure Krull would not wish to incur the displeasure of the Emperor' "How will the emperor know?' asked the troll.

'Do you think you're the first person from the Empire who has ended up on the Circumfence?' "I won't be a slave,' shouted Rincewind. "I'd - I'd jump over the Edge first!' He was amazed at the sound in his own voice.

cWould you, though?' asked the troll. The rocking chair flicked back against the wall and one blue arm caught the wizard around the waist. A moment later the troll was striding out of the shack with Rincewind gripped carelessly in one fist.

He did not stop until he came to the Rimward edge of the island. Rincewind squealed.

"Stop that or I really will throw you over the edge,' snapped the troll. 'i'm holding you. aren't I? Look.' Rincewind looked.

In front of him was a soft black night whose mist-muted stars glowed peacefully. But his eyes turned downwards, drawn by some irresistible fascination.

It was midnight on the Disc and so, therefore, the sun was far, far below, swinging slowly under Great A'Tuin's vast and frosty plastron. Rincewind tried a last attempt to fix his gaze on the tips of hiS boots, which were protruding over the rim of the rock, but the sheer drop wrenched it away.

On either side of him two glittering curtains of water hurtled towards infinity as the sea swept around the island on its way to the long fall. a hundred yards below the wizard the largest sea salmon he had ever seen flicked itself out of the foam in a wild, jerky and ultimately hopeless leap.

Then it fell back, over and over, in the golden underworld light.

Huge shadows grew out of that light like pillars supporting the roof of the universe. Hundreds of miles below him the wizard made out the shape of something, the edge of

something-Like those curious little pictures where the silhouette of an ornate glass suddenly becomes the outline of two faces, the scene beneath him flipped into a whole, new, terrifying perspective. Because down there was the head of an elephant as big as a reasonably-sized continent. One mighty tusk cut like a mountain against the golden light, trailing a widening shadow towards the stars. The head was slightly tilted, and a huge ruby eye might almost have been a red super-giant that had managed to shine at noonday.

Below the elephant-Rincewind swallowed and tried not to think-Below the elephant there was nothing but the distant, painful disc of the sun. And, sweeping slowly past it, was something that for all its city-sized scales, its crater-pocks, its lunar cragginess, was indubitably a flipper.

'Shall I let go?' suggested the troll 'Gaah,' said Rincewind, straining backwards.

"I have lived here on the Edge for five years and I have not had the courage,' boomed Tethis. 'Nor have you, if I'm any judge.' He stepped back.

allowing Rincewind to fling himself onto the ground.

twoflower strolled up to the rim and peered over.

'fantastic,' he said. 'If only I had my picture box.' what else is down there? I mean, if you fell off, what would you see? ' ,Tethis sat down on an outcrop. High over the disc the moon came out from behind a cloud , giving him the appearance of ice.

"My home is down there, perhaps,' he said slowly. 'Beyond your silly elephants and that ridiculous turtle. A real world. Sometimes I come out here and look, but somehow I can never bring myselfto take that extra step . . . A real world, with real people. I have wives and little ones, somewhere down there . . .' He stopped, and blew his nose. "You soon learn what you're made of, here on the Edge.' .Stop saying that. Please,' moaned

Rincewind He turned over and saw Twoflower standing unconcernedly at the very lip of the rock. "Gaah, he said, and tried to burrow into the stone.

"There's another world down there?' said Twoflower, peering'over. cWhere, exactly?" The troll waved an arm vaguely. cSomewhere,' he Said. "That's all I know. It was quite a small world.

Meetly blue.' cSo why are you here?' said Twoflower.

'isn't it obvious?' snapped the troll. "I fell off the edge! ' He told them of the world of Bathys, somewhere among the Stars, where the seafolk had built a number of thriving civilisations in the three large OCeans that sprawled across its disc. He had been a meatman, one of the caste which earned a perilous living in large, sail-powered land yachts that ventured far out to land and hunted the shoals of deer and buffalo that abounded in the stormhaunted continents. His particular yacht had been blown into uncharted lands by a freak gale. The C(Yet of the crew had taken the yacht's little rowing trolley and had struck out for a distant lake, but Tethis, as master, had elected to remain with his Vessel. The storm had carried it right over the rocky rim of the world, smashing it to matchwood in the process.

'At first I fell,' said Tethis, "but falling isn't so bad, you know. It's only the landing that hurts, and there was nothing below me. As I fell I saw the world spin off into space until it was lost against the stars.' "What happened next?' said Twoflower breathlessly, glancing towards the misty universe.

"I froze solid,' said Tethis simply. "Fortunately it is something my race can survive. But I thawed out occasionally when I passed near other worlds.

There was one, I think it was the one with what, I thought was this strange ring of mountains around it that turned out to be the biggest dragon you could ever imagine, covered in snow and glaciers and holding its tail in its mouth - well, I came within a few

leagues of that, I shot over the landscape like a comet, in fact, and then I was off again. Then there was a time I woke up and there was your world coming at me like a custard pie thrown by the Creator and, well, I landed in the sea not far from the Circumfence widdershins of Krull.

All sorts of creatures get washed up against the Fence, and at the time they were looking for slaves to man the way stations, and I ended up here.' He stopped and stared intently at rinCeWind. "every night I come out here and look down.' he finished "and I never jump. Courage is hard to come by. here on the Edge.' Rincewind began to crawl determinedly towards the shack. He gave a little scream as the troll picked him up, not unkindly, and set him on his feet.

"Amazing,' said 'Fwoflower, and leaned further out over the Edge. 'There are lots of other worlds out there?' 'Quite a number, I imagine,' said the troll.

'I suppose one could contrive some sort of, I don't know, some sort of a thing that could preserve one against the cold,' said the little man thoughtfully.

'Some sort of a ship that one could sail over the Edge and sail to far-off worlds, too. I wonder . . .' 'Don't even think about it!' moaned Rincewind.

'Stop talking like that, do you hear?' 'They all talk like that in Krull,' said Tethis.

'Those with tongues, of course,' he added.

'Are you awake?' Twoflower snored on. Rincewind jabbed him viciously in the ribs.

'I said, are you awake?' he snarled.

'Scrdfngh . . .' 'We've got to get out of here before this salvage fleet comes!' The dishwater light of dawn oozed through the shack's one window, slopping across the piles

of salvaged boxes and bundles that were strewn around the interior. Twoflower grunted again and tried to burrow into the pile of furs and blankets that Tethis had given them.

'Look, there's all kinds of weapons and stuff in here,' said Rincewind. 'He's gone out somewhere.

When he comes back we could overpower him and and well, then we can think of something. How about it?' 'That doesn't sound like a very good idea,' said Twoflower 'Anyhow, it's a bit ungracious isn't it?' 'Tough buns,' snapped Rincewind. 'This is a rough universe.' He rummaged through the piles around the walls and selected a heavy, wavy-bladed scimitar that had probably been some pirate's pride and joy. It looked the sort of weapon that relied as much on its weight as its edge to cause damage. He raised it awkwardly.

'Would he leave that sort of thing around if it could hurt him?' Twoflower wondered aloud.

Rincewind ignored him and took up a position beside the door. When it opened some ten minutes later he moved unhesitatingly, swinging it across the opening at what he judged was the troll's head height. It swished harmlessly through nothing at all and struck the doorpost, jerking him off his feet and on to the floor.

There was a sigh above him. He looked up into Tethis' face, which was shaking sadly from side to side.

'It wouldn't have harmed me,' said the troll,'but nevertheless I am hurt. Deeply hurt.' He reached over the wizard and jerked the sword out of the wood. With no apparent effort he bent its blade into a circle and sent it bowling away over the rocks until it hit a stone and sprang, still spinning, in a silver arc that ended in the mists forming over the Rimfall.

'Very deeply hurt" he concluded. He reached down beside the door and tossed a sack towards Twoflower.

'It's the carcase of a deer that is just about how you humans like it, and a few lobsters, and a sea salmon.

The Circumfence provides,' he said casually.

He looked hard at the tourist, and then down again at Rincewind.

'What are you staring at?' he said.

'It's just that-' said Twoflower.

'-compared to last night-' said Rincewind.

'You're so small,' finished Twoflower.

'I see, said the troll carefully.'Personal remarks now.' He drew himself up to his full height, which was currently about four feet. 'Just because I'm made of water doesn't mean I'm made of wood, you know.' 'I'm sorry,' said Twoflower, climbing hastily out of the furs.

'You're made of dirt,' said the troll,'but I didn't pass comments about things you can't help, did I? Oh, no. We can't help the way the Creator made us, that's my view. but if you must know, your moon here is rather more powerful than the ones around my own world.' "the moon?' said Twoflower.'I don't under-' 'If I've got to spell it out,' said the troll. testily, 'I'm suffering from chronic tides.' A bell jangled in the darkness of the shack.

Tethis strode across the creaking floor to the complicated devices of levers, strings and bells that was mounted on the Circumfence's topmost strand where it passed through the hut.

The bell rang again, and then started to clang away in an odd jerky rhythm for several minutes.

The troll stood with his ear pressed close to it.

When it stopped he turned slowly and looked at them with a worried frown.

'You're more important than I thought,' he said.

'You're not to wait for the salvage fleet. You're to be collected by a flyer. That's what they say in Krull.' He shrugged. 'And I hadn't even sent a message that you're here, yet. Someone's been drinking vul nut wine again.' He picked up a large mallet that hung on a pillar beside the bell and used it to tap out a brief carillon.

'That'll be passed from lengthman to lengthman all the way back to Krull,' he said. 'Marvellous really, isn't it?' It came speeding across the sea, floating a manlength above it, but still leaving a foaming wake as whatever power that held it up smacked brutally into the water. Rincewind knew what power held it up. He was, he would be the first to admit, a coward, an incompetent, and not even very good at being a failure; but he was still a wizard of sorts, he knew one of the Eight Great Spells, he would be claimed by Death himself when he died' and he recognized really finely honed magic when he saw it.

The lens skimming towards the island was perhaps twenty feet across, and totally transparent Sitting around its circumference were a large number of black-robed men, each one strapped securely to the disc by a leather harness and each one staring down at the waves with an expression so tormented, so agonising, that the transparent disc seemed to be ringed with gargoyles.

Rincewind sighed with relief. This was such an unusual sound that it made Twoflower take his eyes off the approaching disc and turn them on him.

'We're important, no lie,' explained Rincewind.

"They wouldn't be wasting all that magic on a couple of potential slaves.' He grinned.

'What is it?' said Twoflower.

'Well, the disc itself would have been created by Fresnel's Wonderful Concentrator,' said Rincewind, authoritatively. 'That calls for many rare and unstable ingredients, such as demon's breath and so forth, and it takes at least eight fourthgrade wizards a week to envision. Then there's those wizards on it, who must all be gifted hydrophobes-' ' You mean they hate water?' said Twoflower.

'NO, that wouldn't work,' said Rincewind.'Hate is an attracting force, just like love. They really loathe it, the very idea of it revolts them. A really good hydrophobe has to be trained on debydrated water from birth. I mean, that costs a fortune in magic alone. But they make great weather magicians.

Rain clouds just give up and go away.' 'It sounds terrible,' said the water troll behind them.

'And they all die young,' said Rincewind, ignoring him. 'They just can't live with themselves.' ' Sometimes I think a man could wander across the disc all his life and not see everything there is to see,' said Twoflower. 'And now it seems there are lots of other worlds as well. When I think I might die without seeing a hundredth of all there is to see it makes me feel,' he paused, then added, 'well, humble, I suppose. And very angry, of course.' The flyer halted a few yards hubward of the island, throwing up a sheet of spray.

It hung there, spinning slowly. A hooded figure standing by the stubby pillar at the exact centre of the lens beckoned to them.

'You'd better wade out,' said the troll. 'It doesn't do to keep them waiting. It has been nice to make your acquaintance.' He shook them both, wetly, by the hand. As he waded out a little way with them the two nearest loathers on the lens shied away with expressions of extreme disgust.

The hooded figure reached down with one hand and released a rope ladder. In its other hand it held a silver rod, which had about it the unmistakable air of something designed for killing people.

Rincewind's first impression was reinforced when the figure raised the stick and waved it carelessly towards the shore. A section of rock vanished, leaving a small grey haze of nothingness.

'That's so you don't think I'm afraid to use it,' said the figure.

'Don't think you're afraid?' said Rincewind. The hooded figure snorted.

'We know all about you, Rincewind the magician.

You are a man of great cunning and artifice. You laugh in the face of Death. Your affected air of craven cowardice does not fool me.' It fooled Rincewind. 'I-' he began, and paled as the nothingness-stick was turned towards him. 'I see you know all about me,' he finished weakly, and sat down heavily on the slippery surface. He and Twoflower, under instructions from the hooded commander, strapped themselves down to rings set in the transparent disc.

'If you make the merest suggestion of weaving a spell,' said the darkness under the hood, 'you die.

Third quadrant reconcile, ninth quadrant redouble, forward all!' A wall of water shot into the air behind Rincewind and the disc jerked suddenly. The dreadful presence of the sea troll had probably concentrated the hydrophobes' minds wonderfully, because it then rose at a very steep angle and didn't begin level flight until it was a dozen fathoms above the waves. Rincewind glanced down through the transparent surface and wished he hadn't.

'Well, off again then,' said Twoflower cheerfully.

He turned and waved at the troll, now no more than a speck on the edge of the world.

Rincewind glared at him. 'Doesn't anything ever worry you?' he asked.

'We're still alive; aren't we?' asked Twoflower.

'And you yourself said they wouldn't be going to all this trouble if we were just going to be slaves. I expect Tethis was exaggerating. I expect it's all a misunderstanding. I expect we'll be sent home.

After we've seen Krull, of course. And I must say it all sounds fascinating.' 'Oh yes,' said Rincewind, in a hollow voice.

'Fascinating.' He was thinking: I've seen excitement, and I've seen boredom. And boredom was best.

Had either of them happened to look down at that moment they would have noticed a strange v-shaped wave surging through the water far below them, its apex pointing directly at Tethis' island. But they weren't looking. The twenty-four hydrophobic magicians were looking, but to them it was just another piece of dreadfulness, not really any different from the liquid horror around it. They were probably right.

Sometime before all this the blazing pirate ship had hissed under the waves and started the long slow slide towards the distant ooze. It was more distant than average, because directly under the stricken keel was the Gorunna Trench - a chasm in the Disc's surface that was so black, so deep and so reputedly evil that even the krakens went there fearfully, and in pairs. In less reputedly evil chasms the fish went about with natural lights on their heads and on the whole managed quite well.

In Gorunna they left them unlit and, insofar as it is possible for something without legs to creep, they crept; they tended to bump into things, too.

Horrible things.

The water around the ship turned from green to purple, from purple to black, from black to a darkness so complete that blackness itself seemed merely grey by comparison. Most of its timbers had already been crushed into splinters under the intense pressure.

It spiralled past groves of nightmare polyps and drifting forests of seaweed which glowed with faint, diseased colours. Things brushed it briefly with soft, cold tentacles as they darted away into the freezing silence.

Something rose up from the murk and ate it in one mouthful.

Some time later the islanders on a little rimward atoll were amazed to find, washed into their little local lagoon, the wave-rocked corpse of a hideous sea monster, all beaks, eyes and tentacles. They were further astonished at its size, since it was rather larger than their village. But their surprise was tiny compared to the huge, stricken expression on the face of the dead monster, which appeared to have been trampled to death.

Somewhat further rimward of the atoll a couple of little boats, trolling a net for the ferocious freeswimming oysters which abounded in those seas, caught something that

dragged both vessels for several miles before one captain had the presence of mind to sever the lines.

But even his bewilderment was as nothing compared to that of the islanders on the last atoll in the archipelago. During the following night they were awakened by a terrific crashing and splintering noise coming from their minute jungle; when some of the bolder spirits went to investigate in the morning they found that the trees had been smashed in a broad swathe that started on the hubmost shore of the atoll and made a line of total destruction pointing precisely Edgewise, littered with broken lianas, crushed bushes and a few bewildered and angry oysters.

They were high enough now to see the wide curve of the Rim sweeping away from them, lapped by the fluffy clouds that mercifully hid the waterfall for most of the time. From up here the sea, a deep blue dappled with cloud-shadows, looked almost inviting. Rincewind shuddered.

'Excuse me,' he said. The hooded figure turned from its contemplation of the distant haze and raised its wand threateningly.

'I don't want to use this,' it said.

'You don't?' said Rincewind.

'What is it, anyway?' said Twoflower.

'Ajandurah's Wand of Utter Negativity,' said Rincewind. 'And I wish you'd stop waving it about.

It might go off,' he added, nodding at the wand's glittering point. 'I mean, it's all very flattering, all this magic being used just for our benefit, but there's no need to go quite that far. And-' 'Shut up.' The figure reached up and pulled back its hood, revealing itself

to be a most unusually tinted young woman. Her skin was black. Not the dark brown of Urabewe, or the polished blue-black of monsoon-haunted Klatch, but the deep black of midnight at the bottom of a cave. Her hair and eyebrows were the colour of moonlight. There was the same pale sheen around her lips. She looked about fifteen, and very frightened.

Rincewind couldn't help noticing that the hand holding the wand was shaking, this was because a piece of sudden death, wobbling uncertainly a-mere five feet from your nose, is very hard to miss. It dawned on him - very slowly, because it was a completely new sensation - that someone in the world was frightened of him. The complete reverse was so often the case that he had come to think of it as a kind of natural law.

'What is your name?' he said, as reassuringly as he could manage. She might be frightened, but she did have the wand. If I had a wand like that, he thought, I wouldn't be frightened of anything. So what in Creation can she imagine I could do? 'My name is immaterial,' she said.

'That's a pretty name,' said Rincewind. 'Where are you taking us, and why? I can't see any harm in your telling us.' 'You are being brought to Krull,' said the girl.

'And don't mock me, hublander. Else I'll use the wand. I must bring you in alive, but no-one said anything about bringing you in whole. My name is Marchesa, and I am a wizard of the fifth level. Do you understand?' 'Well, since you know all about me then you know that I never even made it to Neophyte,' said Rincewind. 'I'm not even a wizard, really.' He caught Twoflower's astonished expression, and added hastily,'Just a wizard of sorts.' 'You can't do magic because one of the Eight Great Spells is indelibly lodged in your mind,' said Marchesa, shifting her balance gracefully as the great lens described a wide arc over the sea. 'That's why you were thrown out of Unseen University.

We know.' 'But you said just now that he was a magician of great cunning and artifice,' protested Twoflower.

'Yes, because anyone who survives all that he has survived - most of which was brought on himself by his tendency to think of himself as a wizard - well, he must be some kind of a magician,' said Marchesa. 'I warn you, Rincewind. If you give me the merest suspicion that you are intoning the Great Spell I really will kill you.' She scowled at him nervously.

'Seems to me your best course would be to just, you know, drop us off somewhere,' said Rincewind.

'I mean, thanks for rescuing us and everything, so , if you'd just let us get on with leading our lives I'm ' sure we'd all-' 'I hope you're not proposing to enslave us,' said Twoflower. ' Marchesa looked genuinely shocked. 'Certainly not! Whatever could have given you that idea? Your lives in Krull will be rich, full and comfortable-' ' Oh, good,' said Rincewind.

'-just not very long.' Krull turned out to be a large island, quite mountainous and heavily wooded, with pleasant white buildings visible here and there among the trees. The land sloped gradually up towards the rim, so that the highest point in Krull in fact slightly overhung the Edge. Here the Krullians had built their major city, also called Krull, and since so much of their building material had been salvaged from the Circumfence the houses of Krull had a decidedly nautical persuasion.

To put it bluntly, entire ships had been mortic artfully together and converted into buildings, Triremes, chows and caravels protruded at strange angles from the general wooden chaos. Painted figureheads and hublandish dragonprows reminded the citizens of Krull that their good fortune stemmed from the sea; barquentines and carracks lent a distinctive shape to the larger buildings. And so the city rose tier on tier between the blue-green ocean of the Disc and the soft clo sea of the Edge, the eight colours of the Rimbow reflected in every window and in the many telescope lenses of the city's multitude of astronomers.

'It's absolutely awful,' said Rincewind gloomily The lens was approaching now along the very I of the rimfall. The island not only got higher as it neared the Edge. It got narrower too, so that the lens was able to remain over water until it was very near the city. The parapet along the edgewise cliff was dotted with gantries projecting into nothingness . The lens glided smoothly towards one of them and docked with it as smoothly as a boat might glide up to a quay. Four guards, with the same moonlight hair and nightblack faces as Marchesa, were waiting. They did not appear to be armed, but as Twoflower and Rincewind stumbled on to the parapet they were each grabbed by the arms and held quite firmly enough for any thought" of escape to be instantly dismissed.

Then Marchesa and the watching hydrophobic wizards were quickly left behind and the guards and their prisoners set off briskly along a lane that wound between the ship-houses. Soon it lead downwards, into what turned out to be a palace of some sort, half-hewn out of the rock of the clif itself. Rincewind was vaguely aware of brightly-lit tunnels, and courtyards open to the distant sky. a few elderly men, their robes covered in mysterious occult symbols, stood aside and watched with interest as the sextet passed. Several times Rincewind noticed hydrophobes - their ingrained expressions of self-revulsion at their own body-fluids was distinctive- and here and there trudging men who could only be slaves. He didn't have much time to reflect on all this before a door was opened ahead of them and they were pushed, gently but firmly, into a room. Then the door slammed behind them.

Rincewind and Twoflower regained their balance and stared around the room in which they now found themselves.

'Gosh,' said Twoflower ineffectually, after a pause during which he had tried unsuccessfully to find a better word.

'This is a prison cell?' wondered Rincewind aloud.

'All that gold and silk and stuff,' Twoflower added. 'I've never seen anything like it!' In the centre of the richly-decorated room, on a carpet that was so deep and furry that Rincewind trod on it gingerly lest it be some kind of shaggy, floor-loving beast, was a long gleaming table laden with food. Most were fish dishes, including the biggest and most ornately-prepared lobster Rincewind had ever seen, but there were also plenty of bowls and platters piled with strange creations that he had never seen before. He reached out cautiously and picked up some sort of purple fruit crusted with green crystals.

'Candied sea urchin,' said a cracked, cheerful voice behind him. 'A great delicacy.' He dropped it quickly and turned around. An old man had stepped out from behind the heavy curtains. He was tall, thin and looked almost benign compared to some of the faces Rincewind had seen recently.

'The puree of sea cucumbers is very good too,' said the face, conversationally. 'Those little green bits are baby starfish.' 'Thank you for telling me,' said Rincewind weakly.

'Actually, they're rather good,' said Twoflower, his mouth full. 'I thought you liked seafood?' 'Yes, I thought I did,' said Rincewind. 'What's this wine- crushed octopus eyeballs?' 'Sea "rape,' said the old man.

'Great,' said Rincewind, and swallowed a glassful. ' Not bad. A bit salty, maybe.' 'Sea grape is a kind of small jellyfish,' explained the stranger. 'And now I really think I should introduce myself. Why has your friend gone that strange colour?' 'Culture shock, I imagine,' said Twoflower. 'What did you say your name was?' 'I didn't. It's Garhartra. I'm the Guestmaster, you see. It is my pleasant task to make sure that your stay here is as delightful as possible.' He bowed. 'If there is anything you want you have only to say.' Twoflower sat down on an ornate mother-of-pearl chair with a glass of oily wine in one hand and a crystallised squid in the other. He frowned.

'I think I've missed something along the way,' he said. 'First we were told we were going to be slaves-' 'A base canard!' interrupted Garhartra.

'What's a canard?' said Twoflower.

'I think it's a kind of duck,' said Rincewind from the far end of the long table. 'Are these biscuits made of something really nauseating, do you suppose?' '-and then we were rescued at great magical expense-' 'They're made of pressed seaweed,' snapped the Guestmaster.

'-but then we're threatened, also at a vast expenditure of magic-' 'Yes, I thought it would be something like seaweed,' agreed Rincewind. 'They certainly taste like seaweed would taste if anyone was masochistic enough to eat seaweed.' '-and then we're manhandled by guards and thrown in here-' 'Pushed gently,' corrected Garhartra.

'-which turned out to be this amazingly rich room and there's all this food and a man saying he's devoting his life to making us happy,' Twoflower concluded. 'What I'm getting at is this sort of lack of consistency.' 'Yar,' said Rincewind. 'What he means is, are you about to start being generally unpleasant again? Is this just a break for lunch?' Garhartra held up his hands reassuringly.

'Please, please,' he protested. 'It was just necessary to get you here as soon as possible. We certainly do not want to enslave you. Please be reassured on that score.' 'Well, fine,' said Rincewind.

'Yes, you will in fact be sacrificed,' Garhartra continued placidly.

'Sacrificed? You're going to kill us?' shouted the wizard.

'Kill? Yes, of course. Certainly! It would hardly be a sacrifice if we didn't, would it? But don't worry - it'll be comparatively painless.' 'Comparatively? Compared to what?' said Rincewind.

He picked up a tall green bottle that was full of sea grape jellyfish wine and hurled it hard at the Guestmaster, who flung up a hand as if to protect himself.

There was a crackle of octarine flame from his fingers and the air suddenly took on the thick, greasy feel that indicated a powerful magical discharge. The flung bottle slowed and then stopped in mid-air, rotating gently.

At the same time an invisible force picked Rincewind up and hurled him down the length of the room, pinning him awkwardly halfway up the far wall with no breath left in his body. He hung there with his mouth open in rage and astonishment.

Garhartra lowered his hand and brushed it slowly on his robe 'I didn't enjoy doing that, you know,' he said.

'I could tell,' muttered Rincewind.

'but what do you want to sacrifice us for?' asked Twoflower.'You hardly know us!' 'That's rather the point, isn't it? It's not very good manners to sacrifice a friend. Besides, you were, um, specified. I don't know a lot about the god in question, but He was quite clear on that point. Look, I must be running along now. So much to organise, you know how it is,' the Guestmaster opened the door, and then peered back around it.

'Please make yourselves comfortable, and don't worry.' 'But you haven't actually told us anything!' wailed Twoflower.

'It's not really worth it, is it? What with you being sacrificed in the morning,' said Garhartra 'it's hardly worth the bother of knowing, really.

Sleep well. Comparatively well, anyway.' He shut the door. A brief octarine flicker of balefire around it suggested that it had now been sealed beyond the skills of any earthly locksmith.

Gling, clang, tang went the bells along the Circumfence in the moonlit, rimfall-roaring night.

Terton, lengthman of the 40th Length, hadn't heard such a clashing since the night a giant kraken had been swept into the Fence five years ago. He leaned out of his hut, which for the lack of any convenient eyot on this Length had been built on wooden piles driven into the sea bed, and stared into the darkness. Once or twice he thought he could see movement, far off. Strictly speaking, he should row out to see what was causing the din But here in the clammy darkness it didn't seem like an astoundingly good idea, so he slammed the door, wrapped some sacking around the madly jangling bells, and tried to get back to sleep.

That didn't work, because even the top strand of the Fence was thrumming now, as if something big and heavy was bouncing on it. After staring at the ceiling for a few minutes, and trying hard not to think of great long tentacles and pond-sized eyes, Terton blew out the lantern and opened the door a crack.

Something was coming along the Fence, in giant loping bounds that covered metres at a time. It loomed up at him and for a moment Terton saw something rectangular, multi-legged, shaggy with seaweed and - although it had absolutely no features from which he could have deduced this - it was also very angry indeed.

The hut was smashed to fragments as the monster charged through it, although Terton survived by clinging to the Circumfence; some weeks later he was picked up by a returning salvage fleet, subsequently escaped from Krull on a hijacked lens (having developed hydrophobia to an astonishing degree) and after a number of adventures eventually found his way to the Great Nef, an area of the Disc so dry that it actually has negative rainfall, which he nevertheless considered uncomfortably damp.

'Have you tried the door?' 'Yes,' said Twoflower. 'And it isn't any less locked than it was last time you asked. There's the window, though.' 'A great way of escape,' muttered Rincewind, from his perch halfway up the wall. 'You said it looks out over the Edge. Just step out, eh, and plunge through space and maybe freeze solid or hit some other world at incredible speeds or plunge wildly into the burning heart of a sun?' 'Worth a try,' said Twoflower. 'Want a seaweed biscuit?' 'No!' 'When are you coming down?' Rincewind snarled. This was partly in embarrassment.

Garhartra's spell had been the little-used and hard-to-master Atavarr's Personal Gravitational Upset, the practical result of which was that until it wore off Rincewind's body was convinced that'down' lay at ninety degrees to that direction normally accepted as of a downward persuasion by the majority of the Disc's inhabitants.

He was in fact standing on the wall.

Meanwhile the flung bottle hung supportless in the air a few yards away. In its case time had well, not actually been stopped, but had been slowed by several orders of magnitude, and its trajectory had so far occupied several hours and a couple of inches as far as Twoflower and Rincewind were concerned. The glass gleamed in the moonlight. Rincewind sighed and tried to make himself comfortable on the wall.

'Why don't you ever worry?' he demanded petulantly. 'Here we are, going to be sacrificed to some god or other in the morning, and you just sit there eating barnacle canapes.' 'I expect something will turn up,' said Twoflower.

'I mean, it's not as if we know why we're going to be killed,' the wizard went on.

You'd like to, would you? 'Did you say that?' asked Rincewind.

'Say what? Twoflower gave him a worried look.

'I'm Twoflower,'he said.'Surely you remember?' Rincewind put his head in his hands.

'It's happened at last,' he moaned.'I'm going out of my mind.' Good idea said the voice. It's getting pretty crowded in here The spell pinning Rincewind to the wall vanished with a faint 'pop'. He fell forward and landed in a heap on the floor.

Careful- you nearly squashed me Rincewind struggled to his elbows and reached into the pocket of his robe. When he withdrew his hand the green frog was sitting on it, its eyes oddly luminous in the half-light.

'You?' said Rincewind.

Put me down on the floor and stand back The frog blinked.

The wizard did so, and dragged a bewildered Twoflower out of the way.

The room darkened. There was a windy, roaring sound. Streamers of green, purple and octarine cloud appeared out of nowhere and began to spiral rapidly towards the recumbent amphibian, shedding small bolts of lightning as they whirled. Soon the frog was lost in a golden haze which began to elongate upwards, filling the room with a warm yellow light. Within it was a darker, indistinct shape, which wavered and changed even as they watched. And all the time there was the high, brain-curdling whine of a huge magical field . . .

As suddenly as it had appeared, the magical tornado vanished. And there, occupying the space where the frog had been, was a frog.

'Fantastic,' said Rincewind.

The frog gazed at him reproachfully.

'Really amazing,' said Rincewind sourly.'A frog magically transformed into a frog. Wondrous.' 'Turn around,' said a voice behind them. It was a soft, feminine voice, almost an inviting voice, the sort of voice you could have a few drinks with, but it was coming from a spot where there oughtn't to be a voice at all. They managed to turn without really moving, like a couple of statues revolving on plinths.

There was a woman standing in the pre-dawn light. She looked - she was - she had a - in point of actual fact she . . .

Later Rincewind and Twoflower couldn't quite agree on any single fact about her, except that she had appeared to be beautiful (precisely what physical features made her beautiful they could not, definitively, state) and that she had green eyes. Not the pale green of ordinary eyes, eitherthese were the green of fresh emeralds and as iridescent as a dragonfly. And one of the few genuinely magical facts that Rincewind knew was that no god or goddess, contrary and volatile as they might be in all other respects, could change the colour or nature of their eyes . . .

'L-'he began. She raised a hand.

'You know that if you say my name I must depart,' she hissed. 'Surely you recall that I am the one goddess who comes only when not invoked?' 'Uh. Yes, I suppose I do,' croaked the wizard, trying not to look at the eyes. 'You're the one they call the Lady?' 'Yes.' 'Are you a goddess then?' said Twoflower excitedly.'I've always wanted to meet one.' Rincewind tensed, waiting for the explosion of rage. Instead, the Lady merely smiled.

'Your friend the wizard should introduce us,' she said.

Rincewind coughed. 'Uh, yar,' he said. 'This is Twoflower, Lady, he's a tourist-' '-I have attended him on a number of occasions-'

'and, Twoflower, this is the Lady. Just the Lady, right? Nothing else. Don't try and give her any other name, okay?' he went on desperatelY, his eyes darting meaningful glances that were totally lost on the little man.

Rincewind shivered. He was not, of course, an atheist; on the Disc the gods dealt severely with atheists. On the few occasions when he had some spare change he had always made a point of dropping a few coppers into a temple coffer somewhere, on the principle that a man needed all the friends he could get. But usually he didn't bother the Gods, and he hoped the Gods wouldn't bother him. Life was quite complicated enough.

There were two gods, however, who were really terrifying. The rest of the gods were usually only sort of large-scale humans, fond of wine and war and whoring. But Fate and the Lady were chilling.

In the Gods' Quarter, in Ankh-Morpork, Fate had a small, heavy, leaden temple, where hollowey-ed and gaunt worshippers met on dark nights for their predestined -and fairly pointless rites. There were no temples at all to the Lady, although she was arguably the most powerful goddess in the entire history of Creation. A few of the more daring members of the Gamblers' Guild had once experimented with a form of worship, in the deepest cellars of Guild headquarters, and had all died of penury, murder or just Death within the week. She was the Goddess Who Must Not Be Named; those who sought her never found her, yet she was known to come to the aid of those in greatest need.

And, then again, sometimes she didn't. She was like that. She didn't like the clicking of rosaries, but was attracted to the sound of dice. No man knew what She looked like, although there were many times when a man who was gambling his life on the turn of the cards would pick up the hand he had been dealt and stare Her full in the face. Of course, sometimes he didn't. Among all the gods she was at one and the same time the most courted and the most cursed.

'We don't have gods where I come from,' said Twoflower.

'You do, you know,' said the Lady.'Everyone has gods. You just don't think they're gods.' Rincewind shook himself mentally.

'look,' he said. 'I don't want to sound impatient, but in a few minutes some people are going to come through that door and take us away and kill us.' 'Yes,' said the Lady.

'I suppose you wouldn't tell us why?' said Twoflower.

'Yes,' said the Lady. 'The Krullians intend to launch a bronze vessel over the edge of the Disc.

Their prime purpose is to learn the sex of A'tuin the World Turtle.' 'Seems rather pointless,' said Rincewind.

'No. Consider. One day Great A'tuin may encounter another member of the species chelys galactica, somewhere in the vast night in which we move. Will they fight? Will they mate? A little imagination will show you that the sex of Great A'tuin could be very important to us. At least, so the Krullians say.' Rincewind tried not to think of World Turtles mating. It wasn't completely easy.

!'SO,' continued the goddess, 'they intend to launch this ship of space, with two voyagers aboard. It will be the culmination of decades of research. It will also be very dangerous for the travellers. And so, in an attempt to reduce the risks, the Arch-astronomer of Krull has bargained with Fate to sacrifice two men at the moment of launch. Fate, in His turn, has agreed to smile on the space ship. A neat barter, is it not?' 'And we're the sacrifices,' said Rincewind.

'Yes.'

'I thought Fate didn't go in for that sort of bargaining. I thought Fate was implacable,' said Rincewind.

'Normally, yes. But you two have been thorns in his side for some time. He specified that the sacrifices should be you. He allowed you to escape from the pirates. He allowed you to drift into the Circumfence. Fate can be one mean god at times.' There was a pause. The frog sighed and wandered off under the table.

'But you can help us?' prompted Twoflower.

'You amuse me,' said the Lady. 'I have a sentimental streak. You'd know that, if you were gamblers. So for a little while I rode in a frog's mind and you kindly rescued me, for, as we all know, no-one likes to see pathetic and helpless creatures swept to their death.' 'Thank you,' said Rincewind.

'The whole mind of Fate is bent against you,' said the Lady. 'But all I can do is give you one chance. Just one, small chance. The rest is up to you.' She vanished.

'Gosh,' said Twoflower, after a while. 'That's the first time I've ever seen a goddess.' The door swung open. Garhartra entered, holding a wand in front of him. Behind him were two guards, armed more conventionally with swords.

'Ah,' he said conversationally.'You are ready, I see.' Ready, said a voice inside Rincewind's head.

The bottle that the wizard had flung some eight hours earlier had been hanging in the air, imprisoned by magic in its own personal time-field.

But during all those hours the original mane of the spell had been slowly leaking away until the total magical energy was no longer sufficient to hold it against the Universe's own powerful normality field, and when that happened Reality snapped back in a matter

of microseconds. The visible sign of this was that the bottle suddenly completed the last part of its parabola and burst against the side of the Guestmaster's head, showering the guards with glass and jellyfish wine.

Rincewind grabbed Twoflower's arm, kicked the nearest guard in the groin, and dragged the startled tourist into the corridor. Before the stunned Garhartra had sunk to the floor his two guests were already pounding across distant flagstones.

Rincewind skidded around a corner and found himself on a balcony that ran around the four sides of a courtyard. Below them, most of the floor of the yard was taken up by an ornamental pond in which a few terrapins sunbathed among the lily leaves.

And ahead of Rincewind were a couple of very surprised wizards wearing the distinctive dark blue and black robes of trained hydrophobes. One of them, quicker on the uptake than his companion, raised a hand and began the first words of a spell.

There was a short sharp noise by Rincewind's side. Twoflower had spat. The hydrophobe screamed and dropped his hand as though it had been stung.

The other didn't have time to move before Rincewind was on him, fists swinging wildly. One stiff punch with the weight of terror behind it sent the man tumbling over the balcony rail and into the pond, which did a very strange thing; the water smacked aside as though a large invisible balloon had been dropped into it, and the hydrophobe hung screaming in his own revulsion field.

Twoflower watched him in amazement until Rincewind snatched at his shoulder and indicated a likely looking passage. They hurried down it, leaving the remaining hydrophobe writhing on the floor and snatching at his damp hand.

For a while there was some shouting behind them, but they scuttled along a cross corridor and another courtyard and soon left the sounds of pursuit behind. Finally Rincewind

picked a safe looking door, peered around it, found the room beyond to be unoccupied, dragged Twoflower inside, and slammed it behind him. Then he leaned against it, wheezing horribly.

'We're totally lost in a palace on an island we haven't a hope of leaving,' he panted.'And what's more we- hey!' he finished, as the sight of the contents of the room filtered up his deranged optic nerves.

Twoflower was already staring at the walls.

Because what was so odd about the room was, it contained the whole Universe.

Death sat in His garden, running a whetstone along the edge of His scythe. It was already so sharp that any passing breeze that blew across it was sliced smoothly into two puzzled zephyrs, although breezes were rare indeed in Death's silent garden. It lay on a sheltered plateau overlooking the Disc world's complex dimensions, and behind it loomed the cold, still, immensely high and brooding mountains of Eternity.

Swish! went the stone. Death hummed a dirge, and tapped one bony foot on the frosty flagstones.

Someone approached through the dim orchard where the nightapples grew, and there came the sickly sweet smell of crushed lilies. Death looked up angrily, and found Himself staring into eyes that were black as the inside of a cat and full of distant stars that had no counterpart among the familiar constellations of the Realtime universe.

Death and Fate looked at each other. Death grinned - He had no alternative, of course, being made of implacable bone. The whetstone sang rhythmically along the blade as He continued His task.

'I have a task for you,' said Fate. His words drifted across death's scythe and split tidily into two ribbons of consonants and vowels.

I HAVE TASKS ENOUGH THIS DAY, said Death in a voice as heavy as neutronium, THE WHITE PLAGUE ABIDES EVEN NOW IN PSEUDOPOLIS AND I AM BOUND THERE TO RESCUE MANY OF ITS CITIZENS FROM HIS GRASP. SUCH A ONE HAS NOT BEEN SEEN THESE HUNDRED YEARS. I AM EXPECTED TO STALK THE STREETS, AS IS MY DUTY.

'I refer to the matter of the little wanderer and the rogue wizard,' said Fate softly, seating himself beside Death's black-robed form and staring down at the,distant, multifaceted jewel which was the Disc universe as seen from this extra-dimensional vantage point.

The scythe ceased its song.

'They die in a few hours,' said Fate. 'It is fated.' Death stirred, and the stone began to move again.

'I thought you would be pleased,' said Fate.

Death shrugged, a particularly expressive gesture for someone whose visible shape was that of a skeleton.

I DID INDEED CHASE THEM MIGHTILY. ONCE, he said, BUT AT LAST THE THOUGHT CAME TO ME THAT SOONER OR LATER AlL MEN MUST DIE. EVERYTHING DIES IN THE END. I CAN BE ROBBED BUT NEVER DENIED, I TOLD MYSELF. WHY WORRY? 'I too cannot be cheated,' snapped Fate.

SO I HAVE HEARD, said Death, still grinning.

'Enough!' shouted Fate, jumping to his feet.

'They will die!' He vanished in a sheet of blue fire.

Death nodded to Himself and continued at His work. After some minutes the edge of the blade seemed to be finished to His satisfaction. He stood up and levelled the scythe at the fat and noisome candle that burned on the edge of the bench and then, with two deft sweeps, cut the flame into three bright slivers. Death grinned.

A short while later he was saddling his white stallion, which lived in a stable at the back of Death's cottage. The beast snuffled at him in a friendly fashion; though it was crimson-eyed and had flanks like oiled silk, it was nevertheless a real flesh-and-blood horse and, indeed, was in all probability better treated than most beasts of burden on the Disc. Death was not an unkind master. He weighed very little and, although He often rode back with His saddlebags bulging, they weighed nothing whatsoever.

'All those worlds!' said Twoflower.'It's fantastic!' Rincewind grunted, and continued to prowl warily around the star-filled room. Twoflower turned to a complicated astrolabe, in the centre of which was the entire Great A'Tuin-Elephant-Disc system wrought in brass and picked out with tiny jewels. Around it stars and planets wheeled on fine silver wires.

'Fantastic!' he said again. On the walls around him constellations made of tiny phosphorescent seed pearls had been picked out on vast tapestries made of jet-black velvet, giving the room's occupants the impression of floating in the interstellar gulf. Various easels held huge sketches of Great A'Tuin as viewed from various parts of the Circumfence, with every mighty scale and cratered pock-mark meticulously marked in. Twoflower stared about him with a faraway look in his eyes.

Rincewind was deeply troubled. What troubled him most of all were the two suits that hung from supports in the centre of the room. He circled them uneasily.

They appeared to be made of fine white leather, hung about with straps and brass nozzles and other highly unfamiliar and suspicious contrivances . The leggings ended in high, thick-soled boots, and the arms were shoved into big supple gauntlets. Strangest of all were the big copper helmets that were obviously supposed to fit on heavy collars around the neck of the suits. The helmets were almost certainly useless for protection a light sword would have no difficulty in splitting them, even if it didn't hit the ridiculous little glass windows in the front. Each helmet had a crest of white feathers on top, which went absolutely no way at all towards improving their overall appearance.

Rincewind was beginning to have the glimmerings of a suspicion about those suits.

In front of them .was a table covered with celestial charts and scraps of parchment covered with figures. Whoever would be wearing those suits, Rincewind decided, was expecting to boldly go where no man - other than the occasional luckless sailor, who didn't really count - had boldly gone before, and he was now beginning to get not just a suspicion but a horrible premonition.

He turned round and found Twoflower looking at him with a speculative expression.

'No-' began Rincewind, urgently. Twoflower ignored him.

'The goddess said two men were going to be sent over the Edge,' he said, his eyes gleaming, 'and you remember Tethis the troll saying you'd need some kind of protection? The Krullians have got over that. These are suits of space armour.' 'They don't look very roomy to me,' said Rincewind hurriedly, and grabbed the tourist by the arm, 'so if you'd just come on, no sense in staying here-' 'Why must you always panic?' asked Twoflower petulantly.

'Because the whole of my future life just flashed in front of my eyes, and it didn't take very long, and if you don't move now I'm going to leave without you because any second now you're going to suggest that we put on-' The door opened.

Two husky young men stepped into the room. All they were wearing was a pair of woollen pants apiece. One of them was still towelling himself briskly. They both nodded at the two escapees with no apparent surprise.

The taller of the two men sat down on one of the benches in front of the seats. He beckoned to Rincewind, and said: '? Ty0 yur atl h0 sooten gatrunen?' And this was awkward, because although Rincewind considered himself an expert in most of the tongues of the western segments of the Disc it was the first time that he had ever been addressed in Krullian, and he did not understand one word of it.

Neither did Twoflower, but that did not stop him stepping forward and taking a breath.

The speed of light through a magical aura such as the one that surrounded the Disc was quite slow, being not much faster than the speed of sound in less highly-tuned universes. But it was still the fastest thing around with the exception, in moments like this, of Rincewind's mind.

In an instant he became aware that the tourist was about to try his own peculiar brand of linguistics, which meant that he would speak loudly and slowly in his own language.

Rincewind's elbow shot back, knocking the breath from Twoflower's body. When the little man looked up in pain and astonishment Rincewind caught his eye and pulled an imaginary tongue out of his mouth and cut it with an imaginary pair of scissors.

The second chelonaut- for such was the profession of the men whose fate it would shortly be to voyage to Great A'Tuin - looked up from the chart table and watched this in puzzlement. His big heroic brow wrinkled with the effort of speech.

'? Hor yu latruin nor u?' he said.

Rincewind smiled and nodded and pushed Twoflower in his general direction. With an inward sigh of relief he saw the tourist pay sudden attention to a big brass telescope that lay on the table.

'! Sooten u!' commanded the seated chelonaut.

Rincewind nodded and smiled and took one of the big copper helmets from the rack and brought it down on the man's head as hard as he possibly could. The chelonaut fell forward with a soft grunt.

The other man took one startled step before Twoflower hit him amateurishly but effectively with the telescope. He crumpled on top of his colleague.

Rincewind and Twoflower looked at each other over the carnage.

'All right!' snapped Rincewind, aware that he had lost some kind of contest but not entirely certain what it was. 'Don't bother to say it.

Someone out there is expecting these two guys to come out in the suits in a minute. I suppose they thought we were slaves. Help me hide these behind the drapes and then, and then-' '-we'd better suit up,' said Twoflower, picking up the second helmet.

'Yes,' said Rincewind. 'You know, as soon as I saw the suits I just knew I'd end up wearing one.

Don't ask me how I knew - I suppose it was because it was just about the worst possible thing that was likely to happen.' 'Well, you said yourself we have no way of escaping,' said Twoflower, his voice muffled as he pulled the top half of a suit over his head.

'Anything's better than being sacrificed.' 'As soon as we get a chance we run for it,' said Rincewind. 'Don't get any ideas.' He thrust an arm savagely into his suit and banged his head on the helmet. He reflected briefly that someone up there was watching over him.

'Thanks a lot,' he said bitterly.

At the very edge of the city and country of Krull was a large semicircular amphitheatre, with seating for several tens of thousands of people. The arena was only semi-circular for the very elegant reason that it overlooked the cloud sea that boiled up from the Rimfall, far below, and now every seat was occupied. And the crowd was growing restive.

It had come to see a double sacrifice and also the launching of the great bronze space ship. Neither event had yet materialised.

The Arch-Astronomer beckoned the Master Launchcontroller to him.

'Well?' he said, filling a mere four letters with a full lexicon of anger and menace. The Master Launchcontroller went pale.

'No news, lord,' said the Launchcontroller, and added with a brittle brightness, 'except that your prominence will be pleased to hear that Garhartra has recovered.' 'That is a fact he may come to regret,' said the Arch-Astronomer.

'Yes, lord.' 'How much longer do we have?' The Launchcontroller glanced at the rapidly-climbing sun.

'Thirty minutes, your prominence. After that Krull will have revolved away from Great A'Tuin's tail and the Potent Voyager will be doomed to spin away into the interterrapene gulf. I have already set the automatic controls, so-' 'All right, all right,' the Arch-Astronomer said, waving him away. 'The launch must go ahead.

Maintain the watch on the harbour, of course.

When the wretched pair are caught I will personally take a great deal of pleasure in executing them myself.' 'Yes, lord. Er-' The Arch-Astronomer frowned. 'What else have you got to say, man?' The Launchcontroller swallowed. All this was very unfair on him, he was a practical magician rather than a diplomat, and that was why some wiser brains had seen to it that he would be the one to pass on the news.

'A monster has come out of the sea and it's attacking the ships in the harbour,' he said. 'A runner just arrived from there.' 'A big monster?' said the Arch-Astronomer.

'Not particularly, although it is said to be exceptionally fierce, lord.' The ruler of Krull and the Circumfence considered this for a moment, then shrugged.

'The sea is full of monsters,' he said.'It is one of its prime attributes. Have it dealt with. AndMaster Launchcontroller?' 'Lord?' 'If I am further vexed, you will recall that two people are due to be sacrificed. I may feel generous and increase the number.' 'Yes, lord.'The Master Launchcontroller scuttled away, relieved to be out of the autocrat's sight.

The Potent Voyager, no longer the blank bronze shell that had been smashed from the mould a few days earlier, rested in its cradle on top of a wooden tower in the centre of the arena. In front of it a railway ran down towards the Edge, where for the space of a few yards it turned suddenly upwards.

The late Dactylos Goldeneyes, who had designed the launching pad as well as the Potent Voyager itself, had claimed that this last touch was merely to ensure that the ship would not snag on any rocks as it began its long plunge. Maybe it was merely coincidental that it would also, because of that little twitch in the track, leap like a salmon and shine theatrically in the sunlight before disappearing into the cloud sea.

There was a fanfare of trumpets at the edge of the arena. The chelonauts' honour guard appeared, to much cheering from the crowd. Then the whitesuited explorers themselves stepped out into the light.

It immediately dawned on the Arch-Astronomer that something was wrong. Heroes always walked in a certain way, for example. They certainly didn't waddle, and one of the chelonauts was definitely waddling.

The roar of the assembled people of Krull was deafening. As the chelonauts and their guards crossed the great arena, passing between the many altars that had been set up for the various wizards and priests of Krull's many sects to ensure the success of the launch, the Arch-Astronomer frowned.

By the time the party was halfway across the floor his mind had reached a conclusion. By the time the chelonauts were standing at the foot of the ladder that led to the ship- and was there more than a hint of reluctance about them? - the Arch-Astronomer was on his feet, his words lost in the noise of the crowd. One of his arms shot out and back fingers spread dramatically in the traditional spell-casting position, and any passing lip-reader who was also familiar with the standard texts on magic would have recognized the opening words of Vestcake's Floating Curse, and would then have prudently run away.

Its final words remained unsaid, however. The Arch-Astronomer turned in astonishment as a commotion broke out around the big arched entrance to the arena. Guards were running out into the daylight, throwing down their weapons as they scuttled among the altars or vaulted the parapet into the stands.

Something emerged behind them, and the crowd around the entrance ceased its raucous cheering and began a silent, determined scramble to get out of the way.

The something was a low dome of seaweed, moving slowly but with a sinister sense of purpose.

One guard overcame his horror sufficiently to stand in its path and hurl his spear, which landed squarely among the weeds. The crowd cheered then went deathly silent as the dome surged forward and engulfed the man completely.

The Arch-Astronomer dismissed the half-formed shape of Vestcake's famous Curse with a sharP wave of his hand, and quickly spoke the words of one of the most powerful spells in his repertoire: the Infernal Combustion Enigma.

Octarine fire spiralled around and between his fingers as he shaped the complex rune of the spell in mid-air and sent it, screaming and trailing blue smoke, towards the shape.

There was a satisfying explosion and a gout of flame shot up into the clear morning sky, shedding flakes of burning seaweed on the way. A cloud of smoke and steam concealed the monster for several minutes, and when it cleared the dome had completely disappeared.

There was a large charred circle on the flagstones, however, in which a few clumps of kelp and bladderwrack still smouldered.

And in the centre of the circle was a perfectly ordinary, if somewhat large, wooden chest. It was not even scorched. Someone on the far side of the arena started to laugh, but the sound was broken off abruptly as the chest rose up on dozens of what could only be legs and turned to face the Arch-Astronomer.

A perfectly ordinary if somewhat large wooden chest does not, of course, have a face with which to face, but this one was quite definitely facing. In precisely the same way as he understood that, the Arch-Astronomer was also horribly aware that this perfectly normal box was in some indescribable way narrowing its eyes.

It began to move resolutely towards him. He shuddered.

'Magicians!' he screamed. 'Where are my magicians?'

Around the arena pale-faced men peeped out from behind altars and under benches. One of the bolder ones, seeing the expression on the Arch-Astronomer's face, raised an arm tremulously and essayed a hasty thunderbolt. It hissed towards the chest and struck it squarely in a shower of white sparks.

That was the signal for every magician, enchanter and thaumaturgist in Krull to leap up eagerly and, under the terrified eyes of their master, unleash the first spell that came to each desperate mind. Charms curved and whistled through the air.

Soon the chest was lost to view again in an expanding cloud of magical particles, which billowed out and wreathed it in twisting, disquieting shapes. Spell after spell screamed into the melee.

Flame and lightning bolts of all eight colours stabbed out brightly from the seething thing that now occupied the space where the box had been.

Not since the Mage Wars had so much magic been concentrated on one small area. The air itself wavered and glittered. Spell ricocheted off spell, creating short-lived wild spells whose brief half-life was both weird and uncontrolled. The stones under the heaving mass began to buckle and split. One of them in fact turned into something best left undescribed and slunk off into some dismal dimension. Other strange side-effects began to manifest themselves. A shower of small lead cubes bounced out of the storm and rolled across the heaving floor, and eldritch shapes gibbered and beckoned obscenely; four-sided triangles and double-ended circles existed momentarily before merging again into the booming, screaming tower of runaway raw magic that boiled up from the molten flagstones and spread out over Krull. It no longer mattered that most of the magicians had ceased their spell casting and fled - the thing was now feeding on the stream of octarine particles that were always at their thickest near the Edge of the Disc. Throughout the island of Krull

every magical activity failed as all the available mana in the area was sucked into the cloud, which was already a quarter of a mile high and streaming out into mind-curdling shapes; hydrophobes on their seaskimming lenses crashed screaming into the waves, magic potions turned to mere impure water in their phials, magic swords melted and dripped from their scabbards.

But none of this in any way prevented the thing at the base of the cloud, now gleaming mirrorbright in the intensity of the power storm around it, from moving at a steady walking pace towards the Arch-Astronomer.

Rincewind and Twoflower watched in awe from the shelter of Potent Voyager's launch tower. The honour party had long since vanished, leaving their weapons scattered behind them.

'Well,' sighed Twoflower at last, 'there goes the Luggage.' He sighed.

'Don't you believe it,' said Rincewind. 'Sapient pearwood is totally impervious to all known forms of magic. It's been constructed to follow you anywhere. I mean, when you die, if you go to Heaven, you'll at least have a clean pair of socks in the afterlife. But I don't want to die yet, so let's just get going, shall we?' 'Where?' said Twoflower.

Rincewind picked up a crossbow and a handful of quarrels. 'Anywhere that isn't here,' he said.

'What about the Luggage?' 'Don't worry. When the storm has used up all the free magic in the vicinity it'll just die out.' In fact that was already beginning to happen.

The billowing cloud was still flowing up from the area but now it had a tenuous, harmless look about it. Even as Twoflower stared, it began to flicker uncertainly.

Soon it was a pale ghost. The luggage was now visible as a squat shape among the almost invisible flames. Around it the rapidly cooling stones began to crack and buckle.

Twoflower called softly to his luggage. It stopped its stolid progression across the tortured flags and appeared to be listening intently; then, moving its dozens of feet in an intricate pattern, it turned on its length and headed towards the Potent Voyager. Rincewind watched it sourly. The Luggage had an elemental nature, absolutely no brain, a homicidal attitude towards anything that threatened its master, and he wasn't quite sure that its inside occupied the same space-time framework as its outside.

'Not a mark on it,' said Twoflower cheerfully, as the box settled down in front of him. He pushed open the lid.

'This is a fine time to change your underwear,' snarled Rincewind. 'In a minute all those guards and priests are going to come back, and they're going to be upset, man!' 'Water,' murmured Twoflower. 'The whole box is full of water!' Rincewind peered over his shoulder. There was no sign of clothes, moneybags, or any other of the tourist's belongings. The whole box was full of water.

A wave sprang up from nowhere and lapped over the edge. It hit the flagstones but, instead of spreading out, began to take the shape of-a foot.

Another foot and the bottom half of a pair of legs followed as more water streamed down as if filling an invisible mould. A moment later Tethis the sea troll was standing in front of them, blinking.

'I see,' he said at last. 'You two. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.' He looked around, ignoring their astonished expressions.

'I was just sitting outside my hut, watching the sun set, when this thing came roaring up out of the water and swallowed me,' he said. 'I thought it was rather strange. Where is this

place?' 'Krull,' said Rincewind. He stared hard at the now closed luggage, which was managing to project a smug expression. Swallowing people was something it did quite frequently, but always when the lid was next opened there was nothing inside but Twoflower's laundry. Savagely he wrenched the lid up. There was nothing inside but Twoflower's laundry. It was perfectly dry.

'Well, well,' said Tethis. He looked up.

'Hey!' he said. 'Isn't this the ship they're going to send over the Edge? Isn't it? It must be!' An arrow zipped through his chest, leaving a faint ripple. He didn't appear to notice. Rincewind did. Soldiers were beginning to appear at the edge of the arena, and a number of them were peering around the entrances.

Another arrow bounced off the tower behind Twoflower. At this range the bolts did not have a lot of force, but it would only be a matter of time . . .

'Quick!' said Twoflower. 'Into the ship! They won't dare fire at that!' 'I knew you were going to suggest that,' groaned Rincewind. 'I just knew it!' He aimed a kick at the Luggage. It backed off a few inches, and opened its lid threateningly.

A spear arced out of the sky and trembled to a halt in the woodwork by the wizard's ear. He screamed briefly and scrambled up the ladder after the others.

Arrows whistled around them as theY came out on to the narrow catwalk that led along the spine of the Potent Voyager. Twoflower led the way, jogging along with what Rincewind considered to be too much suppressed excitement.

Atop the centre of the ship was a large round bronze hatch with hasps around it. The troll and the tourist knelt down and started to work on them.

In the heart of the Potent Voyager fine sand had been trickling into a carefully designed cup for several hours. Now the cup was filled by exactly the right amount to dip down and upset a carefully-balanced weight. The weight swung away, pulling a pin from an intricate little mechanism. A chain began to move. There was a clonk . . .

'What was that?' said Rincewind urgently. He looked down.

The hail of arrows had stopped. The crowd of priests and soldiers were standing motionless, staring intently at the ship. A small worried man elbowed his way through them and started to shout something.

'What was what?' said Twoflower, busy with a wing-nut.

'I thought I heard something,' said Rincewind.

'Look,' he said,'we'll threaten to damage the thing if they don't let us go, right? That's all we're going to do, right?' 'Yah,' said Twoflower vaguely. He sat back on his heels. 'That's it,' he said. 'It ought to lift off now.' Several muscular men were swarming up the ladder to the ship. Rincewind recognized the two chelonauts among them. They were carrying swords.

'I-' he began.

The ship lurched. Then, with infinite slowness, it began to move along the rails.

In that moment of black horror Rincewind saw that Twoflower and the troll had managed to pull the hatch up. A metal ladder inside led into the cabin below. The troll disappeared.

'We've got to get off,' whispered Rincewind.

Twoflower looked at him, a strange mad smile on his face.

'Stars,' said the tourist.'Worlds. The whole damn sky full of worlds. Places no-one will ever see.

Except me.' He stepped through the hatchway.

'You're totally mad,' said Rincewind hoarsely, trying to keep his balance as the ship began to speed up. He turned as one of the chelonauts tried to leap the gap between the Voyager and the tower, landed on the curving flank of the ship, scrabbled for an instant for purchase, failed to find any, and dropped away with a shriek.

The Voyager was travelling quite fast now. Rincewind could see past Twoflower's head to the sunlit cloud sea and the impossible Rimbow, floating tantalisingly beyond it, beckoning fools to venture too far . . .

He also saw a gang of men climbing desperately over the lower slopes of the launching ramp and manhandling a large baulk of timber on to the track, in a frantic attempt to derail the ship before it vanished over the Edge. The wheels slammed into it, but the only effect was to make the ship rock, Twoflower to lose his grip on the ladder and fall into the cabin, and the hatch to slam down with the horrible sound of a dozen fiddly little catches snapping into place. Rincewind dived forward and scrabbled at them, whimpering.

The cloud sea was much nearer now. The Edge itself, a rocky perimeter to the arena, was startlingly close.

Rincewind stood up. There was only one thing to do now, and he did it. He panicked blindly, just as the ship's bogeys hit the little upgrade and flung it sparkling like a salmon, into the sky and over the Edge.

A few seconds later there was a thunder of little feet and the Luggage cleared the rim of the world, legs still pumping determinedly, and plunged down into the Universe.

THE END Rincewind woke up and shivered. He was freezing cold.

So this is it, he thought. When you die you go to a cold, damp, misty freezing place. Hades, where the mournful spirits of the Dead troop forever across the sorrowful marshes, corpse-lights flickering fit fully in the encircling-hang on a minute . . .

Surely Hades wasn't this uncomfortable? And he was very uncomfortable indeed. His back ached where a branch was pressing into it, his legs and arms hurt where the twigs had lacerated them and, judging by the way his head was feeling, something hard had recently hit it. If this was Hades it sure was hell-hang on a minute . . .

Tree. He concentrated on the word that floated up from his mind, although the buzzing in his ears and the flashing lights in front of his eyes made this an unexpected achievement. Tree. Wooden thing. That was it. Branches and twigs and things. And Rincewind, lying in it. Tree. Dripping wet. Cold white cloud all around. Underneath, too. Now that was odd.

He was alive and lying covered in bruises in a small thorn tree that was growing in a crevice in a rock that projected out of the foaming white wall that was the Rimfall. The realization hit him in much the same way as an icy hammer. He shuddered.

The tree gave a warning creak.

Something blue and blurred shot past him, dipped briefly into the thundering waters, and whirred back and settled on a branch near Rincewind's head. It was a small bird with a tuft of blue and green feathers. It swallowed the little silver fish that it had snatched from the Fall and eyed him curiously.

Rincewind became aware that there were lots of similar birds around.

They hovered, darted and swooped easily across the face of the water, and every so often one would raise an extra plume of spray as it stole another doomed morsel from the waterfall. Several of them were perching in the tree. They were as iridescent as jewels. Rincewind was entranced.

He was in fact the first man ever to see the rimfishers, the tiny creatures who had long ago evolved a lifestyle quite unique even for the Disc.

long before the Krullians had built the Circumfence the rimfishers had devised their own efficient method of policing the edge of the world for a living.

They didn't seem bothered about Rincewind. He had a brief but chilling vision of himself living the rest of his life out in this tree, subsisting on raw birds and such fish as he could snatch as they plummeted past.

The tree moved distinctly. Rincewind gave a whimper as he found himself sliding backwards, but managed to grab a branch. Only, sooner or later, he would fall asleep . . .

There was a subtle change of scene, a slight purplish tint to the sky. A tall, black-cloaked figure was standing on the air next to the tree. It had a scythe in one hand. Its face was hidden in the shadows of the hood.

I HAVE COME FOR THEE, said the invisible mouth, in tones as heavy as a whale's heartbeat.

The trunk of the tree gave another protesting creak, and a pebble bounced off Rincewind's helmet as one root tore loose from the rock.

Death Himself always came in person to harvest the souls of wizards.

'What am I going to die of?' said Rincewind.

The tall figure hesitated.

PARDoN? it said.

'Well, I haven't broken anything, and I haven't drowned, so what am I about to die of-? You can't just be killed by Death; there has to be a reason,' said Rincewind. To his utter amazement he didn't feel terrified any more. For about the first time in his life he wasn't frightened. Pity the experience didn't look like lasting for long. Death appeared to reach a conclusion. ! YOU COUlD DIE OF TERROR, the hood intoned. The voice still had its graveyard ring, but there was a slight tremor of uncertainty.

'Won't work,' said Rincewind smugly.

THERE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A REASON, said Death, I CAN JUST KILL YOU.

'Hey, you can't do that! It'd be murder!' The cowled figure sighed and pulled back its . hood. Instead of the grinning death's head that Rincewind had been expecting he found himself looking up into the pale and slightly transparent face of a rather worried demon, of sorts.

'I'm making rather a mess of this, aren't I?' it said wearily.

'You're not Death! Who are you?' cried Rincewind.

' Scrofula.' 'Scrofula ?' 'Death couldn't come,' said the demon wretchedly.

'There's a big plague on in Pseudopolis. He had to go and stalk the streets. So he sent me.' 'No-one dies of scrofula! I've got rights. I'm a wizard!' 'All right, all right. This was going

to be my big chance,' said Scrofula, 'but look at it this way - if I hit you with this scythe you'll be just as dead as you would be if Death had done it. Who'd know?' 'I'd know!' snapped Rincewind.

'You wouldn't. You'd be dead,' said Scrofula logically.

'Piss off,' said Rincewind.

'That's all very well,' said the demon, hefting the scythe' 'but why not try to see things from my point of view? This means a lot to me, and you've got to admit that your life isn't all that wonderful.

Reincarnation can only be an improvement- uh.' His hand flew to his mouth but Rincewind was already pointing a trembling finger at him.

'Reincarnation!' he said excitedly. 'So it is true what the mystics say!' 'I'm admitting nothing,' said Scrofula testily.'It was a slip of the tongue. Now- are you going to die willingly or not?' 'No,' said Rincewind.

'Please yourself,' replied the demon. He raised the scythe. It whistled down in quite a professional way, but Rincewind wasn't there. He was in fact several metres below, and the distance was increasing all the time, because the branch had chosen that moment to snap and send him on his interrupted journey towards the interstellar gulf.

'Come back!' screamed the demon.

Rincewind didn't answer. He was lying belly down in the rushing air, staring down into the clouds that even now were thinning.

They vanished.

Below, the whole Universe twinkled at Rincewind.

There was Great A'Tuin, huge and ponderous and pocked with craters. There was the little Disc moon. There was a distant gleam that could only be the Potent Voyager. And there were all the stars, looking remarkably like powdered diamonds spilled on black velvet, the stars that lured and ultimately called the boldest towards them. . .

The whole of Creation was waiting for Rincewind to drop in.

He did so.

There didn't seem to be any alternative.

THE END

The Light Fantastic

The Light Fantastic

The sun rose slowly, as if it wasn't sure it was worth all the effort.

Another Disc day dawned, but very gradually, and this is why.

When light encounters a strong magical field it loses ail sense of urgency. It slows right down. And on the Discworld the magic was embarrassingly strong, which meant that the soft yellow light of dawn flowed over the sleeping landscape like the caress of a gentle lover or, as some would have it, like golden syrup. It paused to fill up valleys. It piled up against mountain ranges. When it reached Cori Celesti, the ten mile spire of grey stone and green ice that marked the hub of the Disc and was the home of its gods, it built up in heaps until it finally crashed in great lazy tsunami as silent as velvet, across the dark landscape beyond.

It was a sight to be seen on no other world.

Of course, no other world was carried through the starry infinity on the backs of four giant elephants, who A'ere themselves perched on the shell of a giant turtle. His name – or Her name, according to another school of thought – was Great A'Tuin; he – or, as it might be, she – will not take a central role in what follows but it is vital to an understanding of the Disc that he – or she – is there, down below the mines and sea ooze and fake fossil bones put there by a Creator with nothing better to do than upset archeologists and give them silly ideas.

Great A'Tuin the star turtle, shell frosted with frozen methane, pitted with meteor craters, and scoured with asteroidal dust. Great A'Tuin, with eyes like ancient seas and a brain the size of a continent through which thoughts moved like little glittering glaciers. Great A'Tuin of the great slow sad flippers and star-polished carapace, labouring through the

galactic night under the weight of the Disc. As large as worlds. As old as Time. As patient as a brick.

Actually, the philosophers have got it all wrong. Great A'Tuin is in fact having a great time.

Great A'Tuin is the only creature in the entire universe that knows exactly where it is going.

Of course, philosophers have debated for years about where Great A'Tuin might be going, and have often said how worried they are that they might never find out.

They're due to find out in about two months. And then they're *really* going to worry . . .

Something else that has long worried the more imaginative philosophers on the Disc is the question of Great A'Tuin's sex, and quite a lot of time and trouble has been spent in trying to establish it once and for all.

In fact, as the great dark shape drifts past like an endless tortoiseshell hairbrush, the results of the latest effort are just coming into view.

Tumbling past, totally out of control, is the bronze shell of the Potent Voyager, a sort of neolithic spaceship built and pushed over the edge by the astronomer-priests of Krull, which is conveniently situated on the very rim of the world and proves, whatever people say, that there *is* such a thing as a free launch.

Inside the ship is Twoflower, the Disc's first tourist. He had recently spent some months exploring it and is now rapidly leaving it for reasons that are rather complicated but have to do with an attempt to escape from Krull.

This attempt has been one thousand per cent successful.

But despite all the evidence that he may be the Disc's *last* tourist as well, he is enjoying the view.

Plunging along some two miles above him is Rincewind the wizard, in what on the Disc passes for a spacesuit. Picture it as a diving suit designed by men who have never seen the sea. Six months ago he was a perfectly ordinary failed wizard. Then he met Twoflower, was employed at an outrageous salary as his guide, and has spent most of the intervening time being shot at, terrorised, chased and hanging from high places with no hope of salvation or, as is now the case, dropping from high places.

He isn't looking at the view because his past life keeps flashing in front of his eyes and getting in the way. He is learning why it is that when you put on a spacesuit it is vitally important not to forget the helmet.

A lot more could be included now to explain why these two are dropping out of the world, and why Twoflower's Luggage, last seen desperately trying to follow him on hundreds of little legs, is no ordinary suitcase, but such questions take time and could be more trouble than they are worth. For example, it is said that someone at a party once asked the famous philosopher Ly Tin Weedle 'Why are you here?' and the reply took three years.

What is far more important is an event happening way overhead, far above A'Tuin, the elephants and the rapidly-expiring wizard. The very fabric of time and space is about to be put through the wringer.

The air was greasy with the distinctive feel of magic, and acrid with the smoke of candles made of a black wax whose precise origin a wise man wouldn't inquire about.

There was something very strange about this room deep in the cellars of Unseen University, the Disc's premier college of magic. For one thing it seemed to have too many dimensions, not exactly visible, just hovering out of eyeshot. The walls were covered with occult symbols, and most of the floor was taken up by the Eightfold Seal of Stasis, generally agreed in magical circles to have all the stopping power of a well-aimed half brick.

The only furnishing in the room was a lectern dark wood, carved into the shape of a bird – well, to be frank, into the shape of a winged thing it is probably best not to examine too closely – and on the lectern, fastened to it by a heavy chain covered in padlocks, was a book.

A large, but not particularly impressive, book. Other books in the University's libraries had covers inlaid with rare jewels and fascinating wood, or bound with dragon skin. This one was just a rather tatty leather. It looked the sort of book described in library catalogues as 'slightly foxed', although it would be more honest to admit that it looked as though it had been badgered, wolved and possibly beared as well.

Metal clasps held it shut. They weren't decorated, they were just very heavy – like the chain, which didn't so much attach the book to the lectern as tether it.

They looked like the work of someone who had a pretty definite aim in mind, and who had spent most of his life making training harness for elephants.

The air thickened and swirled. The pages of the book began to crinkle in a quite horrible, deliberate way, and blue light spilled out from between them. The silence of the room crowded in like a fist, slowly being clenched.

Half a dozen wizards in their nightshirts were taking turns to peer in through the little grille in the door. No wizard could sleep with this sort of thing going on – the build-up of raw magic was rising through the university like a tide.

'Right,' said a voice. What's going on? And why wasn't I summoned?'

Galder Weatherwax, Supreme Grand Conjuror of the Order of the Silver Star, Lord Imperial of the Sacred Staff, Eighth Level Ipsissimus and 304th Chancellor of Unseen University, wasn't simply an impressive sight even in his red nightshirt with the hand-embroidered mystic runes, even in his long cap with the bobble on, even with the Wee Willie Winkie candlestick in his hand. He even managed to very nearly pull it off in fluffy pompom slippers as well.

Six frightened faces turned towards him.

'Um, you *were* summoned, lord,' said one of the under-wizards.

'That's why you're here,' he added helpfully.

'I mean why wasn't I summoned *before?'* snapped Galder, pushing his way to the grille.

'Um, before who, lord?' said the wizard.

Galder glared at him, and ventured a quick glance through the grille.

The air in the room was now sparkling with tiny flashes as dust motes incinerated in the flow of raw magic. The Seal of Stasis was beginning to blister and curl up at the edges.

The book in question was called the Octavo and, quite obviously, it was no ordinary book.

There are of course many famous books of magic. Some may talk of the Necrotelicomnicon, with its pages made of ancient lizard skin; some may point to the Book of Going Forth Around Elevenish, written by a mysterious and rather lazy Llamaic

sect; some may recall that the Bumper Fun Grimoire reputedly contains the one original joke left in the universe. But they are all mere pamphlets when compared with the Octavo, which the Creator of the Universe reputedly left behind – with characteristic absent-mindedness – shortly after completing his major work.

The eight spells imprisoned in its pages led a secret and complex life of their own, and it was generally believed that —

Galder's brow furrowed as he stared into the troubled room. Of course, there were only seven spells now. Some young idiot of a student wizard had stolen a look at the book one day and one of the spells had escaped and lodged in his mind. No-one had ever managed to get to the bottom of how it had happened. What was his name, now? Winswand?

Octarine and purple sparks glittered on the spine of the book. A thin curl of smoke was beginning to rise from the lectern, and the heavy metal clasps that held the book shut were definitely beginning to look strained.

'Why are the spells so restless?' said one of the younger wizards.

Galder shrugged. He couldn't show it, of course, but he was beginning to be really worried. As a skilled eighth-level wizard he could see the half-imaginary shapes that appeared momentarily in the vibrating air, wheedling arid beckoning. In much the same way that gnats appear before a thunderstorm, really heavy build-ups of magic always attracted things from the chaotic Dungeon Dimensions – nasty Things, all misplaced organs and spittle, forever searching for any gap through which they might sidle into the world of men. [1]

[1] They won't be described, since even the pretty ones looked like the offspring of an octopus and a bicycle. It is well known that *things* from undesirable universes are always seeking an entrance into this one, which is the psychic equivalent of handy for the buses and closer to the shops.

This had to be stopped.

'I shall need a volunteer,' he said firmly.

There was a sudden silence. The only sound came from behind the door. It was the nasty little noise of metal parting under stress.

'Very well, then,' he said. 'In that case I shall need some silver tweezers, about two pints of cat's blood, a small whip and a chair —'

It is said that the opposite of noise is silence. This isn't true. Silence is only the absence of noise. Silence would have been a terrible din compared to the sudden soft implosion of noiselessness that hit the wizards with the force of an exploding dandelion clock.

A thick column of spitting light sprang up from the book, hit the ceiling in a splash of flame, and disappeared.

Galder stared up at the hole, ignoring the smouldering patches in his beard. He pointed dramatically.

To the upper cellars!' he cried, and bounded up the stone stairs. Slippers flapping and nightshirts billowing he other wizards followed him, falling over one another in their eagerness to be last.

Nevertheless, they were all in time to see the fireball of occult potentiality disappear into the ceiling of the room above.

'Urgh,' said the youngest wizard, and pointed to the floor.

The room had been part of the library until the magic had drifted through, violently reassembling the possibility particles of everything in its path. So it was reasonable to assume that the small purple newts had been part of the floor and the pineapple custard may once have been some books. And several of the wizards later swore that the small sad orang outang sitting in the middle of it all looked very much like the head librarian.

Galder stared upwards. 'To the kitchen!' he bellowed, wading through the custard to the next flight of stairs.

No-one ever found out what the great cast-iron cooking range had been turned into, because it had broken down a wall and made good its escape before the dishevelled party of wild-eyed mages burst into the room. The vegetable chef was found much later hiding in the soup cauldron, gibbering unhelpful things like The knuckles! The horrible knuckles!'

The last wisps of magic, now somewhat slowed, were disappearing into the ceiling.

'To the Great Hall!'

The stairs were much wider here, and better lit. Panting and pineapple-flavoured, the fitter wizards got to the top by the time the fireball had reached the middle of the huge draughty chamber that was the University's main hall. It hung motionless, except for the occasional small prominence that arched and spluttered across its surface.

Wizards smoke, as everyone knows. That probably explained the chorus of coffin coughs and sawtooth wheezes that erupted behind Galder as he stood appraising the situation and wondering if he dare look for somewhere to hide. He grabbed a frightened student.

'Get me seers, farseers, scryers and withinlookmen!' he barked. 'I want this studied!'

Something was taking shape inside the fireball. Galder shielded his eyes and peered at the shape forming in front of him. There was no mistaking it. It was the universe.

He was quite sure of this, because he had a model of it in his study and it was generally agreed to be far more impressive than the real thing. Faced with the possibilities offered by seed pearls and silver filigree, the Creator had been at a complete loss.

But the tiny universe inside the fireball was uncannily – well, real. The only thing missing was colour. It was all in translucent misty white.

There was Great A'Tuin, and the four elephants, and the Disc itself. From this angle Galder couldn't see the surface very well, but he knew with cold certainty that it would be absolutely accurately modelled. He could, though, just make out a miniature replica of Cori Celesti, upon whose utter peak the world's quarrelsome and somewhat bourgeois gods lived in a palace of marble, alabaster and uncut moquette three-piece suites they had chosen to call Dunmanifestin. It was always a considerable annoyance to any Disc citizen with pretensions to culture that they were ruled by gods whose idea of an uplifting artistic experience was a musical doorbell.

The little embryo universe began to move slowly, tilting . . .

Galder tried to shout, but his voice refused to come out.

Gently, but with the unstoppable force of an explosion, the shape expanded.

He watched in horror, and then in astonishment, as it passed through him as lightly as a thought. He held out a hand and watched the pale ghosts of rock strata stream through his fingers in busy silence.

Great A'Tuin had already sunk peacefully below floor level, larger than a house.

The wizards behind Galder were waist deep in seas. A boat smaller than a thimble caught Galder's eye for a oment before the rush carried it through the walls and away.

To the roof!' he managed, pointing a shaking finger skywards.

Those wizards with enough marbles left to think with and enough breath to run followed him, running through continents that sleeted smoothly through the solid stone.

It was a still night, tinted with the promise of dawn. A crescent moon was just setting. Ankh-Morpork, largest city in the lands around the Circle Sea, slept.

That statement is not really true.

On the one hand, those parts of the city which normally concerned themselves with, for example, selling vegetables, shoeing horses, carving exquisite small jade ornaments, changing money and making tables, on the whole, slept. Unless they had insomnia. Or had got up in the night. as it might be, to go to the lavatory. On the other hand, many of the less law-abiding citizens were wide awake and, for instance, climbing through windows that didn't, t belong to them, slitting throats, mugging one another, listening to loud music in smoky cellars and gener,erally having a lot more fun. But most of the animals were asleep, except for the rats. And the bats, too, of course. As far as the insects were concerned . . .

The point is that descriptive writing is very rarely entireliy accurate and during the reign of Olaf Quimby II is Patrician of Ankh some legislation was passed in a determined attempt to put a stop to this sort of thing and introduce some honesty into reporting. Thus, if a legend said of a notable hero that 'all men spoke of his prowess' any bard who valued his life would add hastily 'except for a couple of people in his home village who thought he was a liar, and quite a lot of other people who had never really heard of him.' Poetic

simile was strictly limited to statements like 'his mighty steed was as fleet as the wind n a fairly calm day, say about Force Three,' and any loose talk about a beloved having a face that launched a thousand ships would have to be backed by evidence that the object of desire did indeed look like a bottle of champagne.

Quimby was eventually killed by a disgruntled poet during an experiment conducted in the palace grounds to prove the disputed accuracy of the proverb The pen is mightier than the sword,' and in his memory it was amended to include the phrase 'only if the sword is very small and the pen is very sharp.'

So. Approximately sixty-seven, maybe sixty-eight per cent, of the city slept. Not that the other citizens creeping about on their generally unlawful occasions noticed the pale tide streaming through the streets. Only the wizards, used to seeing the invisible, watched it foam across the distant fields.

The Disc, being flat, has no real horizon. Any adventurous sailors who got funny ideas from staring at eggs and oranges for too long and set out for the antipodes soon learned that the reason why distant ships sometimes looked as though they were disappearing over the edge of the world was that they *were* disappearing over the edge of the world.

But there was still a limit even to Galder's vision in the mist-swirled, dust-filled air. He looked up. Looming high over the University was the grim and ancient Tower of Art, said to be the oldest building on the Disc, with its famous spiral staircase of eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eight steps. From its crenelated roof, the haunt of ravens and disconcertingly alert gargoyles, a wizard might see to the very edge of the Disc. After spending ten minutes or so coughing horribly, of course.

'Sod that,' he muttered. 'What's the good of being a wizard, after all? Avyento, thessalousl I would fly! To me, spirits of air and darkness!'

He spread a gnarled hand and pointed to a piece of crumbling parapet. Octarine fire sprouted from under his nicotine-stained nails and burst against the otting stone far above.

It fell. By a finely calculated exchange of velocities Ga.cer rose, nightshirt flapping around his bony legs. Higher and higher he soared, hurtling through the pale night like a, like a – all right, like an elderly but powerful wizard being propelled upwards by an expertly judged thumb on the scales of the universe.

He landed in a litter of old nests, caught his balance, and stared down at the vertiginous view of a Disc dawn.

At this time of the long year the Circle Sea was almost on the sunset side of Cori Celesti, and as the daylight sloshed down into the lands around Ankh-Morpork the shadow of the mountain scythed across the landscape like the gnomon of God's sundial. But nightwards, racing the slow light towards the edge of the world, a line of white mist surged on. There was a crackling of dry twigs behind him. He turned to see Ymper Trymon, second in command of the Order, who had been the only other wizard able to keep up.

Galder ignored him for the moment, taking care only to keep a firm grip on the stonework and strengthen his personal spells of protection. Promotion was slow in a profession that traditionally bestowed long life, and it was accepted that younger *wizards would frequently seek* advancement via dead men's curly shoes, having previosly emptied them of their occupants. Besides, there was something disquieting about young Trymon. He didn't smoke, only drank boiled water, and Galder had the nasty suspicion that he was clever. He didn't smile often enough, and he liked figures and the sort of organisation charts that show lots of squares with arrows pointing :o other squares. In short, he was the sort of man who could use the word 'personnel' and mean it.

The whole of the visible Disc was now covered with a shmmering white skin that fitted it perfectly.

Galder looked down at his own hands and saw them covered with a pale network of shining threads that ollowed every movement.

He recognised this kind of spell. He'd used them himself. But his had been smaller – much smaller.

'It's a Change spell,' said Trymon. The whole world is being changed.'

Some people, thought Galder grimly, would have had the decency to put an exclamation mark on the end of a statement like that.

There was the faintest of pure sounds, high and sharp, like the breaking of a mouse's heart.

'What was that?' he said.

Trymon cocked his head.

'C sharp, I think,' he said.

Galder said nothing. The white shimmer had vanished, and the.first sounds of the waking city began to filter up to the two wizards. Everything seemed exactly the same as it had before. All that, just to make things stay the same?

He patted his nightshirt pockets distractedly and finally found what he was looking for lodged behind his ear. He put the soggy dogend in his mouth, called up mystical fire from between his fingers, and dragged hard on the wretched rollup until little blue lights flashed in front of his eyes. He coughed once or twice.

He was thinking very hard indeed.

He was trying to remember if any gods owed him any favours.

In fact the Gods were as puzzled by all this as the wizards were, but they were powerless to do anything and in any case were engaged in an eons-old battle with the Ice Giants, who had refused to return the lawnmower.

But some clue as to what actually had happened might be found in the fact that Rincewind, whose past life had just got up to a quite interesting bit when he was fifteen, suddenly found himself not dying after all but hanging upside down in a pine tree.

He got down easily by dropping uncontrollably from branch to branch until he landed on his head in a pile of pine needles, where he lay gasping for breath and wishing he d been a better person.

Somewhere, he knew, there had to be a perfectly logical connection. One minute one happens to be dying, having dropped off the rim of the world, and the next one is upside down in a tree.

As always happened at times like this, the Spell rose up in his mind.

Rincewind had been generally reckoned by his tutors to be a natural wizard in the same way that fish are natural mountaineers. He probably would have been thrown out of Unseen University anyway – he couldn't remember spells and smoking made him feel ill – but what had really caused trouble was all that stupid business about sneaking into the room where the Octavo was chained and opening it.

And what made the trouble even *worse* was that no-one could figure out why all the locks had temporarily become unlocked.

The spell wasn|t;sa demanding lodger. It just sat there like an old toad at the bottom of a pond. But whenever Rincewind was feeling really tired or very afraid it tried to get itself said. No-one:knew what would happen if one of the Eight Great Spells was said by itself, but the general Agreement was that the best place from which to watch the effects would be the next universe.

It was a weird thought to have, lying on a heap of pine needles after just falling off the edge of the world, but Rincewind had a feeling that the spell wanted to keep him alive.

'Suits me,' he thought.

He sat up and looked at the trees. Rincewind was a city wizard and, although he was aware that there were various differences among types of tree by which their nearest and dearest could tell them apart, the only thing he knew for certain was that the end without the leaves on fitted nto the ground. There were far too many of them, arranged with absolutely no sense of order. The place hadn't been swept for ages.

He remembered something about being able to tell where you were by looking at which side of a tree the moss grew on. These trees had moss everywhere, and wooden warts, and scrabbly old branches; if trees were people, these trees would be sitting in rocking chairs.

Rincewind gave the nearest one a kick. With unerring aim it dropped an acorn on him. He said 'Ow.' The tree, in a voice like a very old door swinging open, said, 'Serves you right.'

There was a long silence.

Then Rincewind said, 'Did you say that?'

'Yes.'

'And that too?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.' He thought for a bit. Then he tried, 'I suppose you wouldn't happen to know the way out of the forest, possibly, by any chance?'

'No. I don't get about much,' said the tree.

'Fairly boring life, I imagine,' said Rincewind.

'I wouldn't know. I've never been anything else,' said the tree.

Rincewind looked at it closely. It seemed pretty much like every other tree he'd seen.

'Are you magical?' he said.

'No-one's ever said,' said the tree, 'I suppose so.'

Rincewind thought: I can't be talking to a tree. If I was talking to a tree I'd be mad, and I'm not mad, so trees can't talk.

'Goodbye,' he said firmly.

'Hey, don't go,' the tree began, and then realised the hopelessness of it all. It watched him stagger off through the bushes, and settled down to feeling the sun on its leaves, the slurp and gurgle of the water in its roots, and the very ebb and flow of its sap in response to the natural tug of the sun and moon. Boring, it thought. What a trange thing to say. Trees can be bored, of course, beetles do it all the time, but I don't think that was what he was trying to mean. And: can you actually be anything else? In fact Rincewind never spoke to

this particular tree again, but from that brief conversation it spun the basis of the first tree religion which, in time, swept the forests of the world. Its tenet of faith was this: a tree that was a good tree, and led a clean, decent and upstanding life, could be assured of a future life after death. If it was very good indeed it would eventually be reincarnated as five thousand rolls of lavatory paper.

A few miles away Twoflower was also getting over his surprise at finding himself back on the Disc. He was sitting on the hull of the Potent Voyager as it gurgled gradually under the dark waters of a large lake, surrounded by trees.

Strangely enough, he was not particularly worried. Twoflower was a tourist, the first of the species to evolve on the Disc, and fundamental to his very existence was the rock-hard belief that nothing bad could really happen to him because he was *not involved;* he also believed that anyone could understand anything he said provided he spoke loudly and slowly, that people were basically trustworthy, and that anything could be sorted out among men of goodwill if they just acted sensibly.

On the face of it this gave him a survival value marginally less than, say, a soap herring, but to Rincewind's amazement it all seemed to work and the little man's total obliviousness to all forms of danger somehow made danger so discouraged that it gave up and went away.

Merely being faced with drowning stood no chance. Twoflower was quite certain that in a well-organised society people would not be allowed to go around getting drowned.

He was a little bothered, though, about where his Luggage had got to. But he comforted himself with the nowledge that it was made of sapient pearwood, and ought to be intelligent enough to look after itself . . .

In yet another part of the forest a young shaman was undergoing a very essential part of his training. He had eaten of the sacred toadstool, he had smoked the holy rhizome, he had carefully powdered up and inserted into various orifices the mystic mushroom and now, sitting crosslegged under a pine tree, he was concentrating firstly on making contact with the strange and wonderful secrets at the heart of Being but mainly on stopping the top of his head from unscrewing and floating away.

Blue four-side triangles pinwheeled across his vision. Occasionally he smiled knowingly at nothing very much and said things like 'Wow' and 'Urgh.'

There was a movement in the air and what he later described as 'like, a sort of explosion only backwards, you know?', and suddenly where there had only been nothing there was a large, battered, wooden chest.

It landed heavily on the leafmould, extended dozens of little legs, and turned around ponderously to look at the shaman. That is to say, it had no face, but even through the mycological haze he was horribly aware that it was looking at him. And not a nice look, either. It was amazing how baleful a keyhole and a couple of knotholes could be.

To his intense relief it gave a sort of wooden shrug, and set off through the trees at a canter.

With superhuman effort the shaman recalled the correct sequence of movements for standing up and even managed a couple of steps before he looked down and gave up, having run out of legs.

Rincewind, meanwhile, had found a path. It wound about a good deal, and he would have been happier if it had been cobbled, but following it gave him something to do.

Several trees tried to strike up a conversation, but Rincewind was nearly certain that this was not normal behaviour for trees and ignored them.

The day lengthened. There was no sound but the murmur of nasty little stinging insects, the occasional crack of a falling branch, and the whispering of the trees discussing religion and the trouble with squirrels. Rincewind began to feel very lonely. He imagined himself living in the woods forever, sleeping on leaves and eating . . . and eating . . . whatever there was to eat in woods. Trees, he supposed, and nuts and berries. He would have to . . .

'Rincewind!'

There, coming up the path, was Twoflower – dripping wet, but beaming with delight. The Luggage trotted along behind him (anything made of the wood would follow its owner anywhere and it was often used to make luggage for the grave goods of very rich dead kings who wanted to be sure of starting a new life in the next world with clean underwear).

Rincewind sighed. Up to now, he'd thought the day couldn't possibly get worse.

It began to rain a particularly wet and cold rain. Rincewind and Twoflower sat under a tree and watched it.

'Rincewind?'

'Um?'

'Why are we here?'

'Well, some say that the Creator of the Universe made the Disc and everything on it, others say that its all a very complicated story involving the testicles of the Sky God and the milk of the Celestial Cow, and some even hold that we're all just due to the total random accretion of probability particles. But if you mean why are we *here* as opposed to falling off the Disc, I haven't the faintest idea. It's probably all some ghastly mistake.'

'Oh. Do you think there's anything to eat in this forest?'

'Yes,' said the wizard bitterly, us.'

'I've got some acorns, if you like,' said the tree helpfully.

They sat in damp silence for some moments.

'Rincewind, the tree said—'

'Trees can't talk,' snapped Rincewind. 'It's very important to remember that.'

'But you just heard—'

Rincewind sighed. Took,' he said. It's all down to simple biology, isn't it? If you're going to talk you need the right equipment, like lungs and lips and, and—'

'Vocal chords,' said the tree.

'Yeah, them,' said Rincewind. He shut up and stared gloomily at the rain.

'*I* thought wizards knew all about trees and wild food and things,' said Twoflower reproachfully. It was very seldom that anything in his voice suggested that he thought of Rincewind as anything other than a magnificent enchanter, and the wizard was stung into action.

'I do, I do,' he snapped.

'Well, what kind of tree is this?' said the tourist. Rincewind looked up.

'Beech,' he said firmly.

'Actually—' began the tree, and shut up quickly. It had caught Rincewind's look.

'Those things up there look like acorns,' said Twoflower.

'Yes, well, this is the sessile or heptocarpic variety,' said Rincewind. The nuts look very much like acorns, in fact. They can fool practically anybody.'

'Gosh,' said Twoflower, and, What's that bush over there, then?'

'Mistletoe.'

'But it's got thorns and red berries!'

'Well?' said Rincewind sternly, and stared hard at him. Twoflower broke first.

'Nothing,' he said meekly. 'I must have been misinformed.'

'Right.'

'But there's some big mushrooms under it. Can you eat them?'

Rincewind looked at them cautiously. They were, indeed, very big, and had red and white spotted caps. They were in fact a variety that the local shaman (who at this point was some miles away, making friends with a rock) would only eat after first attaching one leg

to a large stone with a rope. There was nothing for it but to go out in the rain and look at them.

He knelt down in the leafmould and peered under the cap. After a while he said weakly, 'No, no good to eat at all.'

'Why?' called Twoflower. 'Are the gills the wrong shade of yellow?'

'No, not really . . .'

'I expect the stems haven't got the right kind of fluting, then.'

'They look okay, actually.'

'The cap, then, I expect the cap is the wrong colour,' said Twoflower.

'Not sure about that.'

'Well then, why can't you eat them?'

Rincewind coughed. It's the little doors and windows,' he said wretchedly, 'it's a dead giveaway.'

Thunder rolled across Unseen University. Rain poured over its roofs and gurgled out of its gargoyles, although one or two of the more cunning ones had scuttled off to shelter among the maze of tiles.

Far below, in the Great Hall, the eight most powerful wizards on the Discworld gathered at the angles of a ceremonial octogram. Actually they probably weren't the most

powerful, if the truth were known, but they certainly had great powers of survival which, in the highly competitive world of magic, was pretty much the same thing. Behind every wizard of the eighth rank were half a dozen eventh rank wizards trying to bump him off, and senior wizards had to develop an inquiring attitude to, for example, scorpions in their bed. An ancient proverb summed it up: when a wizard is tired of looking for broken glass in his dinner, it ran, he is tired of life.

The oldest wizard, Greyhald Spold of the Ancient and Truly Original Sages of the Unbroken Circle, leaned heavily on his carven staff and spake thusly:

'Get on with it, Weatherwax, my feet are giving me gyp.'

Galder, who had merely paused for effect, glared at him.

'Very well, then, I will be brief —'

'Jolly good.'

We all sought guidance as to the events of this morning. Can anyone among us say he received it?'

The wizards looked sidelong at one another. Nowhere outside a trades union conference fraternal benefit night can so much mutual distrust and suspicion be found as among a gathering of senior enchanters. But the plain fact was that the day had gone very badly. Normally informative demons, summoned abruptly from the Dungeon Dimensions, had looked sheepish and sidled away when questioned. Magic mirrors had cracked. Tarot cards had mysteriously become blank. Crystal balls had gone all cloudy. Even tealeaves, normally scorned by wizards as frivolous and unworthy of contemplation, had clustered together at the bottom of cups and refused to move.

In short, the assembled wizards were at a loss. There was a general murmur of agreement.

'And therefore I propose that we perform the Rite of AshkEnte,' said Galder dramatically.

He had to admit that he had hoped for a better response, something on the lines of, well, 'No, not the Rite of AshkEnte! Man was not meant to meddle with such things!'

In fact there was a general mutter of approval.

'Good idea.'

'Seems reasonable.'

'Get on with it, then.'

Slightly put out, he summoned a procession of lesser wizards who carried various magical implements into the hall.

It has already been hinted that around this time there was some disagreement among the fraternity of wizards about how to practise magic.

Younger wizards in particular went about saying that it was time that magic started to update its image and that they should all stop mucking about with bits of wax and bone and put the whole thing on a properly-organised basis, with research programmes and three-day conventions in good hotels where they could read papers with titles like 'Whither Geomancy?' and The role of Seven-League Boots in a caring society.'

Trymon, for example, hardly ever did any magic these days but ran the Order with hourglass efficiency and wrote lots of memos and had a big chart on his office wall, covered with coloured blobs and flags and lines that no-one else really understood but which looked very impressive.

The other type of wizard thought all this was so much marsh gas and wouldn't have anything to do with an image unless it was made of wax and had pins stuck in it.

The heads of the eight orders were all of this persuasion, traditionalists to a mage, and the utensils that were heaped around the octogram had a definite, no-nonsense occult look about them. Rams horns, skulls, baroque metalwork and heavy candles were much in evidence, despite the discovery by younger wizards that the Rite of AshkEnte could perfectly well be performed with three small bits of wood and 4 cc of mouse blood.

The preparations normally took several hours, but the combined powers of the senior wizards shortened it considerably and, after a mere forty minutes, Galder chanted the final words of the spell. They hung in front of him for a moment before dissolving.

The air in the centre of the octogram shimmered and thickened, and suddenly contained a tall, dark figure.

Most of it was hidden by a black robe and hood and this was probably just as well. It held a long scythe in one hand and one couldn't help noticing that what should have been fingers were simply white bone.

The other skeletal hand held small cubes of cheese and pineapple on a stick.

WELL? said Death, in a voice with all the warmth and colour of an iceberg. He caught the wizards' gaze, and glanced down at the stick.

I WAS AT A PARTY, he added, a shade reproachfully.

'O Creature of Earth and Darkness, we do charge thee to abjure from—' began Galder in a firm, commanding voice. Death nodded.

YES, YES, I KNOW ALL THAT, he said. WHY HAVE YOU SUMMONED ME?

'It is said that you can see both the past and future,' said Galder a little sulkily, because the big speech of binding and conjuration was one he rather liked and people had said he was very good at it.

THAT IS ABSOLUTELY CORRECT.

Then perhaps you can tell us what exactly it was that happened this morning?' said Galder. He pulled himself together, and added loudly, 'I command this by Azimrothe, by T'chikel, by—'

ALL RIGHT, YOU'VE MADE YOUR POINT, said Death. WHAT PRECISELY WAS IT YOU WISHED TO KNOW? QUITE A LOT OF THINGS HAPPENED THIS MORNING, PEOPLE WERE BORN, PEOPLE DIED, ALL THE TREES GREW A BIT TALLER, RIPPLES MADE INTERESTING PATTERNS ON THE SEA—

'I mean about the Octavo,' said Galder coldly.

THAT? OH, THAT WAS JUST A READJUSTMENT OF REALITY. I UNDERSTAND THE OCTAVO WAS ANXIOUS NOT TO LOSE THE EIGHTH SPELL. IT WAS DROPPING OFF THE DISC, APPARENTLY.

'Hold on, hold on,' said Galder. He scratched his chin. 'Are we talking about the one inside the head of Rincewind? Tall thin man, bit scraggy? The one—'

—THAT HE HAS BEEN CARRYING AROUND ALL THESE YEARS, YES.

Galder frowned. It seemed a lot of trouble to go to. Everyone knew that when a wizard died all the spells in h:s head would go free, so why bother to save Rincewind? The spell would just float back eventually.

Any idea why?' he said without thinking and then, remembering himself in time, added hastily, 'By Yrriph and Kcharla I do abjure thee and—'

I WISH YOU WOULDN'T KEEP DOING THAT, said Death, ALL THAT I KNOW IS THAT ALL THE SPELLS HAVE TO BE SAID TOGETHER NEXT HOGS-WATCHNIGHT OR THE DISC WILL BE DESTROYED.

'Speak up there!' demanded Greyhald Spold.

'Shut up!' said Galder.

ME?

'No, him. Daft old—'

'I heard that!' snapped Spold, 'You young people—' He stopped. Death was looking at him thoughtfully, as if he was trying to remember his face.

'Look,' said Galder, 'just repeat that bit again, will you? The Disc will be what?'

DESTROYED, said Death. CAN I GO NOW? I LEFT MY DRINK.

'Hang on,' said Galder hurriedly. 'By Chelilliki and Orizone and so forth, what do you mean, destroyed?'

IT'S AN ANCIENT PROPHECY WRITTEN ON THE INNER WALLS OF THE GREAT PYRAMID OF TSORT. THE WORD DESTROYED SEEMS QUITE SELF-EXPLANATORY TO ME.

'That's all you can tell us?'

YES.

'But Hogswatchnight is only two months away!'

YES.

'At least you can tell us where Rincewind is now!' Death shrugged. It was a gesture he was particularly well built for.

THE FOREST OF SKUND, RIMWARDS OF THE RAMTOP MOUNTAINS.

What is he doing there?'

FEELING VERY SORRY FOR HIMSELF.

'Oh.'

NOW MAY I GO?

Galder nodded distractedly. He had been thinking wistfully of the banishment ritual, which started 'Begone, foul shade' and had some rather impressive passages which he had been practising, but somehow he couldn't work up any enthusiasm.

'Oh, yes,' he said. Thank you, yes.' And then, because it's as well not to make enemies even among the creatures of night, he added politely, 'I hope it is a good party.'

Death didn't answer. He was looking at Spold in the same way that a dog looks at a bone, only in this case things were more or less the other way around.

'I said I hope it is a good party,' said Galder, loudly.

AT THE MOMENT IT IS, said Death levelly. I THINK IT MIGHT GO DOWNHILL VERY QUICKLY AT MIDNIGHT.

'Why?'

THAT'S WHEN THEY THINK I'LL BE TAKING MY MASK OFF.

He vanished, leaving only a cocktail stick and a short paper streamer behind.

There had been an unseen observer of all this. It was of course entirely against the rules, but Trymon knew all about rules and had always considered they were for making, not obeying.

Long before the eight mages had got down to some serious arguing about what the apparition had meant he was down in the main levels of the University library.

It was an awe-inspiring place. Many of the books were magical, and the important thing to remember about grimoires is that they are deadly in the hands of any ibrarian who cares about order, because he's bound to stick them all on the same shelf. This is not a good idea with books that tend to leak magic, because more than one or two of them together form a critical Black Mass. On top of that, many of the lesser spells are quite particular about the company they keep, and tend to express any objections by hurling their books viciously across the room. And, of course, there is always the half-felt presence of the Things from the Dungeon Dimensions, clustering around the magical leakage and constantly probing the walls of reality.

The job of magical librarian, who has to spend his working days in this sort of highly charged atmosphere, is a high-risk occupation.

The Head Librarian was sitting on top of his desk, quietly peeling a orange, and was well aware of that.

He glanced up when Trymon entered.

'I'm looking for anything we've got on the Pyramid of Tshut,' said Trymon. He had come prepared: he took a banana out of his pocket.

The librarian looked at it mournfully, and then flopped down heavily on the floor. Trymon found a soft hand poked gently into his and the librarian led the way, waddling sadly between the bookshelves. It was like holding a little leather glove.

Around them the books sizzled and sparked, with the occasional discharge of undirected magic flashing over to the carefully-placed earthing rods nailed to the shelves. There was a tinny, blue smell and, just at the very limit of hearing, the horrible chittering of the dungeon creatures.

Like many other parts of Unseen University the library occupied rather more space than its outside dimensions would suggest, because magic distorts space in strange ways, and it was probably the only library in the universe with Mobius shelves. But the librarian's mental catalogue was ticking over perfectly. He stopped by a soaring stack of musty books and swung himself up into the darkness. There was the sound of rustling paper, and a cloud of dust oated down to Trymon. Then the librarian was back, a slim volume in his hands.

'Oook,' he said.

Trymon took it gingerly.

The cover was scratched and very dog-eared, the gold of its lettering had long ago curled off, but he could just make out, in the old magic tongue of the Tsort Valley, the words: I*yt Gryet Teymple hyte Tsort,* Y *Hiystory Myistical.*

'Oook?' said the librarian, anxiously.

Trymon turned the pages cautiously. He wasn't very good at languages, he'd always found them highly inefficient things which by rights ought to be replaced by some sort of

easily understood numerical system, but this seemed exactly what he was looking for. There were whole pages covered with meaningful hieroglyphs.

'Is this the only book you've got about the pyramid of Tsort?' he said slowly.

'Oook.'

'You're quite sure?'

'Oook.'

Trymon listened. He could hear, a long way off, the sound of approaching feet and arguing voices. But he had been prepared for that, too.

He reached into a pocket.

'Would you like another banana?' he said.

The forest of Skund was indeed enchanted, which was nothing unusual on the Disc, and was also the only forest in the whole universe to be called – in the local language – Your Finger You Fool, which was the literal meaning of the word Skund.

The reason for this is regrettably all too common. When the first explorers from the warm lands around the Circle Sea travelled into the chilly hinterland they filled in the blank spaces on their maps by grabbing the nearest native, pointing at some distant landmark, speaking very clearly n a loud voice, and writing down whatever the bemused man told them. Thus were immortalised in generations of atlases such geographical oddities as Just A Mountain, I Don't Know, What? and, of course, Your Finger You Fool.

Rainclouds clustered around the bald heights of Mt. Oolskunrahod ('Who is this Fool who does Not Know what a Mountain Is') and the Luggage settled itself more comfortably under a dripping tree, which tried unsuccessfully to strike up a conversation.

Twoflower and Rincewind were arguing. The person they were arguing about sat on his mushroom and watched them with interest. He looked like someone who smelled like someone who lived in a mushroom, and that bothered Twoflower.

'Well, why hasn't he got a red hat?'

Rincewind hesitated, desperately trying to imagine what Twoflower was getting at.

'What?' he said, giving in.

'He should have a red hat,' said Twoflower. 'And he certainly ought to be cleaner and more, more sort of jolly. He doesn't look like any sort of gnome to me.'

'What are you going on about?'

'Look at that beard,' said Twoflower sternly. 'I've seen better beards on a piece of cheese.'

'Look, he's six inches high and lives in a mushroom,' snarled Rincewind. 'Of course he's a bloody gnome.'

'We've only got his word for it.'

Rincewind looked down at the gnome.

'Excuse me,' he said. He took Twoflower to the other side of the clearing.

'Listen,' he said between his teeth. 'If he was fifteen feet tall and said he was a giant we'd only have his word for that too, wouldn't we?'

'He could be a goblin,' said Twoflower defiantly.

Rincewind looked back at the tiny figure, which was industriously picking its nose.

'Well?' he said. 'So what? Gnome, goblin, pixie – so what?'

'Not a pixie,' said Twoflower firmly. 'Pixies, they wear these sort of green combinations and they have pointy caps and little knobbly antenna thingies sticking out of their heads. I've seen pictures.'

'Where?'

Twoflower hesitated, and looked at his feet. 'I think it was called the "mutter, mutter, mutter." '

'The what? Called the what?'

The little man took a sudden interest in the backs of his hands.

'The Little Folks' Book of Flower Fairies,' he muttered.

Rincewind looked blank.

'It's a book on how to avoid them?' he said.

'Oh no,' said Twoflower hurriedly. It tells you where to look for them. I can remember the pictures now.' A dreamy look came over his face, and Rincewind groaned inwardly. There was even a special fairy that came and took your teeth away.'

'What, came and pulled out your actual teeth – ?'

'No, no, you're wrong, I mean after they'd fallen out, what you did was, you put the tooth under your pillow and the fairy came and took it away and left a *rhinu* piece.'

'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why did it collect teeth?'

'It just did.'

Rincewind formed a mental picture of some strange entity living in a castle made of teeth. It was the kind of mental picture you tried to forget. Unsuccessfully.

'Urgh,' he said.

Red hats! He wondered whether to enlighten the tourist about what life was really like when a frog was a good meal, a rabbit hole a useful place to shelter out of the rain, and an owl a drifting, silent terror in the night. Moleskin trousers sounded quaint unless you personally had to remove them from their original owner when the vicious little sod was cornered in his burrow. As for red hats, anyone who went around a forest looking bright nd conspicuous would only do so very, very briefly.

He wanted to say: look, the life of gnomes and goblins is nasty, brutish and short. So are they.

He wanted to say all this, and couldn't. For a man with an itch to see the whole of infinity, Twoflower never actually moved outside his own head. Telling him the truth would be like kicking a spaniel.

'Swee whee weedle wheet,' said a voice by his foot. He looked down. The gnome, who had introduced himself as Swires, looked up. Rincewind had a very good ear for languages. The gnome had just said, 'I've got some newt sorbet left over from yesterday.'

'Sounds wonderful,' said Rincewind.

Swires gave him another prod in the ankle.

'The other bigger, is he all right?' he said solicitously.

'He's just suffering from reality shock,' said Rincewind. You haven't got a red hat, by any chance?'

'Wheet?'

'Just a thought.'

'I know where there's some food for biggers,' said the gnome, 'and shelter, too. It's not far.'

Rincewind looked at the lowering sky. The daylight was draining out of the landscape and the clouds looked as if they had heard about snow and were considering the idea. Of course, people who lived in mushrooms couldn't necessarily be trusted, but right now a trap baited with a hot meal and clean sheets would have had the wizard hammering to get in.

They set off. After a few seconds the Luggage got carefully to its feet and started to follow.

'Psst!'

It turned carefully, little legs moving in a complicated pattern, and appeared to look up.

'Is it good, being joinery?' said the tree, anxiously. 'Did it hurt?'

The Luggage seemed to think about this. Every brass handle, every knothole, radiated extreme concentration.

Then it shrugged its lid and waddled away.

The tree sighed, and shook a few dead leaves out of its twigs.

The cottage was small, tumbledown and as ornate as a doily. Some mad whittler had got to work on it, Rincewind decided, and had created terrible havoc before he could be dragged away. Every door, every shutter had its clusters of wooden grapes and half-moon cutouts, and there were massed outbreaks of fretwork pinecones all over the walls. He half expected a giant cuckoo to come hurtling out of an upper window.

What he also noticed was the characteristic greasy feel in the air. Tiny green and purple sparks flashed from his fingernails.

'Strong magical field,' he muttered. 'A hundred milli-thaums[2] at least.'

[2] A Thaum is the basic unit of magical strength. It has been universally established as the amount of magic needed to create one small white pigeon or three normal sized billiard balls.

'There's magic all over the place,' said Swires. 'An old witch used to live around here. She went a long time ago but the magic still keeps the house going.'

'Here, there's something odd about that door,' said Twoflower.

Why should a house need magic to keep it going?' said Rincewind. Twoflower touched a wall gingerly.

'It's all sticky!'

'Nougat,' said Swires.

'Good grief! A real gingerbread cottage! Rincewind, a real—'

Rincewind nodded glumly. Yeah, the Confectionary School of Architecture,' he said. 'It never caught on.'

He looked suspiciously at the liquorice doorknocker.

'It sort of regenerates,' said Swires. 'Marvellous, really. You just don't get this sort of place nowadays, you just an't get the gingerbread.'

'Really?' said Rincewind, gloomily.

'Come on in,' said the gnome, '*but* mind the doormat.

'Why?'

'Candyfloss.'

The great Disc spun slowly under its toiling sun, and daylight pooled in hollows and finally drained away as night fell.

In his chilly room in Unseen University Trymon pored over the book, his lips moving as his finger traced the unfamiliar, ancient script. He read that the Great Pyramid of Tsort, now long vanished, was made of one million, three thousand and ten limestone blocks. He read that ten thousand slaves had been worked to death in its building. He learned that it was a maze of secret passages, their walls reputedly decorated with the distilled wisdom of ancient Tsort. He read that its height plus its length divided by half its width equalled exactly 1.67563, or precisely 1,237.98712567 times the difference between the distance to the sun and the weight of a small orange. He learned that sixty years had been devoted entirely to its construction.

It all seemed, he thought, to be rather a lot of trouble to go to just to sharpen a razor blade.

And in the Forest of Skund Twoflower and Rincewind settled down to a meal of gingerbread mantlepiece and thought longingly of pickled onions.

And far away, but set as it were on a collision course, the greatest hero the Disc ever produced rolled himself a cigarette, entirely unaware of the role that lay in store for him.

It was quite an interesting tailormade that he twirled expertly between his fingers because, like many of the wandering wizards from whom he had picked up the art, he was in the habit of saving dogends in a leather bag and rolling them into fresh smokes. The implacable law of verages therefore dictated that some of that tobacco had been

smoked almost continuously for many years now. The thing he was trying unsuccessfully to light was, well, you could have coated roads with it.

So great was the reputation of this person that a group of nomadic barbarian horsemen had respectfully invited him to join them as they sat around a horseturd fire. The nomads of the Hub regions usually migrated Rimwards for the winter, and these were part of a tribe who had pitched their felt tents in the sweltering heatwave of a mere -3 degrees and were going around with peeling noses and complaining about heatstroke.

The barbarian chieftain said: What then are the greatest things that a man may find in life?' This is the sort of thing you're supposed to say to maintain steppe-cred in barbarian circles.

The man on his right thoughtfully drank his cocktail of mare's milk and snowcat blood, and spoke thus: The crisp horizon of the steppe, the wind in your hair, a fresh horse under you.'

The man on his left said: The cry of the white eagle in the heights, the fall of snow in the forest, a true arrow in your bow.'

The chieftain nodded, and said: 'Surely it is the sight of your enemy slain, the humiliation of his tribe and the lamentation of his women.'

There was a general murmur of whiskery approval at this outrageous display.

Then the chieftain turned respectfully to his guest, a small figure carefully warming his chilblains by the fire, and said: 'But our guest, whose name is legend, must tell us truly: what is it that a man may call the greatest things in life?'

The guest paused in the middle of another unsuccessful attempt to light up.

'What shay?' he said, toothlessly.

'I said: what is it that a man may call the greatest things in life?'

The warriors leaned closer. This should be worth hearing.

The guest thought long and hard and then said, with deliberation: 'Hot water, good dentishtry and shoft lavatory paper.'

Brilliant octarine light flared in the forge. Galder Weatherwax, stripped to the waist, his face hidden by a mask of smoked glass, squinted into the glow and brought a hammer down with surgical precision. The magic squealed and writhed in the tongs but still he worked it, drawing it into a line of agonised fire.

A floorboard creaked. Galder had spent many hours tuning them, always a wise precaution with an ambitious assistant who walked like a cat.

D flat. That meant he was just to the right of the door.

'Ah, Trymon,' he said, without turning, and noted with some satisfaction the faint indrawing of breath behind him. 'Good of you to come. Shut the door, will you?'

Trymon pushed the heavy door, his face expressionless. On the high shelf above him various bottled impossibilities wallowed in their pickle jars and watched him with interest.

Like all wizards' workshops, the place looked as though a taxidermist had dropped his stock in a foundry and then had a fight with a maddened glassblower, braining a passing crocodile in the process (it hung from the ceiling and smelt strongly of camphor). There

were lamps and rings that Trymon itched to rub, and mirrors that looked as though they could repay a second glance. A pair of seven-league boots stirred restlessly in a cage. A whole library of grimoires, not of course as powerful as the Octavo but still heavy with spells, creaked and rattled their chains as they sensed the wizard's covetous glance on them. The naked power of it all stirred him as nothing else could, but he deplored the scruffiness and Galder's sense of theatre.

For example, he happened to know that the green liquid bubbling mysteriously through a maze of contorted pipework on one of the benches was just green dye with soap in it, because he'd bribed one of the servants.

One day, he thought, it's all going to go. Starting with that bloody alligator. His knuckles whitened . . .

'Well now,' said Galder cheerfully, hanging up his apron and sitting back in his chair with the lion paw arms and duck legs, 'You sent me this memmy-thing.'

Trymon shrugged. 'Memo. I merely pointed out, lord, that the other Orders have all sent agents to Skund Forest to recapture the spell, while you do nothing,' he said. 'No doubt you will reveal your reasons in good time.'

'Your faith shames me,' said Galder.

The wizard who captures the spell will bring great honour on himself and his order,' said Trymon. The others have used boots and all manner of elsewhere spells. What do you propose using, master?'

'Did I detect a hint of sarcasm there?'

'Absolutely not, master.'

'Not even a smidgeon?'

'Not even the merest smidgeon, master.'

'Good. Because I don't propose to go.' Galder reached down and picked up an ancient book. He mumbled a command and it creaked open; a bookmark suspiciously like a tongue flicked back into the binding.

He fumbled down beside his cushion and produced a little leather bag of tobacco and a pipe the size of an incinerator. With all the skill of a terminal nicotine addict he rubbed a nut of tobacco between his hands and tamped it into the bowl. He snapped his fingers and fire flared. He sucked deep, sighed with satisfaction . . .

. . . looked up.

'Still here, Tryrnon?'

'You summoned me, master,' said Trymon levelly. At least, that's what his voice said. Deep in his grey eyes was the faintest glitter that said he had a list of every slight, every patronising twinkle, every gentle reproof, every knowing glance, and for every single one Galder's living brain was going to spend a year in acid.

'Oh, yes, so I did. Humour the deficiencies of an old man,' said Galder pleasantly. He held up the book he had been reading.

'I don't hold with all this running about,' he said. 'It's all very dramatic, mucking about with magic carpets and the like, but it isn't true magic to my mind. Take seven league boots, now. If men were meant to walk twenty-one miles at a step I am sure God would have given us longer legs . . . Where was I?'

'I am not sure,' said Trymon coldly.

'Ah, yes. Strange that we could find nothing about the Pyramid of Tsort in the Library, you would have thought there'd be something, wouldn't you?'

The librarian will be disciplined, of course.'

Galder looked sideways at him. 'Nothing drastic,' he said. 'Withold his bananas, perhaps.'

They looked at each other for a moment.

Galder broke off first – looking hard at Trymon always bothered him. It had the same disconcerting effect as gazing into a mirror and seeing no-one there.

'Anyway,' he said, 'strangely enough, I found assistance elsewhere. In my own modest bookshelves, in fact. The journal of Skrelt Changebasket, the founder of our order. You, my keen young man who would rush off so soon, do you know what happens when a wizard dies?'

'Any spells he has memorised say themselves,' said Trymon. 'It is one of the first things we learn.'

'In fact it is not true of the original Eight Great Spells. By dint of close study Skrelt learned that a Great Spell will simply take refuge in the nearest mind open and ready to receive it. Just push the big mirror over here, will you?'

Galder got to his feet and shuffled across to the forge, which was now cold. The strand of magic still writhed, though, at once present and not present, like a slit cut into another universe full of hot blue light. He picked it p easily, took a longbow from a rack, said a word of power, and watched with satisfaction as the magic grasped the ends of the bow and then tightened until the wood creaked. Then lie selected an arrow.

Trymon had tugged a heavy, full-length mirror into the middle of the floor. When I am head of the Order, he told himself, I certainly won't shuffle around in carpet slippers.

Trymon, as mentioned earlier, felt that a lot could be done by fresh blood if only the dead wood could be removed – but, just for the moment, he was genuinely interested in seeing what the old fool would do next.

He may have derived some satisfaction if he had known that Galder and Skrelt Changebasket were both absolutely wrong.

Galder made a few passes in front of the glass, which clouded over and then cleared to show an aerial view of the Forest of Skund. He looked at it intently while holding the bow with the arrow pointing vaguely at the ceiling. He muttered a few words like 'allow for wind speed of, say, three knots' and 'adjust for temperature' and then, with a rather disappointing movement, released the arrow.

If the laws of action and reaction had anything to do with it, it should have flopped to the ground a few feet away. But no-one was listening to them.

With a sound that defies description, but which for the sake of completeness can be thought of basically as 'spang!' plus three days hard work in any decently equipped radiophonic workshop, the arrow vanished.

Galder threw the bow aside and grinned.

'Of course, it'll take about an hour to get there,' he said. Then the spell will simply follow the ionised path back here. To me.'

'Remarkable,' said Trymon, but any passing telepath would have read in letters ten yards high: if you, then why not me? He looked down at the cluttered workbench, when a long and very sharp knife looked tailormade for what he suddenly had in mind.

Violence was not something he liked to be involved in except at one remove. But the Pyramid of Tsort had been quite clear about the rewards for whoever brought all right spells together at the right time, and Trymon was not about to let years of painstaking work go for nothing because some old fool had a bright idea.

'Would you like some cocoa while we're waiting?' said Galder, hobbling across the room to the servants' bell.

'Certainly,' said Trymon. He picked up the knife, weighing it for balance and accuracy. 'I must congratulate you, master. I can see that we must all get up very early in the morning to get the better of you.'

Galder laughed. And the knife left Trymon's hand at such speed that (because of the somewhat sluggish nature of Disc light) it actually grew a bit shorter and a little more massive as it plunged, with unerring aim, towards Galder's neck.

It didn't reach it. Instead, it swerved to one side and began a fast orbit – so fast that Galder appeared suddenly to be wearing a metal collar. He turned around, and to Trymon it seemed that he had suddenly grown several feet taller and much more powerful.

The knife broke away and shuddered into the door a mere shadow's depth from Trymon's ear.

'Early in the morning?' said Galder pleasantly. 'My dear lad, you will need to stay up all night.'

'Have a bit more table,' said Rincewind.

'No thanks, I don't like marzipan,' said Twoflower. 'Anyway, I'm sure it's not right to eat other people's furniture.'

'Don't worry,' said Swires. The old witch hasn't been seen for years. They say she was done up good and proper by a couple of young tearaways.'

'Kids of today,' commented Rincewind.

'I blame the parents,' said Twoflower.

Once you had made the necessary mental adjustments, the gingerbread cottage was quite a pleasant place. Residual magic kept it standing and it was shunned by such local wild animals who hadn't already died of terminal tooth decay. A bright fire of liquorice logs burned rather messily in the fireplace; Rincewind had tried gathering wood outside, but had given up. It's hard to burn wood that talks to you.

He belched.

'This isn't very healthy,' he said. 'I mean, why sweets? Why not crispbread and cheese? Or salami, now – I could just do with a nice salami sofa.'

'Search me,' said Swires. 'Old Granny Whitlow just did sweets. You should have seen her meringues —'

'I have,' said Rincewind, 'I looked at the mattresses . . .'

'Gingerbread is more traditional,' said Twoflower.

'What, for mattresses?'

'Don't be silly,' said Twoflower reasonably. Whoever heard of a gingerbread mattress?'

Rincewind grunted. He was thinking of food – more accurately, of food in Ankh-Morpork. Funny how the old place seemed more attractive the further he got from it. He only had to close his eyes to picture, in dribbling detail, the food stalls of a hundred different cultures in the market places. You could eat *squishi* or shark's fin soup so fresh that swimmers wouldn't go near it, and —

'Do you think I could buy this place?' said Twoflower. Rincewind hesitated. He'd found it always paid to think very carefully before answering Twoflower's more surprising questions.

'What for?' he said, cautiously.

'Well, it just reeks of ambience.'

'Oh.'

'What's ambience?' said Swires, sniffing cautiously and wearing the kind of expression that said that he hadn't done it, whatever it was.

'I think it's a kind of frog,' said Rincewind. 'Anyway, you can't buy this place because there isn't anyone to buy t *from—'*

'I think I could probably arrange that, on behalf of the forest council of course,' interrupted Swires, trying to avoid Rincewind's glare.

'— and anyway you couldn't take it with you, I mean, you could hardly pack it in the Luggage, could you?' Rincewind indicated the Luggage, which was lying by the fire and managing in some quite impossible way to look like a contented but alert tiger, and then looked back at Twoflower. His face fell.

'Could you?' he repeated.

He had never quite come to terms with the fact that the inside of the Luggage didn't seem to inhabit quite the same world as the outside. Of course, this was simply a byproduct of its essential weirdness, but it was disconcerting to see Twoflower fill it full of dirty shirts and old socks and then open the lid again on a pile of nice crisp laundry, smelling faintly of lavender. Twoflower also bought a lot of quaint native artifacts or, as Rincewind would put it, junk, and even a seven-foot ceremonial pig tickling pole seemed to fit inside quite easily without sticking out *anywhere.*

'I don't know,' said Twoflower. 'You're a wizard, you know about these things.'

'Yes, well, of course, but baggage magic is a highly specialised art,' said Rincewind. 'Anyway, I'm sure the gnomes wouldn't really want to sell it, it's, it's—,' he groped through what he knew of Twoflower's mad vocabulary – 'it's a tourist attraction.'

'What's that?' said Swires, interestedly.

'It means that lots of people like him will come and look at it,' said Rincewind.

'Why?'

'Because—' Rincewind groped for words – 'it's quaint. Urn, oldey worldey. Folkloresque. Er, a delightful example of a vanished folk art, steeped in the traditions of an age long gone.'

'It is?' said Swires, looking at the cottage in bewilderment.

'Yes.'

'All that?'

'Fraid so.'

'I'll help you pack.'

And the night wears on, under a blanket of lowering clouds which covers most of the Disc – which is fortuitous, because when it clears and the astrologers get a good view of the sky they are going to get angry and upset.

And in various parts of the forest parties of wizards are getting lost, and going around in circles, and hiding from each other, and getting upset because whenever they bump into a tree it apologises to them. But, unsteadily though it may be, many of them are getting quite close to the cottage . . .

Which is a good time to get back to the rambling buildings of Unseen University and in particular the apartments of Greyhald Spold, currently the oldest wizard on the Disc and determined to keep it that way.

He has just been extremely surprised and upset.

For the last few hours he has been very busy. He may be deaf and a little hard of thinking, but elderly wizards have very well-trained survival instincts, and they know that when a tall figure in a black robe and the latest in agricultural handtools starts looking thoughtfully at you it is time to act fast. The servants have been dismissed. The doorways have been sealed with a paste made from powdered mayflies, and protective octograms have been drawn on the windows. Rare and rather smelly oils have been poured in complex patterns on the floor, in designs which hurt the eyes and suggest the designer was drunk or from some other dimension or, possibly, both; in the very centre of the room is the eightfold octogram of Witholding, surrounded by red and green candles. And in the centre of that is a box made from wood of the curly-fern pine, which grows to a great age, and it is lined with red silk and yet more protective amulets. Because Greyhald

Spold knows that Death is looking for him, and has spent many years designing an impregnable hiding place.

He has just set the complicated clockwork of the lock and shut the lid, lying back in the knowledge that here at last is the perfect defence against the most ultimate of all his enemies, although as yet he has not considered the important part that airholes must play in an enterprise of this kind.

And right beside him, very close to his ear, a voice has just said: DARK IN HERE, ISN'T IT?

It began to snow. The barleysugar windows of the cottage showed bright and cheerful against the blackness.

At one side of the clearing three tiny red points of light-glowed momentarily and there was the sound of a chesty cough, abruptly silenced.

'Shut up!' hissed a third rank wizard. They'll hear us!'

'Who will? We gave the lads from the Brotherhood of the Hoodwink the slip in the swamp, and those idiots from the Venerable Council of Seers went off the wrong way anyway.'

'Yeah,' said the most junior wizard, 'but who keeps talking to us? They say this is a magic wood, it's full of goblins and wolves and —'

'Trees,' said a voice out of the darkness, high above. It possessed what can only be described as timbre.

'Yeah,' said the youngest wizard. He sucked on his dogend, and shivered.

The leader of the party peered over the rock and watched the cottage.

'Right then,' he said, knocking out his pipe on the heel of his seven league boot, who squeaked in protest. 'We rush in, we grab them, we're away. Okay?'

'You sure it's just people?' said the youngest wizard, nervously.

'Of course I'm sure,' snarled the leader. 'What do you expect, three bears?'

'There could be monsters. This is the sort of wood that 45 has monsters.'

'And trees,' said a friendly voice from the branches. 'Yeah,' said the leader, cautiously.

Rincewind looked carefully at the bed. It was quite a nice little bed, in a sort of hard toffee inlaid with caramel, but he'd rather eat it than sleep in it and it looked as though someone already had.

'Someone's been eating my bed,' he said.

'I like toffee,' said Twoflower defensively.

'If you don't watch out the fairy will come and take all your teeth away,' said Rincewind.

'No, that's elves,' said Swires from the dressing table. 'Elves do that. Toenails, too. Very touchy at times, elves can be.'

Twoflower sat down heavily on his bed.

'You've got it wrong,' he said. 'Elves are noble and beautiful and wise and fair; I'm sure I read that somewhere.'

Swires and Rincewind's kneecap exchanged glances.

'I think you must be thinking about different elves,' the gnome said slowly. 'We've just got the other sort around here. Not that you could call them quick-tempered,' he added hastily. 'Not if you didn't want to take your teeth home in your hat, anyway.'

There was the tiny, distinctive sound of a nougat door opening. At the same time, from the other side of the cottage, came the faintest of tinkles, like a rock smashing a barley sugar window as delicately as possible.

'What was that?' said Twoflower.

'Which one?' said Rincewind.

There was the clonk of a heavy branch banging against the window sill. With a cry of 'Elves!' Swires scuttled across the floor to a mousehole and vanished.

'What shall we do?' said Twoflower.

'Panic?' said Rincewind hopefully. He always held that panic was the best means of survival; back in the olden days, his theory went, people faced with hungry sabre-toothed tigers could be divided very simply into those who panicked and those who stood there saying 'What a magnificent brute!' and 'Here, pussy.'

'There's a cupboard,' said Twoflower, pointing to a narrow door that was squeezed between the wall and the chimneybreast. They scrambled into sweet, musty darkness.

There was the creak of a chocolate floorboard outside. Someone said 'I heard voices.'

Someone else said, 'Yeah, downstairs. I think it's the Hood winkers.'

'I thought you said we'd given them the slip!'

'Hey, you two, you can eat this place! Here, look you can —'

'Shut up!'

There was a lot more creaking, and a muffled scream from downstairs where a Venerable Seer, creeping carefully through the darkness from the broken window, had trodden on the fingers of a Hoodwinker who was hiding under the table. There was the sudden zip and zing of magic.

'Bugger!'said a voice outside. They've got him! Let's go!'

There was more creaking, and then silence. After a while Twoflower said, 'Rincewind, I think there's a broomstick in this cupboard.'

Well, what's so unusual about that?'

This one's got handlebars.'

There was a piercing shriek from below. In the darkness a wizard had tried to open the Luggage's lid. A crash from the scullery indicated the sudden arrival of a party of Illuminated Mages of the Unbroken Circle.

'What do you think they're after?' whispered Twoflower.

'I don't know, but I think it might be a good idea not to find out,' said Rincewind thoughtfully.

'You could be right.'

Rincewind pushed open the door gingerly. The room was empty. He tiptoed across to the window, and looked own into the upturned faces of three Brothers of the Order of Midnight.

'That's him!'

He drew back hurriedly and rushed for the stairs.

The scene below was indescribable but since that statement would earn the death penalty in the reign of Olaf Quimby II the attempt better be made. Firstly, most of the struggling wizards were trying to illuminate the scene by various flames, fireballs and magical glows, so the overall lighting gave the impression of a disco in a strobelight factory; each man was trying to find a position from which he could see the rest of the room without being attacked himself, and absolutely everyone was trying to keep out of the way of the Luggage, which had two Venerable Seers pinned in a corner and was snapping its lid at anyone who approached. But one wizard did happen to look up.

'It's him!'

Rincewind jerked back, and something bumped into him. He looked around hurriedly, and stared when he saw Twoflower sitting on the broomstick – which was floating in mid-air.

'The witch must have left it behind!' said Twoflower. 'A genuine magic broomstick!'

Rincewind hesitated. Octarine sparks were spitting off the broomstick's bristles and he hated heights almost more than anything else, but what he really hated more than

anything at all was a dozen very angry and bad-tempered wizards rushing up the stairs towards him, and this was happening.

'All right,' he said, *'but* I'll drive.'

He lashed out with a boot at a wizard who was halfway through a Spell of Binding and jumped onto the broomstick, which bobbed down the stairwell and then turned upside down so that Rincewind was horribly eye to eye with a Brother of Midnight.

He yelped and gave the handlebars a convulsive twist.

Several things happened at once. The broomstick shot orward and broke through the wall in a shower of crumbs: the Luggage surged forward and bit the Brother in the leg: and with a strange whistling sound an arrow appeared from nowhere, missed Rincewind by inches, and struck the Luggage's lid with a very solid thud. The Luggage vanished.

In a little village deep in the forest an ancient shaman threw a few more twigs on his fire and stared through the smoke at his shamefaced apprentice.

'A box with legs on?' he said.

'Yes, master. It just appeared out of the sky and looked at me,' said the apprentice.

'It had eyes then, this box?'

'N—,' began the apprentice and stopped, puzzled. The old man frowned.

'Many have seen Topaxci, God of the Red Mushroom, and they earn the name of shaman,' he said. 'Some have seen Skelde, spirit of the smoke, and they are called

sorcerers. A few have been privileged to see Umcherrel, the soul of the forest, and they are known as spirit masters. But none have seen a box with hundreds of legs that looked at them without eyes, and they are known as idio—'

The interruption was caused by a sudden screaming noise and a flurry of snow and sparks that blew the fire across the dark hut; there was a brief blurred vision and then the opposite wall was blasted aside and the apparition vanished.

There was a long silence. Then a slightly shorter silence. Then the old shaman said carefully, 'You didn't just see two men go through upside down on a broomstick, shouting and screaming at each other, did you?'

The boy looked at him levelly. 'Certainly not,' he said.

The old man heaved a sigh of relief. Thank goodness for that,' he said. 'Neither did I.'

The cottage was in turmoil, because not only did the wizards want to follow the broomstick, they also wanted to prevent each other from doing so, and this led to several regrettable incidents.The most spectacular, and certainly the most tragic, happened when one Seer attempted to use his seven league boots without the proper sequence of spells and preparations. Seven league boots, as has already been intimated, are a tricksy form of magic at best, and he remembered too late that the utmost caution must be taken in using a means of transport which, when all is said and done, relies for its effectiveness on trying to put one foot twenty-one miles in front of the other.

The first snowstorms of winter were raging, and in fact there was a suspiciously heavy covering of cloud over most of the Disc. And yet, from far above and by the silver light

of the discworld's tiny moon, it presented one of the most beautiful sights in the multiverse.

Great streamers of cloud, hundreds of miles along, swirled from the waterfall at the Rim to the mountains of the Hub. In the cold crystal silence the huge white spiral glittered frostily under the stars, imperceptibly turning, very much as though God had stirred His coffee and then poured the cream in.

Nothing disturbed the glowing scene, which —

Something small and distant broke through the cloud layer, trailing shreds of vapour. In the stratospheric calm the sounds of bickering came sharp and clear.

'You said you could fly one of these things!'

'No I didn't; I just said *you* couldn't!'

'But I've never been on one before!'

'What a coincidence!'

'Anyway, you said— *look at the sky!'*

'No I didn't!'

'What's happened to the stars?'

And so it was that Rincewind and Twoflower became the first two people on the Disc to see what the future held.

A thousand miles behind them the Hub mountain of Cori Celesti stabbed the sky and cast a knife-bright shadow across the broiling clouds, so that Gods ought to have noticed too – but the Gods don't normally look at the sky and in any case were engaged in litigation with the Ice Giants, who had refused to turn their radio down.

Rimwards, in the direction of Great A'Tuin's travel, the sky had been swept of stars.

In that circle of blackness there was just one star, a red and baleful star, a star like the glitter in the eyesocket of a rabid mink. It was small and horrible and uncompromising. And the Disc was being carried straight towards it.

Rincewind knew precisely what to do in these circumstances. He screamed and pointed the broomstick straight down.

Galder Weatherwax stood in the centre of the octogram and raised his hands.

'Urshalo, dileptor, c'hula, do my bidding!'

A small mist formed over his head. He glanced sideways at Trymon, who was sulking at the edge of the magic circle.

'This next bit's quite impressive,' he said. 'Watch. *Kot-b'hai! Kot-sham!* To me, o spirits of small isolated rocks and worried mice not less than three inches long!'

'What?' said Trymon.

That bit took quite a lot of research,' agreed Galder, especially the mice. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes . . .'

He raised his arms again. Trymon watched him, and licked his lips distractedly. The old fool was really concentrating, bending his mind entirely to the Spell and hardly paying any attention to Trymon.

Words of power rolled around the room, bouncing off the walls and scuttling out of sight behind shelves and jars. Trymon hesitated.

Galder shut his eyes momentarily, his face a mask of ecstacy as he mouthed the final word.

Trymon tensed, his fingers curling around the knife again. And Galder opened one eye, nodded at him and sent a sideways blast of power that picked the younger man up and sent him sprawling against the wall.

Galder winked at him and raised his arms again.

'To me, o spirits of—'

There was a thunderclap, an implosion of light and a moment of complete physical uncertainty during which even the walls seemed to turn in on themselves. Trymon heard a sharp intake of breath and then a dull, solid thump.

The room was suddenly silent.

After a few minutes Trymon crawled out from behind a chair and dusted himself off. He whistled a few bars of nothing much and turned towards the door with exaggerated care, looking at the ceiling as if he had never seen it before. He moved in a way that suggested he was attempting the world speed record for the nonchalant walk.

The Luggage squatted in the centre of the circle and opened its lid.

Trymon stopped. He turned very, very carefully, dreading what he might see.

The Luggage seemed to contain some clean laundry, smelling slightly of lavender. Somehow it was quite the most terrifying thing the wizard had ever seen.

'Well, er,' he said. 'You, um, wouldn't have seen another wizard around here, by any chance?'

The Luggage contrived to look more menacing.

'Oh,' said Trymon. 'Well, fine. It doesn't matter.'

He pulled vaguely at the hem of his robe and took a brief interest in the detail of its stitching. When he looked up the horrible box was still there.

'Goodbye,' he said, and ran. He managed to get through the door just in time.

'Rincewind?'

Rincewind opened his eyes. Not that it helped much. It just meant that instead of seeing nothing but blackness he saw nothing but whiteness which, surprisingly, was worse.

'Are you all right?'

'No.'

'Ah.'

Rincewind sat up. He appeared to be on a rock speckled with snow, but it didn't seem to be everything a rock ought to be. For example, it shouldn't be moving.

Snow blew around him. Twoflower was a few feet away, a look of genuine concern on his face.

Rincewind groaned. His bones were very angry at the treatment they had recently received and were queuing up to complain.

'What now?' he said.

You know when we were flying and I was worried we might hit something in the storm and you said the only thing we could possibly hit at this height was a cloud stuffed with rocks?'

'Well?'

'How did you know?'

Rincewind looked around, but for all the variety and interest in the scene around him they might as well have been in the inside of a pingpong ball.

The rock underneath was – well, rocking. He ran his hands over it, and felt the scoring of chisels. When he put an ear to the cold wet stone he fancied he could hear a dull, slow thumping, like a heartbeat. He crawled forward until he came to an edge, and peered very cautiously over it.

At that moment the rock must have been passing over a break in the clouds, because he caught a dim but horribly distant view of jagged-edged mountain peaks.

They were a long way down.

He gurgled incoherently and inched his way backwards.

'This is ridiculous,' he told Twoflower. 'Rocks don't fly. They're noted for not doing it.'

'Maybe they would if they could,' said Twoflower. 'Perhaps this one just found out how.'

'Let's just hope it doesn't forget again,' said Rincewind. He huddled up in his soaking robe and looked glumly at the cloud around him. He supposed there were some people somewhere who had some control over their lives; they got up in the mornings, and went to bed at night in the reasonable certainty of not falling over the edge of the world or being attacked by lunatics or waking up on a rock with ideas above its station. He dimly remembered leading a life like that once.

Rincewind sniffed. This rock smelt of frying. The smell seemed to be coming from up ahead, and appealed straight to his stomach.

'Can you smell anything?' he said.

'I think it's bacon,' said Twoflower.

'I hope it's bacon,' said Rincewind, 'because I'm going to eat it.' He stood up on the trembling stone and tottered forward into the clouds, peering through the wet gloom.

At the front or leading edge of the rock a small druid was sitting crosslegged in front of a small fire. A square of oilskin was tied across his head and knotted under his chin. He was poking at a pan of bacon with an ornamental sickle.

'Um,' said Rincewind. The druid looked up, and dropped the pan into the fire. He leapt to his feet and gripped the sickle aggressively, or at least as aggressively as anyone can look in a long wet white nightshirt and a dripping headscarf.

'I warn you, I shall deal harshly with hijackers,' he said, and sneezed violently.

'We'll help,' said Rincewind, looking longingly at the burning bacon. This seemed to puzzle the druid who, to Rincewind's mild surprise, was quite young; he supposed here had to be such things as young druids, theoretically, it was just that he had never imagined them.

'You're not trying to steal the rock?' said the druid, lowering the sickle a fraction.

'I didn't even know you could steal rocks,' said Rincewind wearily.

'Excuse me,' said Twoflower politely, 'I think your breakfast is on fire.'

The druid glanced down and flailed ineffectually at the flames. Rincewind hurried forward to help, there was a fair amount of smoke, ash and confusion, and the shared triumph of actually rescuing a few pieces of rather charred bacon did more good than a whole book on diplomacy.

'How did you get here, actually?' said the druid. 'We're five hundred feet up, unless I've got the runes wrong again.'

Rincewind tried not to think about height. 'We sort of dropped in as we were passing,' he said.

'On our way to the ground,' Twoflower added.

'Only your rock broke our fall,' said Rincewind. His back complained. Thanks,' he added.

'I thought we'd run into some turbulence a while back,' said the druid, whose name turned out to be Belafon. That must have been you.' He shivered. 'It must be morning by now,' he said. 'Sod the rules, I'm taking us up. Hang on.'

'What to?' said Rincewind.

'Well, just indicate a general unwillingness to fall off,' said Belafon. He took a large iron pendulum out of his robe and swung it in a series of baffling sweeps over the fire.

Clouds whipped around them, there was a horrible feeling of heaviness, and suddenly the rock burst into sunlight.

It levelled off a few feet above the clouds, in a cold but bright blue sky. The clouds that had seemed chillingly distant last night and horribly clammy this morning were now a fleecy white carpet, stretching away in all directions; a few mountain peaks stood out like islands. Behind the rock the wind of its passage sculpted the clouds into transient whirls. The rock—

It was about thirty feet long and ten feet wide, and blueish.

'What an amazing panorama,' said Twoflower, his eyes shining.

'Um, what's keeping us up?' said Rincewind.

'Persuasion,' said Belafon, wringing out the hem of his robe.

'Ah,' said Rincewind sagely.

'Keeping them up is easy,' said the druid, holding up a thumb and squinting down the length of his arm at a distant mountain, The hard part is landing.'

'You wouldn't think so, would you?' said Twoflower.

'Persuasion is what keeps the whole universe together,' said Belafon. 'It's no good saying it's all done by magic.'

Rincewind happened to glance down through the thinning cloud to a snowy landscape a considerable distance below. He knew he was in the presence of a madman, but he was used to that; if listening to this madman meant he stayed up here, he was all ears.

Belafon sat down with his feet dangling over the edge of the rock.

'Look, don't worry,' he said. 'If you keep thinking the rock shouldn't be flying it might hear you and become persuaded and you will turn out to be right, okay? It's obvious you aren't up to date with modern thinking.'

'So it would seem,' said Rincewind weakly. He was trying not to think about rocks on the ground. He was trying to think about rocks swooping like swallows, bounding across landscapes in the sheer joy of levity, zooming skywards in a—

He was horribly aware he wasn't very good at it.

The druids of the Disc prided themselves on their forward-looking approach to the discovery of the mysteries of the Universe. Of course, like druids everywhere they believed in the essential unity of all life, the healing ower of plants, the natural rhythm of the seasons and the burning alive of anyone who didn't approach all this in the right frame of mind, but they had also thought long and hard about the very basis of creation and had formulated the following theory:

The universe, they said, depended for its operation on the balance of four forces which they identified as charm, persuasion, uncertainty and bloody-mindedness.

Thus it was that the sun and moon orbited the disc because they were persuaded not to fall down, but didn't actually fly away because of uncertainty. Charm allowed trees to grow and bloody-mindedness kept them up, and so on.

Some druids suggested that there were certain flaws in this theory, but senior druids explained very pointedly that there was indeed room for informed argument, the cut and thrust of exciting scientific debate, and basically it lay on top of the next solstice bonfire.

'Ah, so you're an astronomer?' said Twoflower.

'Oh no,' said Belafon, as the rock drifted gently around the curve of a mountain, I'm a computer hardware consultant.'

'What's a computer hardware?'

'Well, this is,' said the druid, tapping the rock with a sandalled foot.'Part of one, anyway. It's a replacement. I'm delivering it. They're having trouble with the big circles up on the Vortex Plains. So they say, anyway; I wished I had a bronze tore for every user who didn't read the manual.' He shrugged.

'What use is it, then, exactly?' asked Rincewind. Anything to keep his mind off the drop below.

'You can use it to – to tell you what time of year it is,' said Belafon.

'Ah. You mean if it's covered in snow then it must be winter?'

'Yes. I mean no. I mean, supposing you wanted to know when a particular star is going to rise —'

'Why?' said Twoflower, radiating polite interest.

'Well, maybe you want to know when to plant your crops,' said Belafon, sweating a little, 'or maybe—'

'I'll lend you my almanac, if you like,' said Twoflower.

'Almanac?'

'It's a book that tells you what day it is,' said Rincewind wearily. 'It'd be right up your leyline.'

Belafon stiffened. 'Book?' he said. 'Like, with paper?'

'Yes.'

That doesn't sound very reliable to *me,'* said the druid nastily. 'How can a book know what day it is? Paper can't count.'

He stamped off to the front of the rock, causing it to wallow alarmingly. Rincewind swallowed hard and beckoned Twoflower closer.

'Have you ever heard of culture shock?' he hissed.

'What's that?'

'It's what happens when people spend five hundred years trying to get a stone circle to work properly and then someone comes up with a little book with a page for every day and little chatty bits saying things like "Now is a good time to plant broad beans" and "Early to rise, early to bed, makes a man healthy, wealthy and dead," and do you know what the most important thing to remember about culture shock.' Rincewind paused for breath, and moved his lips silently trying to remember where the sentence had got to, 'is?' he concluded.

'What?'

'Don't give it to a man flying a thousand ton rock.'

'Has it gone?'

Trymon peered cautiously over the battlements of the Tower of Art, the great spire of crumbling masonry that loomed over Unseen University. The cluster of students nd instructors of magic, far below, nodded.

'Are you sure?'

The bursar cupped his hands and shouted.

'It broke down the hubward door and escaped an hour ago, sir,' he yelled.

'Wrong,' said Trymon. 'It left, we escaped. Well, I'll be getting down, then. Did it get anyone?'

The bursar swallowed. He was not a wizard, but a kind, good-natured man who should not have had to see the things he had witnessed in the past hour. Of course, it wasn't

unknown for small demons, coloured lights and various half-materialised imaginings to wander around the campus, but there had been something about the implacable onslaught of the Luggage that had unnerved him. Trying to stop it would have been like trying to wrestle a glacier.

It – it swallowed the Dean of Liberal Studies, sir,' he shouted.

Trymon brightened. 'It's an ill wind,' he murmured. He started down the long spiral staircase. After a while he smiled, a thin, tight smile. The day was definitely improving.

There was a lot of organising to do. And if there was something Trymon really liked, it was organising.

The rock swooped across the high plains, whipping snow from the drifts a mere few feet below. Belafon scuttled about urgently, smearing a little mistletoe ointment here, chalking a rune there, while Rincewind cowered in terror and exhaustion and Twoflower worried about his Luggage.

'Up ahead!' screamed the druid above the noise of the slipstream. 'Behold, the great computer of the skies!'

Rincewind peered between his fingers. On the distant skyline was an immense construction of grey and black slabs, arranged in concentric circles and mystic avenues, aunt and forbidding against the snow. Surely men couldn't have moved those nascent mountains – surely a troop of giants had been turned to stone by some . . .

'It looks like a lot of rocks,' said Twoflower.

Belafon hesitated in mid-gesture.

'What?' he said.

'It's very nice,' added the tourist hurriedly. He sought for a word. 'Ethnic,' he decided.

The druid stiffened. *'Nice?'* he said. 'A triumph of the silicon chunk, a miracle of modern masonic technology – *nice?'*

'Oh, yes,' said Twoflower, to whom sarcasm was merely a seven letter word beginning with S.

'What does ethnic mean?' said the druid.

'It means terribly impressive,' said Rincewind hurriedly, 'and we seem to be in danger of landing, if you don't mind—'

Belafon turned around, only slightly mollified. He raised his arms wide and shouted a series of untranslatable words, ending with *'nice!'* in a hurt whisper.

The rock slowed, drifted sideways in a billow of snow, and hovered over the circle. Down below a druid waved two bunches of mistletoe in complicated patterns, and Belafon skilfully brought the massive slab to rest across two giant uprights with the faintest of clicks.

Rincewind let his breath out in a long sigh. It hurried off to hide somewhere.

A ladder banged against the side of the slab and the head of an elderly druid appeared over the edge. He gave the two passengers a puzzled glance, and then looked up at Belafon.

'About bloody time,' he said. 'Seven weeks to Hogswatchnight and it's gone down on us again.'

'Hallo, Zakriah,' said Belafon. What happened this time?'

'It's all totally fouled up. Today it predicted sunrise three minutes early. Talk about a klutz, boy, this is it.'

Belafon clambered onto the ladder and disappeared from view. The passengers looked at each other, and then tared down into the vast open space between the inner circle of stones.

'What shall we do now?' said Twoflower.

'We could go to sleep?' suggested Rincewind.

Twoflower ignored him, and climbed down the ladder.

Around the circle druids were tapping the megaliths with little hammers and listening intently. Several of the huge stones were lying on their sides, and each was surrounded by another crowd of druids who were examining it carefully and arguing amongst themselves. Arcane phrases floated up to where Rincewind sat:

'It can't be software incompatibility – the Chant of the Trodden Spiral was *designed* for concentric rings, idiot . . .'

'I say fire it up again and try a simple moon ceremony . . .'

'. . . all right, all right, nothing's wrong with the stones, it's just that the universe has gone wrong, right? . . .'

Through the mists of his exhausted mind Rincewind remembered the horrible star they'd seen in the sky. Something *had* gone wrong with the universe last night.

How had he come to be back on the Disc?

He had a feeling that the answers were somewhere inside his head. And an even more unpleasant feeling began to dawn on him that something else was watching the scene below – watching it from behind his eyes.

The Spell had crept from its lair deep in the untrodden dirtroads of his mind, and was sitting bold as brass in his forebrain, watching the passing scene and doing the mental equivalent of eating popcorn.

He tried to push it back – and the world vanished . . .

He was in darkness; a warm, musty darkness, the darkness of the tomb, the velvet blackness of the mummy case. There was a strong smell of old leather and the sourness of ancient paper. The paper rustled.

He felt that the darkness was full of unimaginable horrors – and the trouble with unimaginable horrors was that they were only to easy to imagine . . .

'Rincewind,' said a voice. Rincewind had never heard a lizard speak, but if one did it would have a voice like that.

'Um,' he said. 'Yes?'

The voice chuckled – a strange sound, rather papery.

'You ought to say "Where am I?" ' it said.

'Would I like it if I knew?' said Rincewind. He stared hard at the darkness. Now that he was accustomed to it, he could see something. Something vague, hardly bright enough to be anything at all, just the merest tracery in the air. Something strangely familiar.

'All right,' he said. 'Where am I?'

'You're dreaming.'

'Can I wake up now, please?'

'No,' said another voice, as old and dry as the first but still slightly different.

'We have something very important to tell you,' said a third voice, if anything more corpse-dry than the others. Rincewind nodded stupidly. In the back of his mind the Spell lurked and peered cautiously over his mental shoulder.

'You've caused us a lot of trouble, young Rincewind,' the voice went on. 'All this dropping over the edge of the world with no thought for other people. We had to seriously distort reality, you know.'

'Gosh.'

'And now you have a very important task ahead of you.'

'Oh. Good.'

'Many years ago we arranged for one of our number to hide in your head, because we could foresee a time coming when you would need to play a very important role.'

'Me? Why?'

'You run away a lot,' said one of the voices. That is good. You are a survivor.'

'Survivor? I've nearly been killed dozens of times!'

'Exactly.'

'Oh.'

'But try not to fall off the Disc again. We really can't have that.'

'Who are *we,* exactly?' said Rincewind.

There was a rustling in the darkness.

'In the beginning was the word,' said a dry voice right ehind him.

'It was the Egg,' corrected another voice. 'I distinctly remember. The Great Egg of the Universe. Slightly rubbery.'

'You're both wrong, in fact. I'm sure it was the primordial slime.'

A voice by Rincewind's knee said: 'No, that came afterwards. There was firmament first. Lots of firmament. Rather sticky, like candyfloss. Very syrupy, in fact—.'

'In case anyone's interested,' said a crackly voice on Rincewind's left, 'you're all wrong. In the beginning was the Clearing of the Throat—'

'—then the word—'

'Pardon me, the slime—'

'Distinctly rubbery, I thought—'

There was a pause. Then a voice said carefully, 'Anyway, whatever it was, we remember it distinctly.'

'Quite so.'

'Exactly.'

'And our task is to see that nothing dreadful happens to it, Rincewind.'

Rincewind squinted into the blackness. 'Would you kindly explain what you're talking about?'

There was a papery sigh. 'So much for metaphor,' said one of the voices. 'Look, it is very important you safeguard the Spell in your head and bring it back to us at the right time, you understand, so that when the moment is precisely right we can be said. Do you understand?'

Rincewind thought: we can be *said!*

And it dawned on him what the tracery was, ahead of him. It was writing on a page, seen from underneath.

'I'm *in* the Octavo?' he said.

'In certain metaphysical respects,' said one of the voices in offhand tones. It came closer. He could feel the dry rustling right in front of his nose . . .

He ran away.

The single red dot glowed in its patch of darkness. Trymon, still wearing the ceremonial robes from his inauguration as head of the Order, couldn't rid himself of the feeling that it had grown slightly while he watched. He turned away from the window with a shudder.

'Well?' he said.

'It's a star,' said the Professor of Astrology, 'I think.'

'You think?'

The astrologer winced. They were standing in Unseen University's observatory, and the tiny ruby pinpoint on the horizon wasn't glaring at him any worse than his new master.

'Well, you see, the point is that we've always believed stars to be pretty much the same as our sun —'

'You mean balls of fire about a mile across?'

'Yes. But this new one is, well—big.'

'Bigger than the sun?' said Trymon. He'd always considered a mile-wide ball of fire quite impressive, although he disapproved of stars on principle. They made the sky look untidy.

'A lot bigger,' said the astrologer slowly.

'Bigger than Great A'Tuin's head, perhaps?'

The astrologer looked wretched.

'Bigger than Great A'Tuin and the Disc together,' he said. 'We've checked,' he added hurriedly, 'and we're quite sure.'

That is big,' agreed Trymon. The word "huge" comes to mind.'

'Massive,' agreed the astrologer hurriedly.

'Hmm.'

Trymon paced the broad mosaic floor of the observatory, which was inlaid with the signs of the Disc zodiac. There were sixty-four of them, from Wezen the Double-headed Kangaroo to Gahoolie, the Vase of Tulips (a constellation of great religious significance whose meaning, alas, was now lost).

He paused on the blue and gold tilework of Mubbo the Hyaena, and turned suddenly.

'We're going to hit it?' he asked.

'I am afraid so, sir,' said the astrologer.

'Hmm.' Trymon walked a few paces forward, stroking his beard thoughtfully. He paused on the cusp of Okjock the Salesman and The Celestial Parsnip.

'I'm not an expert in these matters,' he said, 'but I imagine this would not be a good thing?'

'No, sir.'

'Very hot, stars?'

The astrologer swallowed. 'Yes, sir.'

'We'd be burned up?'

'Eventually. Of course, before that there would be discquakes, tidal waves, gravitational disruption and probably the atmosphere would be stripped away.'

'Ah. In a word, lack of decent organisation.'

The astrologer hesitated, and gave in. You could say so, sir.'

'People would panic?' 'Fairly briefly, I'm afraid.'

Hmm,' said Trymon, who was just passing over The Perhaps Gate and orbiting smoothly towards the Cow of Heaven. He squinted up again at the red gleam on the horizon. He appeared to reach a decision.

'We can't find Rincewind,' he said, 'and if we can't find Rincewind we can't find the eighth spell of the Octavo. But we believe that the Octavo must be read to avert catastrophe – otherwise why did the Creator leave it behind?'

'Perhaps He was just forgetful,' suggested the astrologer.

Trymon glared at him.

'The other Orders are searching all the lands between here and the Hub,' he continued, counting the points on his fingers, 'because it seems unreasonable that a man can fly into a cloud and not come out . . .'

'Unless it was stuffed with rocks,' said the astrologer, in a wretched and, as it turned out, entirely unsuccessful attempt to lighten the mood.

'But come down he must – somewhere. Where? we ask ourselves.'

'Where?' said the astrologer loyally.

'And immediately a course of action suggests itself to us.'

'Ah,' said the astrologer, running in an attempt to keep up as the wizard stalked across The Two Fat Cousins.

'And that course is . . .?'

The astrologer looked up into two eyes as grey and bland as steel.

'Um. We stop looking?' he ventured.

'Precisely! We use the gifts the Creator has given us, to whit, we look down and what is it we see?'

The astrologer groaned inwardly. He looked down.

'Tiles?' he hazarded.

'Tiles, yes, which together make up the . . .?' Trymon looked expectant.

'Zodiac?' ventured the astrologer, a desperate man.

'Right! And therefore all we need do is cast Rincewind's precise horoscope and we will know exactly where he is!'

The astrologer grinned like a man who, having tap-danced on quicksand, feels the press of solid rock under his feet.

'I shall need to know his precise place and time of birth,' he said.

'Easily done. I copied them out of the University files before I came up here.'

The astrologer looked at the notes, and his forehead wrinkled. He crossed the room and pulled out a wide drawer full of charts. He read the notes again. He picked up a complicated pair of compasses and made some passes across the charts. He picked up a small brass astrolobe and cranked it carefully. He whistled between his teeth. He picked up a piece of chalk and scribbled some numbers on a blackboard.

Trymon, meanwhile, had been staring out at the new star. He thought: the legend in the Pyramid of Tsort says that whoever says the Eight Spells together when the Disc is in danger will obtain all that he truly desires. And it will be so soon!

And he thought: I remember Rincewind, wasn't he the cruffy boy who always came bottom of the class when we were training? Not a magical bone in his body. Let me get him in front of me, and we'll see if we can't get all eight—

The astrologer said 'Gosh' under his breath. Trymon spun around.

'Well?'

'Fascinating chart,' said the astrologer, breathlessly. His forehead wrinkled. 'Bit strange, really,' he said.

'How strange?'

'He was born under The Small Boring Group of Faint Stars which, as you know, lies between The Flying Moose and The Knotted String. It is said that even the ancients couldn't find anything interesting to say about the sign, which—'

'Yes, yes, get on with it,' said Trymon irritably.

'It's the sign traditionally associated with chess board makers, sellers of onions, manufacturers of plaster images of small religious significance, and people allergic to pewter. Not a wizard's sign at all. And at the time of his birth the shadow of Cori Celesti—'

'I don't want to know all the mechanical details,' growled Trymon. 'Just give me his horoscope.'

The astrologer, who had been rather enjoying himself, sighed and made a few additional calculations.

'Very well,'he said. 'It reads as follows: "Today is a good tine for making new friends. A good deed may have unforeseen consequences. Don't upset any druids. You will soon be going on a very strange journey. Your lucky food is small cucumbers. People pointing knives at you are probably up to no good. PS, we really mean it about druids".'

Druids?' said Trymon. 'I wonder . . .'

'Are you all right?' said Twoflower. Rincewind opened his eyes.

The wizard sat up hurriedly and grabbed Twoflower by the shirt.

'I want to leave here!' he said urgently. 'Right now!'

'But there's going to be an ancient and traditional ceremony I'

'I don't care how ancient! I want the feel of honest cobbles under my feet, I want the old familiar smell of cesspits, I want to go where there's lots of people and fires and roofs and walls and friendly things like that! I want to go *home!'*

He found that he had this sudden desperate longing for the fuming, smoky streets of Ankh-Morpork, which was always at its best in the spring, when the gummy sheen on the turbid waters of the Ankh River had a special iridescence and the eaves were full of birdsong, or at least birds coughing rhythmically.

A tear sprang to his eye as he recalled the subtle play of light on the Temple of Small Gods, a noted local landmark, and a lump came to his throat when he remembered the fried fish stall on the junction of Midden Street and The Street of Cunning Artificers. He thought of the gherkins they sold there, great green things lurking at the bottom of their jar like drowned whales. They called to Rincewind across the miles, promising to introduce him to the pickled eggs in the next jar.

He thought of the cosy livery stable lofts and warm gratings where he spent his nights. Foolishly, he had sometimes jibed at this way of life. It seemed incredible now, but he had found it boring.

Now he'd had enough. He was going home. Pickled gherkins, I hear you calling . . .

He pushed Twoflower aside, gathered his tattered robe around him with great dignity, set his face towards that area of horizon he believed to contain the city of his birth, and with intense determination and considerable absentmindedness stepped right off the top of a thirty-foot trilithon.

Some ten minutes later, when a worried and rather contrite Twoflower dug him out of the large snowdrift at the base of the stones, his expression hadn't changed.

Twoflower peered at him.

'Are you all right?' he said. 'How many fingers am I holding up?'

'I want to go home!'

'Okay.'

'No, don't try and talk me out of it, I've had enough, I'd like to say it's been great fun but I can't, and – what?'

'I said okay,' said Twoflower. 'I'd quite like to see Ankh-Morpork again. I expect they've rebuilt quite a lot of it by now.'

It should be noted that the last time the two of them had seen the city it was burning quite fiercely, a fact which had a lot to do with Twoflower introducing the concept of fire insurance to a venial but ignorant populace. But devastating fires were a regular feature of Morporkian life and it had always been cheerfully and meticulously rebuilt, using the traditional local materials of tinder-dry wood and thatch waterproofed with tar.

'Oh,' said Rincewind, deflating a bit. 'Oh, right. Right then. Good. Perhaps we'd better be off, then.'

He scrambled up and brushed the snow off himself.

'Only I think we should wait until morning,' added Twoflower.

'Why?'

'Well, because it's freezing cold, we don't really know where we are, the Luggage has gone missing, it's getting dark—'

Rincewind paused. In the deep canyons of his mind he thought he heard the distant rustle of ancient paper. He had a horrible feeling that his dreams were going to be very repetitive from now on, and he had much better things to do than be lectured by a bunch of ancient spells who couldn't even agree on how the Universe began —

A tiny dry voice at the back of his brain said: *What things?*

'Oh, shut up,' he said.

'I only said it's freezing cold and—' Twoflower began.

'I didn't mean you, I meant me.'

'What?'

'Oh, shut up,' said Rincewind wearily. 'I don't suppose there's anything to eat around here?'

The giant stones were black and menacing against the dying green light of sunset. The inner circle was full of druids, scurrying around by the light of several bonfires and tuning up all the necessary peripherals of a stone computer, like rams' skulls on poles topped with mistletoe, banners embroidered with twisted snakes and so on. Beyond the circles of firelight a large number of plains people had gathered; druidic festivals were always popular, especially when things went wrong. Rincewind stared at them.

'What's going on?'

'Oh, well,' said Twoflower enthusiastically, 'apparently there's this ceremony dating back for thousands of years to celebrate the, um, rebirth of the moon, or possibly the sun. No, I'm pretty certain it's the moon. Apparently it's very solemn and beautiful and invested with a quiet dignity.'

Rincewind shivered. He always began to worry when Twoflower started to talk like that. At least he hadn't said 'picturesque' or 'quaint' yet; Rincewind had never found a satisfactory translation for those words, but the nearest he had been able to come was 'trouble'.

'I wish the Luggage was here,' said the tourist regretfully. 'I could use my picture box. It sounds very quaint and picturesque.'

The crowd stirred expectantly. Apparently things were about to start.

'Look,' said Rincewind urgently. 'Druids are priests. You must remember that. Don't do anything to upset them.'

'But—'

'Don't offer to buy the stones.'

'But I-'

'Don't start talking about quaint native folkways.'

'I thought—'

'Really don't try to sell them insurance, that always upsets them.'

'But they're priests!' wailed Twoflower. Rincewind paused.

'Yes,' he said. That's the whole point, isn't it?'

At the far side of the outer circle some sort of procession was forming up.

'But priests are good kind men,' said Twoflower. 'At home they go around with begging bowls. It's their only possession,' he added.

'Ah,' said Rincewind, not certain he understood. This would be for putting the blood in, right?'

'Blood?'

'Yes, from sacrifices.' Rincewind thought about the priests he had known at home. He was, of course, anxious not to make an enemy of any god and had attended any number of temple functions and, on the whole, he thought that the most accurate definition of any priest in the Circle Sea Regions was someone who spent quite a lot of time gory to the armpits.

Twoflower looked horrified.

'Oh no,' he said. 'Where I come from priests are holy men who have dedicated themselves to lives of poverty, good works and the study of the nature of God.'

Rincewind considered this novel proposition.

'No sacrifices?' he said.

'Absolutely not.'

Rincewind gave up. 'Well,' he said, 'they don't sound very holy to *me.'*

There was a loud blarting noise from a band of bronze trumpets. Rincewind looked around. A line of druids marched slowly past, their long sickles hung with sprays of mistletoe. Various junior druids and apprentices followed them, playing a variety of percussion instruments that were traditionally supposed to drive away evil spirits and quite probably succeeded.

Torchlight made excitingly dramatic patterns on the stones, which stood ominously against the green-lit sky. Hubwards, the shimmering curtains of the aurora coriolis began to wink and glitter among the stars as a million ice rystals danced in the Disc's magical field.

'Belafon explained it all to me,' whispered Twoflower. We're going to see a time-honoured ceremony that celebrates the Oneness of Man with the Universe, that was what he said.'

Rincewind looked sourly at the procession. As the druids spread out around a great flat stone that dominated the centre of the circle he couldn't help noticing the attractive if rather pale young lady in their midst. She wore a long white robe, a gold torc around her neck, and an expression of vague apprehension.

'Is she a druidess?' said Twoflower.

'I don't think so,' said Rincewind slowly.

The druids began to chant. It was, Rincewind felt, a particularly nasty and rather dull chant which sounded very much as if it was going to build up to an abrupt crescendo. The sight of the young woman lying down on the big stone didn't do anything to derail his train of thought.

'I want to stay,' said Twoflower. 'I think ceremonies like this hark back to a primitive simplicity which—'

Yes, yes,' said Rincewind, 'but they're going to sacrifice her, if you must know.'

Twoflower looked at him in astonishment.

'What, kill her?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Don't ask me. To make the crops grow or the moon rise or something. Or maybe they're just keen on killing people. That's religion for you.'

He became aware of a low humming sound, not so much heard as felt. It seemed to be coming from the stone next to them. Little points of light flickered under its surface, like mica specks.

Twoflower was opening and shutting his mouth.

'Can't they just use flowers and berries and things?' he said. 'Sort of symbolic?'

'Nope.'

'Has anyone ever tried?'

Rincewind sighed. 'Look,' he said. 'No self-respecting High Priest is going to go through all the business with the trumpets and the processions and the banners and everything, and then shove his knife into a daffodil and a couple of plums. You've got to face it, all

this stuff about golden boughs and the cycles of nature and stuff just boils down to sex and violence, usually at the same time.'

To his amazement Twoflower's lip was trembling. Twoflower didn't just look at the world through rose-tinted spectacles, Rincewind knew – he looked at it through a rose-tinted brain, too, and heard it through rose-tinted ears.

The chant was rising inexorably to a crescendo. The head druid was testing the edge of his sickle and all eyes were turned to the finger of stone on the snowy hills beyond the circle where the moon was due to make a guest appearance.

'It's no use you—'

But Rincewind was talking to himself.

However, the chilly landscape outside the circle was not entirely devoid of life. For one thing a party of wizards was even now drawing near, alerted by Trymon.

But a small and solitary figure was also watching from the cover of a handy fallen stone. One of the Disc's greatest legends watched the events in the stone circle with considerable interest.

He saw the druids circle and chant, saw the chief druid I raise his sickle . . .'

Heard the voice.

'I say! Excuse me! Can I have a word?'

Rincewind looked around desperately for a way of escape. There wasn't one. Twoflower was standing by the altar stone with one finger in the air and an attitude of polite determination.

Rincewind remembered one day when Twoflower had thought a passing drover was beating his cattle too hard, and the case he had made for decency towards animals had left Rincewind severely trampled and lightly gored. The druids were looking at Twoflower with the kind of expression normally reserved for mad sheep or the sudden appearance of a rain of frogs. Rincewind couldn't quite hear what Twoflower was saying, but a few phrases like 'ethnic folkways' and 'nuts and flowers' floated across the hushed circle.

Then fingers like a bunch of cheese straws clamped over the wizard's mouth and an extremely sharp cutting edge pinked his adams apple and a damp voice right by his ear said, 'Not a shound, or you ish a dead man.'

Rincewind's eyes swivelled in their sockets as if trying to find a way out.

'If you don't want me to say anything, how will you know I understand what you just said?' he hissed.

'Shut up and tell me what that other idiot ish doing!'

'No, but look, if I've got to shut up, how can I—' The knife at his throat became a hot streak of pain and Rincewind decided to give logic a miss.

'His name's Twoflower. He isn't from these parts.'

'Doeshn't look like it. Friend of yoursh?'

'We've got this sort of hate-hate relationship, yes.'

Rincewind couldn't see his captor, but by the feel of it he had a body made of coathangers. He also smelt strongly of peppermints.

'He hash got guts, I'll give him that. Do exshactly what I shay and it ish just poshible he won't end up with them wrapped around a shtone.'

'Urrr.'

'They're not very ecumenical around here, you shee.'

It was at that moment that the moon, in due obedience to the laws of persuasion, rose, although in deference to he laws of computing it wasn't anywhere near where the stones said it should be.

But what was there, peeking through ragged clouds, was a glaring red star. It hung exactly over the circle's holiest stone, glittering away like the sparkle in the eyesocket of Death. It was sullen and awful and, Rincewind couldn't help noticing, just a little bit bigger than it was last night.

A cry of horror went up from the assembled priests. The crowd on the surrounding banks pressed forward; this looked quite promising.

Rincewind felt a knife handle slip into his hand, and the squelchy voice behind him said, 'You ever done this short of thing before?'

'What sort of thing?'

'Rushed into a temple, killed the prieshts, shtolen the gold and reshcued the girl.'

'No, not in so many words.'

'You do it like thish.'

Two inches from Rincewind's left ear a voice broke into a sound like a baboon with its foot trapped in an echo canyon, and a small but wiry shape rushed past him.

By the light of the torches he saw that it was a very old man, the skinny variety that generally gets called 'spry', with a totally bald head, a beard almost down to his knees, and a pair of matchstick legs on which varicose veins had traced the street map of quite a large city. Despite the snow he wore nothing more than a studded leather holdall and a pair of boots that could have easily accommodated a second pair of feet.

The two druids closest to him exchanged glances and hefted their sickles. There was a brief blur and they collapsed into tight balls of agony, making rattling noises. In the excitement that followed Rincewind sidled along towards the altar stone, holding his knife gingerly so as not to attract any unwelcome comment. In fact no-one was paying a great deal of attention to him; the druids that hadn't fled the circle, generally the younger and more muscular ones, had congregated around the old man n order to discuss the whole subject of sacrilege as it pertained to stone circles, but judging by the cackling and sounds of gristle he was carrying the debate.

Twoflower was watching the fight with interest. Rincewind grabbed him by the shoulder.

'Let's go,' he said.

'Shouldn't we help?'

'I'm sure we'd only get in the way,' said Rincewind hurriedly. 'You know what it's like to have people looking over your shoulder when you're busy.'

'At least we must rescue the young lady,' said Twoflower firmly.

'All right, but get a move on!'

Twoflower took the knife and hurried up to the altar stone. After several inept slashes he managed to cut the ropes that bound the girl, who sat up and burst into tears.

'It's all right—' he began.

'It bloody well isn't!' she snapped, glaring at him through two red-rimmed eyes. Why do people always go and spoil things?' She blew her nose resentfully on the edge of her robe.

Twoflower looked up at Rincewind in embarrassment.

'Um,' I don't think you quite understand,' he said. 'I mean, we just saved you from absolutely certain death.'

'It's not easy around here,' she said. 'I mean, keeping yourself—' she blushed, and twisted the hem of her robe wretchedly. 'I mean, staying . . . not letting yourself be . . . not losing your qualifications . . .'

'Qualifications? said Twoflower, earning the Rincewind Cup for the slowest person on the uptake in the entire multiverse. The girl's eyes narrowed.

'I could have been up there with the Moon Goddess by now, drinking mead out of a silver bowl,' she said petulantly. 'Eight years of staying home on Saturday nights right down the drain!'

She looked up at Rincewind and scowled.

Then he sensed something. Perhaps it was a barely heard footstep behind him, perhaps it was movement reflected n her eyes – but he ducked.

Something whistled through the air where his neck had been and glanced off Twoflower's bald head. Rincewind spun round to see the archdruid readying his sickle for another swing and, in the absence of any hope of running away, lashed out desperately with a foot.

It caught the druid squarely on the kneecap. As the man screamed and dropped his weapon there was a nasty little fleshy sound and he fell forward. Behind him the little man with the long beard pulled his sword from the body, wiped it with a handful of snow, and said, 'My lumbago is giving me gyp. You can carry the treashure.'

'Treasure?' said Rincewind weakly.

'All the necklashes and shtuff. All the gold collarsh. They've got lotsh of them. Thatsh prieshts for you,' said the old man wetly. 'Nothing but torc, torc, torc. Who'she the girl?'

'She won't let us rescue her,' said Rincewind. The girl looked at the old man defiantly through her smudged eyeshadow.

'Bugger that,' he said, and with one movement picked her up, staggered a little, screamed at his arthritis and fell over.

After a moment he said, from his prone position, 'Don't just shtand there, you daft bitcsh – help me up.' Much to Rincewind's amazement, and almost certainly to hers as well, she did so.

Rincewind, meanwhile, was trying to rouse Twoflower. There was a graze across his temple which didn't look too deep, but the little man was unconscious with a faintly worried smile plastered across his face. His breathing was shallow and – strange.

And he felt light. Not simply underweight, but weightless. The wizard might as well have been holding a shadow. Rincewind remembered that it was said that druids used strange and terrible poisons. Of course, it was often said, usually by the same people, that crooks always had close-set eyes, lightning never struck twice in the same lace and if the gods had wanted men to fly they'd have given them an airline ticket. But something about Twoflower's lightness frightened Rincewind. Frightened him horribly.

He looked up at the girl. She had the old man slung over one shoulder, and gave Rincewind an apologetic half-smile. From somewhere around the small of her back a voice said, 'Got everything? Letsh get out of here before they come back.'

Rincewind tucked Twoflower under one arm and jogged along after them. It seemed the only thing to do.

The old man had a large white horse tethered to a withered tree in a snow-filled gully some way from the circles. It was sleek, glossy and the general effect of a superb battle charger was only very slightly spoiled by the haemorrhoid ring tied to the saddle.

'Okay, put me down. There'sh a bottle of shome linament shtuff in the shaddle bag, if you wouldn't mind . . .' Rincewind propped Twoflower as nicely as possible against the tree, and by moonlight – and, he realised, by the faint red light of the menacing new star – took the first real look at his rescuer.

The man had only one eye; the other was covered by a black patch. His thin body was a network of scars and, currently, twanging white-hot with tendonitis. His teeth had obviously decided to quit long ago.

'Who are you?' he said.

'Bethan,' said the girl, rubbing a handful of nasty-smelling green ointment into the old man's back. She wore the air of one who, if asked to consider what sort of events might occur after being rescued from virgin sacrifice by a hero with a white charger, would probably not have mentioned linament, but who, now linament was apparently what did happen to you after all, was determined to be good at it.

'I meant him,' said Rincewind.

One star-bright eye looked up at him.

'Cohen ish my name, boy.' Bethan's hands stopped moving.

'Cohen?' she said. 'Cohen the Barbarian?'

'The very shame.'

'Hang on, hang on,' said Rincewind. 'Cohen's a great big chap, neck like a bull, got chest muscles like a sack of footballs. I mean, he's the Disc's greatest warrior, a legend in his own lifetime. I remember my grandad telling me he saw him . . . my grandad telling me he . . . my grandad . . .'

He faltered under the gimlet gaze.

'Oh,' he said. 'Oh. Of course. Sorry.'

'Yesh,' said Cohen, and sighed. Thatsh right, boy. I'm a lifetime in my own legend.'

'Gosh,' said Rincewind. 'How old are you, exactly?'

'Eighty-sheven.'

'But you were the greatest!' said Bethan. 'Bards still sing songs about you.'

Cohen shrugged, and gave a little yelp of pain.

'I never get any royaltiesh,' he said. He looked moodily at the snow. That'sh the shaga of my life. Eighty yearsh in the bushiness and what have I got to show for it? Backache, pilesh, bad digeshtion and a hundred different recipesh for shoop. Shoop! I hate shoop!'

Bethan's forehead wrinkled. 'Shoop?'

'Soup,' explained Rincewind.

Yeah, shoop,' said Cohen, miserably. 'It'sh my teeths, you shee. No-one takes you sheriously when you've got no teeths, they shay "Shit down by the fire, grandad, and have shome shoo—" Cohen looked sharply at Rincewind. That'sh a nashty cough you have there, boy.'

Rincewind looked away, unable to look Bethan in the face. Then his heart sank. Twoflower was still leaning against the tree, peacefully unconscious, and looking as reproachful as was possible in the circumstances.

Cohen appeared to remember him, too. He got unsteadily to his feet and shuffled over to the tourist. He humbed both eyes open, examined the graze, felt the pulse.

'He'sh gone,' he said.

'Dead?' said Rincewind, In the debating chamber of his mind a dozen emotions got to their feet and started shouting. Relief was in full spate when Shock cut in on a point of order and then Bewilderment, Terror and Loss started a fight which was ended only when Shame slunk in from next door to see what all the row was about.

'No,' said Cohen thoughtfully, 'not exshactly. Just – gone.'

'Gone where?'

'I don't know,' said Cohen, 'but I think I know shomeone who might have a map.'

Far out on the snowfield half a dozen pinpoints of red light glowed in the shadows.

'He's not far away,' said the leading wizard, peering into a small crystal sphere.

There was general mutter from the ranks behind him which roughly meant that however far away Rincewind was he couldn't be further than a nice hot bath, a good meal and a warm bed.

Then the wizard who was tramping along in the rear stopped and said, 'Listen!'

They listened. There were the subtle sounds of winter beginning to close its grip on the land, the creak of rocks, the muted scuffling of small creatures in their tunnels under the blanket of snow. In a distant forest a wolf howled, felt embarrassed when no-one joined in, and stopped. There was the silver sleeting sound of moonlight. There was also the wheezing noise of half a dozen wizards trying to breathe quietly.

'I can't hear a thing—' one began.

'Ssshh!'

'All right, all right—'

Then they all heard it; a tiny distant crunching, like omething moving very quickly over the snow crust.

'Wolves?' said a wizard. They all thought about hundreds of lean, hungry bodies leaping through the night.

'N-no,' said the leader. 'It's too regular. Perhaps it's a messenger?'

It was louder now, a crisp rhythm like someone eating celery very fast.

'I'll send up a flare,' said the leader. He picked up a handful of snow, rolled it into a ball, threw it up into the air and ignited it with a stream of octarine fire from his fingertips. There was a brief, fierce blue glare.

There was silence. Then another wizard said, 'You daft bugger, I can't see a thing now.'

That was the last thing they heard before something fast, hard and noisy cannoned into them out of the darkness and vanished into the night.

When they dug one another out of the snow all they could find was a tight pressed trail of little footprints. Hundreds of little footprints, all very close together and heading across the snow as straight as a searchlight.

'A necromancer!' said Rincewind.

The old woman across the fire shrugged and pulled a pack of greasy cards from some unseen pocket.

Despite the deep frost outside, the atmosphere inside the yurt was like a blacksmith's armpit and the wizard was already sweating heavily. Horse dung made a good fuel, but the Horse People had a lot to learn about air conditioning, starting with what it meant.

Bethan leaned sideways.

'What's neck romance?' she whispered.

'Necromancy. Talking to the dead,' he explained.

'Oh,' she said, vaguely disappointed.

They had dined on horse meat, horse cheese, horse black pudding, horse d'oeuvres and a thin beer that Rincewind didn't want to speculate about. Cohen (who'd ad horse soup) explained that the Horse Tribes of the Hubland steppes were born in the saddle, which Rincewind considered was a gynaecological impossibility, and they were particularly adept at natural magic, since life on the open steppe makes you realise how neatly the sky fits the land all around the edges and this naturally inspires the mind to deep thoughts like 'Why?', 'When?' and 'Why don't we try beef for a change?'

The chieftain's grandmother nodded at Rincewind and spread the cards in front of her.

Rincewind, as it has already been noted, was the worst wizard on the Disc: no other spells would stay in his mind once the Spell had lodged in there, in much the same way that fish don't hang around in a pike pool. But he still had his pride, and wizards don't like to see women perform even simple magic. Unseen University had never admitted women, muttering something about problems with the plumbing, but the real reason was an unspoken dread that if women were allowed to mess around with magic they would probably be embarrassingly good at it . . .

'Anyway, I don't believe in Caroc cards,' he muttered, 'All that stuff about it being the distilled wisdom of the universe is a load of rubbish.'

The first card, smoke-yellowed and age-crinkled, was . . .

It should have been The Star. But instead of the familiar round disc with crude little rays, it had become a tiny red dot. The old woman muttered and scratched at the card with a fingernail, then looked sharply at Rincewind.

'Nothing to do with me,' he said.

She turned up the Importance of Washing the Hands, the Eight of Octograms, the Dome of the Sky, the Pool of Night, the Four of Elephants, the Ace of Turtles, and – Rincewind had been expecting it – Death.

And something was wrong with Death, too. It should have been a fairly realistic drawing of Death on his white horse, and indeed He was still there. But the sky was red lit, and coming over a distant hill was a tiny figure. barely visible by the light of the horsefat lamps.

Rincewind didn't have to identify it, because behind it was a box on hundreds of little legs.

The Luggage would follow its owner anywhere.

Rincewind looked across the tent to Twoflower, a pale shape on a pile of horsehides.

'He's really dead?' he said. Cohen translated for the old woman, who shook her head. She reached down to a small wooden chest beside her and rummaged around in a collection of bags and bottles until she found a tiny green bottle which she tipped into Rincewind's beer. He looked at it suspiciously.

'She shays it's sort of medicine,' said Cohen. 'I should drink it if I were you, theshe people get a bit upshet if you don't accshept hoshpitality.'

'It's not going to blow my head off?' said Rincewind.

'She shays it's esshential you drink it.'

'Well, if you're sure it's okay. It can't make the beer taste any worse.'

He took a swig, aware of all eyes on him.

'Um,' he said. 'Actually, it's not at all ba—'

Something picked him up and threw him into the air. Except that in another .sense he was still sitting by the fire – he could see himself there, a dwindling figure in the circle of firelight that was rapidly getting smaller. The toy figures around it were looking intently at his body. Except for the old woman. She was looking right up at , him, and grinning.

The Circle Sea's senior wizards were not grinning at all. They were becoming aware that they were confronted with something entirely new and fearsome: a young man on the make.

Actually none of them were quite sure how old Trymion really was, but his sparse hair was still black and his skin had a waxy look to it that could be taken, in a poor light, to be the bloom of youth.

The six surviving heads of the Eight Orders sat at the long, shiny and new table in what had been Galder Weatherwax's study and each one wondered precisely what it was about Trymon that made them want to kick him.

It wasn't that he was ambitious and cruel. Cruel men were stupid; they all knew how to use cruel men, and they certainly knew how to bend other men's ambitions. You didn't stay an Eighth Level magus for long unless you were adept at a kind of mental judo.

It wasn't that he was bloodthirsty, power-hungry or especially wicked. These things were not necessarily drawbacks in a wizard. The wizards were, on the whole, no more wicked than, say, the committee of the average Rotary Club, and each had risen to pre-eminence in his chosen profession not so much by skill at magic but by never neglecting to capitalise on the weaknesses of opponents.

It wasn't that he was particularly wise. Every wizard considered himself a fairly hot property, wisewise; it went with the job.

It wasn't even that he had charisma. They all knew charisma when they encountered it, and Trymon had all the charisma of a duck egg.

That was it, in fact . . .

He wasn't good or evil or cruel or extreme in any way but one, which was that he had elevated greyness to the status of a fine art and cultivated a mind that was as bleak and pitiless and logical as the slopes of Hell.

And what was so strange was that each of the wizards, who had in the course of their work encountered many a fire-spitting, bat-winged, tiger-taloned entity in the privacy of a magical octogram, had never before had quite the same uncomfortable feeling as they had when, ten minutes late, Trymon strode into the room.

'Sorry I'm late, gentlemen,' he lied, rubbing his hands briskly. 'So many things to do, so much to organise, I'm ure you know how it is.'

The wizards looked sidelong at one another as Trymon sat down at the head of the table and shuffled busily through some papers.

What happened to old Galder's chair, the one with the lion arms and the chicken feet?' said Jiglad Wert. It had gone, along with most of the other familiar furniture, and in its place were a number of low leather chairs that appeared to be incredibly comfortable until you'd sat in them for five minutes.

'That? Oh, I had it burnt,' said Trymon, not looking up.

'Burnt? But it was a priceless magical artifact, a genuine—'

'Just a piece of junk, I'm afraid,' said Trymon, treating him to a fleeting smile. 'I'm sure real wizards don't really need that sort of thing, now if I may draw your attention to the business of the day—'

'What's this paper?' said Jiglad Wert, of the Hood-winkers, waving the document that had been left in front of him, and waving it all the more forcefully because his own chair, back in his cluttered and comfortable tower, was if anything more ornate than Galder's had been.

'It's an agenda, Jiglad,' said Trymon, patiently.

'And what does a gender do?'

'It's just a list of the things we've got to discuss. It's very simple, I'm sorry if you feel that—'

'We've never needed one before!'

'I think perhaps you *have* needed one, you just haven't used one,' said Trymon, his voice resonant with reasonableness.

Wert hesitated. 'Well, all right,' he said sullenly, looking around the table for support, 'but what's this here where it says—' he peered closely at the writing – ' "Successor to Greyhald Spold". It's going to be old Rhunlet Yard, isn't it? He's been waiting for years.'

'Yes, but *is* he sound?' said Trymon.

'What?'

I'm sure we all realise the importance of proper leadership,' said Trymon. 'Now, Vard is – well, worthy, of course, in his way, but —'

'It's not our business,' said one of the other wizards.

'No, but it could be,' said Trymon.

There was silence.

'Interfere with the affairs of another order?' said Wert.

'Of course not,' said Trymon. 'I merely suggest that we could offer . . . advice. But let us discuss this later . . .'

The wizards had never heard of the words 'power base', otherwise Trymon would never have been able to get away with all this. But the plain fact was that helping others to achieve power, even to strengthen your own hand, was quite alien to them. As far as they

were concerned, every wizard stood alone. Never mind about hostile paranormal entities, an ambitious wizard had quite enough to do fighting his enemies in his own Order.

'I think we should now consider the matter of Rincewind,' said Trymon.

'And the star,' said Wert. 'People are noticing, you know.'

'Yes, they say *we* should be doing something,' said Lumuel Panter, of the Order of Midnight. 'What, I should like to know?'

'Oh, that's easy,' said Wert. They say we should read the Octavo. That's what they always say. Crops bad? Read the Octavo. Cows ill? Read the Octavo. The Spells will make everything all right.'

'There could be something in that,' said Trymon. 'My, er, late predecessor made quite study of the Octavo.'

'We all have,' said Panter, sharply, 'but what's the use? The Eight Spells have to work together. Oh, I agree, if all else fails maybe we should risk it, but the Eight have to be said together or not at all – and one of them is inside this Rincewind's head.'

'And we cannot find him,' said Trymon. That is the case, isn't it? I'm sure we've all tried, privately.'

The wizards looked at one another, embarrassed. Eventually Wert said. 'Yes. All right. Cards on the table. I an't seem to locate him.'

'I've tried scrying,' said another. 'Nothing.'

'I've sent familiars,' said a third. The others sat up. If confessing failure was the order of the day, then they were damn well going to make it clear that they had failed heroically.

'Is that all? *I've* sent demons.'

'I've looked into the Mirror of Oversight.'

'Last night I sought him out in the Runes of M'haw.'

'I'd like to make it clear that I tried both the Runes and the Mirror *and* the entrails of a manicreach.'

'I've spoken to the beasts of the field and the birds of the Air.'

'Any good?'

'Nah.'

Well, I've questioned the very bones of the country, yea, and the deep stones and the mountains thereof.'

There was a sudden chilly silence. Everyone looked at the wizard who had spoken. It was Ganmack Treehallet, of the Venerable Seers, who shifted uneasily in his seat.

'Yes, with bells on, I expect,' said someone.

'I never said they answered, did I?'

Trymon looked along the table.

'I've sent someone to find him,' he said.

Wert snorted. 'That didn't work out so well the last two times, did it?'

'That was because we relied on magic, but it is obvious that Rincewind is somehow hidden from magic. But he can't hide his footprints.'

'You've set a tracker?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'A *hero?'* Wert managed to pack a lot of meaning into the one word. In such a tone of voice, in another universe, would a Southerner say 'damnyankee'.

The wizards looked at Trymon, open-mouthed.

'Yes,' he said calmly.

'On whose authority?' demanded Wert. Trymon turned his grey eyes on him.

'Mine. I needed no other.'

'It's – it's highly irregular! Since when have wizards needed to hire heroes to do their work for them?'

'Ever since wizards found their magic wouldn't work,' said Trymon.

'A temporary setback, nothing more.'

Trymon shrugged. 'Maybe,' he said, 'but we haven't the time to find out. Prove me wrong. Find Rincewind by scrying or talking to birds. But as for me, I know I'm meant to be wise. And wise men do what the times demand.'

It is a well known fact that warriors and wizards do not get along, because one side considers the other side to be a collection of bloodthirsty idiots who can't walk and think at the same time, while the other side is naturally suspicious of a body of men who mumble a lot and wear long dresses. Oh, say the wizards, if we're going to be like that, then, what about all those studded collars and oiled muscles down at the Young Men's Pagan Association? To which the heroes reply, that's a pretty good allegation coming from a bunch of wimpsoes who won't go near a woman on account, can you believe it, of their mystical power being sort of drained out. Right, say the wizards, that just about does it, you and your leather posing pouches. Oh yeah, say the heroes, why don't you . . .

And so on. This sort of thing has been going on for centuries, and caused a number of major battles which have left large tracts of land uninhabitable because of magical harmonics.

In fact, the hero even at this moment galloping towards the Vortex Plains didn't get involved in this kind of argument, because they didn't take it seriously W mainly because this particular hero was a heroine. A redheaded one.

Now, there is a tendency at a point like this to look over one's shoulder at the cover artist and start going on at length about leather, thighboots and naked blades.

Words like 'full', 'round' and even 'pert' creep into the narrative, until the writer has to go and have a cold hower and a lie down.

Which is all rather silly, because any woman setting out to make a living by the sword isn't about to go around looking like something off the cover of the more advanced kind of lingerie catalogue for the specialised buyer.

Oh well, all right. The point that must be made is that although Herrena the Henna-Haired Harridan would look quite stunning after a good bath, a heavy-duty manicure, and the pick of the leather racks in Woo Hun Ling's Oriental Exotica and Martial Aids on

Heroes Street, she was currently quite sensibly dressed in light chain mail, soft boots, and a short sword.

All right, maybe the boots were leather. But not black.

Riding with her were a number of swarthy men that will certainly be killed before too long anyway, so a description is probably not essential. There was absolutely nothing pert about any of them.

Look, they can wear leather if you like.

Herrena wasn't too happy about them, but they were all that was available for hire in Morpork. Many of the citizens were moving out and heading for the hills, out of fear of the new star.

But Herrena was heading for the hills for a different reason. Just turnwise and rimwards of the Plains were the bare Trollbone Mountains. Herrena, who had for many years availed herself of the uniquely equal opportunities available to any woman who could make a sword sing, was trusting to her instincts.

This Rincewind, as Trymon had described him, was a rat, and rats like cover. Anyway, the mountains were a long way from Trymon and, for all that he was currently her employer, Herrena was very happy about that. There something about his manner that made her fists itch.

Rincewind knew he ought to be panicking, but that was difficult because, although he wasn't aware of it, motions like panic and terror and anger are all to do with stuff sloshing around in glands and all Rincewind's glands were still in his body.

It was difficult to be certain where his real body was, but when he looked down he could see a fine blue line trailing from what for the sake of sanity he would still call his ankle into the blackness around him, and it seemed reasonable to assume that his body was on the other end.

It was not a particularly good body, he'd be the first to admit, but one or two bits of it had sentimental value and it dawned on him that if the little blue line snapped he'd have to spend the rest of his li – his existence hanging around ouija boards pretending to be people's dead aunties and all the other things lost souls do to pass the time.

The sheer horror of this so appalled him he hardly felt his feet touch the ground. *Some* ground, anyway; he decided that it almost certainly wasn't *the* ground, which as far as he could remember wasn't black and didn't swirl in such a disconcerting way.

He took a look around.

Sheer sharp mountains speared up around him into a frosty sky hung with cruel stars, stars which appeared on no celestial chart in the multiverse, but right in there amongst them was a malevolent red disc. Rincewind shivered, and looked away. The land ahead of him sloped down sharply, and a dry wind whispered across the frost-cracked rocks.

It really did whisper. As grey eddies caught at his robe and tugged at his hair Rincewind thought he could hear voices, faint and far off, saying things like 'Are you sure those were mushrooms in the stew? I feel a bit —,' and There's a lovely view if you lean over this —,' and 'Don't fuss, it's only a scratch —,' and Watch where you're pointing that bow, you nearly—' and so on.

He stumbled down the slope, with his fingers in his ears, until he saw a sight seen by very few living men.

The ground dipped sharply until it became a vast funnel, ully a mile across, into which the whispering wind of the souls of the dead blew with a vast, echoing susurration, as though the Disc itself was breathing. But a narrow spur of rock arched out and over the hole, ending in an outcrop perhaps a hundred feet across.

There was a garden up there, with orchards and flowerbeds, and a quite small black cottage.

A little path led up to it.

Rincewind looked behind him. The shiny blue line was still there.

So was the Luggage.

It squatted on the path, watching him.

Rincewind had never got on with the Luggage, it had always given him the impression that it thoroughly disapproved of him. But just for once it wasn't glaring at him. It had a rather pathetic look, like a dog that's just come home after a pleasant roll in the cowpats to find that the family has moved to the next continent.

'All right,' said Rincewind. 'Come on.'

It extended its legs and followed him up the path.

Somehow Rincewind had expected the garden on the outcrop to be full of dead flowers, but it was in fact well kept and had obviously been planted by someone with an eye for colour, always provided the colour was deep purple, night black or shroud white. Huge lilies perfumed the air. There was a sundial without a gnomon in the middle of a freshly-scythed lawn.

With the Luggage trailing behind him Rincewind crept along a path of marble chippings until he was at the rear of the cottage, and pushed open a door.

Four horses looked at him over the top of their nosebags. They were warm and alive, and some of the best kept beasts Rincewind had ever seen. A big white one had a stall all to itself, and a silver and black harness hung over the door. The other three were tethered in front of a hay rack on the opposite wall, as if visitors had just dropped by. They regarded Rincewind with vague animal curiosity.

The Luggage bumped into his ankle. He spun around nd hissed, 'Push off, you!'

The Luggage backed away. It looked abashed.

Rincewind tiptoed to the far door and cautiously pushed it open. It gave onto a stone-flagged passageway, which in turn opened onto a wide entrance hall.

He crept forward with his back pressed tightly against a wall. Behind him the Luggage rose up on tiptoes and skittered along nervously.

The hall itself . . .

Well, it wasn't the fact that it was considerably bigger than the whole cottage had appeared from the outside that worried Rincewind; the way things were these days, he'd have laughed sarcastically if anyone had said you couldn't get a quart into a pint pot. And it wasn't the decor, which was Early Crypt and ran heavily to black drapes.

It was the clock. It was very big, and occupied a space between two curving wooden staircases covered with carvings of things that normal men only see after a heavy session on something illegal.

It had a very long pendulum, and the pendulum swung with a slow tick-tock that set his teeth on edge, because it was the kind of deliberate, annoying ticking that wanted to make it abundantly clear that every tick and every tock was stripping another second off your life. It was the kind of sound that suggested very pointedly that in some hypothetical hourglass, somewhere, another few grains of sand had dropped out from under you.

Needless to say, the weight on the pendulum was knife-edged and razor sharp.

Something tapped him in the small of the back. He turned angrily.

'Look, you son of a suitcase, I told you —'

It wasn't the Luggage. It was a young woman – silver haired, silver eyed, rather taken aback.

'Oh,' said Rincewind. 'Um. Hallo?'

'Are you alive?' she said. It was the kind of voice associated with beach umbrellas, suntan oil and long cool drinks.

'Well, I hope so,' said Rincewind, wondering if his glands were having a good time wherever they were. 'Sometimes I'm not so sure. What is this place?'

'This is the house of Death,' she said.

'Ah,' said Rincewind. He ran a tongue over his dry lips. Well, nice to meet you, I think I ought to be getting along —'

She clapped her hands. 'Oh, you mustn't go!' she said. We don't often have living people here. Dead people are so boring, don't you think?'

'Uh, yes,' Rincewind agreed fervently, eyeing the doorway. 'Not much conversation, I imagine.'

'It's always "When I was alive — " and "We really knew how to breathe in my day — ",' she said, laying a small white hand on his arm and smiling at him. They're always so set in their ways, too. No fun at all. So formal.'

'Stiff?' suggested Rincewind. She was propelling him towards an archway.

'Absolutely. What's your name? My name is Ysabell.'

'Um, Rincewind. Excuse me, but if this is the house of Death, what are you doing here? You don't look dead to me.'

'Oh, I live here.' She looked intently at him. 'I say, you haven't come to rescue your lost love, have you? That always annoys daddy, he says it's a good job he never sleeps because if he did he'd be kept awake by the tramp, tramp, tramp of young heroes coming down here to carry back a lot of silly girls, he says.'

'Goes on a lot, does it?' said Rincewind weakly, as they walked along a black-hung corridor.

'All the time. I think it's very romantic. Only when you leave, it's very important not to look back.'

'Why not?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. Perhaps the view isn't very good. Are you a hero, actually?'

'Um, no. Not as such. Not at all, really. Even less than that, in fact. I just came to look for a friend of mine,' he said wretchedly. 'I suppose you haven't seen him?

Little fat man, talks a lot, wears eyeglasses, funny sort of clothes?'

As he spoke he was aware that he may have missed something vital. He shut his eyes and tried to recall the last few minutes of conversation. Then it hit him like a sandbag.

'Daddy?'

She looked down demurely. 'Adopted, actually,' she said. 'He found me when I was a little girl, he says. It was all rather sad.' She brightened. 'But come and meet him – he's got his friends in tonight, I'm sure hell be interested to see you. He doesn't meet many people socially. Nor do I, actually,' she added.

'Sorry,' said Rincewind. 'Have I got it right? We're talking about Death, yes? Tall, thin, empty eye-sockets, handy in the scythe department?'

She sighed. 'Yes. His looks are against him, I'm afraid.'

While it was true that, as has already been indicated, Rincewind was to magic what a bicycle is to a bumblebee, he nevertheless retained one privilege available to practitioners of the art, which was that at the point of death it would be Death himself who turned up to claim him (instead of delegating the job to a lesser mythological anthropomorphic personification, as is usually the case). Owing largely to inefficiency Rincewind had consistently failed to die at the right time, and if there is one thing that Death does not like it is unpunctuality.

'Look, I expect my friend has just wandered off somewhere,' he said. 'He's always doing that, story of his life, nice to have met you, must be going —'

But she had already stopped in front of a tall door padded with purple velvet. There were voices on the other side – eldritch voices, the sort of voices that mere typography will

remain totally unable to convey until someone can make a linotype machine with echo-reverb and, possibly, a typeface that looks like something said by a slug.

This is what the voices were saying:

WOULD YOU MIND EXPLAINING THAT AGAIN?

Well, if you return anything *except* a trump, South will be able to get in his two ruffs, losing only one Turtle, one Elephant and one Major Arcana, then —'

'That's Twoflower!' hissed Rincewind. 'I'd know that voice anywhere!'

JUST A MINUTE – PESTILENCE IS SOUTH?

'Oh, come on, Mort, He explained that. What if Famine had played a – what was it – a trump return!' It was a breathy, wet voice, practically contagious all by itself.

'Ah, then you'd only be able to ruff one Turtle instead of two,' said Twoflower enthusiastically.

'But if War had chosen a trump lead originally, then the contract would have gone two down?'

'Exactly!'

I DIDN'T QUITE FOLLOW THAT. TELL ME ABOUT PSYCHIC BIDS AGAIN, I THOUGHT I WAS GETTING THE HANG OF THAT. It was a heavy, hollow voice, like two large lumps of lead smashing together.

'That's when you make a bid primarily to deceive your opponents, but of course it might cause problems for your partner —'

Twoflower's voice rambled on in its enthusiastic way. Rincewind looked blankly at Ysabell as words like rebiddable suit', 'double finesse' and 'grand slam' floated through the velvet.

'Do you understand any of that?' she asked.

'Not a word,' he said.

'It sounds awfully complicated.'

On the other side of the door the heavy voice said: 'DID YOU SAY HUMANS PLAY THIS FOR FUN?'

'Some of them get to be very good at it, yes. I'm only an amateur, I'm afraid.'

BUT THEY ONLY LIVE EIGHTY OR NINETY YEARS!

'You should know, Mort,' said a voice that Rincewind hadn't heard before and certainly never wanted to hear again, especially after dark.

'It's certainly very – intriguing.'

DEAL AGAIN AND LET'S SEE IF I'VE GOT THE HANG OF IT.

'Do you think perhaps we should go in?' said Ysabell. A voice behind the door said, I BID . . . THE KNAVE OF TERRAPINS.

'No, sorry, I'm sure you're wrong, let's have a look at your —'

Ysabell pushed the door open.

It was, in fact, a rather pleasant study, perhaps a little on the sombre side, possibly created on a bad day by an interior designer who had a headache and a craving for putting large hourglasses on every flat surface and also a lot of large, fat, yellow and extremely runny candles he wanted to get rid of.

The Death of the Disc was a traditionalist who prided himself on his personal service and spent most of the time being depressed because this was not appreciated. He would point out that no-one feared death itself, just pain and separation and oblivion, and that it was quite unreasonable to take against someone just because he had empty eye-sockets and a quiet pride in his work. He still used a scythe, he'd point out, while the Deaths of other worlds had long ago invested in combined harvesters.

Death sat at one side of a black baize table in the centre of the room, arguing with Famine, War and Pestilence. Twoflower was the only one to look up and notice Rincewind.

'Hey, how did you get here?' he said.

'Well, some say the Creator took a handful – oh, I see, well, it's hard to explain but I —'

'Have you got the Luggage?'

The wooden box pushed past Rincewind and settled down in front of its owner, who opened its lid and rummaged around inside until he came up with a small, leatherbound book which he handed to War, who was hammering the table with a mailed fist.

'It's :Nosehinger on the Laws of Contract:,' he said. It's quite good, there's a lot in it about double finessing and how to —'

Death snatched the book with a bony hand and flipped through the pages, quite oblivious to the presence of the two men.

RIGHT, he said, PESTILENCE, OPEN ANOTHER PACK OF CARDS. I'M GOING TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS IF IT KILLS ME, FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING OF COURSE.

Rincewind grabbed Twoflower and pulled him out of the room: As they jogged down the corridor with the Luggage galloping behind them he said:

'What was all that about?'

'Well, they've got lots of time and I thought they might enjoy it,' panted Twoflower.

'What, playing with cards?'

'It's a special kind of playing,' said Twoflower. 'It's called—' he hesitated. Language wasn't his strong point. 'In your language it's called a thing you put across a river, for example,' he concluded, 'I think.'

'Aqueduct?' hazarded Rincewind. 'Fishing line? Weir? Dam?'

'Yes, possibly.'

They reached the hallway, where the big clock still shaved the seconds off the lives of the world.

'And how long do you think that'll keep them occupied?'

Twoflower paused. 'I'm not sure,' he said thoughtfully. Probably until the last trump – what an amazing clock. . .'

'Don't try to buy it,' Rincewind advised. 'I don't think they'd appreciate it around here.'

'Where is here, exactly?' said Twoflower, beckoning the Luggage and opening its lid.

Rincewind looked around. The hall was dark and deserted, its tall narrow windows whorled with ice. He looked down. There was the faint blue line stretching away from his ankle. Now he could see that Twoflower had one too.

'We're sort of informally dead,' he said. It was the best he could manage.

'Oh.' Twoflower continued to rummage.

'Doesn't that worry you?'

'Well, things tend to work out in the end, don't you think? Anyway, I'm a firm believer in reincarnation. What would you like to come back as?'

'I don't want to go,' said Rincewind firmly. 'Come on, let's get out of – oh, no. Not that.'

Twoflower had produced a box from the depths of the Luggage. It was large and black and had a handle on one side and a little round window in front and a strap so that Twoflower could put it around his neck, which he did.

There was a time when Rincewind had quite liked the iconoscope. He believed, against all experience, that the world was fundamentally understandable, and that if he could only equip himself with the right mental toolbox he could take the back off and see how it worked. He was, of course, dead wrong. The iconoscope didn't take pictures by letting light fall onto specially treated paper, as he had surmised, but by the far simpler method of imprisoning a small demon with a good eye for colour and a speedy hand with a paintbrush. He had been very upset to find that out.

'You haven't got time to take pictures!' he hissed.

'It won't take long,' said Twoflower firmly, and rapped on the side of the box. A tiny door flew open and the imp poked his head out.

'Bloody hell,' it said. 'Where are we?'

'It doesn't matter,' said Twoflower. The clock first, I think.'

The demon squinted.

'Poor light,' he said. Three bloody years at f8, if you ask me.' He slammed the door shut. A second later there was the tiny scraping noise of his stool being dragged up to his easel.

Rincewind gritted his teeth.

'You don't need to take pictures, you can just remember it!' he shouted.

It's not the same,' said Twoflower calmly.

'It's better! It's more real!'

'It isn't really. In years to come, when I'm sitting by the fire —'

'You'll be sitting by the fire forever if we don't get out of here!'

'Oh, I do hope you're not going.'

They both turned. Ysabell was standing in the archway, smiling faintly. She held a scythe in one hand, a scythe with a blade of proverbial sharpness. Rincewind tried not to look down at his blue lifeline; a girl holding a scythe shouldn't smile in that unpleasant, knowing and slightly deranged way.

'Daddy seems a little preoccupied at the moment but I'm sure he wouldn't dream of letting you go off just like that,' she added. 'Besides, I'd have no-one to talk to.'

'Who's this?' said Twoflower.

'She sort of lives here,' mumbled Rincewind. 'She's a sort of girl,' he added.

He grabbed Twoflower's shoulder and tried to shuffle imperceptibly towards the door into the dark, cold garden. It didn't work, largely because Twoflower wasn't the sort of person who went in for nuances of expression and somehow never assumed that anything bad might apply to him.

'Charmed, I'm sure,' he said. Very nice place, you have here. Interesting baroque effect with the bones and skulls.'

Ysabell smiled. Rincewind thought: if Death ever does hand over the family business, she'll be better at it than he is – she's bonkers.

'Yes, but we must be going,' he said.

'I really won't hear of it,' she said. You must stay and tell me all about yourselves. There's plenty of time and it's so boring here.'

She darted sideways and swung the scythe at the shining threads. It screamed through the air like a neutered tomcat – and stopped sharply.

There was the creak of wood. The Luggage had snapped its lid shut on the blade.

Twoflower looked up at Rincewind in astonishment.

And the wizard, with great deliberation and a certain amount of satisfaction, hit him smartly on the chin. As the little man fell backwards Rincewind caught him, threw him over a shoulder and ran.

Branches whipped at him in the starlit garden, and small, furry and probably horrible things scampered away as he pounded desperately along the faint lifeline that shone eerily on the freezing grass.

From the building behind him came a shrill scream of disappointment and rage. He cannoned off a tree and sped on.

Somewhere there was a path, he remembered. But in this maze of silver light and shadows, tinted now with red as the terrible new star made its presence felt even in the netherworld, nothing looked right. Anyway, the lifeline appeared to be going in quite the wrong direction.

There was the sound of feet behind him. Rincewind wheezed with effort; it sounded like the Luggage, and at the moment he didn't want to meet the Luggage, because it might have got the wrong idea about him hitting its master, and generally the Luggage bit people it didn't like. Rincewind had never had the nerve to ask where it was they actually *went* when the heavy lid slammed shut on them, but they certainly weren't there when it opened again.

In fact he needn't have worried. The Luggage overtook him easily, its little legs a blur of movement. It seemed to Rincewind to be concentrating very heavily on running, as if it had some inkling of what was coming up behind it and didn't like the idea at all.

Don't look back, he remembered. The view probably isn't very nice.

The Luggage crashed through a bush and vanished.

A moment later Rincewind saw why. It had careened over the edge of the outcrop and was dropping towards the great hole underneath, which he could now see was faintly red lit at the bottom. Stretching from Rincewind, out over the edge of the rocks and down into the hole, were two shimmering blue lines.

He paused uncertainly, although that isn't precisely true because he was totally certain of several things, for example that he didn't want to jump, and that he certainly didn't want to face whatever it was coming up behind him, and that in the spirit world Twoflower was quite heavy, and that there were worse things than being dead.

'Name two,' he muttered, and jumped.

A few seconds later the horsemen arrived and didn't stop when they reached the edge of the rock but simply rode into the air and reined their horses over nothingness.

Death looked down.

THAT ALWAYS ANNOYS ME, he said. I MIGHT AS WELL INSTALL A REVOLVING DOOR.

'I wonder what they wanted!' said Pestilence.

'Search me,' said War. 'Nice game, though.'

'Right,' agreed Famine. 'Compelling, I thought.'

WE'VE GOT TIME FOR ANOTHER FONDLE, said Death.

'Rubber,' corrected War.

RUBBER WHAT?

'You call them rubbers,' said War.

RIGHT, RUBBERS, said Death. He looked up at the new star, puzzled as to what it might mean.

I THINK WE'VE GOT TIME, he repeated, a trifle uncertainly.

Mention has already been made of an attempt to inject a little honesty into reporting on the Disc, and how poets and bards were banned on pain of – well, pain – from going on about babbling brooks and rosy-fingered dawn and could only say, for example, that a face had launched a thousand ships if they were able to produce certified dockyard accounts.

And therefore, out of a passing respect for this tradition, it will not be said of Rincewind and Twoflower that they became an ice-blue sinewave arcing through the dark imensions, or that there was a sound like the twanging of a monstrous tusk, or that their lives passed in front of their eyes (Rincewind had in any case seen his past life flash in front of his eyes so many times that he could sleep through the boring bits) or that the universe dropped on them like a large jelly.

It will be said, because experiment has proven it to be true, that there was a noise like a wooden ruler being struck heavily with a C sharp tuning fork, possibly B flat, and a sudden sensation of absolute stillness.

This was because they were absolutely still, and it was absolutely dark.

It occurred to Rincewind that something had gone wrong.

Then he saw the faint blue tracery in front of him.

He was inside the Octavo again. He wondered what would happen if anyone opened the book; would he and Twoflower appear like a colour plate?

Probably not, he decided. The Octavo they were in was something a bit different from the mere book chained to its lectern deep in Unseen University, which was merely a three-dimensional representation of a multidimensional reality, and—

Hold on, he thought. I don't think like this. Who's thinking for me?

'Rincewind,' said a voice like the rustle of old pages.

'Who? Me?'

'Of course you, you daft sod.'

A flicker of defiance flared very briefly in Rincewind's battered heart.

'Have you managed to recall how the Universe started yet?' he said nastily. 'The Clearing of the Throat, wasn't it, or the Drawing of the Breath, or the Scratching of the Head and Trying to Remember It, It was On the Tip of the Tongue?'

Another voice, dry as tinder, hissed, 'You would do well to remember where you are.' It should be impossible to hiss a sentence with no sibilants in it, but the voice made a very good attempt.

'Remember where I am? Remember where I am?' shouted Rincewind. 'Of course I remember where I am, I'm inside a bloody book talking to a load of voices I can't see, why do you think I'm screaming?'

'I expect you're wondering why we brought you here again,' said a voice by his ear.

'No.'

'No?'

'What did he say?' said another disembodied voice.

'He said no.'

'He really said no?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

'Why?'

'This sort of thing happens to me all the time,' said Rincewind. 'One minute I'm falling off the world, then I'm inside a book, then I'm on a flying rock, then I'm watching Death learn how to play Weir or Dam or whatever it was, why should I wonder about anything?'

'Well, we imagine you will be wondering why we don't want anyone to say us,' said the first voice, aware that it was losing the initiative.

Rincewind hesitated. The thought had crossed his mind, only very fast and looking nervously from side to side in case it got knocked over.

'Why should anyone want to say you?'

'It's the star,' said the spell. 'The red star. Wizards are already looking for you; when they find you they want to say all eight Spells together to change the future. They think the Disc is going to collide with the star.'

Rincewind thought about this. 'Is it?'

'Not exactly, but in a— *what's that?'*

Rincewind looked down. The Luggage padded out of the darkness. There was a long sliver of scytheblade in its lid.

'It's just the Luggage,' he said.

'But we didn't summon it here!'

'No-one summons it anywhere,' said Rincewind. 'It just turns up. Don't worry about it.'

'Oh. What were we talking about?'

'This red star thing.'

'Right. It's very important that you —'

'Hallo? Hallo? Anyone out there?'

It was a small and squeaky voice and came from the picture box still slung around Twoflower's inert neck.

The picture imp opened his hatch and squinted up at Rincewind.

'Where's this, squire?' it said.

'I'm not sure.'

'We still dead?'

'Maybe.'

'Well, let's hope we go somewhere where we don't need too much black, because I've run out.' The hatch slammed shut.

Rincewind had a fleeting vision of Twoflower handing around his pictures and saying things like 'This is me being tormented by a million demons' and 'This is me with that funny couple we met on the freezing slopes of the Underworld.' Rincewind wasn't certain about what happened to you after you really died, the authorities were a little unclear on the subject; a swarthy sailor from the Rimward lands had said that he was confident of going to a paradise where there was sherbet and houris. Rincewind wasn't certain what a houri was, but after some thought he came to the conclusion that it was a little liquorice tube for sucking up the sherbet. Anyway, sherbet made him sneeze.

'Now that interruption is over,' said a dry voice firmly, 'perhaps we can get on. It is most important that you don't let the wizards take the spell from you. Terrible things will happen if all eight spells are said too soon.'

'I just want to be left in peace,' said Rincewind.

'Good, good. We knew we could trust you from the day you first opened the Octavo.'

Rincewind hesitated. 'Hang on a minute,' he said. 'You want me to run around keeping the wizards from getting all the spells together?'

'Exactly.'

'That's why one of you got into my head?'

'Precisely.'

'You totally ruined my life, you know that?' said Rincewind hotly. 'I could have really made it as a wizard if you hadn't decided to use me as a sort of portable spellbook. I can't remember any other spells, they're too frightened to stay in the same head as you!'

'We're sorry.'

'I just want to go home! I want to go back to where—' a trace of moisture appeared in Rincewind's eye – 'to where there's cobbles under your feet and some of the beer isn't too bad and you can get quite a good piece of fried fish of an evening, with maybe a couple of big green gherkins, and even an eel pie and a dish of whelks, and there's always a warm stable somewhere to sleep in and in the morning you are always in the same place as you were the night before and there wasn't all this weather all over the place. I mean, I don't mind about the magic, I'm probably not, you know, the right sort of material for a wizard, I just want to go *home!—'*

'But you must—' one of the spells began.

It was too late. Homesickness, the little elastic band in the subconscious that can wind up a salmon and propel it three thousand miles through strange seas, or send a million lemmings running joyfully back to an ancestral homeland which, owing to a slight kink in the continental drift, isn't there any more – homesickness rose up inside Rincewind like a late-night prawn biriani, flowed along the tenuous thread linking his tortured soul to his body, dug its heels in and tugged . . .

The spells were alone inside their Octavo.

Alone, at any rate, apart from the Luggage.

They looked at it, not with eyes, but with consciousness as old as the Discworld itself.

'And you can bugger off too,' they said.

'— bad.'

Rincewind knew it was himself speaking, he recognised the voice. For a moment he was looking out through his eyes not in any normal way, but as a spy might peer through the cut-out eyes of a picture. Then he was back.

'You okay, Rinshwind?' said Cohen. 'You looked a bit gone there.'

'You did look a bit white,' agreed Bethan. 'Like someone had walked over your grave.'

'Uh, yes, it was probably me,' he said. He held up his fingers and counted them. There appeared to be the normal amount.

'Um, have I moved at all?' he said.

'You just looked at the fire as if you had seen a ghost,' said Bethan.

There was a groan behind them. Twoflower was sitting up, holding his head in his hands.

His eyes focused on them. His lips moved soundlessly.

'That was a really strange . . . dream,' he said. 'What's this place? Why am I here?'

'Well,' said Cohen, 'shome shay the Creator of the Univershe took a handful of clay and —'

'No, I mean *here,'* said Twoflower. 'Is that you, Rincewind?'

'Yes,' said Rincewind, giving it the benefit of the doubt.

'There was this . . . a clock that . . . and these people who . . .' said Twoflower. He shook his head. 'Why does everything smell of horses?'

'You've been ill,' said Rincewind. 'Hallucinating.'

'Yes . . . I suppose I was.' Twoflower looked down at his chest. 'But in that case, why have I—' Rincewind jumped to his feet.

'Sorry, very close in here, got to have a breath of fresh air,' he said. He removed the picture box's strap from Twoflower's neck, and dashed for the tent flap.

'I didn't notice that when he came in,' said Bethan. Cohen shrugged.

Rincewind managed to get a few yards from the yurt efore the ratchet of the picture box began to click. Very slowly, the box extruded the last picture that the imp had taken.

Rincewind snatched at it.

What it showed would have been quite horrible even in broad daylight. By freezing starlight, tinted red with the fires of the evil new star, it was a lot worse.

'No,' said Rincewind softly. 'No, it wasn't like that, there was a house, and this girl, and . . .'

'You see what you see and I paint what I see,' said the imp from its hatch. 'What I see is real. I was bred for it. I only see what's really there.'

A dark shape crunched over the snowcrust towards Rincewind. It was the Luggage. Rincewind, who normally hated and distrusted it, suddenly felt it was the most refreshingly normal thing he had ever seen.

'I see you made it, then,' said Rincewind. The Luggage rattled its lid.

'Okay, but what did *you* see?' said Rincewind. 'Did you look behind?'

The Luggage said nothing. For a moment they were silent, like two warriors who have fled the field of carnage and have paused for a return of breath and sanity.

Then Rincewind said, 'Come on, there's a fire inside.' He reached out to pat the Luggage's lid. It snapped irritably at him, nearly catching his fingers. Life was back to normal again.

The next day dawned bright and clear and cold. The sky became a blue dome stuck on the white sheet of the world, and the whole effect would have been as fresh and clean as a toothpaste advert if it wasn't for the pink dot on the horizon.

'You can shee it in daylight now,' said Cohen. 'What is it?'

He looked hard at Rincewind, who reddened.

'Why does everyone look at me?' he said. 'I don't know 107 what it is, maybe it's a comet or something.'

'Will we all be burned up?' said Bethan.

'How should I know? I've never been hit by a comet before.'

They were riding in single file across the brilliant snow-field. The Horse people, who seemed to hold Cohen in high regard, had given them their mounts and directions to the River Smarl, a hundred miles rimward, where Cohen reckoned Rincewind and Twoflower could find a boat to take them to the Circle Sea. He had announced that he was coming with them, on account of his chilblains.

Bethan had promptly announced that she was going to come too, in case Cohen wanted anything rubbed.

Rincewind was vaguely aware of some sort of chemistry bubbling away. For one thing, Cohen had made an effort to comb his beard.

'I think she's rather taken with you,' he said. Cohen sighed.

If I wash twenty yearsh younger,' he said wistfully.

'Yes?'

'I'd be shixty-sheven.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Well – how can I put it? When I wash a young man, carving my name in the world, well, then I liked my women red-haired and fiery.'

'Ah.'

'And then I grew a little older and for preference I looked for a woman with blonde hair, and the glint of the world in her eye.'

'Oh? Yes?'

'But then I grew a little older again and I came to see the point of dark women of a sultry nature.'

He paused. Rincewind waited.

'And?' he said. 'Then what? What is it that you look for in a woman now?'

Cohen turned one rheumy blue eye on him.

'Patience,' he said.

'I can't believe it!' said a voice behind them. 'Me riding ith Cohen the Barbarian!'

It was Twoflower. Since early morning he had been like a monkey with the key to the banana plantation after discovering he was breathing the same air as the greatest hero of all time.

'Is he perhapsh being sharcashtic?' said Cohen to Rincewind.

'No. He's always like that.'

Cohen turned in his saddle. Twoflower beamed at him, and waved proudly. Cohen turned back, and grunted.

'He's got eyesh, hashn't he?'

'Yes, but they don't work like other people's. Take it from me. I mean – well, you know the Horse people's yurt, where we were last night?'

'Yesh.'

'Would you say it was a bit dark and greasy and smelt like a very ill horse?'

'Very accurate deshcription, I'd shay.'

'He wouldn't agree. He'd say it was a magnificent barbarian tent, hung with the pelts of the great beasts hunted by the lean-eyed warriors from the edge of civilisation, and smelt of the rare and curious resins plundered from the caravans as they crossed the trackless – well, and so on. I mean it,' he added.

'He'sh mad?'

'Sort of mad. But mad with lots of money.'

'Ah, then he can't be mad. I've been around; if a man hash lotsh of money he'sh just ecshentric.'

Cohen turned in his saddle again. Twoflower was telling Bethan how Cohen had single-handed defeated the snake warriors of the witch lord of S'belinde and stolen the sacred diamond from the giant statue of Offler the Crocodile God.

A weird smile formed among the wrinkles of Cohen's face.

'I could tell him to shut up, if you like,' said Rincewind.

'Would he?'

'No, not really.'

'Let him babble,' said Cohen. His hand fell to the handle of his sword, polished smooth by the grip of decades.

'Anyway, I *like* his eyes,' he said. They can see for fifty years.'

A hundred yards behind them, hopping rather awkwardly through the soft snow, came the Luggage. No-one ever asked its opinion about anything.

By evening they had come to the edge of the high plains, and rode down through gloomy pine forests that had only been lightly dusted by the snowstorm. It was a landscape of huge cracked rocks, and valleys so narrow and deep that the days only lasted about twenty minutes. A wild, windy country, the sort where you might expect to find —

Trollsh,' said Cohen, sniffing the air.

Rincewind stared around him in the red evening light. Suddenly rocks that had seemed perfectly normal looked suspiciously alive. Shadows that he wouldn't have looked at twice now began to look horribly occupied.

'I like trolls,' said Twoflower.

'No you don't,' said Rincewind firmly. 'You can't. They're big and knobbly and they eat people.'

'No they don't,' said Cohen, sliding awkwardly off his horse and massaging his knees. 'Well-known mishap-prehenshion, that ish. Trolls never ate anybody.'

'No?'

'No, they alwaysh spit the bitsh out. Can't digesht people, see? Your average troll don't want any more out of life than a nice lump of granite, maybe, with perhapsh a nice slab of limeshtone for aftersh. I heard someone shay it's becosh they're a shilicashe – a shillycaysheou – Cohen paused, and wiped his beard, 'made out of rocks.

Rincewind nodded. Trolls were not unknown in Ankh-Morpork, of course, where they often got employment as bodyguards. They tended to be a bit expensive to keep ntil they learned about doors and didn't simply leave the house by walking aimlessly through the nearest wall.

As they gathered firewood Cohen went on, Trollsh teeth, that'sh the thingsh.'

'Why?' said Bethan.

'Diamonds. Got to be, you shee. Only thing that can shtand the rocksh, and they shtill have to grow a new shet every year.'

'Talking of teeth—' said Twoflower.

'Yesh?'

'I can't help noticing —'

'Yesh?'

'Oh, nothing,' said Twoflower.

'Yesh? Oh. Let'sh get thish fire going before we loshe the light. And then,' Cohen's face fell, 'I supposhe we'd better make some shoop.'

'Rincewind's good at that,' said Twoflower enthusiastically. 'He knows all about herbs and roots and things.'

Cohen gave Rincewind a look which suggested that he, Cohen, didn't believe that.

'Well, the Horshe people gave us shome horse jerky,' he said. 'If you can find shome wild onionsh and stuff, it might make it tashte better.'

'But I—' Rincewind began, and gave up. Anyway, he reasoned, I know what an onion looks like, it's a sort of saggy white thing with a green bit sticking out of the top, should be fairly conspicuous.

'I'll just go and have a look, shall I?' he said.

'Yesh.'

'Over there in all that thick, shadowy undergrowth?'

'Very good playshe, yesh.'

'Where all the deep gullies and things are, you mean?'

'Ideal shpot, I'd shay.'

'Yes, I thought so,' said Rincewind bitterly. He set off, wondering how you attracted onions. After all, he thought, although you see them hanging in ropes on market stalls they probably don't grow like that, perhaps peasants or whatever use onions hounds or something, or ing songs to attract onions.

There were a few early stars out as he started to poke aimlessly among the leaves and grass. Luminous fungi, unpleasantly organic and looking like marital aids for gnomes, squished under his feet. Small flying things bit him. Other things, fortunately invisible, hopped or slithered away under the bushes and croaked reproachfully at him.

'Onions?' whispered Rincewind. 'Any onions here?'

'There's a patch of them by that old yew tree,' said a voice beside him.

'Ah,' said Rincewind. 'Good.'

There was a long silence, except for the buzzing of the mosquitoes around Rincewind's ears.

He was standing perfectly still. He hadn't even moved his eyes.

Eventually he said, 'Excuse me.'

'Yes?'

'Which one's the yew?'

'Small gnarly one with the little dark green needles.'

'Oh, yes. I see it. Thanks again.'

He didn't move. Eventually the voice said conversationally, 'Anything more I can do for you?'

'You're not a tree, are you?' said Rincewind, still staring straight ahead.

'Don't be silly. Trees can't talk.'

'Sorry. It's just that I've been having a bit of difficulty with trees lately, you know how it is.'

'Not really. I'm a rock.'

Rincewind's voice hardly changed.

'Fine, fine,' he said slowly. 'Well, I'll just be getting those onions, then.'

'Enjoy them.'

He walked forward in a careful and dignified fashion, spotted a clump of stringy white things huddling in the undergrowth, uprooted them carefully, and turned around.

There was a rock a little way away. But there were rocks everywhere, the very bones of the Disc were near he surface here.

He looked hard at the yew tree, just in case it had been speaking. But the yew, being a fairly solitary tree, hadn't heard about Rincewind the arborial saviour, and in any case was asleep.

'If that was you, Twoflower, I knew it was you all along,' said Rincewind. His voice sounded suddenly clear and very alone in the gathering dusk.

Rincewind remembered the only fact he knew for sure about trolls, which was that they turned to stone when exposed to sunlight, so that anyone who employed trolls to work during daylight had to spend a fortune in barrier cream.

But now that he came to think about it, it didn't say *anywhere* what happened to them after the sun had gone down again . . .

The last of the daylight trickled out of the landscape. And there suddenly seemed to be a great many rocks about.

'He's an awful long time with those onions,' said Two-flower. 'Do you think we'd better go and look for him?'

'Wishards know how to look after themshelves,' said Cohen. 'Don't worry.' He winced. Bethan was cutting his toenails.

'He's not a terribly good wizard, actually,' said Twoflower, drawing nearer the fire. 'I wouldn't say this to his face, but' – he leaned towards Cohen – 'I've never actually seen him do any magic.'

'Right, let's have the other one,' said Bethan.

'Thish is very kind of you.'

'You'd have quite nice feet if only you'd look after them.'

'Can't sheem to bend down like I used to,' said Cohen, sheepishly. 'Of courshe, you don't get to meet many chiropodishts in my line of work. Funny, really. I've met any amount of snake prieshts, mad godsh, warlordsh, never any chiropodishts. I shupposhe it wouldn't look right, really – Cohen Against the Chiropodishts . . .'

'Or Cohen And The Chiropractors of Doom,' suggested Bethan. Cohen cackled.

'Or Cohen And The Mad Dentists!' laughed Twoflower.

Cohen's mouth snapped shut.

'What'sh sho funny about that?' he asked, and his voice had knuckles in it.

'Oh, er, well,' said Twoflower. Tour teeth, you see . . .'

'What about them?' snapped Cohen.

Twoflower swallowed. 'I can't help noticing that they're, um, not in the same geographical location as your mouth.'

Cohen glared at him. Then he sagged, and looked very small and old.

'True, of corsh,' he muttered. 'I don't blame you. It'sh hard to be a hero with no teethsh. It don't matter what elsh you loosh, you can get by with one eye even, but you show 'em a mouth full of gumsh and no-one hash any reshpect.'

'I do,' said Bethan loyally.

'Why don't you get some more?'said Twoflower brightly.

'Yesh, well, if I wash a shark or something, yesh, I'd grow shome,' said Cohen sarcastically.

'Oh, no, you buy them,' said Twoflower. 'Look, I'll show you – er, Bethan, do you mind looking the other way?' He waited until she had turned around and then put his hand to his mouth.

'You shee?' he said.

Bethan heard Cohen gasp.

'You can take yoursh out?'

'Oh yesh. I've got sheveral shets. Excushe me—' there was a swallowing noise, and then in a more normal voice Twoflower said, 'It's very convenient, of course.'

Cohen's very voice radiated awe, or as much awe as is possible without teeth, which is about the same amount as with teeth but sounds a great deal less impressive.

'I should think show,' he said. 'When they ache, you jusht take them out and let them get on with it, yesh?

Teach the little buggersh a lesshon, shee how they like being left to ache all by themshelvesh!'

That's not quite right,' said Twoflower carefully. They're not mine, they just *belong* to me.'

'You put shomeone elshe's teethsh in your mouth?'

'No, someone made them, lots of people wear them where I come from, it's a—'

But Twoflower's lecture on dental appliances went ungiven, because somebody hit him.

The Disc's little moon toiled across the sky. It shone by its own light, owing to the cramped and rather inefficient astronomical arrangements made by the Creator, and was quite crowded with assorted lunar goddesses who were not, at this particular time, paying

much attention to what went on in the Disc but were getting up a petition about the Ice Giants.

Had they looked down, they would have seen Rincewind talking urgently to a bunch of rocks.

Trolls are one of the oldest lifeforms in the multiverse, dating from an early attempt to get the whole life thing on the road without all that squashy protoplasm. Individual trolls live for a long time, hibernating during the summertime and sleeping during the day, since heat affects them and makes them slow. They have a fascinating geology. One could talk about tribology, one could mention the semiconductor effects of impure silicon, one could talk about the giant trolls of prehistory who make up most of the Disc's major mountain ranges and will cause some real problems if they ever awake, but the plain fact is that without the Disc's powerful and pervasive magical field trolls would have died out a long time ago.

Psychiatry hadn't been invented on the Disc. No-one had ever shoved an inkblot under Rincewind's nose to see if he had any loose toys in the attic. So the only way he'd have been able to describe the rocks turning back into rolls was by gabbling vaguely about how pictures suddenly form when you look at the fire, or clouds.

One minute there'd be a perfectly ordinary rock, and suddenly a few cracks that had been there all along took on the definite appearance of a mouth or a pointed ear. A moment later, and without anything actually changing at all, a troll would be sitting there, grinning at him with a mouth full of diamonds.

They wouldn't be able to digest me, he told himself. I'd make them awfully ill.

It wasn't much of a comfort.

'So you're Rincewind the wizard,' said the nearest one. It sounded like someone running over gravel. 'I dunno. I thought you'd be taller.'

'Perhaps he's eroded a bit,' said another one. 'The legend is awfully old.'

Rincewind shifted awkwardly. He was pretty certain the rock he was sitting on was changing shape, and a tiny troll – hardly any more than a pebble – was sitting companionably on his foot and watching him with extreme interest.

'Legend?' he said. 'What legend?'

'It's been handed down from mountain to gravel since the sunset[3] of time,' said the first troll. ' "When the red star lights the sky Rincewind the wizard will come looking for onions. Do not bite him. It is very important that you help him stay alive." '

There was a pause.

'That's it?' said Rincewind.

'Yes,' said the troll. 'We've always been puzzled about it. Most of our legends are much more exciting. It was more interesting being a rock in the old days.'

'It was?' said Rincewind weakly.

'Oh yes. No end of fun. Volcanoes all over the place. It really *meant* something, being a rock then.There was none f this sedimentary nonsense, you were igneous or nothing. Of course, that's all gone now. People call themselves trolls today, well, sometimes they're

[3] An interesting metaphor. To nocturnal trolls, of course, the dawn of time lies in the future.

hardly more than slate. Chalk even. I wouldn't give myself airs if you could use me to draw with, would you?'

'No,' said Rincewind quickly. 'Absolutely not, no. This, er, this legend thing. It said you shouldn't bite me?'

'That's right!' said the little troll on his foot, 'and it was me who told you where the onions were!'

'We're rather glad you came along,' said the first troll, which Rincewind couldn't help noticing was the biggest one there. 'We're a bit worried about this new star. What does it mean?'

'I don't know,' said Rincewind. 'Everyone seems to think I know about it, but I don't —'

'It's not that we would mind being melted down,' said the big troll. That's how we all started, anyway. But we thought, maybe, it might mean the end of everything and that doesn't seem a very good thing.'

'It's getting bigger,' said another troll. 'Look at it now. Bigger than last night.'

Rincewind looked. It was *definitely* bigger than last night.

'So we thought you might have some suggestions?' said the head troll, as meekly as it is possible to sound with a voice like a granite gargle.

'You could jump over the Edge,' said Rincewind. There must be lots of places in the universe that could do with some extra rocks.'

'We've heard about that,' said the troll. 'We've met rocks that tried it. They say you float about for millions of years and then you get very hot and burn away and end up at the bottom of a big hole in the scenery. That doesn't sound very bright.'

It stood up with a noise like coal rattling down a chute, and stretched its thick, knobbly arms.

'Well, we're supposed to help you,' it said. 'Anything you want doing?'

'I was supposed to be making some soup,' said Rincewind. He waved the onions vaguely. It was probably not the most heroic or purposeful gesture ever made.

'Soup?' said the troll. 'Is that all?'

'Well, maybe some biscuits too.'

The trolls looked at one another, exposing enough mouth jewellery to buy a medium-sized city.

Eventually the biggest troll said, 'Soup it is, then.' It shrugged grittily. 'It's just that we imagined that the legend would, well, be a little more – I don't know, somehow I thought – still, I expect it doesn't matter.'

It extended a hand like a bunch of fossil bananas.

'I'm Kwartz,' it said. 'That's Krysoprase over there, and Breccia, and Jasper, and my wife Beryl – she's la bit meta-morphic, but who isn't these days? Jasper, get off his foot.'

Rincewind took the hand gingerly, bracing himself for the crunch of crushed bone. It didn't come. The troll's hand was rough and a bit lichenous around the fingernails.

'I'm sorry,' said Rincewind. 'I never really met trolls before.'

'We're a dying race,' said Kwartz sadly, as the party set off under the stars. 'Young Jasper's the only pebble in our tribe. We suffer from philosophy, you know.'

'Yes?' said Rincewind, trying to keep up. The troll band moved very quickly, but also very quietly, big round shapes moving like wraiths through the night. Only the occasional flat squeak of a night creature who hadn't heard them approaching marked their passage.

'Oh, yes. Martyrs to it. It comes to all of us in the end. One evening, they say, you start to wake up and then you think "Why bother?" and you just don't. See those boulders over there?'

Rincewind saw some huge shapes lying in the grass.

'The one on the end's my aunt. I don't know what's she's thinking about, but she hasn't moved for two hundred years.'

'Gosh, I'm sorry.'

'Oh, it's no problem with us around to look after them,' aid Kwartz. 'Not many humans around here, you see. I know it's not your fault, but you don't seem to be able to spot the difference between a thinking troll and an ordinary rock. My great-uncle was actually *quarried*, you know.'

'That's terrible!'

'Yes, one minute he was a troll, the next he was an ornamental fireplace.'

They paused in front of a familiar-looking cliff. The scuffed remains of a fire smouldered in the darkness.

'It looks like there's been a fight,' said Beryl.

'They're all gone!' said Rincewind. He ran to the end of the clearing. 'The horses, too! Even the Luggage!'

'One of them's leaked,' said Kwartz, kneeling down. 'That red watery stuff you have in your insides. Look.'

'Blood!'

'Is that what it's called? I've never really seen the point of it.'

Rincewind scuttled about in the manner of one totally at his wits' end, peering behind bushes in case anyone was hiding there. That was why he tripped over a small green bottle.

'Cohen's liniment!' he moaned. 'He never goes anywhere without it!'

'Well,' said Kwartz, 'you humans have something you can do, I mean like when we slow right down and catch philosophy, only you just fall to bits —'

'Dying, it's called!' screamed Rincewind.

'That's it. They haven't done that, because they're not here.'

'Unless they were eaten!' suggested Jasper excitedly.

'Hmm,' said Kwartz, and, 'Wolves?' said Rincewind.

'We flattened all the wolves around here years ago,' said the troll. 'Old Grandad did, anyway.'

'He didn't like them?'

'No, he just didn't used to look where he was going. Hmm.' The trolls looked at the ground again.

'There's a trail,' he said. 'Quite a lot of horses.' He ooked up at the nearby hills, where sheer cliffs and dangerous crags loomed over the moonlit forests.

'Old Grandad lives up there,' he said quietly.

There was something about the way he said it that made Rincewind decide that he didn't ever want to meet Old Grandad.

'Dangerous, is he?' he ventured.

'He's very old and big and mean. We haven't seen him about for years,' said Kwartz.

'Centuries,' corrected Beryl.

'He'll squash them all flat!' added Jasper, jumping up and down on Rincewind's toes.

'It just happens sometimes that a really old and big troll will go off by himself into the hills, and – um – the rock takes over, if you follow me.'

'No?'

Kwartz sighed. 'People sometimes act like animals, don't they? And sometimes a troll will start thinking like a rock, and rocks don't like people much.'

Breccia, a skinny troll with a sandstone finish, rapped on Kwartz's shoulder.

'Are we going to follow them, then?' he said. 'The legend says we should help this Rincewind squashy.'

Kwartz stood up, thought for a moment, then picked Rincewind up by the scruff of his neck and with a big gritty movement placed him on his shoulders.

'We go,' he said firmly. 'If we meet Old Grandad I'll try to explain . . .'

Two miles away a string of horses trotted through the night. Three of them carried captives, expertly gagged and bound. A fourth pulled a rough *travois* on which the Luggage lay trussed and netted and silent.

Herrena softly called the column to a halt and beckoned one of her men to her.

'Are you quite sure?' she said. 'I can't hear anything.'

'I saw troll shapes,' he said flatly.

She looked around. The trees had thinned out here, there was a lot of scree, and ahead of them the track led towards a bald, rocky hill that looked especially unpleasant by red starlight.

She was worried about that track. It was extremely old, but something had made it, and trolls took a lot of killing.

She sighed. Suddenly it looked as though that secretarial career was not such a bad option, at that.

Not for the first time she reflected that there were many drawbacks to being a swordswoman, not least of which was that men didn't take you seriously until you'd actually killed them, by which time it didn't really matter anyway. Then there was all the leather, which brought her out in a rash but seemed to be unbreakably traditional. And then there was the ale. It was all right for the likes of Hrun the Barbarian or Cimbar the Assassin to carouse all night in low bars, but Herrena drew the line at it unless they sold proper drinks in small glasses, preferably with a cherry in. As for the toilet facilities . . .

But she was too big to be a thief, too honest to be an assassin, too intelligent to be a wife, and too proud to enter the only other female profession generally available.

So she'd become a swordswoman and had been a good one, amassing a modest fortune that she was carefully husbanding for a future that she hadn't quite worked out yet but which would certainly include a bidet if she had anything to say about it.

There was a distant sound of splintering timber. Trolls had never seen the point of walking around trees.

She looked up at the hill again. Two arms of high ground swept away to right and left, and up ahead was a large outcrop with – she squinted – some caves in it?

Troll caves. But maybe a better option than blundering around at night. And come sunup, there'd be no problem.

She leaned across to Gancia, leader of the gang of Morpork mercenaries. She wasn't very happy about him. It was true that he had the muscles of an ox and the tamina of an ox, the trouble was that he seemed to have the brains of an ox. And the viciousness of a ferret.

Like most of the lads in downtown Morpork he'd have cheerfully sold his granny for glue, and probably had.

'We'll head for the caves and light a big fire in the entrance,' she said. Trolls don't like fire.'

He gave her a look which suggested he had his own ideas about who should be giving the orders, but his lips said, 'You're the boss.'

'Right.'

Herrena looked back at the three captives. That was the box all right – Trymon's description had been absolutely accurate. But neither of the men looked like a wizard. Not even a failed wizard.

'Oh, dear,' said Kwartz.

The trolls halted. The night closed in like velvet. An owl hooted eerily – at least Rincewind assumed it was an owl, he was a little hazy on ornithology. Perhaps a nightingale hooted, unless it was a thrush. A bat flittered overhead. He was quite confident about that.

He was also very tired and quite bruised.

'Why oh dear?' he said.

He peered into the gloom. There was a distant speck in the hills that might have been a fire.

'Oh,' he said. 'You don't like fires, do you?'

Kwartz nodded. 'It destroys the superconductivity of our brains,' he said, 'but a fire that small wouldn't have much effect on Old Grandad.'

Rincewind looked around cautiously, listening for the sound of a rogue troll. He'd seen what normal trolls could do to a forest. They weren't naturally destructive, they just treated organic matter as a sort of inconvenient fog.

'Let's hope he doesn't find it, then,' he said fervently.

Kwartz sighed. 'Not much chance of that,' he said. They've lit it in his mouth.'

'It'sh a judgeshment on me!' moaned Cohen. He tugged ineffectually at his bonds.

Twoflower peered at him muzzily. Gancia's slingshot had raised quite a lump on the back of his head and he was a little uncertain about things, starting with his name and working upwards.

'I should have been lisshening out,' said Cohen. 'I should have been paying attenshion and not being shwayed by all this talk about your wosshnarnes, your *din-chewers.* I mussht be getting shoft.'

He levered himself up by his elbows. Herrena and the rest of the gang were standing around the fire in the cave mouth. The Luggage was still and silent under its net in a corner.

'There's something funny about this cave,' said Bethan.

'What?' said Cohen.

'Well, look at it. Have you ever seen rocks like those before?'

Cohen had to agree that the semi-circle of stones around the cave entrance were unusual; each one was higher than a man, and heavily worn, and surprisingly shiny. There was a matching semi-circle on the ceiling. The whole effect was that of a stone computer built by a druid with a vague idea of geometry and no sense of gravity.

'Look at the walls, too.'

Cohen squinted at the wall next to him. There were veins of red crystal in it. He couldn't be quite certain, but it was almost as if little points of light kept flashing on and off deep within the rock itself.

It was also extremely drafty. A steady breeze blew out of the black depths of the cave.

'I'm sure it was blowing the other way when we came in,' whispered Bethan. 'What do you think, Twoflower?'

'Well, I'm not a cave expert,' he said, 'but I was just thinking, that's a very interesting stalag-thingy hanging from the ceiling up there. Sort of bulbous, isn't it?'

They looked at it.

'I can't quite put my finger on why,' said Twoflower, 'but I think it might be a rather good idea to get out of here.'

'Oh yesh,' said Cohen sarcastically, 'I shupposhe we'd jusht better ashk theesh people to untie ush and let us go, eh?'

Cohen hadn't spent much time in Twoflower's company, otherwise he would not have been surprised when the little man nodded brightly and said, in the loud, slow and careful voice he employed as an alternative to actually speaking other people's languages: 'Excuse me? Could you please untie us and let us go? It's rather damp and drafty here. Sorry.'

Bethan looked sidelong at Cohen.

'Was he supposed to say that?'

'It'sh novel, I'll grant you.'

And, indeed, three people detached themselves from the group around the fire and came towards them. They did not look as if they intended to untie anyone. The two men, in fact, looked the sort of people who, when they see other people tied up, start playing around with knives and making greasy suggestions and leering a lot.

Herrena introduced herself by drawing her sword and pointing it at Twoflower's heart.

'Which one of you is Rincewind the wizard?' she said. There were four horses. Is he here?'

'Um, I don't know where he is,' said Twoflower. 'He was looking for some onions.'

'Then you are his friends and he will come looking for you,' said Herrena. She glanced at Cohen and Bethan, then looked closely at the Luggage.

Trymon had been emphatic that they shouldn't touch the Luggage. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but Herrena's curiosity could have massacred a pride of lions.

She slit the netting and grasped the lid of the box.

Twoflower winced.

'Locked,' she said eventually. 'Where is the key, fat one?'

'It – it hasn't got a key,' said Twoflower.

'There is a keyhole,' she pointed out.

'Well, yes, but if it wants to stay locked, it stays locked,' said Twoflower uncomfortably.

Herrena was aware of Gancia's grin. She snarled.

'I want it open,' she said. 'Gancia, see to it.' She strode back to the fire.

Gancia drew a long thin knife and leaned down close to Twoflower's face.

'She wants it open,' he said. He looked up at the other man and grinned.

'She wants it open, Weems.'

'Yah.'

Gancia waved the knife slowly in front of Twoflower's face.

'Look,' said Twoflower patiently, 'I don't think you understand. No-one can open the Luggage if it's feeling in a locked mood.'

'Oh yes, I forgot,' said Gancia thoughtfully. 'Of course, it's a magic box, isn't that right? With little legs, they say. I say, Weems, any legs your side? No?'

He held his knife to Twoflower's throat.

'I'm really upset about that,' he said. 'So's Weems. He doesn't say much but what he does is, he tears bits off people. So open – the – box!'

He turned and planted a kick on the side of the box, leaving a nasty gash in the wood.

There was a tiny little click.

Gancia grinned. The lid swung up slowly, ponderously. The distant firelight gleamed off gold – lots of gold, in plate, chain, and coin, heavy and glistening in the flickering shadows.

'All right,' said Gancia softly.

He looked back at the unheeding men around the fire, who seemed to be shouting at someone outside the cave. Then he looked speculatively at Weems. His lips moved soundlessly with the unaccustomed effort of mental arithmetic.

He looked down at his knife.

Then the floor moved.

'I heard someone,' said one of the men. 'Down there. Among the – uh – rocks.'

Rincewind's voice floated up out of the darkness.

'I say,' he said.

'Well?' said Herrena.

'You're in great danger!' shouted Rincewind. 'You must put the fire out!'

'No, no,' said Herrena. 'You've got it wrong, *you're* in great danger. And the fire stays.'

'There's this big old troll —'

'Everyone knows trolls keep away from fire,' said Herrena. She nodded. A couple of men drew their swords and slipped out into the darkness.

'Absolutely true!' shouted Rincewind desperately. 'Only this specific troll can't, you see.'

'Can't?' Herrena hesitated. Something of the terror in Rincewind's voice hit her.

'Yes, because, you see, you've lit it on his tongue.'

Then the floor moved.

Old Grandad awoke very slowly from his centuries-old slumber. He nearly didn't awake at all, in fact a few decades later none of this could have happened. When a troll gets old and starts to think seriously about the universe it normally finds a quiet spot and gets down to some hard philosophising, and after a while starts to forget about its extremities. It begins to crystallise around the edges until nothing remains except a tiny flicker of life inside quite a large hill with some unusual rock strata.

Old Grandad hadn't quite got that far. He awoke from considering quite a promising line of inquiry about the meaning of truth and found a hot ashy taste in what, after a certain amount of thought, he remembered as being his mouth.

He began to get angry. Commands skittered along neural pathways of impure silicon. Deep within his sili-caceous body stone slipped smoothly along special fracture lines. Trees toppled, turf split, as fingers the size of ships unfolded and gripped the ground. Two enormous rock-slides high on his cliff face marked the opening of eyes like great crusted opals.

Rincewind couldn't see all this, of course, since his own eyes were daylight issue only, but he did see the whole dark landscape shake itself slowly and then begin to rise impossibly against the stars.

The sun rose.

However, the sunlight didn't. What did happen was that the famous Discworld sunlight, which as has already been indicated travels very slowly through the Disc's powerful magical field, sloshed gently over the lands around the Rim and began its soft, silent battle against the retreating armies of the night. It poured like molten gold[4] across the sleeping landscape – bright, clean and, above all, slow.

Herrena didn't hesitate. With great presence of mind she ran to the edge of Old Grandad's bottom lip and jumped, rolling as she hit the earth. The men followed her, cursing as they landed among the debris.

[4] Not precisely, of course. Trees didn't burst into flame, people didn't suddenly become very rich and extremely dead, and the seas didn't flash into steam. A better simile, in fact, would be 'not like molten gold'

Like a fat man trying to do press-ups the old troll pushed himself upwards.

This wasn't apparent from where the prisoners were lying. All they knew was that the floor kept rolling under them and that there was a lot of noise going on, most of it unpleasant.

Weems grabbed Gancia's arm.

'It's a herthquake,' he said. 'Let's get out of here!'

'Not without that gold,' said Gancia.

'What?'

'The gold, the gold. Man, we could be as rich as Creosote!'

Weems might have had a room-temperature IQ, but he knew idiocy when he saw it. Gancia's eyes gleamed more than gold, and he appeared to be staring at Weems' left ear.

Weems looked desperately at the Luggage. It was still open invitingly, which was odd – you'd have thought all this shaking would have slammed the lid shut.

'We'd never carry it,' he suggested. 'It's too heavy,' he added.

'We'll damn well carry some of it!' shouted Gancia, and leapt towards the chest as the floor shook again.

The lid snapped shut. Gancia vanished.

And just in case Weems thought it was accidental the Luggage's lid snapped open again, just for a second, and a large tongue as red as mahogany licked across broad teeth as white as sycamore. Then it slammed shut again.

To Weem's further horror hundreds of little legs extruded from the underside of the box. It rose very deliberately and, carefully arranging its feet, shuffled around to face him. There was a particularly malevolent look about its keyhole, the sort of look that says 'Go on – make my day . . .'

He backed away and looked imploringly at Twoflower.

'I think it might be a good idea if you untied us,' suggested Twoflower. 'It's really quite friendly once it gets to know you.'

Licking his lips nervously, Weems drew his knife. The Luggage gave a warning creak.

He slashed through their bonds and stood back quickly.

'Thank you,' said Twoflower.

'I think my back'sh gone again,' complained Cohen, as Bethan helped him to his feet.

'What do we do with this man?' said Bethan.

'We take hish knife and tell him to bugger off,' said Cohen. 'Right?'

'Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!' said Weems, and bolted towards the cavemouth. For a moment he was outlined against the grey pre-dawn sky, and then he vanished. There was a distant cry of 'aaargh'.

The sunlight roared silently across the land like surf. Here and there, where the magic field was slightly weaker, tongues of morning raced ahead of the day, leaving isolated islands of night that contracted and vanished as the bright ocean flowed onwards.

The uplands around the Vortex Plains stood out ahead of the advancing tide like a great grey ship.

It is possible to stab a troll, but the technique takes practice and no-one ever gets a chance to practise more than once. Herrena's men saw the trolls loom out of the darkness like very solid ghosts. Blades shattered as they hit silica skins, there were one or two brief, flat screams, and then nothing more but shouts far away in the forest as they put as much distance as they could between themselves and the avenging earth.

Rincewind crept out from behind a tree and looked around. He was alone, but the bushes behind him rustled as the trolls lumbered after the gang.

He looked up.

High above him two great crystalline eyes focussed in atred of everything soft and squelchy and, above all, warm. Rincewind cowered in horror as a hand the size of a house rose, curled into a fist, and dropped towards him.

Day came with a silent explosion of light. For a moment the huge terrifying bulk of Old Grandad was a breakwater of shadow as the daylight streamed past. There was a brief grinding noise.

There was silence.

Several minutes passed. Nothing happened.

A few birds started singing. A bumblebee buzzed over the boulder that was Old Grandad's fist and alighted on a patch of thyme that had grown under a stone fingernail.

There was a scuffling down below. Rincewind slid awkwardly out of the narrow gap between the fist and the ground like a snake leaving a burrow.

He lay on his back, staring up at the sky past the frozen shape of the troll. It hadn't changed in any way, apart from the stillness, but already the eye started to play tricks. Last night Rincewind had looked at cracks in stone and seen them become mouths and eyes; now he looked at the great cliff face and saw the features become, like magic, mere blemishes in the rock.

'Wow!' he said.

That didn't seem to help. He stood up, dusted himself off, and looked around. Apart from the bumble bee, he was completely alone.

After poking around for a bit he found a rock that, from certain angles, looked like Beryl.

He was lost and lonely and a long way from home. He —

There was a crunch high above him, and shards of rock spattered into the earth. High up on the face of Old Grandad a hole appeared; there was a brief sight of the Luggage's backside as it struggled to regain its footing, and then Twoflower's head poked out of the mouth cave.

'Anyone down there? I say?'

'Hey!' shouted the wizard. 'Am I glad to see you!'

'I don't know. Are you?' said Twoflower.

'Am I what?'

'Gosh, there's a wonderful view from up here!'

It took them half an hour to get down. Fortunately Old Grandad had been quite craggy with plenty of handholds, but his nose would have presented a tricky obstacle if it hadn't been for the luxuriant oak tree that flourished in one nostril.

The Luggage didn't bother to climb. It just jumped, and bounced its way down with no apparent harm.

Cohen sat in the shade, trying to catch his breath and waiting for his sanity to catch up with him. He eyed the Luggage thoughtfully.

'The horses have all gone,' said Twoflower.

'We'll find 'em,' said Cohen. His eyes bored into the Luggage, which began to look embarrassed.

'They were carrying all our food,' said Rincewind.

'Plenty of food in the foreshts.'

'I have some nourishing biscuits in the Luggage,' said Twoflower. 'Traveller's Digestives. Always a comfort in a tight spot.'

'I've tried them,' said Rincewind. They've got a mean edge on them, and —'

Cohen stood up, wincing.

'Excushe me,' he said flatly. 'There'sh shomething I've got to know.'

He walked over to the Luggage and gripped its lid. The box backed away hurriedly, but Cohen stuck out a skinny foot and tripped up half its legs. As it twisted to snap at him he gritted his teeth and heaved, jerking the Luggage onto its curved lid where it rocked angrily like a maddened tortoise.

'Hey, that's my Luggage!' said Twoflower. 'Why's he attacking my Luggage?'

'I think I know,' said Bethan quietly. 'I think it's because he's scared of it.'

Twoflower turned to Rincewind, open-mouthed.

Rincewind shrugged.

'Search me,' he said. 'I run away from things I'm scared of, myself.'

With a snap of its lid the Luggage jerked into the air and came down running, catching Cohen a crack on the shins with one of its brass corners. As it wheeled around he got a grip on it just long enough to send it galloping full tilt into a rock.

'Not bad,' said Rincewind, admiringly.

The Luggage staggered back, paused for a moment, then came at Cohen waving its lid menacingly. He jumped and landed on it, with both his hands and feet caught in the gap between the box and the lid.

This severely puzzled the Luggage. It was even more astonished when Cohen took a deep breath and heaved, muscles standing out on his skinny arms like a sock full of coconuts.

They stood locked there for some time, tendon versus hinge. Occasionally one or other would creak.

Bethan elbowed Twoflower in the ribs.

'Do something,' she said.

'Um,' said Twoflower. 'Yes. That's about enough, I think. Put him down, please.'

The Luggage gave a creak of betrayal at the sound of its master's voice. Its lid flew up with such force that Cohen tumbled backwards, but he scrambled to his feet and flung himself towards the box.

Its contents lay open to the skies.

Cohen reached inside.

The Luggage creaked a bit, but had obviously weighed up the chances of being sent to the top of that Great Wardrobe in the Sky. When Rincewind dared to peek through his fingers Cohen was peering into the Luggage and cursing under his breath.

'Laundry?' he shouted. 'Is that it? Just laundry?' He was shaking with rage.

'I think there's some biscuits too,' said Twoflower in a small voice.

'But there wash gold! And I shaw it eat shomebody!' Cohen looked imploringly at Rincewind.

The wizard sighed. 'Don't ask me,' he said. 'I don't own the bloody thing.'

'I bought it in a shop,' said Twoflower defensively. 'I said I wanted a travelling trunk.'

'That's what you got, all right,' said Rincewind.

'It's very loyal,' said Twoflower.

'Oh yes,' agreed Rincewind. 'If loyalty is what you look for in a suitcase.'

'Hold on,' said Cohen, who had sagged onto a rock. Wash it one of thoshe shopsh – I mean, I bet you hadn't noticed it before and when you went back again it washn't there?'

Twoflower brightened. 'That's right!'

'Shopkeeper a little wizened old guy? Shop full of strange shtuff?'

'Exactly! Never could find it again, I thought I must have got the wrong street, nothing but a brick wall where I thought it was, I remember thinking at the time it was rather —'

Cohen shrugged. 'One of *those* shops[5], he said. That explainsh it, then.' He felt his back, and grimaced. 'Bloody horshe ran off with my linament!'

Rincewind remembered something, and fumbled in the depths of his torn and now very grubby robe. He held up a green bottle.

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[5] No-one knows why, but all the most truly mysterious and magical items are bought from shops that appear and, after a trading life even briefer than a double-glazing company, vanish like smoke. There had been various attempts to explain this, all of which don't fully account for the observed facts. These shops turn up anywhere in the universe, and their immediate non-existence in any particular city can normally be deduced from crowds of people wandering the streets clutching defunct magical items, ornate guarantee cards, and looking very suspiciously at brick walls

'That'sh the shtuff!' said Cohen. 'You're a marvel.' He ooked sideways at Twoflower.

'I would have beaten it,' he said quietly, 'even if you hadn't called it off, I would have beaten it in the end.'

'That's right,' said Bethan.

'You two can make yourshelf usheful,' he added. That Luggage broke through a troll tooth to get ush out. That wash diamond. Shee if you can find the bitsh. I've had an idea about them.'

As Bethan rolled up her sleeves and uncorked the bottle Rincewind took Twoflower to one side. When they were safely hidden behind a shrub he said, 'He's gone barmy.'

'That's Cohen the Barbarian you're talking about!' said Twoflower, genuinely shocked. 'He is the greatest warrior that —'

'Was,' said Rincewind urgently. 'All that stuff with the warrior priests and man-eating zombies was years ago. All he's got now is memories and so many scars you could play noughts-and-crosses on him.'

'He is rather more elderly than I imagined, yes,' said Twoflower. He picked up a fragment of diamond.

'So we ought to leave them and find our horses and move on,' said Rincewind.

'That's a bit of a mean trick, isn't it?'

'They'll be all right,' said Rincewind heartily. 'The point is, would you feel happy in the company of someone who would attack the Luggage with his bare hands?'

'That is a point,' said Twoflower.

'They'll probably be better off without us anyway.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive,' said Rincewind.

They found the horses wandering aimlessly in the scrub, breakfasted on badly-dried horse jerky, and set off in what Rincewind believed was the right direction. A few minutes later the Luggage emerged from the bushes and followed them.

The sun rose higher in the sky, but still failed to blot out the light of the star.

'It's got bigger overnight,' said Twoflower. 'Why isn't anybody doing something?'

'Such as what?'

Twoflower thought. 'Couldn't somebody tell Great A'Tuin to avoid it?' he said. 'Sort of go around it?'

'That sort of thing has been tried before,' said Rincewind. Wizards tried to tune in to Great A'Tuin's mind.'

'It didn't work?'

'Oh, it worked all right,' said Rincewind. 'Only . . .'

Only there had been certain unforeseen risks in reading a mind as great as the World Turtle's, he explained. The wizards had trained up on tortoises and giant sea turtles first, to get the hang of the chelonian frame of mind, but although they knew that Great A'Tuin's mind would be big they hadn't realised that it would be *slow.*

'There's a bunch of wizards that have been reading it in shifts for thirty years,' said Rincewind. 'All they've found out is that Great A'Tuin is looking forward to something.'

'What?'

'Who knows?'

They rode in silence for a while through a rough country where huge limestone blocks lined the track. Eventually Twoflower said, 'We ought to go back, you know.'

'Look, we'll reach the Smarl tomorrow,' said Rincewind. 'Nothing will happen to them out here, I don't see why —'

He was talking to himself. Twoflower had wheeled his horse and was trotting back, demonstrating all the horsemanship of a sack of potatoes.

Rincewind looked down. The Luggage regarded him owlishly.

'What are you looking at?' said the wizard. 'He can go back if he wants, why should I bother?'

The Luggage said nothing.

'Look, he's not my responsibility,' said Rincewind. let's be absolutely clear about that.'

The Luggage said nothing, but louder this time.

'Go on – follow him. You're nothing to do with me.'

The Luggage retracted its little legs and settled down on the track.

'Well, I'm going,' said Rincewind. 'I mean it,' he added.

He turned the horse's head back towards the new horizon, and glanced down. The Luggage sat there.

'It's no good trying to appeal to my better nature. You can stay there all day for all I care. I'm just going to ride off, okay?'

He glared at the Luggage. The Luggage looked back.

'I thought you'd come back,' said Twoflower.

'I don't want to talk about it,' said Rincewind.

'Shall we talk about something else?'

'Yeah, well, discussing how to get these ropes off would be favourite,' said Rincewind. He wrenched at the bonds around his wrists.

'I can't imagine why you're so important,' said Herrena. She sat on a rock opposite them, sword across her knees. Most of the gang laying among the rocks high above, watching the road. Rincewind and Twoflower had been a pathetically easy ambush.

'Weems told me what your box did to Gancia,' she added. 'I can't say that's a great loss, but I hope it understands that if it comes within a mile of *us* I will personally cut both your throats, yes?'

Rincewind nodded violently.

'Good,' said Herrena. 'You're wanted dead or alive, I'm not really bothered which, but some of the lads might want to have a little discussion with you about those trolls. If the sun hadn't come up when it did—'

She left the words hanging, and walked away.

'Well, here's another fine mess,' said Rincewind. He had another pull at the ropes that bound him. There was a rock behind him, and if he could bring his wrists up – yes, as he thought, it lacerated him while at the same time eing too blunt to have any effect on the rope.

'But why us?' said Twoflower. 'It's to do with that star, isn't it?'

'I don't know anything about the star,' said Rincewind. 'I never even attended astrology lessons at the University!'

'I expect everything will turn out all right in the end,' said Twoflower.

Rincewind looked at him. Remarks like that always threw him.

'Do you really believe that?' he said. 'I mean, really?'

'Well, things generally do work out satisfactorily, when you come to think about it.'

'If you think the total disruption of my life for the last year is satisfactory then you might be right. I've lost count of the times I've nearly been killed —'

'Twenty-seven,' said Twoflower.

'What?'

'Twenty-seven times,' said Twoflower helpfully. 'I worked it out. But you never actually *have.'*

'What? Worked it out?' said Rincewind, who was beginning to have the familiar feeling that the conversation had been mugged.

'No. Been killed. Doesn't that seem a bit suspicious?'

'I've never objected to it, if that's what you mean,' said Rincewind. He glared at his feet. Twoflower was right, of course. The Spell was keeping him alive, it was obvious. No doubt if he jumped over a cliff a passing cloud would cushion his fall.

The trouble with that theory, he decided, was that it only worked if he didn't believe it was true. The moment he thought he was invulnerable he'd be dead.

So, on the whole it was wisest not to think about it at all.

Anyway, he might be wrong.

The only thing he could be certain of was that he was getting a headache. He hoped that the Spell was somewhere in the area of the headache and really suffering.

When they rode out of the hollow both Rincewind and Twoflower were sharing a horse with one of their captors.

Rincewind perched uncomfortably in front of Weems. who had sprained an ankle and was not in a good mood. Twoflower sat in front of Herrena which, since he was fairly short, meant that at least he kept his ears warm. She rode with a drawn knife and a sharp eye out for any-walking boxes; Herrena hadn't quite worked out what the Luggage was, but she was bright enough to know that it wouldn't let Twoflower be killed.

After about ten minutes they saw it in the middle of the road. It's lid lay open invitingly. It was full of gold.

'Go round it,' said Herrena.

'But —'

'It's a trap.'

'That's right,' said Weems, white-faced. 'You take it from me.'

Reluctantly they reined their horses around the glittering temptation and trotted on along the track. Weems glanced back fearfully, dreading to see the chest coming after him.

What he saw was almost worse. It had gone.

Far off to one side of the path the long grass moved mysteriously and was still.

Rincewind wasn't much of a wizard and even less of a fighter, but he was an expert at cowardice and he knew fear when he smelt it. He said, quietly, 'It'll follow you, you know.'

'What?' said Weems, distractedly. He was still peering at the grass.

'It's very patient and it never gives up. That's sapient pearwood you're dealing with. It'll let you think it's forgotten you, then one day you'll be walking along a dark street and you'll hear these little footsteps behind you – shlup, shlup, they'll go, then you'll start running and they'll speed up, shlupshlupSHLUP—'

'Shut up!' shouted Weems.

'It's probably already recognised you, so —'

'I said shut up!'

Herrena turned around in her saddle and glared at them. Weems scowled and pulled Rincewind's ear until it was ight in front his mouth, and said hoarsely, I'm afraid of nothing, understand? This wizard stuff, I spit on it.'

'They all say that until they hear the footsteps,' said Rincewind. He stopped. A knifepoint was pricking his ribs.

Nothing happened for the rest of the day but, to Rincewind's satisfaction and Weems' mounting paranoia, the Luggage showed itself several times. Here it would be perched incongruously on a crag, there it would be half-hidden in a ditch with moss growing over it.

By late afternoon they came to the crest of a hill and looked down on the broad valley of the upper Smarl, the longest river on the Disc. It was already half a mile across, and heavy with the silt that made the lower valley the most fertile area on the continent. A few wisps of early mist wreathed its banks.

'Shlup,' said Rincewind. He felt Weems jerk upright in the saddle.

'Eh?'

'Just clearing my throat,' said Rincewind, and grinned. He had put a lot of thought into that grin. It was the sort of grin people use when they stare at your left ear and tell you in an urgent tone of voice that they are being spied on by secret agents from the next galaxy. It was not a grin to inspire confidence. More horrible grins had probably been seen, but only on the sort of grinner that is orange with black stripes, has a long tail and hangs around in jungles looking for victims to grin at.

'Wipe that off,' said Herrena, trotting up.

Where the track led down to the river bank there was a crude jetty and a big bronze gong.

'It'll summon the ferryman,' said Herrena. 'If we cross here we can cut off a big bend in the river. Might even make it to a town tonight.'

Weems looked doubtful. The sun was getting fat and red, and the mists were beginning to thicken.

'Or maybe you want to spend the night this side of the water?'

Weems picked up the hammer and hit the gong so hard that it spun right around on its hanger and fell off.

They waited in silence. Then with a wet clinking sound a chain sprang out of the water and pulled taut against an iron peg set into the bank. Eventually the slow flat shape of the ferry emerged from the mist, its hooded ferryman heaving on a big wheel set in its centre as he winched his way towards the shore.

The ferry's flat bottom grated on the gravel, and the hooded figure leaned against the wheel panting.

'Two at a time,' it muttered.' That'sh all. Jusht two, with horshesh.'

Rincewind swallowed, and tried not to look at Twoflower. The man would probably be grinning and mugging like an idiot. He risked *a* sideways glance.

Twoflower was sitting with his mouth open.

'You're not the usual ferryman,' said Herrena. 'I've been here before, the usual man is a big fellow, sort of —'

'It'sh hish day off.'

'Well, okay,' she said doubtfully. 'In that case – *what's he laughing at?'*

Twoflower's shoulders were shaking, his face had gone red, and he was emitting muffled snorts. Herrena glared at him, then looked hard at the ferryman.

'Two of you – grab him!'

There was a pause. Then one of the men said, 'What, the ferryman?'

'Yes!'

'Why?'

Herrena looked blank. This sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen. It was accepted that when someone yelled something like 'Get him!' or 'Guards!' people jumped to it, they weren't supposed to sit around discussing things.

'Because I said so!' was the best she could manage. The two men nearest to the bowed figure looked at each ther, shrugged, dismounted, and each took a shoulder. The ferryman was about half their size.

'Like this?' said one of them. Twoflower was choking for breath.

'Now I want to see what he's got under that robe.' The two men exchanged glances. 'I'm not sure that—' said one.

He got no further because a knobbly elbow jerked into his stomach like a piston. His companion looked down incredulously and got the other elbow in the kidneys.

Cohen cursed as he struggled to untangle his sword from his robe while hopping crabwise towards Herrena. Rincewind groaned, gritted his teeth, and jerked his head backwards hard. There was a scream from Weems and Rincewind rolled sideways, landed heavily in the mud, scrambled up madly and looked around for somewhere to hide.

With a cry of triumph Cohen managed to free his sword and waved it triumphantly, severely wounding a man who had been creeping up behind him.

Herrena pushed Twoflower off her horse and fumbled for her own blade. Twoflower tried to stand up and caused the horse of another man to rear, throwing him off and bringing his head down to the right level for Rincewind to kick it as hard as possible. Rincewind would be the first to call himself a rat, but even rats fight in a corner.

Weems' hands dropped onto his shoulder and a fist like a medium-sized rock slammed into his head.

As he went down he heard Herrena say, quite quietly, 'Kill them both. I'll deal with this old fool.'

'Roight!' said Weems, and turned towards Twoflower with his sword drawn.

Rincewind saw him hesitate. There was a moment of silence, and then even Herrena could hear the splashing as the Luggage surged ashore, water pouring from it.

Weems stared at it in horror. His sword fell from his hand. He turned and ran into the mists. A moment later he Luggage bounded over Rincewind and followed him.

Herrena lunged at Cohen, who parried the thrust and grunted as his arm twinged. The blades clanged wetly, and then Herrena was forced to back away as a cunning upward sweep from Cohen nearly disarmed her.

Rincewind staggered towards Twoflower and tugged at him ineffectually.

'Time to be going,' he muttered.

'This is great!' said Twoflower. 'Did you see the way he —'

'Yes, yes, come on.'

'But I want – I say, well done!'

Herrena's sword spun out of her hand and stood quivering in the dirt. With a snort of satisfaction Cohen brought his own sword back, went momentarily crosseyed, gave a little yelp of pain, and stood absolutely motionless.

Herrena looked at him, puzzled. She made an experimental move in the direction of her own sword and when nothing happened she grasped it, tested its balance, and stared at Cohen. Only his agonised eyes moved to follow her as she circled him cautiously.

'His back's gone again!' whispered Twoflower. 'What can we do?'

'We can see if we can catch the horses?'

'Well,' said Herrena, 'I don't know who you are or why you're here, and there's nothing personal about this, you understand.'

She raised her sword in both hands.

There was a sudden movement in the mists and the dull thud of a heavy piece of wood hitting a head. Herrena looked bewildered for a moment, and then fell forward.

Bethan dropped the branch she had been holding and looked at Cohen. Then she grabbed him by the shoulders, stuck her knee in the small of his back, gave a businesslike twist and let him go.

An expression of bliss passed across his face. He gave an experimental bend.

'It's gone!' he said. 'The back! Gone!'

Twoflower turned to Rincewind.

'My father used to recommend hanging from the top of a door,' he said conversationally.

Weems crept very cautiously through the scrubby, mist-laden trees. The pale damp air muffled all sounds, but he was certain that there had been nothing to hear for the past ten minutes. He turned around very slowly, and then allowed himself the luxury of a long, heartfelt sigh. He stepped back into the cover of the bushes.

Something nudged the back of his knees, very gently. Something angular.

He looked down. There seemed to be more feet down there than there ought to be.

There was a short, sharp snap.

The fire was a tiny dot of light in a dark landscape. The moon wasn't up yet, but the star was a lurking glow on the horizon.

'It's circular now,' said Bethan. 'It looks like a tiny sun. I'm sure it's getting hotter, too.'

'Don't,' said Rincewind. 'As if I hadn't got enough to worry about.'

'What I don't understand,' said Cohen, who was having his back massaged, 'ish how they captured you without ush hearing it. We wouldn't have known at all if your Luggage hadn't kept jumping up and down.'

'And whining,' said Bethan. They all looked at her.

'Well, it *looked* as if it was whining,' she said. 'I think it's rather sweet, really.'

Four pairs of eyes turned towards the Luggage, which was squatting on the other side of the fire. It got up, and very pointedly moved back into the shadows.

'Eashy to feed,' said Cohen.

'Hard to lose,' agreed Rincewind.

'Loyal,' suggested Twoflower.

'Roomy,' said Cohen.

'But I wouldn't say sweet,' said Rincewind.

'I shuppose you wouldn't want to shell it?' said Cohen.

Twoflower shook his head. 'I don't think it would understand,' he said.

'No, I shupposhe not,' said Cohen. He sat up, and bit his lip. 'I wash looking for a preshent for Bethan, you shee. We're getting married.'

'We thought you ought to be the first to know,' said Bethan, and blushed.

Rincewind didn't catch Twoflower's eye.

'Well, that's very, er —'

'Just as soon as we find a town where there's a priest,' said Bethan. 'I want it done properly.'

'That's very important,' said Twoflower seriously. 'If there were more morals about we wouldn't be crashing into stars.'

They considered this for a moment. Then Twoflower said brightly, 'This calls for a celebration. I've got some biscuits and water, if you've still got some of that jerky.'

'Oh, good,' said Rincewind weakly. He beckoned Cohen to one side. With his beard trimmed the old man could easily have passed for seventy on a dark night.

'This is, uh, serious?' he said. 'You're really going to marry her?'

'Share thing. Any objections?'

'Well, no, of course not, but – I mean, she's seventeen and you're, you're, how can I put it, you're of the elderly persuasion.'

'Time I shettled down, you mean?'

Rincewind groped for words. 'You're seventy years older than her, Cohen. Are you sure that —'

'I have been married before, you know. I've got quite a good memory,' said Cohen reproachfully.

'No, what I mean is, well, I mean physically, the point is, what about, you know, the age difference and everything, t's a matter of health, isn't it, and —'

'Ah,' said Cohen slowly, 'I shee what you mean. The strain. I hadn't looked at it like that.'

'No,' said Rincewind, straightening up. 'No, well, that's only to be expected.'

'You've given me something to think about and no mishtake,' said Cohen.

'I hope I haven't upset anything.'

'No, no,' said Cohen vaguely. 'Don't apologishe. You were right to point it out.'

He turned and looked at Bethan, who waved at him, and then he looked up at the star that glared through the mists.

Eventually he said, 'Dangerous times, these.'

'That's a fact.'

'Who knows what tomorrow may bring?'

'Not me.'

Cohen clapped Rincewind on the shoulder. 'Shome-timesh we jusht have to take rishks,' he said. 'Don't be offended, but I think we'll go ahead with the wedding anyway and, well,' he looked at Bethan and sighed, 'we'll just have to hope she's shtrong enough.'

Around noon the following day they rode into a small, mud-walled city surrounded by fields still lush and green. There seemed to be a lot of traffic going the other way, though. Huge carts rumbled past them. Herds of livestock ambled along the crown of the road. Old ladies stomped past carrying entire households and haystacks on their backs.

'Plague?' said Rincewind, stopping a man pushing a handcart full of children.

He shook his head. 'It's the star, friend,' he said. 'Haven't you seen it in the sky?'

'We couldn't help noticing it, yes.'

They say that it'll hit us on Hogswatchnight and the seas will boil and the countries of the Disc will be broken nd kings will be brought down and the cities will be as lakes of glass,' said the man. 'I'm off to the mountains.'

'That'll help, will it?' said Rincewind doubtfully.

'No, but the view will be better.'

Rincewind rode back to the others.

'Everyone's worried about the star,' he said. 'Apparently there's hardly anyone left in the cities, they're all frightened of it.'

'I don't want to worry anyone,' said Bethan, 'but hasn't it struck you as unseasonably hot?'

'That's what I said last night,' said Twoflower. 'Very warm, I thought.'

'I shuspect it'll get a lot hotter,' said Cohen. 'Let'sh get on into the city.'

They rode through echoing streets that were practically deserted. Cohen kept peering at merchants' signs until he reined his horse and said, 'Thish ish what I've been looking for. You find a temple and a priesht, I'll join you shortly.'

'A jeweller?' said Rincewind.

'It's a shuprishe.'

'I could do with a new dress, too,' said Bethan.

'I'll shteal you one.'

There was something very oppressive about the city, Rincewind decided. There was also something very odd.

Almost every door was painted with a large red star.

'It's creepy,' said Bethan. 'As if people wanted to bring the star here.'

'Or keep it away,' said Twoflower.

'That won't work. It's too big,' said Rincewind. He saw their faces turned towards him.

'Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it?' he said lamely.

'No,' said Bethan.

'Stars are small lights in the sky,' said Twoflower. 'One fell down near my home once – big white thing, size of a house, glowed for weeks before it went out.'

'This star is different,' said a voice. 'Great A'Tuin has climbed the beach of the universe. This is the great ocean of space.'

'How do you know?' said Twoflower.

'Know what?' said Rincewind.

'What you just said. About beaches and oceans.'

'I didn't say anything!'

'Yes you did, you silly man!' yelled Bethan. 'We saw your lips going up and down and everything!'

Rincewind shut his eyes. Inside his mind he could feel the Spell scuttling off to hide behind his conscience, and muttering to itself.

'All right, all right,' he said. 'No need to shout. I – I don't know how I know, I just *know* —.'

'Well, I wish you'd tell us.'

They turned the corner.

All the cities around the Circle Sea had a special area set aside for the gods, of which the Disc had an elegant sufficiency. Usually they were crowded and not very attractive from an architectural point of view. The most senior gods, of course, had large and splendid temples, but the trouble was that later gods demanded equality and soon the holy areas were sprawling with lean-to's, annexes, loft conversions, sub-basements, bijou flatlets, ecclesiastical infilling and trans-temporal timesharing, since no god would dream of living outside the holy quarter or, as it had become, three-eighths. There were usually three hundred different types of incense being burned and the noise was normally at pain threshold because of all the priests vying with each other to call their share of the faithful to prayer.

But this street was deathly quiet, that particularly unpleasant quiet that comes when hundreds of frightened and angry people are standing very still.

A man at the edge of the crowd turned around and scowled at the newcomers. He had a red star painted on his forehead.

'What's—' Rincewind began, and stopped as his voice seemed far too loud, 'what's this?'

'You're strangers?' said the man.

'Actually we know one another quite—' Twoflower egan, and fell silent. Bethan pointed up the street.

Every temple had a star painted on it. There was a particularly big one daubed across the stone eye outside the temple of Blind Io, leader of the gods.

'Urgh,' said Rincewind. 'Io is going to be really pissed when he sees that. I don't think we ought to hang around here, friends.'

The crowd was facing a crude platform that had been built in the centre of the wide street. A big banner had been draped across the front of it.

'I always heard that Blind Io can see everything that happens everywhere,' said Bethan quietly. 'Why hasn't —'

'Quiet!' said the man beside them. 'Dahoney speaks!'

A figure had stepped up on the platform, a tall thin man with hair like a dandelion. There was no cheer from the crowd, just a collective sigh. He began to speak.

Rincewind listened in mounting horror. Where were the gods? said the man. They had gone. Perhaps they had never been. Who, actually, could remember seeing them? And now the star had been sent —

It went on and on, a quiet, clear voice that used words like 'cleanse' and 'scouring' and 'purify' and drilled into the brain like a hot sword. Where were the wizards? Where was magic? Had it ever really worked, or had it all been a dream?

Rincewind began to be really afraid that the gods might get to hear about this and be so angry that they'd take it out on anyone who happened to have been around at the time.

But somehow even the wrath of the gods would have been better than the sound of that voice. The star was coming, it seemed to say, and its fearful fire could only be averted by – by – Rincewind couldn't be certain, but he had visions of swords and banners and blank-eyed warriors. The voice didn't believe in gods, which in Rincewind's book was fair enough, but it didn't believe in people either.

A tall hooded stranger on Rincewind's left jostled him. He turned – and looked up into a grinning skuli nder a black hood.

Wizards, like cats, can see Death.

Compared to the sound of that voice, Death seemed almost pleasant. He leaned against a wall, his scythe propped up beside him. He nodded at Rincewind.

'Come to gloat?' whispered Rincewind. Death shrugged.

I HAVE COME TO SEE THE FUTURE, he said.

'This is the future?'

A FUTURE, said Death.

'It's horrible,' said Rincewind.

I'M INCLINED TO AGREE, said Death.

'I would have thought you'd be all for it I'

NOT LIKE THIS. THE DEATH OF THE WARRIOR OR THE OLD MAN OR THE LITTLE CHILD, THIS I UNDERSTAND, AND I TAKE AWAY THE PAIN AND END THE SUFFERING. I DO NOT UNDERSTAND THIS DEATH-OF-THE-MIND.

'Who are you talking to?' said Twoflower. Several members of the congregation had turned around and were looking suspiciously at Rincewind.

'Nobody,' said Rincewind. 'Can we go away? I've got a headache.'

Now a group of people at the edge of the crowd were muttering and pointing to them. Rincewind grabbed the other two and hurried them around the corner.

'Mount up and let's go,' he said. 'I've got a bad feeling that —'

A hand landed on his shoulder. He turned around. A pair of cloudy grey eyes set in a round bald head on top of a large muscular body were staring hard at his left ear. The man had a star painted on his forehead.

'You look like a wizard,' he said, in a tone of voice that suggested this was very unwise and quite possibly fatal.

'Who, me? No, I'm – a clerk. Yes. A clerk. That's right,' said Rincewind.

He gave a little laugh.

The man paused, his lips moving soundlessly, as though he was listening to a voice in his head. Several ther star people had joined him. Rincewind's left ear began to be widely regarded.

'I think you're a wizard,' said the man.

'Look,' said Rincewind, 'if I was a wizard I'd be able to do magic, right? I'd just turn you into something, and I haven't, so I'm not.'

'We killed all our wizards,' said one of the men. 'Some ran away, but we killed quite a lot. They waved their hands and nothing came out.'

Rincewind stared at him.

'And we think you're a wizard too,' said the man holding Rincewind in an ever-tightening grip. 'You've got the box on legs and you look like a wizard.'

Rincewind became aware that the three of them and the Luggage had somehow become separated from their horses, and that they were now in a contracting circle of grey-faced, solemn people.

Bethan had gone pale. Even Twoflower, whose ability to recognise danger was as good as Rincewind's ability to fly, was looking worried.

Rincewind took a deep breath.

He raised his hands in the classic pose he'd learned years before, and rasped, 'Stand back! Or I'll fill you full of magic!'

'The magic has faded,' said the man. 'The star has taken it away. All the false wizards said their funny words and then nothing happened and they looked at their hands in horror and very few of them, in fact, had the sense to run away.'

'I mean it!' said Rincewind.

He's going to kill me, he thought. That's it. I can't even bluff any more. No good at magic, no good at bluffing, I'm just a —

The Spell stirred in his mind. He felt it trickle into his brain like iced water and brace itself. A cold tingle coursed down his arm.

His arm raised of its own volition, and he felt his own mouth opening and shutting and his own tongue moving as a voice that wasn't his, a voice that sounded old and dry, said syllables that puffed into the air like steam clouds.

Octarine fire flashed from under his fingernails. It wrapped itself around the horrified man until he was lost in a cold, spitting cloud that rose above the street, hung there for a long moment, and then exploded into nothingness.

There wasn't even a wisp of greasy smoke.

Rincewind stared at his hand in horror.

Twoflower and Bethan each grabbed him by an arm and hustled him through the shocked crowd until they reached the open street. There was a painful moment as they each chose to run down a different alley, but they hurried on with Rincewind's feet barely touching the cobbles.

'Magic,' he mumbled excitedly, drunk with power. 'I did magic . . .'

'That's right,' said Twoflower soothingly.

'Would you like me to do a spell?' said Rincewind. He pointed a finger at a passing dog and said 'Wheeee!' It gave him a hurt look.

'Making your feet run a lot faster'd be favourite,' said Bethan grimly.

'Sure!' slurred Rincewind. 'Feet! Run faster! Hey, look, they're doing it!'

'They've got more sense than you,' said Bethan. 'Which way now?'

Twoflower peered at the maze of alleyways around them. There was a lot of shouting going on, some way off.

Rincewind lurched 6ut of their grasp, and tottered uncertainly down the nearest alley.

'I can do it!' he shouted wildly. 'Just you all watch out —'

'He's in shock,' said Twoflower.

'Why?'

'He's never done a spell before.'

'But he's a wiizard!'

'It's all a bit complicated,' said Twoflower, running after Rincewind. 'Anyway, I'm not sure that was actually him. it certainly didn't sound like him. Come along, old fellow.'

Rincewind looked at him with wild, unseeing eyes.

'I'll turn *you* into a rosebush,' he said.

'Yes, yes, jolly good. Just come along,' said Twoflower soothingly, pulling gently at his arm.

There was a pattering of feet from several alleyways and suddenly a dozen star people were advancing on them.

Bethan grabbed Rincewind's limp hand and held it up threateningly.

'That's far enough!' she screamed.

'Right!' shouted Twoflower. 'We've got a wizard and we're not afraid to use him!'

'I mean it!' screamed Bethan, spinning Rincewind around by his arm, like a capstan.

'Right! We're heavily armed! What?' said Twoflower.

'I said, where's the Luggage?' hissed Bethan behind Rincewind's back.

Twoflower looked around. The Luggage was missing.

Rincewind was having the desired effect of the star people, though. As his hand waved vaguely around they treated it like a rotary scythe and tried to hide behind one another.

'Well, where's it gone?'

'How should I know?' said Twoflower.

'It's *your* Luggage!'

'I often don't know where my Luggage is, that's what being a tourist is all about,' said Twoflower. 'Anyway, it often wanders off by itself. It's probably best not to ask why.'

It began to dawn on the mob that nothing was actually happening, and that Rincewind was in no condition to hurl insults, let alone magical fire. They advanced, watching his hands cautiously.

Twoflower and Bethan backed away. Twoflower looked around.

'Bethan?'

'What?' said Bethan, not taking her eyes off the advancing figures.

'This is a dead end.'

'Are you sure?'

'I think I know a brick wall when I see one,' said Twoflower reproachfully.

'That's about it, then,' said Bethan.

'Do you think perhaps if I explain – ?'

'No.'

'Oh.'

'I don't think these are the sort of people who listen to explanations,' Bethan added.

Twoflower stared at them. He was, as has been mentioned, usually oblivious to personal danger. Against the whole of human experience Twoflower believed that if only people would talk to each other, have a few drinks, exchange pictures of their grandchildren, maybe take in a show or something, then everything could be sorted out. He also believed that people were basically good but sometimes had their bad days. What was coming down the street was having about the same effect on him as a gorilla in a glass factory.

There was the faintest of sounds behind him, not so much a sound in fact as a change in the texture of the air.

The faces in front of him gaped open, turned, and disappeared rapidly down the alley.

'Eh?' said Bethan, still propping up the now unconscious Rincewind.

Twoflower was looking the other way, at a big glass window full of strange wares, and a beaded doorway, and a large sign above it all which now said, after its characters had finished writing into position:

'Skillet, Wang, Yrxle!yt, Bunglestiff, Cwmlad and Patel'

'Estblshd: various'

'PURVEYORS'

The jeweller turned the gold slowly over the tiny anvil, tapping the last strangely-cut diamond into place.

'From a troll's tooth, you say?' he muttered, squinting losely at his work.

'Yesh,' said Cohen, 'and as I shay, you can have all the resht.' He was fingering a tray of gold rings.

'Very generous,' murmured the jeweller, who was dwar-vish and knew a good deal when he saw one. He sighed.

'Not much work lately?' said Cohen. He looked out through the tiny window and watched a group of empty-eyed people gathered on the other side of the narrow street.

'Times are hard, yes.'

'Who are all theshe guysh with the starsh painted on?' said Cohen.

The dwarf jeweller didn't look up.

'Madmen,' he said. 'They say I should do no work because the star comes. I tell them stars have never hurt me, I wish I could say the same about people.'

Cohen nodded thoughtfully as six men detached themselves from the group and came towards the shop. They were carrying an assortment of weapons, and had a driven, determined look about them.

'Strange,' said Cohen.

'I am, as you can see, of the dwarvish persuasion,' said the jeweller. 'One of the magical races, it is said. The star people believe that the star will not destroy the Disc if we turn aside from magic. They're probably going to beat me up a bit. So it goes.'

He held up his latest work in a pair of tweezers.

'The strangest thing I have ever made,' he said, 'but practical, I can see that. What did you say they were called again?'

'Din-chewersh,' said Cohen. He looked at the horseshoe shapes nestling in the wrinkled palm of his hand, then opened his mouth and made a series of painful grunting noises.

The door burst open. The men strode in and took up positions around the walls. They were sweating and uncertain, but their leader pushed Cohen aside disdainfully and picked up the dwarf by his shirt.

'We tole you yesterday, small stuff,' he said. 'You go ut feet down or feet up, we don't mind. So now we gonna get really —.'

Cohen tapped him on the shoulder. The man looked around irritably.

'What do you want, grandad?' he snarled.

Cohen paused until he had the man's full attention, and then he smiled. It was a slow, lazy smile, unveiling about 300 carats of mouth jewellery that seemed to light up the room.

'I will count to three,' he said, in a friendly tone of voice. 'One. Two.' His bony knee came up and buried itself in the man's groin with a satisfyingly meaty noise, and he half-turned to bring the full force of an elbow into the kidneys as the leader collapsed around his private universe of pain.

'Three,' he told the ball of agony on the floor. Cohen had heard of fighting fair, and had long ago decided he wanted no part of it.

He looked up at the other men, and flashed his incredible srnile.

They ought to have rushed him. Instead one of them, secure in the knowledge that he had a broadsword and Cohen didn't, sidled crabwise towards him.

'Oh, no,' said Cohen, waving his hands. 'Oh, come on, lad, not like that.'

The man looked sideways at him.

'Not like what?' he asked suspiciously.

'You never held a sword before?'

The man half-turned to his colleagues for reassurance.

'Not a lot, no,' he said. 'Not often.' He waved his sword menacingly.

Cohen shrugged. 'I may be going to die, but I should hope I could be killed by a man who could hold his sword like a warrior,' he said.

The man looked at his hands. 'Looks all right,' he said, doubtfully.

'Look, lad, I know a little about these things. I mean, come here a minute and – do you mind? – right, your eft hand goes *here*, around the pommel, and your right hand goes – that's right, just *here* — and the blade goes right into your leg.'

As the man screamed and clutched at his foot Cohen kicked his remaining leg away and turned to the room at large.

'This is getting fiddly,' he said. Why don't you rush me?'

'That's right,' said a voice by his waist. The jeweller had produced a very large and dirty axe, guaranteed to add tetanus to all the other terrors of warfare.

The four men gave these odds some consideration, and backed towards the door.

'And wipe those silly stars off,' said Cohen. 'You can tell everyone that Cohen the Barbarian will be very angry if he sees stars like that again, right?'

The door slammed shut. A moment later the axe thumped into it, bounced off, and took a sliver of leather off the toe of Cohen's sandal.

'Sorry,' said the dwarf. 'It belonged to my grandad. I only use it for splitting firewood.'

Cohen felt his jaw experimentally. The dine chewers seemed to be settling in quite well.

'If I was you, I'd be getting out of here anyway,' he said. But the dwarf was already scuttling around the room, tipping trays of precious metal and gems into a leather sack. A roll of tools went into one pocket, a packet of finished jewellery went into another, and

with a grunt the dwarf stuck his arms through handles on either side of his little forge and heaved it bodily onto his back.

'Right,' he said. I'm ready.'

'You're coming with me?'

'As far as the city gates, if you don't mind,' he said. 'You can't blame me, can you?'

'No. But leave the axe behind.'

They stepped out into the afternoon sun and a deserted street. When Cohen opened his mouth little pinpoints of bright light illuminated all the shadows.

'I've got some friends around here to pick up,' he said, nd added, 'I hope they're all right. What's your name?'

'Lackjaw.'

'Is there anywhere around here where I can—' Cohen paused lovingly, savouring the words – 'where I can get a steak?'

The star people have closed all the inns. They said it's wrong to be eating and drinking when —'

'I know, I know,' said Cohen. 'I think I'm beginning to get the hang of it. Don't they approve of anything?'

Lackjaw was lost in thought for a moment. 'Setting fire to things,' he said at last. 'They're quite good at that. Books and stuff. They have these great big bonfires.'

Cohen was shocked.

'Bonfires of books?'

'Yes. Horrible, isn't it?'

'Right,' said Cohen. He thought it was appalling. Someone who spent his life living rough under the sky knew the value of a good thick book, which ought to outlast at least a season of cooking fires if you were careful how you tore the pages out. Many a life had been saved on a snowy night by a handful of sodden kindling and a really dry book. If you felt like a smoke and couldn't find a pipe, a book was your man every time.

Cohen realised people wrote things in books. It had always seemed to him to be a frivolous waste of paper.

I'm afraid if your friends met them they might be in trouble,' said Lackjaw sadly as they walked up the street.

They turned the corner and saw the bonfire. It was in the middle of the street. A couple of star people were feeding it with books from a nearby house, which had its door smashed in and had been daubed with stars.

News of Cohen hadn't spread too far yet. The book burners took no notice as he wandered up and leaned against the wall. Curly flakes of burnt paper bounced in the hot air and floated away over the rooftops.

'What are you doing?' he said.

One of the star people, a woman, pushed her hair out of her eyes with a soot-blackened hand, gazed intently t Cohen's left ear, and said, 'Ridding the disc of wickedness.'

Two men came out of the building and glared at Cohen, or at least at his ear.

Cohen reached out and took the heavy book the woman was carrying. Its cover was crusted with strange red and black stones that spelled out what Cohen was sure was a word. He showed it to Lackjaw.

'The Necrotelecomnicon,' said the dwarf. 'Wizards use it. It's how to contact the dead, I think.'

'That's wizards for you,' said Cohen. He felt a page between finger and thumb; it was thin, and quite soft. The rather unpleasant organic-looking writing didn't worry him at all. Yes, a book like this could be a real friend to a man —

'Yes? You want something?' he said to one of the star men, who had gripped his arm.

'All books of magic must be burned,' said the man, but a little uncertainly, because something about Cohen's teeth was giving him a nasty feeling of sanity.

'Why?' said Cohen.

'It has been revealed to us.' Now Cohen's smile was as wide as all outdoors, and rather more dangerous.

'I think we ought to be getting along,' said Lackjaw nervously. A party of star people had turned into the street behind them.

'I think I would like to kill someone,' said Cohen, still smiling.

'The star directs that the Disc must be cleansed,' said the man, backing away.

'Stars can't talk,' said Cohen, drawing his sword.

'If you kill me a thousand will take my place,' said the man, who was now backed against the wall.

'Yes,' said Cohen, in a reasonable tone of voice, 'but that isn't the point, is it? The point is, *you'll* be dead.'

The man's adam's apple began to bob like a yoyo. He squinted down at Cohen's sword.

'There is that, yes,' he conceded. 'Tell you what – how bout if we put the fire out?' 'Good idea,' said Cohen.

Lackjaw tugged at his belt. The other star people were running towards them. There were a lot of them, many of them were armed, and it began to look as though things would become a little more serious.

Cohen waved his sword at them defiantly, and turned and ran. Even Lackjaw had difficulty in keeping up.

'Funny,' he gasped, as they plunged down another alley, 'I thought – for a minute – you'd want to stand – and fight them.'

'Blow that – for a – lark.'

As they came out into the light at the other end of the alley Cohen flung himself against the wall, drew his sword, stood with his head on one side as he judged the approaching footsteps, and then brought the blade around in a dead flat sweep at stomach height. There was an unpleasant noise and several screams, but by then Cohen was well away up the street, moving in the unusual shambling run that spared his bunions.

With Lackjaw pounding along grimly beside him he turned off into an inn painted with red stars, jumped onto a table with only a faint whimper of pain, ran along it – while, with almost perfect choreography, Lackjaw ran straight underneath without ducking – jumped down at the other end, kicked his way through the kitchens, and came out into another alley.

They scurried around a few more turnings and piled into a doorway. Cohen clung to the wall and wheezed until the little blue and purple lights went away.

'Well,' he panted, 'what did you get?'

'Um, the cruet,' said Lackjaw.

'Just that?'

'Well, I had to go *under* the table, didn't I? You didn't do so well yourself.'

Cohen looked disdainfully at the small melon he had managed to skewer in his flight.

'This must be pretty tough here,' he said, biting through 159 the rind.

'Want some salt on it?' said the dwarf.

Cohen said nothing. He just stood holding the melon, with his mouth open.

Lackjaw looked around. The cul de sac they were in was empty, except for an old box someone had left against a wall.

Cohen was staring at it. He handed the melon to the dwarf without looking at him and walked out into the sunlight. Lackjaw watched him creep stealthily around the box, or as

stealthily as is possible with joints that creaked like a ship under full sail, and prod it once or twice with his sword, but very gingerly, as if he half-expected it to explode.

'It's just a box,' the dwarf called out. 'What's so special about a box?'

Cohen said nothing. He squatted down painfully and peered closely at the lock on the lid.

'What's in it?' said Lackjaw.

'You wouldn't want to know,' said Cohen. 'Help me up, will you?'

'Yes, but this box —'

'This box,' said Cohen, 'this box is—'he waved his arms vaguely.

'Oblong?'

'Eldritch,' said Cohen mysteriously.

'Eldritch?'

'Yup.'

'Oh,' said the dwarf. They stood looking at the box for a moment.

'Cohen?'

'Yes?'

'What does eldritch mean?'

'Well, eldritch is—' Cohen paused and looked down irritably. 'Give it a kick and you'll see.'

Lockjaw's steel-capped dwarfboot whammed into the side of the box. Cohen flinched. Nothing else happened.

'I see,' said the dwarf. 'Eldritch means wooden?'

'No,' said Cohen. 'It – it oughtn't to have done that.'

'I see,' said Lackjaw, who didn't, and was beginning to wish Cohen hadn't gone out into all this hot sunlight. 'It ought to have run away, you think?'

'Yes. Or bitten your leg off.'

'Ah,' said the dwarf. He took Cohen gently by the arm. 'It's nice and shady over here,' he said. 'Why don't you just have a little —'

Cohen shook him off.

'It's watching that wall,' he said. 'Look, that's why it's not taking any notice of us. It's staring at the wall.'

'Yes, that's right,' said Lackjaw soothingly. 'Of course it's watching that wall with its little eyes —'

'Don't be an idiot, it hasn't got any eyes,' snapped Cohen.

'Sorry, sorry,' said Lackjaw hurriedly. 'It's watching the wall without eyes, sorry.'

'I think it's worried about something,' said Cohen.

'Well, it would be, wouldn't it,' said Lackjaw. 'I expect it just wants us to go off somewhere and leave it alone.'

'I think it's very puzzled,' Cohen added.

'Yes, it certainly looks puzzled,' said the dwarf. Cohen glared at him.

'How can *you* tell?' he snapped.

It struck Lackjaw that the roles were unfairly reversing. He looked from Cohen to the box, his mouth opening and shutting.

'How can *you* tell?' he said. But Cohen wasn't listening anyway. He sat down in front of the box, assuming that the bit with the keyhole was the front, and watched it intently. Lackjaw backed away. Funny, said his mind, but the damn thing *is* looking at me.

'All right,' said Cohen, 'I know you and me don't see eye to eye, but we're all trying to find someone we care for, okay?'

'I'm—' said Lackjaw, and realised that Cohen was talking to the box.

'So tell me where they've gone.'

As Lackjaw looked on in horror the Luggage extended 161 its little legs, braced itself, and ran full tilt at the nearest wall. Clay bricks and dusty mortar exploded around it.

Cohen peered through the hole. There was a small grubby storeroom on the other side. The Luggage stood in the middle of the floor, radiating extreme bafflement.

'Shop!' said Twoflower.

'Anyone here?' said Bethan.

'Urrgh,' said Rincewind.

'I think we ought to sit him down somewhere and get him a glass of water,' said Twoflower. 'If there's one here.'

'There's everything else,' said Bethan.

The room was full of shelves, and the shelves were full of everything. Things that couldn't be accommodated on them hung in bunches from the dark and shadowy ceiling; boxes and sacks of everything spilled onto the floor.

There was no sound from outside. Bethan looked around and found out why.

'I've never seen so much stuff,' said Twoflower.

'There's one thing it's out of stock of,' said Bethan, firmly..

'How can you tell?'

'You just have to look. It's fresh out of exits.'

Twoflower turned around. Where the door and window had been there were shelves stacked with boxes; they looked as, though they had been there for a long time.

Twoflower sat Rincewind down on a rickety chair by the counter and poked doubtfully at the shelves. There were boxes of nails, and hairbrushes. There were bars of soap, faded

with age. There was a stack of jars containing deliquescent bath salts, to which someone had fixed a rather sad and jaunty little notice announcing, in the face of all the evidence, that one would make an Ideal Gift. There was also quite a lot of dust.

Bethan peered at the shelves on the other wall, and laughed.

'Would you look at this!' she said.

Twoflower looked. She was holding a – well, it was a little mountain chalet, but with seashells stuck all over it, and then the perpetrator had written 'A Special Souvenir' in pokerwork on the roof (which, of course, opened so that cigarettes could be kept in it, and played a tinny little tune).

'Have you ever seen anything like it?' she said.

Twoflower shook his head. His mouth dropped open.

'Are you all right?' said Bethan.

'I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,' he said.

There was a whirring noise overhead. They looked up.

A big black globe had lowered itself from the darkness of the ceiling. Little red lights flashed on and off on it, and as they stared it spun around and looked at them with a big glass eye. It was menacing, that eye. It seemed to suggest very emphatically that it was watching something distasteful.

'Hallo?' said Twoflower.

A head appeared over the edge of the counter. It looked angry.

'I hope you were intending to pay for that,' it said nastily. Its expression suggested that it expected Rincewind to say yes, and that it wouldn't believe him.

'This?' said Bethan. 'I wouldn't buy this if you threw in a hatful of rubies and —'

'I'll buy it. How much?' said Twoflower urgently, reaching into his pockets. His face fell.

'Actually, I haven't got any money,' he said. 'It's in my Luggage, but I —'

There was a snort. The head disappeared from behind the counter, and reappeared from behind a display of toothbrushes.

It belonged to a very small man almost hidden behind a green apron. He seemed very upset.

'No money?' he said. 'You come into my shop —'

'We didn't mean to,' said Twoflower quickly. 'We didn't notice it was there.'

'It wasn't,' said Bethan firmly. 'It's magical, isn't it?'

The small shopkeeper hesitated.

'Yes,' he reluctantly agreed. 'A bit.'

'A bit?' said Bethan. 'A *bit* magical?'

'Quite a bit, then,' he conceded, backing away, and, 'All right,' he agreed, as Bethan continued to glare at him. 'It's magical. I can't help it. The bloody door hasn't been and gone again, has it?'

'Yes, and we're not happy about that thing in the ceiling.'

He looked up, and frowned. Then he disappeared through a little beaded doorway half-hidden among the merchandise. There was a lot of clanking and whirring, and the black globe disappeared into the shadows. It was replaced by, in succession, a bunch of herbs, a mobile advertising something Twoflower had never heard of but which was apparently a bedtime drink, a suit of armour and a stuffed crocodile with a lifelike expression of extreme pain and surprise.

The shopkeeper reappeared.

'Better?' he demanded.

'It's an improvement,' said Twoflower, doubtfully. 'I liked the herbs best.'

At this point Rincewind groaned. He was about to wake up.

There have been three general theories put forward to explain the phenomenon of the wandering shops or, as they are generically known, *tabernae vagantes.*

The first postulates that many thousands of years ago there evolved somewhere in the multiverse a race whose single talent was to buy cheap and sell dear. Soon they controlled a vast galactic empire or, as they put it, Emporium, and the more advanced members of the species found a way to equip their very shops with unique propulsion units that could break the dark walls of space itself and open up vast new markets. And long after the orlds of the Emporium perished in the heat death of their particular universe, after one last defiant fire sale, the wandering starshops still ply their trade,

eating their way through the pages of spacetime like a worm through a three-volume novel.

The second is that they are the creation of a sympathetic Fate, charged with the role of supplying exactly the right thing at the right time.

The third is that they are simply a very clever way of getting around the various Sunday Closing acts.

All these theories, diverse as they are, have two things in common. They explain the observed facts, and they are completely and utterly wrong.

Rincewind opened his eyes and lay for a moment looking up at the stuffed reptile. It was not the best thing to see when awakening from troubled dreams . . .

Magic! So that's what it felt like! No wonder wizards didn't have much truck with sex!

Rincewind knew what orgasms were, of course, he'd had a few in his time, sometimes even in company, but nothing in his experience even approximated to that tight, hot moment when every nerve in his body streamed with blue-white fire and raw magic had blazed forth from his fingers. It filled you and lifted you and you surfed down the rising, curling wave of elemental force. No wonder wizards fought for power . . .

And so on. The Spell in his head had been doing it, though, not Rincewind. He was really beginning to hate that Spell. He was sure that if it hadn't frightened away all the other spells he'd tried to learn he could have been a decent wizard in his own right. '

Somewhere in Rincewind's battered soul the worm of rebellion flashed a fang.

Right, he thought. You're going back into the Octavo, first chance I get.

He sat up.

'Where the hell is this?' he said, grabbing his head to stop it exploding.

'A shop,' said Twoflower mournfully.

'I hope it sells knives because I think I'd like to cut my head off,' said Rincewind. Something about the expression of the two opposite him sobered him up.

'That was a joke,' he said. 'Mainly a joke, anyway. Why are we in this shop?'

'We can't get out,' said Bethan.

'The door's disappeared,' added Twoflower helpfully.

Rincewind stood up, a little shakily.

'Oh,' he said. 'One of *those* shops?'

'All right,' said the shopkeeper testily. 'It's magical, yes, it moves around, yes, no, I'm not telling you why —'

'Can I have a drink of water, please?' said Rincewind.

The shopkeeper looked affronted.

'First no money, then they want a glass of water,' he snapped. 'That's just about —'

Bethan snorted and strode across to the little man, who tried to back away. He was too late.

She picked him up by his apron straps and glared at him eye to eye. Torn though her dress was, disarrayed though her hair was, she became for a moment the symbol of every woman who has caught a man with his thumb on the scales of life.

'Time is money,' she hissed. 'I'll give you thirty seconds to get him a glass of water. I think that's a bargain, don't you?'

'I say,' Twoflower whispered. 'She's a real terror when she's roused, isn't she?'

'Yes,' said Rincewind', without enthusiasm.

'All right, all right,' said the shopkeeper, visibly cowed.

'And then you can let us out,' Bethan added.

'That's fine by me, I wasn't open for business anyway, I just stopped for a few seconds to get my bearings and you barged in!'

He grumbled off through the bead curtains and returned ith a cup of water.

'I washed it out special,' he said, avoiding Bethan's gaze.

Rincewind looked at the liquid in the cup. It had probably been clean before it was poured in, now drinking it would be genocide for thousands of innocent germs.

He put it down carefully.

'Now I'm going to have a good wash!' stated Bethan, and stalked off through the curtain.

The shopkeeper waved a hand vaguely and looked appealingly at Rincewind and Twoflower.

'She's not bad,' said Twoflower. 'She's going to marry a friend of ours.'

'Does he know?'

'Things not so good in the starshop business?' said Rincewind, as sympathetically as he could manage.

The little man shuddered. 'You wouldn't believe it,' he said. 'I mean, you learn not to expect much, you make a sale here and there, it's a living, you know what I mean? But these people you've got these days, the ones with these star things painted on their faces, well, I hardly have time to open the store and they're threatening to burn it down. Too magical, they say. So I say, of course magical, what else?'

'Are there a lot of them about, then?' said Rincewind.

'All over the Disc, friend. Don't ask me why.'

'They believe a star is going to crash into the Disc,' said Rincewind.

'Is it?'

'Lots of people think so.'

That's a shame. I've done good business here. Too magical, they say! What's wrong with magic, that's what I'd like to know?'

'What will you do?' said Twoflower.

'Oh, go to some other universe, there's plenty around,' said the shopkeeper airily. 'Thanks for telling me about the star, though. Can I drop you off somewhere?'

The Spell gave Rincewind's mind a kick.

"Er, no,' he said, 'I think perhaps we'd better stay. To ee it through, you know.'

'You're not worried about this star thing, then?'

'The star is life, not death,' said Riricewind.

'How's that?'

'How's what?'

'You did it again!' said Twoflower, pointing an accusing finger. 'You say things and then don't know you've said them!'

'I just said we'd better stay,' said Rincewind.

'You said the star was life, not death,' said Twoflower. 'Your voice went all crackly and far away. Didn't it?' He turned to the shopkeeper for confirmation.

'That's true,' said the little man. 'I thought his eyes crossed a bit, too.'

'It's the Spell, then,' said Rincewind. 'It's trying to take me over. It knows what's going to happen, and I think it wants to go to Ankh-Morpork. I want to go too,' he added defiantly. 'Can you get us there?'

'Is that the big city on the Ankh? Sprawling place, smells of cesspits?'

'It has an ancient and honourable history,' said Rincewind, his voice stiff with injured civic pride.

'That's not how you described it to *me,'* said Twoflower. 'You told me it was the only city that actually started out decadent.'

Rincewind looked embarrassed. Yes, but, well, it's my home, don't you see?'

'No,' said the shopkeeper, 'not really. I always say home is where you hang your hat.'

'Um, no,' said Twoflower, always anxious to enlighten. 'Where you hang your hat is a hatstand. A home is —'

'I'll just go and see about setting you on your way,' said the shopkeeper hurriedly, as Bethan came in. He scooted past her.

Twoflower followed him.

On the other side of the curtain was a room with a small bed, a rather grubby stove, and a three-legged table. Then the shopkeeper did something to the table, here was a noise like a cork coming reluctantly out of a bottle, and the room contained a wall-to-wall universe.

'Don't be frightened,' said the shopkeeper, as stars streamed past.

'I'm not frightened,' said Twoflower, his eyes sparkling.

'Oh,' said the shopkeeper, slightly annoyed. 'Anyway, it's just imagery generated by the shop, it's not real.'

'And you can go anywhere?'

'Oh no,' said the shopkeeper, deeply shocked. 'There's all kinds of fail-safes built in, after all, there'd be no point in going somewhere with insufficient per capita disposable income. And there's got to be a suitable wall, of course. Ah, here we are, this is your universe. Very bijou, I always think. A sort of universette . . .'

Here is the blackness of space, the myriad stars gleaming like diamond dust or, as some people would say, like great balls of exploding hydrogen a very long way off. But then, some people would say anything.

A shadow starts to blot out the distant glitter, and it is blacker than space itself.

From here it also looks a great deal bigger, because space is not really big, it is simply somewhere to be big *in*. Planets are big, but planets are meant to be big and there is nothing clever about being the right size.

But this shape blotting out the sky like the footfall of God isn't a planet.

It is a turtle, ten thousand miles long from its crater-pocked head to its armoured tail.

And Great A'Tuin is *huge*.

Great flippers rise and fall ponderously, warping space into strange shapes. The Discworld slides across the sky like a royal barge. But even Great A'Tuin is struggling now as it leaves the free depths of space and must fight the tormenting pressures of the solar shallows. Magic is weaker here, on the littoral of light. Many more days of his and the Discworld will be stripped away by the pressures of reality.

Great A'Tuin knows this, but Great A'Tuin can recall doing all this before, many thousands of years ago.

The astrochelonian's eyes, glowing red in the light of the dwarf star, are not focussed on it but at a little patch of space nearby . . .

'Yes, but where are we?' said Twoflower. The shopkeeper, hunched over his table, just shrugged.

'I don't think we're *anywhere,'* he said. 'We're in a cotangent incongruity, I believe. I could be wrong. The shop generally knows what it's doing.'

'You mean you don't?'

'I pick a bit up, here and there.' The shopkeeper blew his nose. 'Sometimes I land on a world where they understand these things.' He turned a pair of small, sad eyes on Twoflower. 'You've got a kind face, sir. I don't mind telling you.'

'Telling me what?'

'It's no life, you know, minding the Shop. Never settling down, always on the move, never closing.'

Why don't you stop, then?'

'Ah, that's it, you see, sir—I can't. I'm under a curse, I am. A terrible thing.' He blew his nose again.

'Cursed to run a shop?'

'Forever, sir, forever. And never closing! For hundreds of years! There was this sorcerer, you see. I did a terrible thing.'

'In a shop?' said Twoflower.

'Oh, yes. I can't remember what it was he wanted, but when he asked for it I – I gave one of those sucking-in noises, you know, like whistling only backwards?' He demonstrated.

Twoflower looked sombre, but he was at heart a kind man and always ready to forgive.

'I see,' he said slowly. 'Even so —'

'That's not all!'

'Oh.'

'I told him there was no demand for it!'

'After making the sucking noise?'

'Yes. I probably grinned, too.'

'Oh, dear. You didn't call him squire, did you?'

'I – I may have done.'

'Um.'

'There's more.'

'Surely not?'

'Yes, I said I could order it and he could come back next day.'

'That doesn't sound too bad,' said Twoflower, who alone of all the people in the multiverse allowed shops to order things for him and didn't object at all to paying quite large sums of money to reimburse the shopkeeper for the inconvenience of having a bit of stock in his store often for several hours.

'It was early closing day,' said the shopkeeper.

'Oh.'

'Yes, and I heard him rattling the doorhandle, I had this sign on the door, you know, it said something like "Closed even for the sale of Necromancer cigarettes," anyway, I heard him banging and I laughed.'

'You laughed?'

'Yes. Like this. Hnufhnufhnufblort.'

'Probably not a wise thing to do,' said Twoflower, shaking his head.

'I know, I know. My father always said, he said, Do not peddle in the affairs of wizards . . . Anyway, I heard him shouting something about never closing *again,* and a lot of words I couldn't understand, and then the shop – the shop – the shop came *alive.'*

'And you've wandered like this ever since?'

'Yes. I suppose one day I might find the sorcerer and perhaps the thing he wanted will be in stock. Until then I must go from place to place —'

'That was a terrible thing to do,' said Twoflower.

The shopkeeper wiped his nose on his apron. 'Thank you,' he said.

'Even so, he shouldn't have cursed you quite so badly,' Twoflower added.

'Oh. Yes, well.' The shopkeeper straightened his apron and made a brave little attempt to pull himself together. 'Anyway, this isn't getting you to Ankh-Morpork, is it?'

'Funny thing is,' said Twoflower, 'that I bought my Luggage in a shop like this, once. Another shop, I mean.'

'Oh yes, there's several of us,' said the shopkeeper, turning back to the table, 'that sorcerer was a very impatient man, I understand.'

'Endlessly roaming through the universe,' mused Twoflower.

'That's right. Mind you, there is a saving on the rates.'

'Rates?'

'Yes, they're—' the shopkeeper paused, and wrinkled his forehead. 'I can't quite remember, it was such a long time ago. Rates, rates —'

'Very large mice?'

'That's probably it.'

'Hold on – it's thinking about something,' said Cohen.

Lackjaw looked up wearily. It had been quite nice, sitting here in the shade. He had just worked out that in trying to escape from a city of crazed madmen he had appeared to have allowed one mad man to give him his full attention. He wondered whether he would live to regret this.

He earnestly hoped so.

'Oh yes, it's definitely thinking,' he said bitterly. 'Anyone can see that.'

'I think it's found them.'

'Oh, good.'

'Hold onto it.'

'Are you mad?' said Lackjaw.

'I know this thing, trust me. Anyway, would you rather be left with all these star people? They might be interested in having a talk with you.'

Cohen sidled over to the Luggage, and then flung himself astride it. It took no notice.

'Hurry up,' he said. 'I think it's going to go.'

Lackjaw shrugged, and climbed on gingerly behind Cohen.

'Oh?' he said, 'and how does it g —'

Ankh-Morpork!

Pearl of cities!

This is not a completely accurate description, of course – it was not round and shiny – but even its worst enemies would agree that if you had to liken Ankh-Morpork to anything, then it might as well be a piece of rubbish covered with the diseased secretions of a dying mollusc.

There have been bigger cities. There have been richer cities. There have certainly been prettier cities. But no city in the multiverse could rival Ankh-Morpork for its smell.

The Ancient Ones, who know everything about all the universes and have smelt the smells of Calcutta and !Xrc —! and dauntocum Marsport, have agreed that even these fine examples of nasal poetry are mere limericks when set against the glory of the Ankh-Morpork smell.

You can talk about ramps. You can talk about garlic. You can talk about France. Go on. But if you haven't smelled Ankh-Morpork on a hot day you haven't smelled anything.

The citizens are proud of it. They carry chairs outside to enjoy it on a really good day. They puff out their cheeks and slap their chests and comment cheerfully on its little distinctive nuances. They have even put up a statue to it, to commemorate the time when the troops of a rival state tried to invade by stealth one dark night and managed to get to the top of the walls before, to their horror, their nose plugs gave out. Rich merchants who ave spent many years abroad sent back home for specially-stoppered and sealed bottles of the stuff, which brings tears to their eyes.

It has that kind of effect.

There is only really one way to describe the effect the smell of Ankh-Morpork has on the visiting nose, and that is by analogy.

Take a tartan. Sprinkle it with confetti. Light it with strobe lights.

Now take a chameleon.

Put the chameleon on the tartan.

Watch it closely.

See?

Which explains why, when the shop finally materialised in Ankh-Morpork, Rincewind sat bolt upright and said 'We're here,' Bethan went pale and Twoflower, who had no sense of smell, said, 'Really? How can you tell?'

It had been a long afternoon. They had broken into realspace in a number of walls in a variety of cities because, according to the shopkeeper, the Disc's magical field was playing up and upsetting everything.

All the cities were empty of most of their citizens and belonged to roaming gangs of crazed left-ear people.

'Where do they all come from?' said Twoflower, as they fled yet another mob.

'Inside every sane person there's a madman struggling to get out,' said the shopkeeper. 'That's what I've always thought. No one goes mad quicker than a totally sane person.'

'That doesn't make sense,' said Bethan, 'or if it makes sense, I don't like it.' .

The star was bigger than the sun. There would be no night tonight. On the opposite horizon the Disc's own sunlet was doing its best to set normally, but the general effect of all that red light was to make the city, never particularly beautiful, look like something painted by a fanatical artist after a bad time on the shoe polish.

But it was *home*. Rincewind peered up and down the mpty street and felt almost happy.

At the back of his mind the Spell was kicking up a ruckus, but he ignored it. Maybe it was true that magic was getting weaker as the star got nearer, or perhaps he'd had the Spell in his head for so long he had built up some kind of psychic immunity, but he found he *could* resist it.

'We're in the docks,' he declared. 'Just smell that sea air!'

'Oh,' said Bethan, leaning against the wall, 'yes.'

'That's ozone, that is,' said Rincewind. That's air with character, is that.' He breathed deeply.

Twoflower turned to the shopkeeper.

'Well, I hope you find your sorcerer,' he said. 'Sorry we didn't buy anything, but all my money's in my Luggage, you see.'

The shopkeeper pushed something into his hand.

'A little gift,' he said. 'You'll need it.'

He darted back into his shop, the bell jangled, the sign saying Call Again Tomorrow For Spoonfetcher's Leeches, the Little Suckers banged forlornly against the door, and the

shop faded into the brickwork as though it had never been. Twoflower reached out gingerly and touched the wall, not quite believing it.

'What's in the bag?' said Rincewind.

It was a thick brown paper bag, with string handles.

'If it sprouts legs I don't want to know about it,' said Bethan.

Twoflower peered inside, and pulled out the contents.

Is that all?' said Rincewind. 'A little house with shells on?'

'It's very useful,' said Twoflower defensively. 'You can keep cigarettes in it.'

'And they're what you really need, are they?' said Rincewind.

'I'd plump for a bottle of really strong sun-tan oil,' said Bethan.

'Come on,' said Rincewind, and set off down the street. The others followed.

It occurred to Twoflower that some words of comfort were called for, a little tactful small talk to take Bethan out f herself, as he would put it, and generally cheer her up.

'Don't worry,' he said. There's just a chance that Cohen might still be alive.'

'Oh, I expect he's alive all right,' she said, stamping along the cobbles as if she nursed a personal grievance against each one of them. 'You don't live to be eighty-seven in his job if you go around dying all the time. But he's not here.'

'Nor is my Luggage,' said Twoflower. 'Of course, that's not the same thing.'

'Do you think the star is going to hit the Disc?'

'No,' said Twoflower confidently.

'Why not?'

'Because Rincewind doesn't think so.'

She looked at him in amazement.

'You see,' the tourist went on, 'you know that thing you do with seaweed?'

Bethan, brought up on the Vortex Plains, had only heard of the sea in stories, and had decided she didn't like it. She looked blank.

'Eat it?'

'No, what you do is, you hang it up outside your door, and it tells you if it's going to rain.'

Another thing Bethan had learned was that there was no real point in trying to understand anything Twoflower said, and that all anyone could do was run alongside the conversation and hope to jump on as it turned a corner.

'I see,' she said.

'Rincewind is like that, you see.'

'Like seaweed.'

'Yes. If there was anything at all to be frightened about, he'd be frightened. But he's not. The star is just about the only thing I've ever seen him not frightened of. If he's not worried, then take it from me, there's nothing to worry about.'

'It's not going to rain?' said Bethan.

'Well, no. Metaphorically speaking.'

'Oh.' Bethan decided not to ask what 'metaphorically' meant, in case it was something to do with seaweed.

Rincewind turned around.

'Come on,' he said. 'Not far now.'

'Where to?' said Twoflower.

'Unseen University, of course.'

'Is that wise?'

'Probably not, but I'm still going—' Rincewind paused, his face a mask of pain. He put his hand to his ears and groaned.

'Spell giving you trouble?'

'Yargh.'

'Try humming.'

Rincewind grimaced. 'I'm going to get rid of this thing,' he said thickly. 'It's going back into the book where it belongs. I want my head back!'

'But then—' Twoflower began, and stopped. They could all hear it – a distant chanting and the stamping of many feet.

'Do you think it's star people?' said Bethan.

It was. The lead marchers came around a corner a hundred yards away, behind a ragged white banner with an eight-pointed star on it.

'Not just star people,' said Twoflower. 'All kinds of people!'

The crowd swept them up in its passage. One moment they were standing in the deserted street, the next they were perforce moving with a tide of humanity that bore them onwards through the city.

Torchlight flickered easily on the damp tunnels far under the University as the heads of the eight Orders of wizardry filed onwards.

'At least it's cool down here,' said one.

'We shouldn't *be* down here.'

Trymon, who was leading the party, said nothing. But he was thinking very hard. He was thinking about the ottle of oil in his belt, and the eight keys the wizards carried – eight keys that would fit the eight locks that chained the Octavo to its lectern. He was thinking that old wizards who sense that magic is draining away are preoccupied with their own problems and are perhaps less alert than they should be. He was thinking that within a

few minutes the Octavo, the greatest concentration of magic on the Disc, would be under his hands.

Despite the coolness of the tunnel he began to sweat.

They came to a lead-lined door set in the sheer stone. Trymon took a heavy key – a good, honest iron key, not like the twisted and disconcerting keys that would unlock the Octavo – gave the lock a squirt of oil, inserted the key, turned it. The lock squeaked open protestingly.

'Are we of one resolve?' said Trymon. There was a series of vaguely affirmative grunts.

He pushed at the door.

A warm gale of thick and somehow oily air rolled over them. The air was filled with a high-pitched and unpleasant chittering. Tiny sparks of octarine fire flared off every nose, fingernail and beard.

The wizards, their heads bowed against the storm of randomised magic that blew out of the room, pushed forward. Half-formed shapes giggled and fluttered around them as the nightmare inhabitants of the Dungeon Dimensions constantly probed (with things that passed for fingers only because they were at the ends of their arms) for an unguarded entry into the circle of firelight that passed for the universe of reason and order.

Even at this bad time for all things magical, even in a room designed to damp down all magical vibrations, the Octavo was still crackling with power.

There was no real need for the torches. The Octavo filled the room with a dull, sullen light, which wasn't strictly light at all but the opposite of light; darkness isn't the opposite of light, it is simply its absence, and what was radiating from the book was the light that lies on the far side of darkness, the light fantastic.

It was a rather disappointing purple colour.

As has been noted before, the Octavo was chained to a lectern carved into the shape of something that looked vaguely avian, slightly reptilian and horribly alive. Two glittering eyes regarded the wizards with hooded hatred.

'I saw it move,' said one of them.

'We're safe so long as we don't touch the book,' said Trymon. He pulled a scroll out of his belt and unrolled it.

'Bring that torch here,' he said, *'and put that cigarette out!'*

He waited for the explosion of infuriated pride. But none came. Instead, the offending mage removed the dogend from his lips with trembling fingers and ground it into the floor.

Trymon exulted. So, he thought, they do what I say. Just for now, maybe – but just for now is enough.

He peered at the crabby writing of a wizard long dead.

'Right,' he said, let's see: "To Appease Yt, The Thynge That Ys The Guardian . . ." '

The crowd surged over one of the bridges that linked Morpork with Ankh. Below it the river, turgid at the best of times, was a mere trickle which steamed.

The bridge shook under their feet rather more than it should. Strange ripples ran across the muddy remains of the river. A few tiles slid off the roof of a nearby house.

'What was that?' said Twoflower.

Bethan looked behind them, and screamed.

The star was rising. As the Disc's own sun scurried for safety below the horizon the great bloated ball of the star climbed slowly into the sky until the whole of it was several degrees above the edge of the world.

They pulled Rincewind into the safety of a doorway. The crowd hardly noticed them, but ran on, terrified as lemmings.

'The star's got spots on,' said Twoflower.

'No,' said Rincewind. 'They're . . . things. Things going around the star. Like the sun goes around the Disc. But they're close in, because, because . . .' he paused. 'I nearly know!'

'Know what?'

'I've got to get rid of this Spell!'

'Which way is the University?' said Bethan.

'This way!' said Rincewind, pointing along the street.

'It must be very popular. That's where everyone's going.'

'I wonder why?' said Twoflower.

'Somehow,' said Rincewind, 'I don't think it's to enroll for evening classes.'

In fact Unseen University was under siege, or at least those parts of it that extruded into the usual, everyday dimensions were under siege. The crowds outside its gates were, generally, making one of two demands. They were demanding that either a) the wizards should stop messing about and get rid of the star or, and this was the demand favoured by the star people, that b) they should cease all magic and commit suicide in good order, thus ridding the Disc of the curse of magic and warding off the terrible threat in the sky.

The wizards on the other side of the walls had no idea how to do a) and no intention of doing b) and many had in fact plumped for c), which largely consisted of nipping out of hidden side doors and having it away on their toes as far as possible, if not faster.

What reliable magic still remained in the University was being channelled into keeping the great gates secure. The wizards were learning that while it was all very fine and impressive to have a set of gates that were locked by magic, it ought to have occurred to the builders to include some sort of emergency back-up device such as, for example, a pair of ordinary, unimpressive stout iron bolts.

In the square outside the gates several large bonfires had been lit, for effect as much as anything else, because the heat from the star was scorching.

'But you can still see the stars,' said Twoflower, 'the ther stars, I mean. The little ones. In a black sky.'

Rincewind ignored him. He was looking at the gates. A group of star people and citizens were trying to batter them down.

'It's hopeless,' said Bethan. 'We'll never get in. Where are you going?'

'For a walk,' said Rincewind. He was setting off determinedly down a side street.

There were one or two freelance rioters here, mostly engaged in wrecking shops. Rincewind took no notice, but followed the wall until it ran parallel to a dark alley that had the usual unfortunate smell of all alleys, everywhere.

Then he started looking very closely at the stonework. The wall here was twenty feet high, and topped with cruel metal spikes.

'I need a knife,' he said.

'You're going to cut your way through?' said Bethan.

'Just find me a knife,' said Rincewind. He started to tap stones.

Twoflower and Bethan looked at each other, and shrugged. A few minutes later they returned with a selection of knives, and Twoflower had even managed to find a sword.

'We just helped ourselves,' said Bethan.

'But we left some money,' said Twoflower. 'I mean, we would have left some money, if we'd had any —'

'So he insisted on writing a note,' said Bethan wearily.

Twoflower drew himself up to his full height, which was hardly worth it.

'I see no reason—' he began, stiffly.

'Yes, yes,' said Bethan, sitting down glumly. 'I know you don't. Rincewind, all the shops have been smashed open, there was a whole bunch of people across the street helping themselves to musical instruments, can you believe that?'

'Yeah,' said Rincewind, picking up a knife and testing its blade thoughtfully. 'Luters, I expect.'

He thrust the blade into the wall, twisted it, and stepped ack as a heavy stone fell out. He looked up, counting under his breath, and levered another stone from its socket.

'How did you do that?' said Twoflower.

'Just give me a leg up, will you?' said Rincewind. A moment later, his feet wedged into the holes he had created, he was making further steps halfway up the wall.

'It's been like this for centuries,' his voice floated down. 'Some of the stones haven't got any mOrtar. Secret entrance, see? Watch out below.'

Another stone cracked into the cobbles.

'Students made it long ago,' said Rincewind. 'Handy way in and out after lights out.'

'Ah,' said Twoflower, 'I *understand.* Over the wall and out to brightly-lit tavernas to drink and sing and recite poetry, yes?'

'Nearly right except for the singing and the poetry, yes,' said Rincewind. 'A couple of these spikes should be loose—' There was a clang.

'There's not much of a drop this side,' came his voice after a few seconds. 'Come on, then. If you're coming.'

And so it was that Rincewind, Twoflower and Bethan entered Unseen University.

Elsewhere on the campus—

The eight wizards inserted their keys and, with many a worried glance at one another, turned them. There was a faint little snicking sound as the lock slid open.

The Octavo was unchained. A faint octarine light played across its bindings.

Trymon reached out and picked it up, and none of the others objected. His arm tingled.

He turned towards the door.

'Now to the Great Hall, brothers,' he said, 'if I may lead the way —'

And there were no objections.

He reached the door with the book tucked under his rm. It felt hot, and somehow prickly.

At every step he expected a cry, a protest, and none came. He had to use every ounce of control to stop himself from laughing. It was easier than he could have imagined.

The others were halfway across the claustrophobic dungeon by the time he was through the door, and perhaps they had noticed something in the set of his shoulders, but it was too late because he had crossed the threshold, gripped the handle, slammed the door, turned the key, smiled the smile.

He walked easily back along the corridor, ignoring the enraged screams of the wizards who had just discovered how impossible it is to pass spells in a room built to be impervious to magic.

The Octavo *squirmed*, but Trymon held it tightly. Now he ran, putting out of his mind the horrible sensations under his arm as the book shape-changed into things hairy, skeletal and spiky. His hand went numb. The faint chittering noises he had been hearing grew in volume, and there were other sounds behind them – leering sounds, beckoning sounds, sounds made by the voices of unimaginable horrors that Trymon found it all too easy to imagine. As he ran across the Great Hall and up the main staircase the shadows began to move and reform and close in around him, and he also became aware that something was following, something with skittery legs moving obscenely fast. Ice formed on the walls. Doorways lunged at him as he barrelled past. Underfoot the stairs began to feel just like a tongue . . .

Not for nothing had Trymon spent long hours in the University's curious equivalent of a gymnasium, building up mental muscle. Don't trust the senses, he knew, because they can be deceived. The stairs are there, somewhere – *will* them to be there, summon them into being as you climb and, boy, you better get good at it. Because this isn't all imagination.

Great A'Tuin slowed.

With flippers the size of continents the skyturtle fought the pull of the star, and waited. There would not be long to wait . . .

Rincewind sidled into the Great Hall. There were a few torches burning, and it looked as though it had been set up for some sort of magical work. But the ceremonial candlesticks had been overturned, the complex octograms chalked on the floor were scuffed as if something had danced on them, and the air was full of a smell unpleasant even by Ankh-Morpork's broad standards. There was a hint of sulphur to it, but that underlay something worse. It smelt like the bottom of a pond.

There was a distant crash, and a lot of shouting.

'Looks like the gates have gone down,' said Rincewind.

'Let's get out of here,' said Bethan.

'The cellars are this way,' said Rincewind, and set off through an arch.

'Down *there!'*

'Yes. Would you rather stay here?'

He took a torch from its bracket on the wall and started down the steps.

After a few flights the walls stopped being panelled and were bare stone. Here and there heavy doors had been propped open.

'I heard something,' said Twoflower.

Rincewind listened. There did seem to be a noise coming from the depths below. It didn't sound frightening. It sounded like a lot of people hammering on a door and shouting 'Oi!'

'It's not those Things from the Dungeon Dimensions you were telling us about, is it?' said Bethan.

They don't swear like that,' said Rincewind. 'Come on.'

They hurried along the dripping passages, following the screamed curses and deep hacking coughs that were somehow reassuring; anything that wheezed like that, the listeners decided, couldn't possibly represent a danger.

At last they came to a door set in an alcove. It looked strong enough to hold back the sea. There was a tiny grille.

'Hey!' shouted Rincewind. It wasn't very useful, but he couldn't think of anything better.

There was a sudden silence. Then a voice from the other side of the door said, very slowly, Who is out there?'

Rincewind recognised that voice. It had jerked him from daydreams into terror on many a hot classroom afternoon, years before. It was Lemuel Panter, who had once made it his personal business to hammer the rudiments of scrying and summoning into young Rincewind's head. He remembered the eyes like gimlets in a piggy face and the voice saying 'And now Mister Rincewind will come out here and draw the relevant symbol on the board' and the million mile walk past the waiting class as he tried desperately to remember what the voice had been droning on about five minutes before. Even now his throat was going dry with terror and randomised guilt. The Dungeon Dimensions just weren't in it.

'Please sir, it's me, sir, Rincewind, sir,'he squeaked. He saw Twoflower and Bethan staring at him, and coughed, 'Yes,' he added, in as deep a voice as he could manage. That's who it is. Rincewind. Right.'

There was a susurration of whispers on the other side of the door.

'Rincewind?'

'Prince who?'

'I remember a boy who wasn't any—'

'The spell, remember?'

'Rincewind?'

There was a pause. Then the voice said, 'I suppose the key isn't in the lock, is it?'

'No,' said Rincewind.

'What did he say?'

'He said no.'

'Typical of the boy.'

'Um, who is in there?' said Rincewind.

'The Masters of Wizardry,' said the voice, haughtily.

'Why?'

There was another pause, and then a conference of embarrassed whispers.

'We, uh, got locked in,' said the voice, reluctantly.

'What, with the Octavo?'

Whisper, whisper.

'The Octavo, in fact, isn't in here, in fact,' said the voice slowly.

'Oh. But you are?' said Rincewind, as politely as possible while grinning like a necrophiliac in a morgue.

'That would appear to be the case.'

'Is there anything we can get you?' said Twoflower anxiously.

'You could try getting us out.'

'Could we pick the lock?' said Bethan.

'No use,' said Rincewind. 'Totally thief-proof.'

'I expect Cohen would have been able to,' said Bethan loyally. 'Wherever he's got to.'

'The Luggage would soon smash it down,' agreed Twoflower.

'Well, that's it then,' said Bethan. 'Let's get out into the fresh air. Fresher air, anyway.' She turned to walk away.

'Hang on, hang on,' said Rincewind. That's just typical, isn't it? Old Rincewind won't have any ideas, will he? Oh, no, he's just a makeweight, he is. Kick him as you pass. Don't rely on him, he's —'

'All right,' said Bethan. 'Let's hear it, then.'

'— a nonentity, a failure, just a – what?'

'How are you going to get the door open?' said Bethan.

Rincewind looked at her with his mouth open. Then he looked at the door. It really was very solid, and the lock had a smug air.

But he had got in, once, long ago. Rincewind the student had pushed at the door and it had swung open, and then a moment later the Spell had jumped into his mind and ruined his life.

'Look,' said a voice from behind the grille, as kindly as it could manage. 'Just go and find us a wizard, there's a good fellow.'

Rincewind took a deep breath.

'Stand back,' he rasped.

'What?'

'Find something to hide behind,' he barked, with his voice shaking only slightly. 'You too,' he said to Bethan and Twoflower.

'But you can't —'

'I mean it!'

'He means it,' said Twoflower. 'That little vein on the side of his forehead, you know, when it throbs like that, well —'

'Shut up!'

Rincewind raised one arm uncertainly and pointed it at the door.

There was total silence.

Oh gods, he thought, what happens now?

In the blackness at the back of his mind the Spell shifted uneasily.

Rincewind tried to get in tune or whatever with the metal of the lock. If he could sow discord amongst its atoms so that they flew apart —

Nothing happened.

He swallowed hard, and turned his attention to the wood. It was old and nearly fossilised, and probably wouldn't burn even if soaked in oil and dropped into a furnace. He tried anyway, explaining to the ancient molecules that they should try to jump up and down to keep warm —

In the strained silence of his own mind he glared at the Spell, which looked very sheepish.

He considered the air around the door itself, how it might best be twisted into weird shapes so that the door existed in another set of dimensions entirely.

The door sat there, defiantly solid.

Sweating, his mind beginning the endless walk up to 187 the blackboard in front of the grinning class, he turned desperately to the lock again. It must be made of little bits of metal, not very heavy —

From the grille came the faintest of sounds. It was the noise of wizards untensing themselves and shaking their heads.

Someone whispered, *'I told you—'*

There was a tiny grinding noise, and a click.

Rincewind's face was a mask. Perspiration dripped off his chin.

There was another click, and the grinding of reluctant spindles. Trymon had oiled the lock, but the oil had been soaked up by the rust and dust of years, and the only way for a wizard to move something by magic, unless he can harness some external movement, is to use the leverage of his mind itself.

Rincewind was trying very hard to prevent his brain being pushed out of his ears.

The lock rattled. Metal rods flexed in pitted groves, gave in, pushed levers.

Levers clicked, notches engaged. There was a long drawn-out grinding noise that left Rincewind on his knees.

The door swung open on pained hinges. The wizards sidled out cautiously.

Twoflower and Bethan helped Rincewind to his feet. He stood grey-faced and swaying.

'Not bad,' said one of the wizards, looking closely at the lock. 'A little slow, perhaps.'

'Never mind that!' snapped Jiglad Wert. 'Did you three see anyone on the way down here?'

'No,' said Twoflower.

'Someone has stolen the Octavo.'

Rincewind's head jerked up. His eyes focussed.

'Who?'

'Trymon —'

Rincewind swallowed. 'Tall man?' he said. 'Fair hair, looks a bit like a ferret?'

'Now that you mention it —'

'He was in my class,' said Rincewind. 'They always said he'd go a long way.'

'He'll go a lot further if he opens the book,' said one of the wizards, who was hastily rolling a cigarette in shaking fingers.

'Why?' said Twoflower. 'What will happen?'

The wizards looked at one another.

'It's an ancient secret, handed down from mage to mage, and we can't pass it on to knowlessmen,' said Wert.

'Oh, go on,' said Twoflower.

'Oh well, it probably doesn't matter any more. One mind can't hold all the spells. It'll break down, and leave a hole.'

'What? In his head?'

'Um. No. In the fabric of the Universe,' said Wert. 'He might think he can control it by himself, but —'

They felt the sound before they heard it. It started off in the stones as a slow vibration, then rose suddenly to a knife-edge whine that bypassed the eardrums and bored straight into the brain. It sounded like a human voice singing, or chanting, or screamfng, but there were deeper and more horrible harmonics.

The wizards went pale. Then, as one man, they turned and ran up the steps.

There were crowds outside the building. Some people were holding torches, others had stopped in the act of piling kindling around the walls. But everyone was staring up at the Tower of Art.

The wizards pushed their way through the unheeding bodies, and turned to look up.

The sky was full of moons. Each one was three times bigger than the Disc's own moon, and each was in shadow except for a pink crescent where it caught the light of the star.

But in front of everything the top of the Tower of Art was an incandescent fury. Shapes could be dimly glimpsed within it, but there was nothing reassuring about them. The sound had changed now to the wasplike buzzing, magnified a million times.

Some of the wizards sank to their knees.

'He's done it,' said Wert, shaking his head. 'He's opened a pathway.'

'Are those things demons?' said Twoflower.

'Oh, *demons,'* said Wert. 'Demons would be a picnic compared with what's trying to come through up there.'

'They're worse than anything we can possibly imagine,' said Panter.

'I can imagine some pretty bad things,' said Rincewind.

'These are worse.'

'Oh.'

'And what do you propose to do about it?' said a clear voice.

They turned. Bethan was glaring at them, arms folded.

'Pardon?' said Wert.

'You're wizards, aren't you?' she said. 'Well, get on with it.'

'What, tackle that?' said Rincewind.

'Know anyone else?'

Wert pushed forward. 'Madam, I don't think you quite understand —'

'The Dungeons Dimensions will empty into our Universe, right?' said Bethan.

'Well, yes —'

'We'll all be eaten by things with tentacles for faces, right?'

'Nothing so pleasant, but —'

'And you're just going to let it happen?'

'Listen,' said Rincewind. 'It's all over, do you see? You can't put the spells back in the book, you can't unsay what's been said, you can't —'

'You can *try!'*

Rincewind sighed, and turned to Twoflower.

He wasn't there. Rincewind's eyes turned inevitably towards the base of the Tower of Art, and he was just in time to see the tourist's plump figure, sword inexpertly in hand, as it disappeared into a door.

Rincewind's feet made their own decision and, from the oint of view of his head, got it entirely wrong.

The other wizards watched him go.

'Well?' said Bethan. *'He's* going.' . The wizards tried to avoid one another's eyes.

Eventually Wert said, 'We could try, I suppose. It doesn't seem to be spreading.'

'But we've got hardly any magic to speak of,' said one of the wizards.

'Have you got a better idea, then?'

One by one, their ceremonial robes glittering in the weird light, the wizards turned and trudged towards the tower.

The tower was hollow inside, with the stone treads of its staircase mortared spiral-fashion into the walls. Twoflower was already several turns up by the time Rincewind caught him.

'Hold on,' he said, as cheerfully as he could manage. 'This sort of thing is a job for the likes of Cohen, not you. No offence.'

'Would he do any good?'

Rincewind looked up at the actinic light that lanced down through the distant hole at the top of the staircase.

'No,' he admitted.

Then I'd be as good as him, wouldn't I?' said Twoflower, flourishing his looted sword.

Rincewind hopped after him, keeping as close to the wall as possible.

'You don't understand!' he shouted. There's unimaginable horrors up there!'

'You always said I didn't have any imagination.'

'It's a point, yes,' Rincewind conceded, 'but —'

Twoflower sat down.

'Look,' he said. 'I've been looking forward to something like this ever since I came here. I mean, this is an adventure, isn't it? Alone against the gods, that sort of thing?'

Rincewind opened and shut his mouth for a few seconds before the right words managed to come out.

'Can you use a sword?' he said weakly.

'I don't know. I've never tried.'

'You're mad!'

Twoflower looked at him with his head on one side. 'You're a fine one to talk,' he said. 'I'm here because I don't know any better, but what about you?' He pointed downwards, to where the other wizards were toiling up the stairs. 'What about them?'

Blue light speared down the inside of the tower. There was a peal of thunder.

The wizards reached them, coughing horribly and fighting for breath.

'What's the plan?' said Rincewind.

'There isn't one,' said Wert.

'Right. Fine,' said Rincewind. 'I'll leave you to get on with it, then.'

'You'll come with us,' said Panter.

'But I'm not even a proper wizard. You threw me out, remember?'

'I can't think of any student less able,' said the old wizard, 'but you're here, and that's the only qualification you need. Come on.'

The light flared and went out. The terrible noises died as if strangled.

Silence filled the tower; one of those heavy, pressing silences.

'It's stopped,' said Twoflower.

Something moved, high up against the circle of red sky. It fell slowly, turning over and over and drifting from side to side. It hit the stairs a turn above them.

Rincewind was first to it.

It was the Octavo. But it lay on the stone as limp and lifeless as any other book, its pages fluttering in the breeze that blew up the tower.

Twoflower panted up behind Rincewind, and looked down.

'They're blank,' he whispered. 'Every page is completely blank.'

'Then he did it,' said Wert. 'He's read the spells. Successfully, too. I wouldn't have believed it.'

'There was all that noise,' said Rincewind doubtfully. 'The light, too. Those shapes. That didn't sound so successful to me.'

'Oh, you always get a certain amount of extradimen-sional attention in any great work of magic,' said Panter dismissively. 'It impresses people, nothing more.'

'It looked like monsters up there,' said Twoflower, standing closer to Rincewind.

'Monsters? Show me some monsters!' said Wert.

Instinctively they looked up. There was no sound. Nothing moved against the circle of light.

'I think we should go up and, er, congratulate him,' said Wert.

'Congratulate?' exploded Rincewind. 'He stole the Octavo! He locked you up!'

The wizards exchanged knowing looks.

'Yes, well,' said one of them. 'When you've advanced in the craft, lad, you'll know that there are times when the important thing is success.'

'It's getting there that matters,' said Wert bluntly. 'Not how you travel.'

They set off up the spiral.

Rincewind sat down, scowling at the darkness.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Twoflower, who was holding the Octavo.

'This is no way to treat a book,' he said. 'Look, he's bent the spine right back. People always do that, they've got no idea of how to treat them.'

'Yah,' said Rincewind vaguely.

'Don't worry,' said Twoflower.

'I'm not worried, I'm just angry,' snapped Rincewind. 'Give me the bloody thing!'

He snatched the book and snapped it open viciously.

He rummaged around in the back of his mind, where the Spell hung out.

'All right,' he snarled. You've had your fun, you've ruined my life, now get back to where you belong!'

'But I—' protested Twoflower.

'The Spell, I mean the Spell,' said Rincewind. 'Go on, get back on the page!'

He glared at the ancient parchment until his eyes crossed.

'Then I'll say you!' he shouted, his voice echoing up the tower. 'You can join the rest of them and much good may it do you!'

He shoved the book back into Twoflower's arms and staggered off up the steps.

The wizards had reached the top and disappeared from view. Rincewind climbed after them.

'Lad, am I?' he muttered. 'When I'm advanced in the craft, eh? I just managed to go around with one of the Great Spells in my head for years without going totally insane, didn't I?' He considered the last question from all angles. Yes, you did,' he reassured himself. 'You didn't start talking to trees, even when trees started talking to *you.'*

His head emerged into the sultry air at the top of the tower.

He had expected to see fire-blackened stones criss-crossed with talon marks, or perhaps something even worse.

Instead he saw the seven senior wizards standing by Trymon, who seemed totally unscathed. He turned and smiled pleasantly at Rincewind.

'Ah, Rincewind. Come and join us, won't you?'

So this is it, Rincewind thought. All that drama for nothing. Maybe I really am not cut out to be a wizard, maybe —

He looked up and into Trymon's eyes.

Perhaps it was the Spell, in its years of living in Rincewind's head, that had affected his eyes. Perhaps his time with Twoflower, who only saw things as they ought to be, had taught him to see things as they are.

But what was certain was that by far the most difficult thing Rincewind did in his whole life was look at Trymon without running in terror or being very violently sick.

The others didn't seem to have noticed.

They also seemed to be standing very still.

Trymon had tried to contain the seven Spells in his mind and it had broken, and the Dungeon Dimensions had found their hole, all right. Silly to have imagined that the Things would have come marching out of a sort of rip in the sky, waving mandibles and tentacles. That was old-fashioned stuff, far too risky. Even nameless terrors learned to move with the times. All they really needed to enter was one head.

His eyes were empty holes.

Knowledge speared into Rincewind's mind like a knife of ice. The Dungeon Dimensions would be a playgroup compared to what the Things could do in a universe of order. People were craving order, and order they would get – the order of the turning screw, the immutable law of straight lines and numbers. They would beg for the harrow . . .

Trymon was looking at him. *Something* was looking at him. And still the others hadn't noticed. Could he even explain it? Trymon looked the same as he had always done, except for the eyes, and a slight sheen to his skin.

Rincewind stared, and knew that there were far worse things than Evil. All the demons in Hell would torture your very soul, but that was precisely because they valued souls very highly; evil would always try to steal the universe, but at least it considered the universe worth stealing. But the grey world behind those empty eyes would trample and destroy without even according its victims the dignity of hatred. It wouldn't even notice them.

Trymon held out his hand.

'The eighth spell,' he said. 'Give it to me.'

Rincewind backed away.

'This is disobedience, Rincewind. I am your superior, after all. In fact, I have been voted the supreme head of all the Orders.'

'Really?' said Rincewind hoarsely. He looked at the other wizards. They were immobile, like statues.

'Oh yes,' said Trymon pleasantly. 'Quite without prompting, too. Very democratic.'

'I preferred tradition,' said Rincewind. 'That way even the dead get the vote.'

'You will give me the spell voluntarily,' said Trymon. 'Do I have to show you what I will do otherwise? And in the end you will still yield it. You will scream for the opportunity to give it to me.'

If it stops anywhere, it stops here, thought Rincewind.

'You'll have to take it,' he said. 1 won't give it to you.'

'I remember you,' said Trymon. 'Not much good as a student, as I recall. You never really trusted magic, you kept on saying there should be a better way to run a universe. Well, you'll see. I have plans. We can —'

'Not we,' said Rincewind firmly.

'Give me the Spell!'

'Try and take it,' said Rincewind, backing away. 1 don't think you can.'

'Oh?'

Rincewind jumped aside as octarine fire flashed from Trymon's fingers and left a bubbling rock puddle on the stones.

He could sense the Spell lurking in the back of his mind. He could sense its fear.

In the silent caverns of his head he reached out for it. It retreated in astonishment, like a dog faced with a maddened sheep. He followed, stamping angrily through the disused lots and inner-city disaster areas of his subconscious, until he found it cowering behind a heap of condemned memories. It roared silent defiance at him, but Rincewind wasn't having any.

Is this it? he shouted at it. When it's time for the showdown, you go and hide? You're frightened?

The Spell said, that's nonsense, you can't possibly believe that, I'm one of the Eight Spells. But Rincewind advanced on it angrily, shouting, Maybe, but the fact is I do believe it and you'd better remember whose head you're in, right? I can believe anything I like in here!

Rincewind jumped aside again as another bolt of fire lanced through the hot night. Trymon grinned, and made nother complicated motion with his hands.

Pressure gripped Rincewind. Every inch of his skin felt as though it was being used as an anvil. He flopped onto his knees.

'There are much worse things,' said Trymon pleasantly. 'I can make your flesh burn on the bones, or fill your body with ants. I have the power to —'

'I have a sword, you know.'

The voice was squeaky with defiance.

Rincewind raised his head. Through a purple haze of pain he saw Twoflower standing behind Trymon, holding a sword in exactly the wrong way.

Trymon laughed, and flexed his fingers. For a moment his attention was diverted.

Rincewind was angry. He was angry at the Spell, at the world, at the unfairness of everything, at the fact that he hadn't had much sleep lately, at the fact that he wasn't thinking quite straight. But most of all he was angry with Trymon, standing there full of the magic Rincewind had always wanted but had never achieved, and doing nothing worthwhile with it.

He sprang, striking Trymon in the stomach with his head and flinging his arms around him in desperation. Twoflower was knocked aside as they slid along the stones.

Trymon snarled, and got out the first syllable of a spell before Rincewind's wildly flailing elbow caught him in the neck. A blast of randomised magic singed Rincewind's hair.

Rincewind fought as he always fought, without skill or fairness or tactics but with a great deal of whirlwind effort. The strategy was to prevent an opponent getting enough time to realise that in fact Rincewind wasn't a very good or strong fighter, and it often worked.

It was working now, because Trymon had spent rather too much time reading ancient manuscripts and not getting enough healthy exercise and vitamins. He managed to get several blows in, which Rincewind was far too high on rage to notice, but he only used his hands while Rincewind employed knees, feet and teeth as well.

He was, in fact, winning.

This came as a shock.

It came as more of a shock when, as he knelt on Trymon's chest hitting him repeatedly about the head, the other man's face changed. The skin crawled and waved like something seen through a heat haze, and Trymon spoke.

'Help me!'

For a moment his eyes looked up at Rincewind in fear, pain and entreaty. Then they weren't eyes at all, but multi-faceted things on a head that could be called a head only by stretching the definition to its limits. Tentacles and saw-edged legs and talons unfolded to rip Rincewind's rather sparse flesh from his body.

Twoflower, the tower and the red sky all vanished. Time ran slowly, and stopped.

Rincewind bit hard on a tentacle that was trying to pull his face off. As it uncoiled in agony he thrust out a hand and felt it break something hot and squishy.

They were watching. He turned his head, and saw that now he was fighting on the floor of an enormous amphitheatre. On each side tier upon tier of creatures stared down at him,

creatures with bodies and faces that appeared to have been made by crossbreeding nightmares. He caught a glimpse of even worse things behind him, huge shadows that stretched into the overcast sky, before the Trymon-monster lunged at him with a barbed sting the size of a spear.

Rincewind dodged sideways, and then swung around with both hands clasped together into one fist that caught the thing in the stomach, or possibly the thorax, with a blow that ended in the satisfying crunch of chitin.

He plunged forward, fighting now out of terror of what would happen if *he* stopped. The ghostly arena was full of the cluttering of the Dungeon creatures, a wall of rustling sound that hammered at his ears as he struggled. He imagined that sound filling the Disc, and he flung blow after blow to save the world of men, to preserve the little circle of firelight in the dark night of chaos and to lose the gap through which the nightmare was advancing. But mainly he hit it to stop it hitting back.

Claws or talons drew white-hotlines across his back, and something bit his shoulder, but he found a nest of soft tubes among all the hairs and scales and squeezed it hard.

An arm barbed with spikes swept him away, and he rolled over in the gritty black dust.

Instinctively he curled into a ball, but nothing happened. Instead of the onslaught of fury he expected he opened his eyes to see the creature limping away from him, various liquids leaking from it.

It was the first time anything had ever run away from Rincewind.

He dived after it, caught a scaly leg, and wrenched. The creature chittered at him and flailed desperately with such appendages as were still working, but Rincewind's grip was unshakeable. He pulled himself up and planted one last satisfying blow into its remaining eye. It screamed, and ran. And there was only one place for it to run to.

The tower and the red sky came back with the click of restored time.

As soon as he felt the press of the flagstones under his feet Rincewind flung his weight to one side and rolled on his back with the frantic creature at arms' length.

'Now!' he yelled.

'Now what?' said Twoflower. 'Oh. Yes. Right!'

He swung the sword inexpertly but with some force, missing Rincewind by inches and burying it deeply in the Thing. There was a shrill buzzing, as though he had smashed a wasp's nest, and the melee of arms and legs and tentacles flailed in agony. It rolled again, screaming and thrashing at the flagstones, and then it was thrashing at nothing at all because it had rolled over the edge of the stairway, taking Rincewind with it.

There was a squelching noise as it bounced off a few of the stone steps, and then a distant and disappearing shriek as it tumbled the depth of the tower.

Finally there was a dull explosion and a flash of octarine light.

Then Twoflower was alone on the top of the tower – alone, that is, except for seven wizards who still seemed to be frozen to the spot.

He sat bewildered as seven fireballs rose out of the blackness and plunged into the discarded Octavo, which suddenly looked its old self and far more interesting.

'Oh dear,' he said. 'I suppose they're the Spells.'

'Twoflower.' The voice was hollow and echoing, and just recognisable as Rincewind's.

Twoflower stopped with his hand halfway to the book.

'Yes?' he said. 'Is that – is that you, Rincewind?'

'Yes,' said the voice, resonant with the tones of the grave. 'And there is something very important I want you to do for me, Twoflower.'

Twofiower looked around. He pulled himself together. So the fate of the Disc would depend on him, after all.

'I'm ready,' he said, his voice vibrating with pride. 'What is it you want me to do?'

'First, I want you to listen very carefully,' said Rincewind's disembodied voice patiently.

'I'm listening.'

It's very important that when I tell you what to do you don't say "What do you mean?" or argue or anything, understand?'

Twoflower stood to attention. At least, his rnind stood to attention, his body really couldn't. He stuck out several of his chins.

'I'm ready,' he said.

'Good. Now, what I want you to do is —'

'Yes?'

Rincewind's voice rose from the depths of the stairwell.

'I want you to come and help me up before I lose my grip on this stone,' it said.

Twoflower opened his mouth, then shut it quickly. He ran to the square hole and peered down. By the ruddy light of the star he could just make out Rincewind's eyes looking up at him.

Twoflower lay down on his stomach and reached out. Rincewind's hand gripped his wrist in the sort of grip that told Twoflower that if he, Rincewind, wasn't pulled up then there was no possible way in which that grip was going to be relaxed.

'I'm glad you're alive,' he said.

'Good. So am I,' said Rincewind.

He hung around in the darkness for a bit. After the past few minutes it was almost enjoyable, but only almost.

'Pull me up, then,' he hinted.

'I think that might be sort of difficult,' grunted Twoflower. 'I don't actually think I can do it, in fact.'

'What are you holding on to, then?'

'You.'

'I mean besides me.'

'What do you mean, besides you?' said Twoflower.

Rincewind said a word.

'Well, look,' said Twoflower. The steps go around in a spiral, right? If I sort of swing you and then you let go —'

'If you're going to suggest I try dropping twenty feet down a pitch dark tower in the hope of hitting a couple of greasy little steps which might not even still be there, you can forget it,' said Rincewind sharply.

'There is an alternative, then.'

'Out with it, man.'

'You could drop five hundred feet down a pitch black tower and hit stones which certainly are there,' said Twoflower.

Dead silence came from below him. Then Rincewind said, accusingly, 'That was sarcasm.'

'I thought it was just stating the obvious.'

Rincewind grunted.

'I suppose you couldn't do some magic—' Twoflower began.

'No.'

'Just a thought.'

There was a flare of light far below, and a confused shouting, and then more lights, more shouting, and a line f torches starting up the long spiral.

'There's some people coming up the stairs,' said Twoflower, always keen to inform.

'I hope they're running,' said Rincewind. 'I can't feel my arm.'

'You're lucky,' said Twoflower. 'I can feel mine.'

The leading torch stopped its climb and a voice rang out, filling the hollow tower with indecipherable echoes.

'I think,' said Twoflower, aware that he was gradually sliding further over the hole, 'that was someone telling us to hold on.'

Rincewind said another word.

Then he said, in a lower and more urgent tone, 'Actually, I don't think I can hang on any longer.'

'Try.'

'It's no good, I can feel my hand slipping!'

Twoflower sighed. It was time for harsh measures. 'All right, then,' he said. 'Drop, then. See if I care.'

'What?' said Rincewind, so astonished he forgot to let go.

'Go on, die. Take the easy way out.'

'Easy?' .

'All you have to do is plummet screaming through the air and break every bone in your body,' said Twoflower. 'Anybody can do it. Go on. I wouldn't want you to think that

perhaps you ought to stay alive because we need you to say the Spells and save the Disc. Oh, no. Who cares if we all get burned up? Go on, just think of yourself. Drop.'

There was a long, embarrassed silence.

'I don't know why it is,' said Rincewind eventually, in a voice rather louder than necessary, 'but ever since I met you I seem to have spent a lot of time hanging by my fingers over certain depth, have you noticed?'

'Death,' corrected Twoflower.

'Death what?' said Rincewind.

'Certain death,' said Twoflower helpfully, trying to ignore the slow but inexorable slide of his body across the flagstones. 'Hanging over certain death. You don't like heights.'

'Heights I don't mind,' said Rincewind's voice from the darkness. 'Heights I can live with. It's depths that are occupying my attention at the moment. Do you know what I'm going to do when we get out of this?'

'No?' said Twoflower, wedging his toes into a gap in the flagstones and trying to make himself immobile by sheer force of will.

'I'm going to build a house in the flattest country I can find and it's only going to have a ground floor and I'm not even going to wear sandals with thick soles —'

The leading torch came around the last turn of the spiral and Twoflower looked down on the grinning face of Cohen. Behind him, still hopping awkwardly up the stones, he could make out the reassuring bulk of the Luggage.

'Everything all right?' said Cohen. 'Can I do anything?'

Rincewind took a deep breath.

Twoflower recognised the signs. Rincewind was about to say something like, 'Yes, I've got this itch on the back of my neck, you couldn't scratch it, could you, on your way past?' or 'No, I enjoy hanging over bottomless drops' and he decided he couldn't possibly face that. He spoke very quickly.

'Pull Rincewind back onto the stairs,' he snapped. Rincewind deflated in mid-snarl.

Cohen caught him around the waist and jerked him unceremoniously onto the stones.

'Nasty mess down on the floor down there,' he said conversationally. 'Who was it?'

'Did it—' Rincewind swallowed, 'did it have – you know – tentacles and things?'

'No,' said Cohen. 'Just the normal bits. Spread out a bit, of course.'

Rincewind looked at Twoflower, who shook his head.

'Just a wizard who let things get on top of him,' he said.

Unsteadily, with his arms screaming at him, Rincewind let himself be helped back onto the roof of the tower.

'How did you get here?' he added.

Cohen pointed to the Luggage, which had trotted over 203 to Twoflower and opened its lid like a dog that knows it's been bad and is hoping that a quick display of affection may avert the rolled-up newspaper of authority.

'Bumpy but fast,' he said admiringly. 'I'll tell you this, no-one tries to stop you.'

Rincewind looked up at the sky. It was indeed full of moons, huge cratered discs now ten times bigger than the Disc's tiny satellite. He looked at them without much interest. He felt washed out and stretched well beyond breaking point, as fragile as ancient elastic.

He noticed that Twoflower was trying to set up his picture box.

Cohen was looking at the seven senior wizards.

'Funny place to put statues,' he said. 'No-one can see them. Mind you, I can't say they're up to much. Very poor work.'

Rincewind staggered across and tapped Wert gingerly on the chest. He was solid stone.

This is it, he thought. I just want to go home.

Hang on, I am home. More or less. So I just want a good sleep, and perhaps it will all be better in the morning.

His gaze fell on the Octavo, which was outlined in tiny flashes of octarine fire. Oh yes, he thought.

He picked it up and thumbed idly through its pages. They were thick with complex and swirling script that changed and reformed even as he looked at it. It seemed undecided as to what it should be; one moment it was an orderly, matter-of-fact printing; the next a series of angular runes. Then it would be curly Kythian spellscript. Then it would be pictograms in some ancient, evil and forgotten writing that seemed to consist exclusively of unpleasant reptilian beings doing complicated and painful things to one another . . .

The last page was empty. Rincewind sighed, and looked in the back of his mind. The Spell looked back.

He had dreamed of this moment, how he would finally evict the Spell and take vacant possession of his own head and learn all those lesser spells which had, up until hen, been too frightened to stay in his mind. Somehow he had expected it to be far more exciting.

Instead, in utter exhaustion and in a mood to brook no argument, he stared coldly at the Spell and jerked a metaphorical thumb over his shoulder. You. Out.

It looked for a moment as though the Spell was going to argue, but it wisely thought better of it.

There was a tingling sensation, a blue flash behind his eyes, and a sudden feeling of emptiness.

When he looked down at the page it was full of words. They were runes again. He was glad about that, the reptilian pictures were not only unspeakable but probably unpronounceable too, and reminded him of things he would have great difficulty in forgetting.

He looked blankly at the book while Twoflower bustled around unheeded and Cohen tried in vain to lever the rings off the stone wizards.

He had to do something, he reminded himself. What was it, now?

He opened the book at the first page and began to read, his lips moving and his forefinger tracing the outline of each letter. As he mumbled each word it appeared soundlessly in the air beside him, in bright colours that streamed away in the night wind. He turned over the page.

Other people were coming up the steps now – star people, citizens, even some of the Patrician's personal guard. A couple of star people made a half-hearted attempt to approach Rincewind, who was surrounded now by a rainbow swirl of letters and took absolutely no notice of them, but Cohen drew his sword and looked nonchalantly at them and they thought better of it.

Silence spread out from Rincewind's bent form like ripples in a puddle. It cascaded down the tower and spread out through the milling crowds below, flowed over the walls, gushed darkly through the city, and engulfed the lands beyond.

The bulk of the star loomed silently over the Disc. In the sky around it the new moons turned slowly and noiselessly.

The only sound was Rincewind's hoarse whispering as he turned page after page.

'Isn't this exciting!' said Twoflower. Cohen, who was rolling a cigarette from the tarry remnants of its ancestors, looked at him blankly, paper halfway to his lips.

'Isn't *what* exciting?' he said.

'All this magic!'

'It's only lights,' said Cohen critically. 'He hasn't even produced doves out of his sleeves.'

'Yes, but can't you sense the occult potentiality?' said Twoflower.

Cohen produced a big yellow match from somewhere in his tobacco bag, looked at Wert for a moment, and with great deliberation struck the match on his fossilised nose.

'Look,' he said to Twoflower, as kindly as he could manage. 'What do you expect? I've been around a long time, I've seen the whole magical thing, and I can tell you that if you

go around with your jaw dropping all the time people hit it. Anyway, wizard's die just like anyone else when you stick a —'

There was a loud snap as Rincewind shut the book. He stood up, and looked around.

What happened next was this:

Nothing.

It took a little while for people to realise it. Everyone had ducked instinctively, waiting for the explosion of white light or scintillating fireball or, in the case of Cohen, who had fairly low expectations, a few white pigeons, possibly a slightly crumpled rabbit.

It wasn't even an interesting nothing. Sometimes things can fail to happen in quite impressive ways, but as far as non-events went this one just couldn't compete.

'Is that it?' said Cohen. There was a general muttering from the crowd, and several of the star people were looking angrily at Rincewind.

The wizard stared Wearily at Cohen.

'I suppose so,' he said.

'But nothing's happened.'

Rincewind looked blankly at the Octavo.

'Maybe it has a subtle effect?' he said hopefully. 'After all, we don't know exactly what is supposed to happen.'

'We knew it!' shouted one of the star people. 'Magic doesn't work! It's all illusion!'

A stone looped over the roof and hit Rincewind on the shoulder.

'Yeah,' said another star person. 'Let's get him!'

'Let's throw him off the tower!'

'Yeah, let's get him *and* throw him off the tower!'

The crowd surged forward. Twoflower held up his hands.

'I'm sure there's just been a slight mistake—' he began, before his legs were kicked from underneath him.

'Oh bugger,' said Cohen, dropping his dogend and grinding it under a sandalled foot. He drew his sword and looked around for the Luggage.

It hadn't rushed to Twoflower's aid. It was standing in front of Rincewind, who was clutching the Octavo to his chest like a hot-water bottle and looking frantic.

A star man lunged at him. The Luggage raised its lid threateningly.

'I know why it hasn't worked,' said a voice from the back of the crowd. It was Bethan.

'Oh yeah?' said the nearest citizen. 'And why should we listen to you?'

A mere fraction of a second later Cohen's sword was pressed against his neck.

'On the other hand,' said the man evenly, 'perhaps we should pay attention to what this young lady has got to say.'

As Cohen swung around slowly with his sword at the ready Bethan stepped forward and pointed to the swirling shapes of the spells, which still hung in the air around Rincewind.

'That one can't be right,' she said, indicating a smudge of dirty brown amidst the pulsing, brightly coloured flares.

You must have mispronounced a word. Let's have a look.'

Rincewind passed her the Octavo without a word.

She opened it and peered the pages.

'What funny writing,' she said. 'It keeps changing. What's that crocodile thing doing to the octopus?'

Rincewind looked over her shoulder and, without thinking, told her. She was silent for a moment.

'Oh,' she said levelly. 'I didn't know crocodiles could do that.'

'It's just ancient picture writing,' said Rincewind hurriedly. 'It'll change if you wait. The Spells can appear in every known language.'

'Can you remember what you said when the wrong colour appeared?'

Rincewind ran a finger down the page.

'There, I think. Where the two-headed lizard is doing – whatever it's doing.'

Twoflower appeared at her other shoulder. The Spell flowed into another script.

'I can't even pronounce it,' said Bethan. 'Squiggle, squiggle, dot, dash.'

'That's Cupumuguk snow runes,' said Rincewind. 'I think it should be pronounced "zph".'

'It didn't work, though. How about "sph"?'

They looked at the word. It remained resolutely off-colour.

'Or "sff"?' said Bethan.

'It might be "tsff",' said Rincewind doubtfully. If anything the colour became a dirtier shade of brown.

'How about "zsff"?' said Twoflower.

'Don't be silly,' said Rincewind. 'With snow runes the —'

Bethan elbowed him in the stomach and pointed.

The brown shape in the air was now a brilliant red.

The book trembled in her hands. Rincewind grabbed her around the waist, snatched Twoflower by the collar, and jumped backwards.

Bethan lost her grip on the Octavo, which tumbled towards the floor. And didn't reach it.

The air around the Octavo glowed. It rose slowly, flapping its pages like wings.

Then there was a plangent, sweet twanging noise and it seemed to explode in a complicated silent flower of light which rushed outwards, faded, and was gone.

But something was happening much further up in the sky . . .

Down in the geological depths of Great A'Tuin's huge brain new thoughts surged along neural pathways the size of arterial roads. It was impossible for a sky turtle to change its expression, but in some indefinable way its scaly, meteor-pocked face looked quite expectant.

It was staring fixedly at the eight spheres endlessly orbiting around the star, on the very beaches of space.

The spheres were cracking.

Huge segments of rock broke away and began the long spiral down to the star. The sky filled with glittering shards.

From the wreakage of one hollow shell a very small sky turtle paddled its way into the red light. It was barely bigger than an asteroid, its shell still shiny with molten yolk.

There were four small world-elephant calves on there, too. And on their backs was a discworld, tiny as yet, covered in smoke and volcanoes.

Great A'Tuin waited until all eight baby turtles had freed themselves from their shells and were treading space and looking bewildered. Then, carefully, so as not to dislodge anything, the old turtle turned and with considerable relief set out on the long swim to the blessedly cool, bottomless depths of space.

The young turtles followed, orbiting their parent.

Twoflower stared raptly at the display overhead. He probably had the best view of anyone on the Disc.

Then a terrible thought occurred to him.

'Where's the picture box?' he asked urgently.

'What?' said Rincewind, eyes fixed on the sky.

'The picture box,' said Twoflower. 'I must get a picture of this!'

'Can't you just remember it?' said Bethan, not looking at him.

'I might forget.'

'*I* won't ever forget,' she said. 'It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.'

'Much better than pigeons and billiard balls,' agreed Cohen. 'I'll give you that, Rincewind. How's it done?'

'I dunno,' said Rincewind.

'The star's getting smaller,' said Bethan.

Rincewind was vaguely aware of Twoflower's voice arguing with the demon who lived in the box and painted the pictures. It was quite a technical argument, about field depths and whether or not the demon still had enough red paint.

It should be pointed out that currently Great A'Tuin was very pleased and contented, and feelings like that in a brain the size of several large cities are bound to radiate out. In fact most people on the Disc were currently in a state of mind normally achievable only by a lifetime of dedicated meditation or about thirty seconds of illegal herbage.

That's old Twoflower, Rincewind thought. It's not that he doesn't appreciate beauty, he just appreciates it in his own way. I mean, if a poet sees a daffodil he stares at it and writes a long poem about it, but Twoflower wanders off to find a book on botany. And treads on it. It's right what Cohen said. He just looks at things, but nothing he looks at is ever the same again. Including me, I suspect.

The Disc's own sun rose. The star was already dwindling, and it wasn't quite so much competition. Good reliable Disc light poured across the enraptured landscape, like a sea of gold.

Or, as the more reliable observers generally held, like golden syrup.

That is a nice dramatic ending, but life doesn't work like that and there were other things that had to happen.

There was the Octavo, for example.

As the sunlight hit it the book snapped shut and started to fall back to the tower. And many of the observers realised that dropping towards them was the single most magical thing on the Discworld.

The feeling of bliss and brotherhood evaporated along with the morning dew. Rincewind and Twoflower were elbowed aside as the crowd surged forward, struggling and trying to climb up one another, hands outstretched.

The Octavo dropped into the centre of the shouting mass. There was a snap. A decisive snap, the sort of snap made by a lid that doesn't intend to be opening in a hurry.

Rincewind peered between someone's legs at Twoflower.

'Do you know what I think's going to happen?' he said, grinning.

'What?'

'I think that when you open the Luggage there's just going to be your laundry in there, that's what I think.'

'Oh dear.'

'I think the Octavo knows how to look after itself. Best place for it, really.'

'I suppose so. You know, sometimes I get the feeling that the Luggage knows exactly what it's doing.'

'I know what you mean.'

They crawled to the edge of the milling crowd, stood up, dusted themselves off and headed for the steps. No-one paid them any attention.

'What are they doing now?' said Twoflower, trying to see over the heads of the throng.

'It looks as though they're trying to lever it open,' said Rincewind.

There was a snap and a scream.

'I think the Luggage rather enjoys the attention,' said Twoflower, as they began their cautious descent.

'Yes, it probably does it good to get out and meet people,' said Rincewind, 'and now I think it'd do me good to go and order a couple of drinks.'

'Good idea,' said Twoflower. 'I'll have a couple of drinks too.'

It was nearly noon when Twoflower awoke. He couldn't remember why he was in a hayloft, or why he was wearing someone else's coat, but he did wake up with one idea right in the forefront of his mind.

He decided it was vitally important to tell Rincewind about it.

He fell out of the hay and landed on the Luggage.

'Oh, you're here, are you?' he said. 'I hope you're ashamed of yourself.'

The Luggage looked bewildered.

'Anyway, I want to comb my hair. Open up,' said Twoflower.

The Luggage obligingly flipped its lid. Twoflower rooted around among the bags and boxes inside until he found a comb and mirror and repaired some of the damage of the night. Then he looked hard at the Luggage.

'I suppose you wouldn't like to tell me what you've done with the Octavo?'

The Luggage's expression could only be described as wooden.

'All right. Come on, then.'

Twoflower stepped out into the sunlight, which was slightly too bright for his current tastes, and wandered aimlessly along the street. Everything seemed fresh and new, even the smells, but there didn't seem to be many people up yet. It had been a long night.

He found Rincewind at the foot of the Tower of Art, upervising a team of workmen who had rigged up a gantry of sorts on the roof and were lowering the stone wizards to the ground. He seemed to be assisted by a monkey, but Twoflower was in no mood to be surprised at anything.

'Will they be able to be turned back?' he said.

Rincewind looked around. 'What? Oh, it's you. No, probably not. I'm afraid they dropped poor old Wert, anyway. Five hundred feet onto cobbles.'

'Will you be able to do anything about that?'

'Make a nice rockery.' Rincewind turned and waved at the workmen.

'You're very cheerful,' said Twoflower, a shade reproachfully. 'Didn't you go to bed?'

'Funny thing, I couldn't sleep,' said Rincewind. 'I came out for a breath of fresh air, and no-one seemed to have any idea what to do, so I just sort of got people together,' he indicated the librarian, who tried to hold his hand, 'and started organising things. Nice day, isn't it? Air like wine.'

'Rincewind, I've decided that —'

'You know, I think I might re-enroll,' said Rincewind cheerfully. 'I think I could really make a go of things this time. I can really see myself getting to grips with magic and graduating really well. They do say if it's summa cum laude, then the living is easy – .'

'Good, because —'

There's plenty of room at the top, too, now all the big boys will be doing doorstop duty, and —'

'I'm going home.'

'— a sharp lad with a bit of experience of the world could – what?'

'Oook?'

'I said I'm going home,' repeated Twoflower, making polite little attempts to shake off the librarian, who was trying to pick lice off him.

'What home?' said Rincewind, astonished.

'Home home. My home. Where I live,' Twoflower explained sheepishly. 'Back across the sea. You know.

Where I came from. Will you please stop doing that?'

'Oh.'

'Oook?'

There was a pause. Then Twoflower said, 'You see, last night it occurred to me, I thought, well, the thing is, all this travelling and seeing things is fine but there's also a lot of fun to be had from having *been.* You know, sticking all your pictures in a book and remembering things.'

'There is?'

'Oook?'

'Oh, yes. The important thing about having lots of things to remember is that you've got to go somewhere afterwards where you can remember them, you see? You've got to stop. You haven't really been anywhere until you've got back home. I think that's what I mean.'

Rincewind ran the sentence across his mind again. It didn't seem any better second time around.

'Oh,' he said again. Well, good. If that's the way you look at it. When are you going, then?'

'Today, I think. There's bound to be a ship going part of the way.'

'I expect so,' said Rincewind awkwardly. He looked at his feet. He looked at the sky. He cleared his throat.

'We've been through some times together, eh?' said Twoflower, nudging him in the ribs.

'Yeah,' said Rincewind, contorting his face into something like a grin.

'You're not upset, are you?'

'Who, me?' said Rincewind. 'Gosh, no. Hundred and one things to do.'

That's all right, then. Listen, let's go and have breakfast and then we can go down to the docks.'

Rincewind nodded dismally, turned to his assistant, and took a banana out of his pocket.

'You've got the hang of it now, you take over,' he muttered.

'Oook.'

In fact there wasn't any ship going anywhere near the Agatean Empire, but that was an academic point because Twoflower simply counted gold pieces into the hand of the first captain with a halfway clean ship until the man suddenly saw the merits of changing his plans.

Rincewind waited on the quayside until Twoflower had finished paying the man about forty times more than his ship was worth.

'That's settled, then,' said Twoflower. 'He'll drop me at the Brown Islands and I can easily get a ship from there.'

'Great,' said Rincewind.

Twoflower looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he opened the Luggage and pulled out a bag of gold.

'Have you seen Cohen and Bethan?' he said.

'I think they went off to get married,' said Rincewind. 'I heard Bethan say it was now or never.'

'Well, when you see them give them this,' said Twoflower, handing him the bag. 'I know it's expensive, setting up home for the first time.'

Twoflower had never fully understood the gulf in the exchange rate. The bag could quite easily set Cohen up with a small kingdom.

'I'll hand it over first chance I get,' he said, and to his own surprise realised that he meant it.

'Good. I've thought about something to give you, too.'

'Oh, there's no —'

Twoflower rummaged in the Luggage and produced a large sack. He began to fill it with clothes and money and the picture box until finally the Luggage was completely empty. The last thing he put in was his souvenir musical cigarette box with the shell-encrusted lid, carefully wrapped in soft paper.

'It's all yours,' he said, shutting the Luggage's lid. 'I shan't really need it any more, and it won't fit on my wardrobe anyway.'

'What?'

'Don't you want it?'

'Well, I – of course, but – it's yours. It follows you, not me.'

'Luggage,' said Twoflower, 'this is Rincewind. You're his, right?'

The Luggage slowly extended its legs, turned very deliberately and looked at Rincewind.

'I don't think it belongs to anyone but itself, really,' said Twoflower.

'Yes,' said Rincewind uncertainly.

'Well, that's about it, then,' said Twoflower. He held out his hand.

'Goodbye, Rincewind. I'll send you a postcard when I get home. Or something.'

'Yes. Any time you're passing, there's bound to be someone here who knows where I am.'

'Yes. Well. That's it, then.'

'That's it, right enough.'

'Right.'

'Yep.'

Twoflower walked up the gangplank, which the impatient crew hauled up behind him.

The rowing drum started its beat and the ship was propelled slowly out onto the turbid waters of the Ankh, now back to their old level, where it caught the tide and turned towards the open sea.

Rincewind watched it until it was a dot. Then he looked down at the Luggage. It stared back at him.

'Look,' he said. 'Go away. I'm giving you to yourself, do you understand?'

He turned his back on it and stalked away. After a few seconds he was aware of the little footsteps behind him. He spun around.

'I said I don't want you!' he snapped, and gave it a kick.

The Luggage sagged. Rincewind stalked away.

After he had gone a few yards he stopped and listened. There was no sound. When he turned the Luggage was where he had left it. It looked sort of huddled. Rincewind hought for a while.

'All right, then,' he said. 'Come on.'

He turned his back and strode off to the University. After a few minutes the Luggage appeared to make up its mind, extended its legs again and padded after him. It didn't see that it had a lot of choice.

They headed along the quay and into the city, two dots on a dwindling landscape which, as the perspective broadened, included a tiny ship starting out across a wide green sea that was but a part of a bright circling ocean on a cloud-swirled Disc on the back of four giant elephants that themselves stood on the shell of an enormous turtle.

Which soon became a glint among the stars, and disappeared.

The End

Equal Rites

Equal Rites

I would like it to be clearly understood that this book is not wacky. Only dumb redheads in fifties' sitcoms are wacky.

No, it's not zany, either.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The smith didn't feel the need to be quite so subservient. He nodded at the wizard, but it was a greeting between equals, or at least between equals as far as the smith was concerned. After all, any halfway competent blacksmith has more than a nodding acquaintance with magic, or at least likes to think he has.

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

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

The blacksmith shrugged.

"Bad Ass," he said.

"Bad - ?"

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

The wizard considered this.

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

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

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

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

"All right, the rain's stopping," he said. "Piss off, the lot of you. Me and -" he looked at the wizard with raised eyebrows.

"Drum Billet," said the wizard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The smith looked embarrassed. "When?"

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

"Oh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But -"she began.

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

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

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

"But -"said the midwife.

"It's all right, Granny, I know what I'm about. She's a witch, sir, don't mind her. Right," said the smith. "Now what?"

The wizard was silent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," he whispered. "He said -"

"And what would he know about it?" sneered Granny.

"But he said it would be a son!"

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

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

"What have I done?" he moaned.

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

"What?"

"I was talking to the baby."

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

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

PERHAPS IT DOES.

"If only I could do something . . . ."

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

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

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

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

"What about reincarnation?"

Death hesitated.

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

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

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

"It's bad?"

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

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

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

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

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

The living often don't appreciate how complicated the world looks when you are dead, because while death frees the mind from the straitjacket of three dimensions it also cuts it away from Time, which is only another dimension. So while the cat that rubbed up against his invisible legs was undoubtedly the same cat that he had seen a few minutes before, it was also quite clearly a tiny kitten and a fat, half-blind old moggy and every stage in between. All at once. Since it had started off small it looked like a white, catshaped carrot, a description that will have to do until people invent proper four-dimensional adjectives.

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

COME AWAY, MY SON.

"There's nothing I can do?"

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

"Yes. There is that."

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

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

He looked up at her.

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

"What have you done with the wizard?"

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

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

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

"But it's magical," he whispered.

"Well?"

"Will it burn?"

"Never knew wood that didn't."

"It doesn't seem right!"

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

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

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

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

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

It wouldn't move.

"It won't move!"

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

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

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

"Are you all right?"

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

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

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

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

"Right. Now take off your apron."

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

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

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

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

There was silence.

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

Granny stood looking slightly blurred from hitting an absolutely immovable object, and stared at the stub of wood in her hands.

"Rrrrighttttt," she stuttered: "Iiiinnn tthhatttt cccasseee -"

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

"just a stick?"

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

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

"Not right now," she admitted. "But you just give me time -"

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

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

"Granny."

"What?"

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

"Yes! "

"Well, how?"

Granny Weatherwax paused at the bottom of the stairs.

"Reluctantly."

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

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

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

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

Time passed, which, basically, is its job.

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing much happened for seven years, except that one of the apple trees in the smithy orchard grew perceptibly taller than the others and was frequently climbed by a small girl with brown hair, a gap in her front teeth, and the sort of features that promised to become, if not beautiful, then at least attractively interesting.

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

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

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

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

Smith looked at her over his porridge spoon.

"I'm not complaining," he said. "She -"

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

Her parents glared at her.

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

"But father said she's always poking her -"

"Eskarina!"

"But he said -"

"I said -"

"Yes, but, he did say that she had -"

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

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

There was a loud crack, and a thud.

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

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

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

"Right! That's it. That's just about enough!" shouted Esk's mother. "Cern, you and Gulta and Esk can go and see how Granny is and -where's Esk?"

The two youngest boys looked up from where they were halfheartedly fighting under the table.

"She went out to the orchard," said Gulta. "Again."

"Go and fetch her in, then, and be off."

"But it's cold!"

"It's going to snow again!"

"It's only a mile and the road is clear enough and who was so keen to be out in it when we had the first snowfall? Go on with you, and don't come back till you're in a better temper."

They found Esk sitting in a fork of the big apple tree. The boys didn't like the tree much. For one thing, it was so covered in mistletoe that it looked green even in midwinter, its fruit was small and went from stomach-twisting sourness to wasp-filled rottenness overnight, and although it looked easy enough to climb it had a habit of breaking twigs and dislodging feet at inconvenient moments. Cern once swore that a branch had twisted just to spill him off. But it tolerated Esk, who used to go and sit in it if she was annoyed or fed up or just wanted to be by herself, and the boys sensed that every brother's right to gently torture his sister ended at the foot of its trunk. So they threw a snowball at her. It missed.

"We're going to see old Weatherwax."

"But you don't have to come."

"Because you'll just slow us down and probably cry anyway."

Esk looked down at them solemnly. She didn't cry a lot, it never seemed to achieve much.

"If you don't want me to come then I'll come," she said. This sort of thing passes for logic among siblings.

"Oh, we want you to come," said Gulta quickly.

"Very pleased to hear it," said Esk, dropping on to the packed snow.

They had a basket containing smoked sausages, preserved eggs and - because their mother was prudent as well as generous - a large jar of peach preserve that no one in the family liked very much. She still made it every year when the little wild peaches were ripe, anyway.

The people of Bad Ass had learned to live with the long winter snows and the roads out of the village were lined with boards to reduce drifting and, more important, stop travellers from straying. If they lived locally it wouldn't matter too much if they did, because an unsung genius on the village council several generations previously had come up with the idea of carving markers in every tenth tree in the forest around the village, out to a distance of nearly two miles. It had taken ages, and re-cutting markers was always a job for any man with spare time, but in winters where a blizzard could lose a man within yards of his home many a life had been saved by the pattern of notches found by probing fingers under the clinging snow.

It was snowing again when they left the road and started up the track where, in summer, the witch's house nestled in a riot of raspberry thickets and weird witch-growth.

"No footprints," said Cern.

"Except for foxes," said Gulta. "They say she can turn herself into a fox. Or anything. A bird, even. Anything. That's how she always knows what's going on."

They looked around cautiously. A scruffy crow was indeed watching them from a distant tree stump.

"They say there's a whole family over Crack Peak way that can turn themselves into wolves," said Gulta, who wasn't one to leave a promising subject, "because one night someone shot a wolf and next day their auntie was limping with an arrow wound in her leg, and ....

"I don't think people can turn themselves into animals," said Esk, slowly.

"Oh yes, Miss Clever?"

"Granny is quite big. If she turned herself into a fox what would happen to all the bits that wouldn't fit?"

"She'd just magic them away," said Cern.

"I don't think magic works like that," said Esk. "You can't just make things happen, there's a sort of - like a seesaw thing, if you push one end down, the other end goes up . . . ." Her voice trailed off.

They gave her a look.

"I can't see Granny on a seesaw," said Gulta. Cern giggled.

"No, I mean every time something happens, something else has to happen too - I think," said Esk uncertainly, picking her way around a deeper than usual snowdrift. "Only in the . . . opposite direction."

"That's silly," said Gulta, "because, look, you remember when that fair came last summer and there was a wizard with it and he made all those birds and things appear out of nothing? I mean it just happened, he just said these words and waved his hands, and it just happened. There weren't any seesaws."

"There was a swing," said Cern. "And a thing where you had to throw things at things to win things."

"And you didn't hit anything, Gul."

"Nor did you, you said the things were stuck to the things so you couldn't knock them off, you said . . . ."

Their conversation wandered away like a couple of puppies. Esk listened with half an ear. I know what I mean, she told herself. Magic's easy, you just find the place where everything is balanced and push. Anyone could do it. There's nothing magical about it. All the funny words and waving the hands is just . . . it's only for....

She stopped, surprised at herself. She knew what she meant. The idea was right up there in the front of her mind. But she didn't know how to say it in words, even to herself.

It was a horrible feeling to find things in your head and not know how they fitted. It....

"Come on, we'll be all day."

She shook her head and hurried after her brothers.

The witch's cottage consisted of so many extensions and lean-tos that it was difficult to see what the original building had looked like, or even if there had ever been one. In the summer it was surrounded by dense beds of what Granny loosely called "the Herbs" - strange plants, hairy or squat or twining, with curious flowers or vivid fruits or unpleasantly bulging pods. Only Granny knew what they were all for, and any woodpigeon hungry enough to attack them generally emerged giggling to itself and bumping into things (or, sometimes, never emerged at all.

Now everything was deep under the snow. A forlorn windsock flapped against its pole. Granny didn't hold with flying but some of her friends still used broomsticks.

"It looks deserted," said Cem.

"No smoke," said Gulta.

The windows look like eyes, thought Esk, but kept it to herself.

"It's only Granny's house," she said. "There's nothing wrong."

The cottage radiated emptiness. They could feel it. The windows did look like eyes, black and menacing against the snow. And no one in the Ramtops let their fire go out in the winter, as a matter of pride.

Esk wanted to say "Let's go home," but she knew that if she did the boys would run for it. Instead she said, "Mother says there's a key on a nail in the privy," and that was nearly as bad. Even an ordinary unknown privy held minor terrors like wasps' nests, large spiders, mysterious rustling things in the roof and, one very bad winter, a small hibernating bear that caused acute constipation in the family until it was persuaded to bed down in the haybam. A witch's privy could contain anything.

"I'll go and look, shall I?" she added.

"If you like," said Gulta airily, almost successfully concealing his relief.

In fact, when she managed to get the door open against the piled snow, it was neat and clean and contained nothing more sinister than an old almanac, or more precisely about half an old almanac, carefully hung on a nail. Granny had a philosophical objection to reading, but she'd be the last to say that books, especially books with nice thin pages, didn't have their uses.

The key shared a ledge by the door with a chrysalis and the stump of a candle. Esk took it gingerly, trying not to disturb the chrysalis, and hurried back to the boys.

It was no use trying the front door. Front doors in Bad Ass were used only by brides and corpses, and Granny had always avoided becoming either. Around the back the snow was piled in front of the door and no one had broken the ice on the water butt.

The light was starting to pour out of the sky by the time they dug through to the door and managed to persuade the key to turn.

Inside, the big kitchen was dark and chilly and smelled only of snow. It was always dark, but they were used to seeing a big fire in the wide chimney and smelling the thick fumes of whatever it was she was boiling up this time, which sometimes gave you a headache or made you see things.

They wandered around uncertainly, calling, until Esk decided they couldn't put off going upstairs any longer. The clonk of the thumb-latch on the door to the cramped staircase sounded a lot louder than it ought to.

Granny was on the bed, with her arms tightly folded across her chest. The tiny window had blown open. Fine snow had blown in across the floor and over the bed.

Esk stared at the patchwork quilt under the old woman, because there were times when a little detail could expand and fill the whole world. She barely heard Cern start to cry: she remembered lien father, strangely enough, making the quilt two winters before when the snow was almost as bad and there wasn't much to do in the forge, and how he'd used all kinds of rags that had found their way to Bad Ass from every part of the world, like silk, dilemma leather, water cotton and tharga wool and, of course, since he wasn't much good at sewing either, the result was a rather strange lumpy thing more like a flat tortoise than a quilt, and her mother had generously decided to give it to Granny last Hogswatchnight, and ....

"Is she dead?" asked Gulta, as if Esk was an expert in these things.

Esk stared up at Granny Weatherwax. The old woman's face looked thin and grey. Was that how dead people looked? Shouldn't her chest be going up and down?

Gulta pulled himself together.

"We ought to go and get someone and we ought to go now because it will get dark in a minute," he said flatly. "But Cern will stay here."

His brother looked at him in horror.

"What for?" he said.

"Someone has got to stay with dead people," said Gulta. "Remember when old Uncle Derghart died and Father had to go and sit up with all the candles and things all night? Otherwise something nasty comes and takes your soul off to . . . to somewhere," he ended lamely. "And then people come back and haunt you."

Cern opened his mouth to start to cry again. Esk said hurriedly, "I'll stay. I don't mind. It's only Granny."

Gulta looked at her in relief.

"Light some candles or something," he said. "I think that's what you're supposed to do. And then -"

There was a scratching from the windowsill. A crow had landed, and stood there blinking suspiciously at them. Gulta shouted and threw his hat at it. It flew off with a reproachful caw and he shut the window.

"I've seen it around here before," he said. "I think Granny feeds it. Fed it," he corrected himself. "Anyway, we'll be back with people, we'll be hardly any time. Come on, Ce."

They clattered down the dark stairs. Esk saw them out of the house and bolted the door behind them.

The sun was a red ball above the mountains, and there were already a few early stars out.

She wandered around the dark kitchen until she found a scrap of dip candle and a tinderbox. After a great deal of effort she managed to light the candle and stood it on the table, although it didn't really light the room, it simply peopled the darkness with shadows. Then she found Granny's rocking chair by the cold fireplace, and settled down to wait.

Time passed. Nothing happened.

Then there was a tapping at the window. Esk took up the candle stub and peered through the thick round panes.

A beady yellow eye blinked back at her.

The candle guttered, and went out.

She stood stock still, hardly breathing. The tapping started again, and then stopped. There was a short silence, and then the doorlatch rattled.

Something nasty comes, the boys had said.

She felt her way back across the room until she nearly tripped over the rocking chair, and dragged it back and wedged it as best she could in front of the door. The latch gave a final clonk and went silent.

Esk waited, listening until the silence roared in her ears. Then something started to bang against the little window in the scullery, softly but insistently. After a while it stopped. A moment later it started again in the bedroom above her- a faint scrabbling noise, a claw kind of noise.

Esk felt that bravery was called for, but on a night like this bravery lasted only as long as a candle stayed alight. She felt her way back across the dark kitchen, eyes tightly shut, until she reached the door.

There was a thump from the fireplace as a big lump of soot fell down, and when she heard the desperate scratchings coming from the chimney she slipped the bolts, threw open the door and darted out into the night.

The cold struck like a knife. Frost had put a crust on the snow. She didn't care where she was going, but quiet terror gave her a burning determination to get there as fast as she could.

Inside the cottage the crow landed heavily in the fireplace, surrounded by soot and muttering irritably to itself. It hopped into the shadows, and a moment later there was the bang of the latch of the stairway door and the sound of fluttering on the stairs.

Esk reached up as high as she could and felt around the tree for the marker. This time she was lucky, but the pattern of dots and grooves told her she was over a mile from the village and had been running in the wrong direction.

There was a cheese-rind moon and a sprinkling of stars, small and bright and pitiless. The forest around her was a pattern of black shadows and pale snow and, she was aware, not all the shadows were standing still.

Everyone knew there were wolves in the mountains, because on some nights their howls echoed down from the high Tops, but they seldom came near the village - the modern

wolves were the offspring of ancestors that had survived because they had learned that human meat had sharp edges.

But the weather was hard, and this pack was hungry enough to forget all about natural selection.

Esk remembered what all the children were told. Climb a tree. Light a fire. When all else fails, find a stick and at least hurt them. Never try to outrun them.

The tree behind her was a beech, smooth and unclimbable.

Esk watched a long shadow detach itself from a pool of darkness in front of her, and move a little closer. She knelt down, tired, frightened, unable to think, and scrabbled under the burning-cold snow for a stick.

Granny Weatherwax opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, which was cracked and bulged like a tent.

She concentrated on remembering that she had arms, not wings, and didn't need to hop. It was always wise to lie down for a bit after a borrow, to let one's mind get used to one's body, but she knew she didn't have the time.

"Drat the child," she muttered, and tried to fly on to the bedrail. The crow, who had been through all this dozens of times before and who considered, insofar as birds can consider anything, which is a very short distance indeed, that a steady diet of bacon rinds and choice kitchen scraps and a warm roost for the night was well worth the occasional inconvenience of letting Granny share its head, watched her with mild interest.

Granny found her boots and thumped down the stairs, sternly resisting the urge to glide. The door was wide open and there was already a drift of fine snow on the floor.

"Oh, bugger," she said. She wondered if it was worth trying to find Esk's mind, but human minds were never so sharp and clear as animal minds and anyway the overmind of the forest itself made impromptu searching as hard as listening for a waterfall in a thunderstorm. But even without looking she could feel the packmind of the wolves, a sharp, rank feeling that filled the mouth with the taste of blood.

She could just make out the small footprints in the crust, half filled with fresh snow. Cursing and muttering, Granny Weatherwax pulled her shawl around her and set out.

The white cat awoke from its private ledge in the forge when it heard the sounds coming from the darkest corner. Smith had carefully shut the big doors behind him when he went off with the nearly-hysterical boys, and the cat watched with interest as a thin shadow prodded at the lock and tested the hinges.

The doors were oak, hardened by heat and time, but that didn't prevent them being blown right across the street.

Smith heard a sound in the sky as he hurried along the track. So did Granny. It was a determined whirring sound, like the flight of geese, and the snowclouds boiled and twisted as it passed.

The wolves heard it, too, as it spun low over the treetops and hurtled down into the clearing. But they heard it far too late.

Granny Weatherwax didn't have to follow the footprints now. She aimed herself for the distant flashes of weird light, the strange swishing and thumping, and the howls of pain and terror. A couple of wolves bolted past her with their ears flattened in grim determination to have it away on their paws no matter what stood in their way.

There was the crackle of breaking branches. Something big and heavy landed in a fir tree by Granny and crashed, whimpering, into the snow. Another wolf passed her in a flat trajectory at about head height and bounced off a tree-trunk.

There was silence.

Granny pushed her way between the snow-covered branches.

She could see that the snow was flattened in a white circle. A few wolves lay at its edges, either dead or wisely deciding to make no move.

The staff stood upright in the snow and Granny got the feeling it was turning to face her as she walked carefully past it.

There was also a small heap in the centre of the circle, curled tightly up inside itself. Granny knelt down with some effort and reached out gently.

The staff moved. It was little more than a tremble, but her hand stopped just before it touched Esk's shoulder. Granny glared up at the wooden carvings, and dared it to move again.

The air thickened. Then the staff seemed to back away while not moving, while at the same time something quite indefinable made it absolutely clear to the old witch that as far as the staff was concerned this -wasn't a defeat, it was merely a tactical consideration, and it wouldn't like her to think she had won in any way, because she hadn't.

Esk gave a shudder. Granny patted her vaguely.

"It's me, little one. It's only old Granny."

The hump didn't uncurl.

Granny bit her lip. She was never quite certain about children, thinking of them - when she thought about them at all - as coming somewhere between animals and people. She understood babies. You put milk in one end and kept the other end as clean as possible. Adults were even easier, because they did the feeding and cleaning themselves. But in between was a world of experience that she had never really enquired about. As far as she was aware, you just tried to stop them catching anything fatal and hoped that it would all turn out all right.

Granny, in fact, was at a loss, but she knew she had to do something.

"Didda nasty wolfie fwiten us, den?" she hazarded.

For quite the wrong reasons, this seemed to work. From the depths of the ball a muffled voice said: "I am eight, you know."

"People who are eight don't curl up in the middle of the snow," said Granny, feeling her way through the intricacies of adult-child conversation.

The ball didn't answer.

"I've probably got some milk and biscuits at home," Granny ventured.

There was no perceptible effect.

"Eskarina Smith, if you don't behave this minute I will give you such a smack!"

Esk poked her head out cautiously.

"There's no need to be like that," she said.

When Smith reached the cottage Granny had just arrived, leading Esk by the hand. The boys peered around from behind him.

"Um," said Smith, not quite aware of how to begin a conversation with someone who was supposed to be dead. "They, um, told me you were - ill." He turned and glared at his sons.

"I was just having a rest and I must have dozed off. I sleeps very sound."

"Yes," said Smith, uncertainly. "Well. All's well, then. What's up with Esk? "

"She took a bit of a fright," said Granny, squeezing the girl's hand. "Shadows and whatnot. She needs a good warm. I was going to put her in my bed, she's a bit mazed, if that's all right with you."

Smith wasn't absolutely sure that it was all right with him. But he was quite sure that his wife, like every other woman in the village, held Granny Weatherwax in solemn regard, even in awe, and that if he started to object he would rapidly get out of his depth.

"Fine, fine," he said, "if it's no trouble. I'll send along for her in the morning, shall I?"

"That's right," said Granny. "I'd invite you in, but there's me without a fire -"

"No, no, that's all right," said Smith hurriedly. "I've got my supper waiting. Drying up," he added, looking down at Gulta, who opened his mouth to say something and wisely thought better of it.

When they had gone, with the sound of the two boys' protests ringing out among the trees, Granny opened the door, pushed Esk inside, and bolted it behind them. She took a couple of candles from her store above the dresser and lit them. Then she pulled some old but serviceable wool blankets, still smelling of anti-moth herbs, from an old chest, wrapped Esk in them and sat her in the rocking chair.

She got down on her knees, to an accompaniment of clicks and grunts, and started to lay the fire. It was a complicated business involving dry fungus punk, wood shavings, bits of split twig and much puffing and swearing.

Esk said: "You don't have to do it like that, Granny."

Granny stiffened, and looked at the fireback. It was a rather nice one Smith had cast for her, years ago, with an owl-and-bat motif. Currently, though, she wasn't interested in the design.

"Oh yes?" she said, her voice dead-level. "You know of a better way, do you?"

"You could magic it alight."

Granny paid great attention to arranging bits of twig on the reluctant flames.

"How would I do that, pray?" she said, apparently addressing her remarks to the fireback.

"Er," said Esk, "I . . . I can't remember. But you must know anyway, don't you? Everyone knows you can do magic."

"There's magic," said Granny, "and then again, there's magic. The important thing, my girl, is to know what magic is for and what it isn't for. And you can take it from me, it was never intended for lighting fires, you can be absolutely certain of that. If the Creator had meant us to use magic for lighting fires, then he wouldn't have given us - er, matches."

"But could you light a fire with magic?" said Esk, as Granny slung an ancient black kettle on its hook. "I mean, if you wanted to. If it was allowed."

"Maybe," said Granny, who couldn't: fire had no mind, it wasn't alive, and they were two of the three reasons.

"You could light it much better."

"If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing badly," said Granny, fleeing into aphorisms, the last refuge of an adult under siege.

"Yes, but -"

"But me no buts."

Granny rummaged in a dark wooden box on the dresser. She prided herself on her unrivalled knowledge of the properties of Ramtops herbage - none knew better than she the many uses of Earwort, Maiden's Wish and Love-Lies-Oozing - but there were times when she had to resort to her small stock of jealously traded and carefully hoarded medicines from Forn Parts (which as far as she was concerned was anywhere further than a day's journey) to achieve the desired effect.

She shredded some dry red leaves into a mug, topped it up with honey and hot water from the kettle, and pushed it into Esk's hands. Then she put a large round stone under the grate later on, wrapped in a scrap of blanket, it would make a bedwarmer and, with a stern injunction to the girl not to stir from the chair, went out into the scullery.

Esk drummed her heels on the chair legs and sipped the drink. It had a strange, peppery taste. She wondered what it was. She'd tasted Granny's brews before, of course, with a greater or lesser amount of honey in them depending on whether she thought you were making too much of a fuss, and Esk knew that she was famous throughout the mountains for special potions for illnesses that her mother - and some young women too, once in a while -just hinted at with raised eyebrows and lowered voices ....

When Granny came back she was asleep. She didn't remember being put to bed, or Granny bolting the windows.

Granny Weatherwax went back downstairs and pulled her rocking chair closer to the fire.

There was something there, she told herself, lurking away in the child's mind. She didn't like to think about what it was, but she remembered what had happened to the wolves. And all that about lighting fires with magic. Wizards did that, it was one of the first things they learned.

Granny sighed. There was only one way to be sure, and she was getting rather old for this sort of thing.

She picked up the candle and went out through the scullery into the lean-to that housed her goats. They watched her without fear, each sitting in its pen like a furry blob, three mouths working rhythmically on the day's hay. The air smelled warm and slightly flatulent.

Up in the rafters was a small owl, one of a number of creatures who found that living with Granny was worth the occasional inconvenience. It came to her hand at a word, and she stroked its bullet head thoughtfully as she looked for somewhere comfortable to lie. A pile of hay it would have to be.

She blew out the candle and lay back, with the owl perched on her finger.

The goats chewed, burped and swallowed their way through their cozy night. They made the only sound in the building.

Granny's body stilled. The owl felt her enter its mind, and graciously made room. Granny knew she would regret this, Borrowing twice in one day would leave her good for nothing in the morning, and with a terrible desire to eat mice. Of course, when she was

younger she thought nothing of it, running with the stags, hunting with the foxes, learning the strange dark ways of the moles, hardly spending a night in her own body. But it was getting harder now, especially coming back. Maybe the time would come when she couldn't get back, maybe the body back home would be so much dead flesh, and maybe that wouldn't be such a bad way of it, at that.

This was the sort of thing wizards could never know. If it occurred to them to enter a creature's mind they'd do it like a thief, not out of wickedness but because it simply wouldn't occur to them to do it any other way, the daft buggers. And what good would it do to take over an owl's body? You couldn't fly, you needed to spend a lifetime learning. But the gentle way was to ride in its mind, steering it as gently as a breeze stirs a leaf.

The owl stirred, fluttered up on to the little windowsill, and glided silently into the night.

The clouds had cleared and the thin moon made the mountains gleam. Granny peered out through owl eyes as she sped silently between the ranks of trees. This was the only way to travel, once a body had the way of it! She liked Borrowing birds best of all, using them to explore the high, hidden valleys where no one went, the secret lakes between black cliffs, the tiny walled fields on the scraps of flat ground, tucked on the sheer rock faces, that were the property of hidden and secretive beings. Once she had ridden with the geese that passed over the mountains every spring and autumn, and had got the shock of her life when she nearly went beyond range of returning.

The owl broke out of the forest and skimmed across the rooftops of the village, alighting in a shower of snow on the biggest apple tree in Smith's orchard. It was heavy with mistletoe.

She knew she was right as soon as her claws touched the bark. The tree resented her, she could feel it trying to push her away.

I'm not going, she thought.

In the silence of the night the tree said, Bully me, then, just because I'm a tree. Typical woman.

At least you're useful now, thought Granny. Better a tree than a wizard, eh?

It's not such a bad life, thought the tree. Sun. Fresh air. Time to think. Bees, too, in the spring.

There was something lascivious about the way the tree said "bees" that quite put Granny, who had several hives, off the idea of honey. It was like being reminded that eggs were unborn chickens.

I've come about the girl, Esk, she hissed.

A promising child, thought the tree, I'm watching her with interest. She likes apples, too.

You beast, said Granny, shocked.

What did I say? Pardon me for not breathing, I'm sure.

Granny sidled closer to the trunk.

You must let her go, she thought. The magic is starting to come through.

Already? I'm impressed, said the tree.

It's the wrong sort of magic!, screeched Granny. It's wizard magic, not women's magic! She doesn't know what it is yet, but it killed a dozen wolves tonight!

Great! said the tree. Granny hooted with rage.

Great? Supposing she had been arguing with her brothers, and lost her temper, eh?

The tree shrugged. Snowflakes cascaded from its branches.

Then you must train her, it said.

Train? What do I know from training wizards!

Then send her to university.

She's female!, hooted Granny, bouncing up and down on her branch.

Well? Who says women can't be wizards?

Granny hesitated. The tree might as well have asked why fish couldn't be birds. She drew a deep breath, and started to speak. And stopped. She knew a cutting, incisive, withering and above all a self-evident answer existed. It was just that, to her extreme annoyance, she couldn't quite bring it to mind.

Women have never been wizards. It's against nature. You might as well say that witches can be men.

If you define a witch as one who worships the pancreative urge, that is, venerates the basic - the tree began, and continued for several minutes. Granny Weatherwax listened in impatient annoyance to phrases like Mother Goddesses and primitive moon worship and told herself that she was well aware of what being a witch was all about, it was about herbs and curses and flying around of nights and generally keeping on the right side of tradition, and it certainly didn't involve mixing with goddesses, mothers or otherwise, who apparently got up to some very questionable tricks. And when the tree started talking about dancing naked she tried not to listen, because although she was aware that

somewhere under her complicated strata of vests and petticoats there was some skin, that didn't mean to say she approved of it.

The tree finished its monologue.

Granny waited until she was quite sure that it wasn't going to add anything, and said, That's witchcraft, is it?

Its theoretical basis, yes.

You wizards certainly get some funny ideas.

The tree said, Not a wizard anymore, just a tree.

Granny ruffled her feathers.

Well, just you listen to me, Mr. so-called Theoretical Basis Tree, if women were meant to be wizards they'd be able to grow long white beards and she is not going to be a wizard, is that quite clear, wizardry is not the way to use magic, do you hear, it's nothing but lights and fire and meddling with power and she'll be having no part of it and good night to you.

The owl swooped away from the branch. It was only because it would interfere with the flying that Granny wasn't shaking with rage. Wizards! They talked too much and pinned spells down in books like butterflies but, worst of all, they thought theirs was the only magic worth practicing.

Granny was absolutely certain of one thing. Women had never been wizards, and they weren't about to start now.

She arrived back at the cottage in the pale shank of the night. Her body, at least, was rested after its slumber in the hay, and Granny had hoped to spend a few hours in the rocking chair, putting her thoughts in order. This was the time, when night wasn't quite over but day hadn't quite begun, when thoughts stood out bright and clear and without disguise. She....

The staff was leaning against the wall, by the dresser.

Granny stood quite still.

"I see", she said at last. "So that's the way of it, is it? In my own house, too?"

Moving very slowly, she walked over to the inglenook, threw a couple of split logs on to the embers of the fire, and pumped the bellows until the flames roared up the chimney.

When she was satisfied she turned, muttered a few precautionary protective spells under her breath, and grabbed the staff. It didn't resist; she nearly fell over. But now she had it in her hands, and felt the tingle of it, the distinctive thunderstorm crackle of the magic in it, and she laughed.

It was as simple as this, then. There was no fight in it now.

Calling down a curse upon wizards and all their works she raised the staff above her head and brought it down with a clang across the firedogs, over the hottest part of the fire.

Esk screamed. The sound bounced down through the bedroom floorboards and scythed through the dark cottage.

Granny was old and tired and not entirely clear about things after a long day, but to survive as a witch requires an ability to jump to very large conclusions and as she stared at the staff in the flames and heard the scream her hands were already reaching for the big

black kettle. She upended it over the fire, dragged the staff out of the cloud of steam, and ran upstairs, dreading what she might see.

Esk was sitting up in the narrow bed, unsinged but shrieking. Granny took the child in her arms and tried to comfort her; she wasn't sure how one went about it, but a distracted patting on the back and vague reassuring noises seemed to work, and the screams became wails and, eventually, sobs. Here and there Granny could pick out words like "fire" and "hot", and her mouth set in a thin, bitter line.

Finally she settled the child down, tucked her in, and crept quietly down stairs.

The staff was back against the wall. She was not surprised to see that the fire hadn't marked it at all.

Granny turned her rocking chair to face it, and sat down with her chin in her hand and an expression of grim determination.

Presently the chair began to rock, of its own accord. It was the only sound in a silence that thickened and spread and filled the room like a terrible dark fog.

Next morning, before Esk got up, Granny hid the staff in the thatch, well out of harm's way.

Esk ate her breakfast and drank a pint of goat's milk without the least sign of the events of the last twenty-four hours. It was the first time she had been inside Granny's cottage for more than a brief visit, and while the old woman washed the dishes and milked the goats she made the most of her implied license to explore.

She found that life in the cottage wasn't entirely straightforward. There was the matter of the goats' names, for example.

"But they've got to have names!" she said. "Everything's got a name."

Granny looked at her around the pear-shaped flanks of the head nanny, while the milk squirted into the low pail.

"I daresay they've got names in Goat," she said vaguely. "What do they want names in Human for?"

"Well," said Esk, and stopped. She thought for a bit. "How do you make them do what you want, then?"

"They just do, and when they want me they holler."

Esk gravely gave the head goat a wisp of hay. Granny watched her thoughtfully. Goats did have names for themselves, she well knew: there was "goat who is my kid", "goat who is my mother", "goat who is herd leader", and half a dozen other names not least of which was "goat who is this goat". They had a complicated herd system and four stomachs and a digestive system that sounded very busy on still nights, and Granny had always felt that calling all this names like Buttercup was an insult to a noble animal.

"Esk? " she said, making up her mind.

"Yes?"

"What would you like to be when you grow up?"

Esk looked blank. "Don't know."

"Well," said Granny, her hands still milking, "what do you think you will do when you are grown up?"

"Don't know. Get married, I suppose."

"Do you want to?"

Esk's lips started to shape themselves around the D, but she caught Granny's eye and stopped, and thought.

"All the grown ups I know are married," she said at last, and thought some more. "Except you," she added, cautiously.

"That's true," said Granny.

"Didn't you want to get married?"

It was Granny's turn to think.

"Never got around to it," she said at last. "Too many other things to do, you see."

"Father says you're a witch," said Esk, chancing her arm.

"I am that."

Esk nodded. In the Ramtops witches were accorded a status similar to that which other cultures gave to nuns, or tax collectors, or cesspit cleaners. That is to say, they were respected, sometimes admired, generally applauded for doing a job which logically had to be-done, but people never felt quite comfortable in the same room with them.

Granny said, "Would you like to learn the witching?"

"Magic, you mean?" asked Esk, her eyes lighting up.

"Yes, magic. But not firework magic. Real magic."

"Can you fly?"

"There's better things than flying."

"And I can learn them?"

"If your parents say yes."

Esk sighed. "My father won't."

"Then I shall have a word with him," said Granny.

"Now you just listen to me, Gordo Smith!"

Smith backed away across his forge, hands half-raised to ward off the old woman's fury. She advanced on him, one finger stabbing the air righteously.

"I brought you into the world, you stupid man, and you've got no more sense in you now than you had then -"

"But -" Smith tried, dodging around the anvil.

"The magic's found her! Wizard magic! Wrong magic, do you understand? It was never intended for her!"

"Yes, but -"

"Have you any idea of what it can do?"

Smith sagged. "No."

Granny paused, and deflated a little.

"No," she repeated, more softly. "No, you wouldn't."

She sat down on the anvil and tried to think calm thoughts.

"Look. Magic has a sort of - life of its own. That doesn't matter, because - anyway, you see, wizard magic -" she looked up at his big, blank expression and tried again. "Well, you know cider?"

Smith nodded. He felt he was on firmer ground here, but he wasn't certain of where it was going to lead.

"And then there's the ticker. Applejack," said the witch. The smith nodded. Everyone in Bad Ass made applejack in the winter, by leaving cider tubs outside overnight and taking out the ice until a tiny core of alcohol was left.

"Well, you can drink lots of cider and you just feel better and that's it, isn't it?"

The smith nodded again.

"But applejack, you drink that in little mugs and you don't drink a lot and you don't drink it often, because it goes right to your head?"

The smith nodded again and, aware that he wasn't making a major contribution to the dialogue, added, "That's right."

"That's the difference," said Granny.

"The difference from what?"

Granny sighed. "The difference between witch magic and wizard magic," she said. "And it's found her, and if she doesn't control it, then there are those who will control her. Magic can be a sort of door, and there are unpleasant things on the other side. Do you understand?"

The smith nodded. He didn't really understand, but he correctly surmised that if he revealed this fact Granny would start going into horrible details.

"She's strong in her mind and it might take a while," said Granny. "But sooner or later they'll challenge her."

Smith picked up a hammer from his bench, looked at it as though he had never seen it before, and put it down again.

"But," he said, "if it's wizard magic she's got, learning witchery won't be any good, will it? You said they're different."

"They're both magic. If you can't learn to ride an elephant, you can at least learn to ride a horse."

"What's an elephant?"

"A kind of badger," said Granny. She hadn't maintained forest credibility for forty years by ever admitting ignorance.

The blacksmith sighed. He knew he was beaten. His wife had made it clear that she favored the idea and, now that he came to think about it, there were some advantages. After all, Granny wouldn't last forever, and being father to the area's only witch might not be too bad, at that.

"All right," he said.

And so, as the winter turned and started the long, reluctant climb towards spring, Esk spent days at a time with Granny Weatherwax, learning witch craft.

It seemed to consist mainly of things to remember.

The lessons were quite practical. There was cleaning the kitchen table and Basic Herbalism. There was mucking out the goats and The Uses of Fungi. There was doing the washing and The Summoning of the Small Gods. And there was always tending the big copper still in the scullery and The Theory and Practice of Distillation. By the time the warm Rim winds were blowing, and the snow remained only as little streaks of slush on the Hub side of trees, Esk knew how to prepare a range of ointments, several medicinal brandies, a score of special infusions, and a number of mysterious potions that Granny said she might learn the use of in good time.

What she hadn't done was any magic at all.

"All in good time," repeated Granny vaguely.

"But I'm supposed to be a witch!"

"You're not a witch yet. Name me three herbs good for the bowels."

Esk put her hands behind her back, closed her eyes, and said: "The flowering tops of Greater Peahane, the root pith of Old Man's Trousers, the stems of the Bloodwater Lily, the seedcases of -"

"All right. Where may water gherkins be found?"

"Peat bogs and stagnant pools, from the months of -"

"Good. You're learning."

"But it's not magic!"

Granny sat down at the kitchen table.

"Most magic isn't," she said. "It's just knowing the right herbs, and learning to watch the weather, and finding out the ways of animals. And the ways of people, too."

"That's all it is!" said Esk, horrified.

"All? It's a pretty big all," said Granny, "But no, it isn't all. There's other stuff."

"Can't you teach me?"

"All in good time. There's no call to go showing yourself yet."

"Showing myself? Who to?"

Granny's eyes darted towards the shadows in the corners of the room.

"Never you mind."

Then even the last lingering tails of snow had gone and the spring gales roared around the mountains. The air in the forest began to smell of leaf mould and turpentine. A few early flowers braved the night frosts, and the bees started to fly.

"Now bees," said Granny Weatherwax, "is real magic."

She carefully lifted the lid of the first hive.

"Your bees," she went on, "is your mead, your wax, your bee gum, your honey. A wonderful thing is your bee. Ruled by a queen, too," she added, with a touch of approval.

"Don't they sting you?" said Esk, standing back a little. Bees boiled out of the comb and overflowed the rough wooden sides of the box.

"Hardly ever," said Granny. "You wanted magic. Watch."

She put a hand into the struggling mass of insects and made a shrill, faint piping noise at the back of her throat. There was a movement in the mass, and a large bee, longer and fatter than the others, crawled on to her hand. A few workers followed it, stroking it and generally ministering to it.

"How did you do that?" said Esk.

"Ah," said Granny, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes. I would. That's why I asked, Granny," said Esk, severely.

"Do you think I used magic?"

Esk looked down at the queen bee. She looked up at the witch. "No," she said, "I think you just know a lot about bees."

Granny grinned.

"Exactly correct. That's one form of magic, of course."

"What, just knowing things?"

"Knowing things that other people don't know," said Granny. She carefully dropped the queen back among her subjects and closed the lid of the hive.

"And I think it's time you learned a few secrets," she added.

At last, thought Esk.

"But first, we must pay our respects to the Hive," said Granny. She managed to sound the capital H.

Without thinking, Esk bobbed a curtsey.

Granny's hand clipped the back of her head.

"Bow, I told you," she said, without rancor. "Witches bow." She demonstrated.

"But why?" complained Esk.

"Because witches have got to be different, and that's part of the secret," said Granny.

They sat on a bleached bench in front of the rimward wall of the cottage. In front of them the Herbs were already a foot high, a sinister collection of pale green leaves.

"Right," said Granny, settling herself down. "You know the hat on the hook by the door? Go and fetch it."

Esk obediently went inside and unhooked Granny's hat. It was tall, pointed and, of course, black.

Granny turned it over in her hands and regarded it carefully.

"Inside this hat," she said solemnly, "is one of the secrets of witchcraft. If you cannot tell me what it is, then I might as well teach you no more, because once you learn the secret of the hat there is no going back. Tell me what you know about the hat."

"Can I hold it?"

"Be my guest."

Esk peered inside the hat. There was some wire stiffening to give it a shape, and a couple of hatpins. That was all.

There was nothing particularly strange about it, except that no one in the village had one like it. But that didn't make it magical. Esk bit her lip; she had a vision of herself being sent home in disgrace.

It didn't feel strange, and there were no hidden pockets. It was just a typical witch's hat. Granny always wore it when she went into the village, but in the forest she just wore a leather hood.

She tried to recall the bits of lessons that Granny grudgingly doled out. It isn't what you know, it's what other people don't know. Magic can be something right in the wrong place, or something wrong in the right place. It can be

Granny always wore it to the village. And the big black cloak, which certainly wasn't magical, because for most of the winter it had been a goat blanket and Granny washed it in the spring.

Esk began to feel the shape of the answer and she didn't like it much. It was like a lot of Granny's answers. Just a word trick. She just said things you knew all the time, but in a different way so they sounded important.

"I think I know," she said at last.

"Out with it, then."

"It's in sort of two parts."

"Well?"

"It's a witch's hat because you wear it. But you're a witch because you wear the hat. Um."

"So -"prompted Granny.

"So people see you coming in the hat and the cloak and they know you're a witch and that's why your magic works?" said Esk.

"That's right," said Granny. "It's called headology." She tapped her silver hair, which was drawn into a tight bun that could crack rocks.

"But it's not real!" Esk protested. "That's not magic, it's it's -"

"Listen," said Granny, "If you give someone a bottle of red jollop for their wind it may work, right, but if you want it to work for sure then you let their mind make it work for them. Tell 'em it's moonbeams bottled in fairy wine or something. Mumble over it a bit. It's the same with cursing."

"Cursing?" said Esk, weakly.

"Aye, cursing, my girl, and no need to look so shocked! You'll curse, when the need comes. When you're alone, and there's no help to hand, and -"

She hesitated and, uncomfortably aware of Esk's questioning eyes, finished lamely: "-and people aren't showing respect. Make it loud, make it complicated, make it long, and make it up if you have to, but it'll work all right. Next day, when they hit their thumb or they fall off a ladder or their dog drops dead, they'll remember you. They'll behave better next time."

"But it still doesn't seem like magic," said Esk, scuffing the dust with her feet.

"I saved a man's life once," said Granny. "Special medicine, twice a day. Boiled water with a bit of berry juice in it. Told him I'd bought it from the dwarves. That's the biggest part of doct'rin, really. Most people'll get over most things if they put their minds to it, you just have to give them an interest."

She patted Esk's hand as nicely as possible. "You're a bit young for this," she said, "but as you grow older you'll find most people don't set foot outside their own heads much. You too," she added gnomically.

"I don't understand."

"I'd be very surprised if you did," said Granny briskly, "but you can tell me five herbs suitable for dry coughs."

Spring began to unfold in earnest. Granny started taking Esk on long walks that took all day, to hidden ponds or high on to the mountain scree to collect rare plants. Esk enjoyed that, high on the hills where the sun beat down strongly but the air was nevertheless freezing cold. Plants grew thickly and hugged the ground. From some of the highest peaks she could see all the way to the Rim Ocean that ran around the edge of the world; in the other direction the Ramtops marched into the distance, wrapped in eternal winter. They went all the way to the hub of the world where, it was generally agreed, the Gods lived on a ten-mile high mountain of rock and ice.

"Gods are all right," said Granny, as they ate their lunch and looked at the view. "You don't bother gods, and gods don't come bothering you."

"Do you know many gods?"

"I've seen the thundergods a few times," said Granny, "and Hoki, of course."

"Hold? "

Granny chewed a crustless sandwich. "Oh, he's a nature god," she said. "Sometimes he manifests himself as an oak tree, or half a man and half a goat, but mainly I see him in his aspect as a bloody nuisance. You only find him in the deep woods, of course. He plays the flute. Very badly, if you must know."

Esk lay on her stomach and looked out across the lands below while a few hardy, self-employed bumblebees patrolled the thyme clusters. The sun was warm on her back but, up here, there were still drifts of snow on the hubside of rocks.

"Tell me about the lands down there," she said lazily.

Granny peered disapprovingly at ten thousand miles of landscape.

"They're just other places," she said. "Just like here, only different."

"Are there cities and things?"

"Idaresay."

"Haven't you ever been to look?"

Granny sat back, gingerly arranging her skirt to expose several inches of respectable flannelette to the sun, and let the heat caress her old bones.

"No," she said. "There's quite enough troubles around here without going to look for them in forn parts."

"I dreamed of a city once," said Esk. "It had hundreds of people in it, and there was this building with big gates, and they were magical gates -"

A sound like tearing cloth came from behind her. Granny had fallen asleep.

"Granny! "

"Mhnf?"

Esk thought for a moment. "Are you having a good time?" she said artfully.

"Mnph."

"You said you'd show me some real magic, all in good time," said Esk, "and this is a good time."

"Mnph."

Granny Weatherwax opened her eyes and looked straight up at the sky; it was darker up here, more purple than blue. She thought: why not? She's a quick learner. She knows more herblore than I do. At her age old Gammer Tumult had me Borrowing and Shifting and Sending all the hours of the day. Maybe I'm being too cautious.

"Just a bit?" pleaded Esk.

Granny turned it over in her mind. She couldn't think of any more excuses. I'm surely going to regret this, she told herself, displaying considerable foresight.

"All right," she said shortly.

"Real magic?" said Esk. "Not more herbs or headology?"

"Real magic, as you call it, yes."

"A spell?"

"No. A Borrowing."

Esk's face was a picture of expectation. She looked more alive, it seemed to Granny, than she had ever been before.

Granny looked over the valleys stretching out before them until she found what she was after. A grey eagle was circling lazily over a distant blue-hazed patch of forest. Its mind was currently at ease. It would do nicely.

She Called it gently, and it began to circle towards them.

"The first thing to remember about Borrowing is that you must be comfortable and somewhere safe," she said, smoothing out the grass behind her. "Bed's best."

"But what is Borrowing?"

"Lie down and hold my hand. Do you see the eagle up there?"

Esk squinted into the dark, hot sky.

There were . . . two doll figures on the grass below as she pivoted on the wind ....

She could feel the whip and wire of the air through her feathers. Because the eagle was not hunting, but simply enjoying the feel of the sun on its wings, the land below was a mere unimportant shape. But the air, the air was a complex, changing three-dimensional thing, an interlocked pattern of spirals and curves that stretched away into the distance, a switchback of currents built around thermal pillars. She . . .

. . . felt a gentle pressure restraining her.

"The next thing to remember, " said Granny's voice, very close, "is not to upset the owner. If you let it know you're there it'll either fight you or panic, and you won't stand a chance either way. It's had a lifetime of being an eagle, and you haven't."

Esk said nothing.

"You're not frightened, are you?" said Granny. "It can take you that way the first time, and -"

"I'm not frightened," said Esk, and "How do I control it?"

"You don't. Not yet. Anyway, controlling a truly wild creature isn't easily learned. You have to - sort of suggest to it that it might feel inclined to do things. With a tame animal, of course, it's all different. But you can't make any creature do anything that is totally against its nature. Now try and find the eagle's mind."

Esk could sense Granny as a diffuse silver cloud at the back of her own mind. After some searching she found the eagle. She almost missed it. Its mind was small, sharp and purple, like an arrowhead. It was concentrating entirely on flying, and took no notice of her.

"Good," said Granny approvingly. "We're not going to go far. If you want to make it turn, you must -"

"Yes, yes," said Esk. She flexed her fingers, wherever they were, and the bird leaned against the air and turned.

"Very good," said Granny, taken aback. "How did you do that?"

"I - don't know. It just seemed obvious."

"Hmph." Granny gently tested the tiny eagle mind. It was still totally oblivious of its passengers. She was genuinely impressed, a very rare occurrence.

They floated over the mountain, while Esk excitedly explored the eagle's senses. Granny's voice droned through her consciousness, giving instructions and guidance and warnings. She listened with half an ear. It sounded far too complicated. Why couldn't she take over the eagle's mind? It wouldn't hurt it.

She could see how to do it, it was just a knack, like snapping your fingers - which in fact she had never managed to achieve - and then she'd be able to experience flying for real, not at second hand.

Then she could

"Don't," said Granny calmly. "No good will come of it."

"What?"

"Do you really think you're the first, my girl? Do you think we haven't all thought what a fine thing it would be, to take on another body and tread the wind or breathe the water? And do you really think it would be as easy as that?"

Esk glowered at her.

"No need to look like that," said Granny. "You'll thank me one day. Don't you start playing around before you know what you're about, eh? Before you get up to tricks you've got to learn what to do if things go wrong. Don't try to walk before you can run."

"I can feel how to do it, Granny."

"That's as maybe. It's harder than it seems, is Borrowing, although I'll grant you've got a knack. That's enough for today, bring us in over ourselves and I'll show you how to Return."

The eagle beat the air over the two recumbent forms and Esk saw, in her mind's eye, two channels open for them. Granny's mindshape vanished.

Now

Granny had been wrong. The eagle mind barely fought, and didn't have time to panic. Esk held it wrapped in her own mind It writhed for an instant, and then melted into leer.

Granny opened her eyes in time to see the bird give a hoarse cry of triumph, curve down low over the grass-grown scree, and skim away down the mountainside. For a moment it was a vanishing dot and then it had gone, leaving only another echoing shriek.

Granny looked down at Esk's silent form. The girl was light enough, but it was a long way home and the afternoon was dwindling.

"Drat," she said, with no particular emphasis. She stood up, brushed herself down and, with a grunt of effort, hauled Esk's inert body over her shoulder.

High in the crystal sunset air above the mountains the eagle Esk sought more height, drunk with the sheer vitality of flight.

On the way home Granny met a hungry bear. Granny's back was giving her gyp, and she was in no mood to be growled at. She muttered a few words under her breath and the bear, to its brief amazement, walked heavily into a tree and didn't regain consciousness for several hours.

When she reached the cottage Granny put Esk's body to bed and drew up the fire. She brought the goats in and milked them, and finished the chores of the evening.

She made sure all the windows were open and, when it began to grow dark, lit a lantern and put it on the windowsill.

Granny Weatherwax didn't sleep more than a few hours a night, as a rule, and woke again at midnight. The room hadn't changed, although the lantern had its own little solar system of very stupid moths.

When she woke again at dawn the candle had long burned down and Esk was still sleeping the shallow, unwakable sleep of the Borrower.

When she took the goats out to their paddock she looked intently at the sky.

Noon came, and gradually the light drained out of another day. She paced the floor of the kitchen aimlessly. Occasionally she would throw herself into frantic bouts of housework; ancient crusts were unceremoniously dug out of the cracks in the flagstones, and the fireback was scraped free of the winter's soot and blackleaded to within an inch of its life. A nest of mice in the back of the dresser were kindly but firmly ejected into the goatshed.

Sunset came.

The light of the Discworld was old and slow and heavy. From the cottage door Granny watched as it drained off the mountains, flowing in golden rivers through the forest. Here and there it pooled in hollows until it faded and vanished.

She drummed her fingers sharply on the doorpost, humming a small and bitter little tune.

Dawn came, and the cottage was empty except for Esk's body, silent and unmoving on the bed.

But as the golden light flowed slowly across the Discworld like the first freshing of the tide over mudflats the eagle circled higher into the dome of heaven, beating the air down with slow and powerful wingbeats.

The whole of the world was spread out beneath Esk - all the continents, all the islands, all the rivers and especially the great ring of the Rim Ocean.

There was nothing else up here, not even sound.

Esk gloried in the feel of it, willing her flagging muscles into greater effort. But something was wrong. Her thoughts seemed to be chasing around beyond her control, and disappearing. Pain and exhilaration and weariness poured into her mind, but it was as if other things were spilling out at the same time. Memories dwindled away on the wind. As fast as she could latch on to a thought it evaporated, leaving nothing behind.

She was losing chunks of herself, and she couldn't remember. what she was losing. She panicked, burrowing back to the things she was sure of ....

I am Esk, and I have stolen the body of an eagle and the feel of wind in feathers, the hunger, the search of the not-sky below ....

She tried again. I am Esk and seeking the windpath, the pain of muscle, the cut of the air, the cold of it ....

I am Esk high over air-damp-wet-white, above everything, the sky is thin ....

I am I am.

Granny was in the garden, among the beehives, the early morning wind whipping at her skirts. She went from hive to hive, tapping on their roofs. Then, in the thickets of borage and beebalm that she had planted around them, she stood with her arms outstretched in front of her and sang something in tones so high that no normal person could have heard them.

But a roar went up from the hives, and then the air was suddenly thick with the heavy, big-eyed, deep-voiced shapes of drone bees. They circled over her head, adding their own bass humming to her chant.

Then they were gone, soaring into the growing light over the clearing and streaming away over the trees.

It is well known- at least, it is well known to witches - that all colonies of bees are, as it were, just one part of the creature called the Swarm, in the same way that individual bees are component cells of the hivemind. Granny didn't mingle her thoughts with the bees very often, partly because insect minds were strange, alien things that tasted of tin, but mostly because she suspected that the Swarm was a good deal more intelligent than she was.

She knew that the drones would soon reach the wild bee colonies in the deep forest, and within hours every corner of the mountain meadows would be under very close scrutiny indeed. All she could do was wait.

At noon the drones returned, and Granny read in the sharp acid thoughts of the hivemind that there was no sign of Esk.

She went back into the cool of the cottage and sat down in the rocking chair, staring at the doorway.

She knew what the next step was. She hated the very idea of it. But she fetched a short ladder, climbed up creakily on to the roof, and pulled the staff from its hiding place in the thatch.

It was icy cold. It steamed.

"Above the snowline, then," said Granny.

She climbed down, and rammed the staff into a flowerbed. She glared at it. She had a nasty feeling that it was glaring back.

"Don't think you've won, because you haven't," she snapped. "It's just that I haven't got the time to mess around. You must know where she is. I command you to take me to her!"

The staff regarded her woodenly.

"By -" Granny paused, her invocations were a little rusty, "- by stock and stone I order it!"

Activity, movement, liveliness - all these words would be completely inaccurate descriptions of the staff's response.

Granny scratched her chin. She remembered the little lesson all children get taught: what's the magic word?

"Please?" she suggested.

The staff trembled, rose a little way out of the ground, and turned in the air so that it hung invitingly at waist height.

Granny had heard that broomsticks were once again very much the fashion among younger witches, but she didn't hold with it. There was no way a body could look respectable while hurtling through the air aboard a household implement. Besides, it looked decidedly draughty.

But this was no time for respectability. Pausing only to snatch her hat from its hook behind the door she scrambled up on to the staff and perched as best she could, sidesaddle of course, and with her skirts firmly gripped between her knees.

"Right," she said. "Now wha-aaaaaaaaa -"

Across the forest animals broke and scattered as the shadow passed overhead, crying and cursing. Granny clung on with whitened knuckles, her thin legs kicking wildly as, high above the treetops, she learned important lessons about centres of gravity and air turbulence. The staff shot onwards, heedless of her yells.

By the time it had come out over the upland meadows she had come to terms with it somewhat, which meant that she could just about hang on with knees and hands provided she didn't mind being upside down. Her hat, at least, was useful, being aerodynamically shaped.

The staff plunged between black cliffs and along high bare valleys where, it was said, rivers of ice had once flowed in the days of the ice Giants. The air became thin and sharp in the throat.

They came to an abrupt halt over a snowdrift. Granny fell off, and lay panting in the snow while she tried to remember why she was going through all this.

There was a bundle of feathers under an overhang a few feet away. As Granny approached it a head rose jerkily, and the eagle glared at her with fierce, frightened eyes. It tried to fly, and toppled over. When she reached out to touch it, it took a neat triangle of flesh out of her hand.

"I see," said Granny quietly, to no one in particular. She looked around, and found a boulder of about the right size. She disappeared behind it for a few seconds, fox the sake of respectability, and reappeared with a petticoat in her hand. The bird thrashed around, ruining several weeks of meticulous petitpoint embroidery, but she managed to bundle it up and hold it so that she could avoid its sporadic lunges.

Granny turned to the staff, which was now upright in the snowdrift.

"I shall walk back," she told it coldly.

It turned out that they were in a spur valley overlooking a drop of several hundred feet on to sharp black rocks.

"Very well, then," she conceded, "but you're to fly slowly, d'you understand? And no going high."

In fact, because she was slightly more experienced and perhaps because the staff was taking more care, too, the ride back was almost sedate. Granny was almost persuaded that, given time, she could come to merely dislike flying, instead of loathing it. What it needed was some way of stopping yourself from having to look at the ground.

The eagle sprawled on the rag rug in front of the empty hearth. It had drunk some water, over which Granny had mumbled a few of the charms she normally said to impress

patients, but you never knew, there might be some power in them, and it had also gulped a few strips of raw meat.

What it had not done was display the least sign of intelligence.

She wondered whether she had the right bird. She risked another pecking and stared hard into its evil orange eyes, and tried to convince herself that way down in their depths, almost beyond sight, was a strange little flicker.

She probed around inside its head. The eagle mind was still there right enough, vivid and sharp, but there was something else. Mind, of course, has no colour, but nevertheless the strands of the eagle's mind seemed to be purple. Around them and tangled among them were faint strands of silver.

Esk had learned too late that mind shapes body, that Borrowing is one thing but that the dream of truly taking on another form had its built-in penalty.

Granny sat and rocked. She was at a loss, she knew that. Unravelling the tangled minds was beyond her power, beyond any power in the Ramtops, beyond even

There was no sound, but maybe there was a change in the texture of the air. She looked up at the staff, which had been suffered to come back into the cottage.

"No," she said firmly.

Then she thought: whose benefit did I say that for? Mine? There's power there, but it's not my kind of power.

There isn't any other kind around, though. And even now I may be too late.

I might never have been early enough.

She reached out again into the bird's head to calm its fears and dispel its panic. It allowed her to pick it up and sat awkwardly on her wrist, its talons gripping tight enough to draw blood.

Granny took the staff and made her way upstairs, to where Esk lay on the narrow bed in the low bedroom with its ancient contoured ceiling.

She made the bird perch on the bedrail and turned her attention to the staff. Once more the carvings shifted under her glare, never quite revealing their true form.

Granny was no stranger to the uses of power, but she knew she relied on gentle pressure subtly to steer the tide of things. She didn't put it like that, of course - she would have said that there was always a lever if you knew where to look. The power in the staff was harsh, fierce, the raw stuff of magic distilled out of the forces that powered the universe itself.

There would be a price. And Granny knew enough about wizardry to be certain that it would be a high one. But if you were worried about the price, then why were you in the shop?

She cleared her throat, and wondered what the hell she was supposed to do next. Perhaps if she

The power hit her like a half-brick. She could feel it take her and lift her so that she was amazed to look down and see her feet still firmly on the floorboards. She tried to take a step forward and magical discharges crackled in the air around her. She reached out to steady herself against the wall and the ancient wooden beam under her hand stirred and started to sprout leaves. A cyclone of magic swirled around the room, picking up dust and briefly giving it some very disturbing shapes; the jug and basin on the washstand, with

the particularly fetching rosebud pattern, broke into fragments. Under the bed the third member of the traditional china trio turned into something horrible and slunk away.

Granny opened her mouth to swear and thought better of it when her words blossomed out into rainbow-edged clouds.

She looked down at Esk and the eagle, which seemed oblivious to all this, and tried to concentrate. She let herself slide inside its head and again she could see the strands of mind, the silver threads bound so closely around the purple that they took on the same shape. But now she could see where the strands ended, and where a judicious tug or push would begin to unravel them. It was so obvious she heard herself laugh, and the sound curved away in shades of orange and red and vanished into the ceiling.

Time passed. Even with the power throbbing through hey head it was a painfully hard task, like threading a needle by moonlight, but eventually she had a handful of silver. In the slow, heavy world in which she now appeared to be she took the hank and threw it slowly towards Esk. It became a cloud, swirled like a whirlpool, and vanished.

She was aware of a shrill chittering noise, and shadows on the edge of sight. Well, it happened to everyone sooner or later. They had come, drawn as always by a discharge of magic. You just had to learn to ignore them.

Granny woke with bright sunlight skewering into her eyes. She was slumped against the door, and her whole body felt as though it had toothache.

She reached out blindly with one hand, found the edge of the washstand, and pulled herself into a sitting position. She was not really surprised to see that the jug and basin looked just the same as they had always done; in fact sheer curiosity overcame her aches and she gave a quick glance under the bed to check that, yes, things were as normal.

The eagle was still hunched on the bedpost. In the bed Esk was asleep, and Granny saw that it was a true sleep and not the stillness of a vacant body.

All she had to do now was hope that Esk wouldn't wake up with an irresistible urge to pounce on rabbits.

She carried the unresisting bird downstairs and let it free outside the back door. It flew heavily up into the nearest tree, where it settled to rest. It had a feeling it ought to have a grudge against somebody, but for the life of it, it couldn't remember why.

Esk opened her eyes and stared for a long time at the ceiling. Over the months she had grown familiar with every lump and crack of the plaster, which created a fantastic upside-down landscape that she had peopled with a private and complex civilization.

Her mind thronged with dreams. She pulled an arm out from under the sheets and stared at it, wondering why it wasn't covered with feathers. It was all very puzzling.

She pushed the covers back, swung her legs to the edge of the bed, spread her wings into the rush of the wind and glided out into the world ....

The thump on the bedroom floor brought Granny scurrying up the stairs, to take her in her arms and hold her tight as the terror hit her. She rocked back and forth on her heels, making meaningless soothing noises.

Esk looked up at her through a mask of horror.

"I could feel myself vanishing!"

"Yes, yes. Better now," murmured Granny.

"You don't understand! I couldn't even remember my name!" Esk shrieked.

"But you can remember now."

Esk hesitated, checking. "Yes," she said, "Yes, of course. Now."

"So no harm done."

"But -"

Granny sighed. "You have learned something," she said, and thought it safe to insert a touch of sternness into her voice. "They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but it is not; one half so bad as a lot of ignorance."

"But what happened?"

"You thought that Borrowing wasn't enough. You thought it would be a fine thing to steal another's body. But you must know that a body is like - like a jelly mould. It sets a shape on its contents, d'you see? You can't have a girl's mind in an eagle's body. Not for long, at any rate."

"I became an eagle?"

"Yes."

"Not meat all?"

Granny thought for a while. She always had to pause when conversations with Esk led her beyond the reaches of a decent person's vocabulary.

"No," she said at last, "not in the way you mean. Just an eagle with maybe some strange dreams sometimes. Like when you dream you're flying, perhaps it would remember walking and talking."

"Urgh."

"But it's all over now," said Granny, treating her to a thin smile. "You're your true self again and the eagle has got its mind back. It's sitting in the big beech by the privy; I should like you to put out some food for it."

Esk sat back on her heels, staring at a point past Granny's head.

"There were some strange things," she said conversationally. Granny spun around.

"I meant, in a sort of dream I saw things," said Esk. The old woman's shock was so visible that she hesitated, frightened that she had said something wrong.

"What kind of things?" said Granny flatly.

"Sort of big creatures, all sorts of shapes. Just sitting around."

"Was it dark? I mean, these Things, were they in the dark?"

"There were stars, I think. Granny?"

Granny Weatherwax was staring at the wall.

"Granny?" Esk repeated.

"Mmph? Yes? Oh." Granny shook herself. "Yes. I see. Now I would like you to go downstairs and get the bacon that is in the pantry and put it out for the bird, do you understand? It would be a good idea to thank it, too. You never know."

When Esk returned Granny was buttering bread. She pulled her stool up to the table, but the old woman waved the breadknife at her.

"First things first. Stand up. Face me."

Esk did so, puzzled. Granny stuck the knife in the breadboard and shook her head.

"Drat it," she said to the world at large. "I don't know what way they have of it, there should be some kind of ceremony if I know wizards, they always have to complicate things . . . ."

"What do you mean?"

Granny seemed to ignore her, but crossed to the dark corner by the dresser.

"Probably you should have one foot in a bucket of cold porridge and one glove on and all that kind of stuff," she went on. "I didn't want to do this, but They're forcing my hand."

"What are you talking about, Granny?"

The old witch yanked the staff out of its shadow and waved it vaguely at Esk.

"Here. It's yours. Take it. I just hope this is the right thing to do."

In fact the presentation of a staff to an apprentice wizard is usually a very impressive ceremony, especially if the staff has been inherited from an elder wage; by ancient lore there is a long and frightening ordeal involving masks and hoods and swords and fearful

oaths about people's tongues being cut out and their entrails torn by wild birds and their ashes scattered to the eight winds and so on. After some hours of this sort of thing the apprentice can be admitted to the brotherhood of the Wise and Enlightened.

There is also a long speech. By sheer coincidence Granny got the essence of it in a nutshell.

Esk took the staff and peered at it.

"It's very nice," she said uncertainly. "The carvings are pretty. What's it for?"

"Sit down now. And listen properly for once. On the day you were born . . . ."

". . . and that's the shape of it."

Esk looked hard at the staff, then at Granny.

"I've got to be a wizard?"

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"That isn't really an answer, Granny," Esk said reproachfully. "Am I or aren't I?"

"Women can't be wizards," said Granny bluntly. "It's agin nature. You might as well have a female blacksmith."

"Actually I've watched dad at work and I don't see why -"

"Look," said Granny hurriedly, "you can't have a female wizard any more than you can have a male witch, because -"

"I've heard of male witches," said Esk meekly.

"Warlocks!"

"I think so."

"I mean there's no male witches, only silly men," said Granny hotly. "If men were witches, they'd be wizards. It's all down to -"she tapped her head "- headology. How your mind works. Men's minds work different from ours, see. Their magic's all numbers and angles and edges and what the stars are doing, as if that really mattered. It's all power. It's all -" Granny paused, and dredged up her favourite word to describe all she despised in wizardry, "- jommetry."

"That's all right, then," said Esk, relieved. "I'll stay here and learn witchery."

"Ali," said Granny gloomily, "that's all very well for you to say. I don't think it will be as easy as that."

"But you said that men can be wizards and women can be witches and it can't be the other way around."

"That's right."

"Well, then," said Esk triumphantly, "it's all solved, isn't it? I can't help but be a witch."

Granny pointed to the staff. Esk shrugged.

"It's just an old stick."

Granny shook her head. Esk blinked.

"No?"

"No."

"And I can't be a witch?"

"I don't know what you can be. Hold the staff."

"What?"

"Hold the staff. Now, I've laid the fire in the grate. Light it."

"The tinderbox is -" Esk began.

"You once told me there were better ways of lighting fires. Show me."

Granny stood up. In the dimness of the kitchen she seemed to grow until she filled it with shifting, ragged shadows, shot with menace. Her eyes glared down at Esk.

"Show me," she commanded, and her voice had ice in it.

"But -"said Esk desperately, clutching the heavy staff to her and knocking her stool over in her haste to back away.

"Showme."

With a scream Esk spun around. Fire flared from her fingertips and arced across the room. The kindling exploded with a force that hurled the furniture around the room and a ball of fierce green light spluttered on the hearth.

Changing patterns sped across it as it spun sizzling on the stones, which cracked and then flowed. The iron fireback resisted bravely for a few seconds before melting like wax; it made a final appearance as a red smear across the fireball and then vanished. A moment later the kettle went the same way.

Just when it seemed that the chimney would follow them the ancient hearthstone gave up, and with a final splutter the fireball sank from view.

The occasional crackle or puff of steam signaled its passage through the earth. Apart from that there was silence, the loud hissing silence that comes after an ear-splattering noise, and after the actinic glare the room seemed pitch dark.

Eventually Granny crawled out from behind the table and crept as closely as she dared to the hole, which was still surrounded by a crust of lava. She jerked back as another cloud of superheated steam mushroomed up.

"They say there's dwarf mines under the Ramtops," she said inconsequentially. "My, but them little buggers is in for a surprise."

She prodded the little puddle of cooling iron where the kettle had been, and added, "Shame about the fireback. It had owls on it, you know."

She patted her singed hair gingerly with a shaking hand. "I think this calls for a nice cup of, a nice cup of cold water."

Esk sat looking in wonder at her hand.

"That was real magic." she said at last, "And I did it."

"One type of real magic," corrected Granny. "Don't forget that. And you don't want to do that all the time, neither. If it's in you, you've got to learn to control it."

"Can you teach me?"

"Me? No!"

"How can I learn if no one will teach me?"

"You've got to go where they can. Wizard school."

"But you said -"

Granny paused in the act of filling a jug from the water bucket.

"Yes, yes," she snapped, "Never mind what I said, or common sense or anything. Sometimes you just have to go the way things take you, and I reckon you're going to wizard school one way or the other."

Esk considered this.

"You mean it's my destiny?" she said at last.

Granny shrugged. "Something like that. Probably. Who knows? "

That night, long after Esk had been sent to bed, Granny put on her hat, lit a fresh candle, cleared the table, and pulled a small wooden box from its secret hiding place in the dresser. It contained a bottle of ink, an elderly quill pen, and a few sheets of paper.

Granny was not entirely happy when faced with the world of letters. Her eyes protruded, her tongue stuck out, small beads of sweat formed on her forehead, but the pen scratched its way across the page to the accompaniment of the occasional quiet "drat" or "bugger the thing".

The letter read as follows, although this version lacks the candlewax, blots, crossings-out and damp patches of the original.

To then Hed blizzard, Unsene Universety, Greatings, I hop you ar well, I am sending to you won Escarrina Smith, shee bath thee maekings of wizzardery but whot may be ferther dun wyth hyr I knowe not slice is a gode worker and clene about hyr person allso skilled in diuerse arts of thee howse, I will send Monies wyth hyr May you liv longe and ende youre days in pese, And oblije, Esmerelder Weatherwaxe (Mss/ wytch.

Granny held it up to the candlelight and considered it critically. It was a good letter. She had got "diuerse" out of the Alm anack, which she read every night. It was always predicting "diuerse plagues" and "diuerse ill-fortune". Granny wasn't entirely sure what it meant, but it was a damn good word all the same.

She sealed it with candle-wax and put it on the dresser. She could leave it for the carrier to take when she went into the village tomorrow, to see about a new kettle.

Next morning Granny took some pains over her dress, selecting a black dress with a frog and bat motif, a big velvet cloak, or at least a cloak made of the sort of stuff velvet looks like after thirty years of heavy wear, and the pointed hat of office which was crucified with hatpins.

Their first call was to the stonemason, to order a replacement hearthstone. Then they called on the smith.

It was a long and stormy meeting. Esk wandered out into the orchard and climbed up to her old place in the apple tree while from the house came her father's shouts, her mother's wails and long silent pauses which meant that Granny Weatherwax was speaking softly in what Esk thought of as her "just so" voice. The old woman had a flat, measured way of speaking sometimes. It was the kind of voice the Creator had probably used. Whether

there was magic in it, or just headology, it ruled out any possibility of argument. It made it clear that whatever it was talking about was exactly how things should be.

The breeze shook the tree gently. Esk sat on a branch idly swinging her legs.

She thought about wizards. They didn't often come to Bad Ass, but there were a fair number of stories about them. They were wise, she recalled, and usually very old and they did powerful, complex and mysterious magics and almost all of them had beards. They were also, without exception, men.

She was on firmer ground with witches, because she'd trailed off with Granny to visit a couple of villages' witches further along the hills, and anyway witches figured largely in Ramtop folklore. Witches were cunning, she recalled, and usually very old, or at least they tried to look old, and they did slightly suspicious, homely and organic magics and some of them had beards. They were also, without exception, women.

There was some fundamental problem in all that which she couldn't quite resolve. Why wouldn't....

Cern and Gulta hurtled down the path and came to a pushing, shoving halt under the tree. They peered up at their sister with a mixture of fascination and scorn. Witches and wizards were objects of awe, but sisters weren't. Somehow, knowing your own sister was learning to be a witch sort of devalued the whole profession.

"You can't really do spells," said Cern. "Can you?"

"Course you can't," said Gulta. "What's this stick?"

Esk had left the staff leaning against the tree. Cern prodded it cautiously.

"I don't want you to touch it," said Esk hurriedly. "Please. It's mine."

Cern normally had all the sensitivity of a ballbearing, but his hand stopped in mid-prod, much to his surprise.

"I didn't want to anyway," he muttered to hide his confusion. "It's only an old stick."

"Is it true you can do spells?" asked Gulta. "We heard Granny say you could."

"We listened at the door," added Cern.

"You said I couldn't," said Esk, airily.

"Well, can you or can't you?" said Gulta, his face reddening.

"Perhaps."

"You can't!"

Esk looked down at his face. She loved her brothers, when she reminded herself to, in a dutiful sort of way, although she generally remembered them as a collection of loud noises in trousers. But there was something awfully pig-like and unpleasant about the way Gulta was staring up at her, as though she had personally insulted him.

She felt her body start to tingle, and the world suddenly seemed very sharp and clear.

"I can," she said.

Gulta looked from her to the staff, and his eyes narrowed. He kicked it viciously.

"Old stick!"

He looked, she thought, exactly like a small angry pig.

Cern's screams brought Granny and his parents first to the back door and then running down the cinder path.

Esk was perched in the fork of the apple tree, an expression of dreamy contemplation on her face. Cern was hiding behind the tree, his face a mere rim around a red, tonsil-vibrating bawl.

Gulta was sitting rather bewildered in a pile of clothing that no longer fitted him, wrinkling his snout.

Granny strode up to the tree until her hooked nose was level with Esk's.

"Turning people into pigs is not allowed," she hissed. "Even brothers."

"I didn't do it, it just happened. Anyway, you must admit it's a better shape for him," said Esk evenly.

"What's going on?" said Smith. "Where's Gulta? What's this pig doing here?"

"This pig", said Granny Weatherwax, "is your son."

There was a sigh from Esk's mother as she collapsed gently backwards, but Smith was slightly less unprepared. He looked sharply from Gulta, who had managed to untangle himself from his clothing and was now rooting enthusiastically among the early windfalls, to his only daughter.

"She did this?"

"Yes. Or it was done through her," said Granny, looking suspiciously at the staff.

"Oh." Smith looked at his fifth son. He had to admit that the shape suited him. He reached out without looking and fetched the screaming Cern a thump on the back of his head.

"Can you turn him back again?" he asked. Granny spun around and glared the question at Esk, who shrugged.

"He didn't believe I could do magic," she said calmly.

"Yes, well, I think you've made the point," said Granny. "And now you will turn him back, madam. This instant. Do you hear?"

"Don't want to. He was rude."

"I see."

Esk gazed down defiantly. Granny glared up sternly. Their wills clanged like cymbals and the air between them thickened. But Granny had spent a lifetime bending recalcitrant creatures to her bidding and, while Esk was a surprisingly strong opponent, it was obvious that she would give in before the end of the paragraph.

"Oh, all right," she whined. "I don't know why anyone would bother turning him into a pig when he was doing such a good job of it all by himself."

She didn't know where the magic had come from, but she mentally faced that way and made a suggestion. Gulta reappeared, naked, with an apple in his mouth.

"Awts aughtning?" he said.

Granny spun around on Smith.

"Now will you believe me?" she snapped. "Do you really think she's supposed to settle down here and forget all about magic? Can you imagine her poor husband if she marries?"

"But you always said it was impossible for women to be wizards," said Smith. He was actually rather impressed. Granny Weatherwax had never been known to turn anyone into anything.

"Never mind that now," said Granny, calming down a bit. "She needs training. She needs to know how to control. For pity's sake put some clothes on that child."

"Gulta, get dressed and stop grizzling," said his father, and turned back to Granny.

"You said there was some sort of teaching place?" he hazarded.

"The Unseen University, yes. It's for training wizards."

"And you know where it is?"

"Yes," lied Granny, whose grasp of geography was slightly worse than her knowledge of sub-atomic physics.

Smith looked from her to his daughter, who was sulking.

"And they'll make a wizard of her?" he said.

Granny sighed.

"I don't know what they'll make of her," she said.

And so it was that, a week later, Granny locked the cottage door and hung the key on its nail in the privy. The goats had been sent to stay with a sister witch further along the hills, who had also promised to keep an Eye on the cottage. Bad Ass would just have to manage without a witch for a while.

Granny was vaguely aware that you didn't find the Unseen University unless it wanted you to, and the only place to start looking was the town of Ohulan Cutash, a sprawl of a hundred or so houses about fifteen miles away. It was where you went to once or twice a year if you were a really cosmopolitan Bad Assian: Granny had only been once before in her entire life and hadn't approved of it at all. It had smelt all wrong, she'd got lost, and she distrusted city folk with their flashy ways.

They got a lift on the cart that came out periodically with metal for the smithy. It was gritty, but better than walking, especially since Granny had packed their few possessions in a large sack. She sat on it for safety.

Esk sat cradling the staff and watching the woods go by. When they were several miles outside the village she said, "I thought you told me plants were different in forn parts."

"So they are."

"These trees look just the same."

Granny regarded them disdainfully.

"Nothing like as good," she said.

In fact she was already feeling slightly panicky. Her promise to accompany Esk to Unseen University had been made without thinking, and Granny, who picked up what little she knew of the rest of the Disc from rumour and the pages of her Almanack, was convinced that they were heading into earthquakes, tidal waves, plagues and massacres,

many of them diverse or even worse. But she was determined to see it through. A witch relied too much on words ever to go back on them.

She was wearing serviceable black, and concealed about her person were a number of hatpins and a breadknife. She had hidden their small store of money, grudgingly advanced by Smith, in the mysterious strata of her underwear. Her skirt pockets jingled with lucky charms, and a freshly-forged horseshoe, always a potent preventative in time of trouble, weighed down her handbag. She felt about as ready as she ever would be to face the world.

The track wound down between the mountains. For once the sky was clear, the high Ramtops standing out crisp and white like the brides of the sky (with their trousseaux stuffed with thunderstorms) and the many little streams that bordered or crossed the path flowed sluggishly through strands of meadowsweet and go-fasterroot.

By lunchtime they reached the suburb of Ohulan (it was too small to have more than one, which was just an inn and a handful of cottages belonging to people who couldn't stand the pressures of urban life) and a few minutes later the cart deposited them in the town's main, indeed its only, square.

It turned out to be market day.

Granny Weatherwax stood uncertainly on the cobbles, holding tightly to Esk's shoulder as the crowd swirled around them. She had heard that lewd things could happen to country women who were freshly arrived in big cities, and she gripped her handbag until her knuckles whitened. If any male stranger had happened to so much as nod at her it would have gone very hard indeed for him.

Esk's eyes were sparkling. The square was a jigsaw of noise and colour and smell. On one side of it were the temples of the Disc's more demanding deities, and weird perfumes

drifted out to join with the reeks of commerce in a complex ragrug of fragrances. There were stalls filled with enticing curiosities that she itched to investigate.

Granny let the both of them drift with the crowd. The stalls were puzzling her as well. She peered among them, although never for one minute relaxing her vigilance against pickpockets, earthquakes and traffickers in the erotic, until she spied something vaguely familiar.

There was a small covered stall, black draped and musty, that had been wedged into a narrow space between two houses. Inconspicuous though it was, it nevertheless seemed to be doing a very busy trade. Its customers were mainly women, of all ages, although she did notice a few men. They all had one thing in common, though. No one approached it directly. They all sort of strolled almost past it, then suddenly ducked under its shady canopy. A moment later and they would be back again, hand just darting away from bag or pocket, competing for the world's Most Nonchalant Walk title so effectively that a watcher might actually doubt what he or she had just seen.

It was quite amazing that a stall so many people didn't know was there should be quite so popular.

"What's in there?" said Esk. "What's everyone buying?"

"Medicines," said Granny firmly.

"There must be a lot of very sick people in towns," said Esk gravely.

Inside, the stall was a mass of velvet shadows and the herbal scent was thick enough to bottle. Granny poked a few bundles of dry leaves with an expert finger. Esk pulled away from her and tried to read the scrawled labels on the bottles in front of her. She was expert at most of Granny's preparations, but she didn't recognise anything here. The names were quite amusing, like Tiger Oil, Maiden's Prayer and Husband's Helper, and

one or two of the stoppers smelled like Granny's scullery after she had done some of her secret distillations.

A shape moved in the stall's dim recesses and a brown wrinkled hand slid lightly on to hers.

"Can I assist you, missy?" said a cracked voice, in tones of syrup of figs, "Is it your fortune you want telling, or is it your future you want changing, maybe?"

"She's with me," snapped Granny, spinning around, "and your eyes are betraying you, Hilta Goatfounder, if you can't tell her age."

The shape in front of Esk bent forward.

"Esme Weatherwax?" it asked.

"The very same," said Granny. "Still selling thunder drops and penny wishes, Hilta? How goes it?"

"All the better for seeing you," said the shape. "What brings you down from the mountains, Esme? And this child - your assistant, perhaps?"

"What's it you're selling, please?" asked Esk. The shape laughed.

"Oh, things to stop things that shouldn't be and help things that should, love," it said. "Let me just close up, my dears, and I will be right with you."

The shape bustled past Esk in a nasal kaleidoscope of fragrances and buttoned up the curtains at the front of the stall. Then the drapes at the back were thrown up, letting in the afternoon sunlight.

"Can't stand the dark and fug myself," said Hilta Goatfounder, "but the customers expect it. You know how it is."

"Yes," Esk nodded sagely. "Headology."

Hilts, a small fat woman wearing an enormous hat with fruit on it, glanced from her to Granny and grinned.

"That's the way of it," she agreed. "Will you take some tea?"

They sat on bales of unknown herbs in the private corner made by the stall between the angled walls of the houses, and drank something fragrant and green out of surprisingly delicate cups. Unlike Granny, who dressed like a very respectable raven, Hilts Goatfounder was all lace and shawls and colours and earrings and so many bangles that a mere movement of her arms sounded like a percussion section falling off a cliff. But Esk could see the likeness.

It was hard to describe. You couldn't imagine them curtseying to anyone.

"So," said Granny, "how goes the life?"

The other witch shrugged, causing the drummers to lose their grip again, just when they had nearly climbed back up.

"Like the hurried lover, it comes and goe-" she began, and stopped at Granny's meaningful glance at Esk.

"Not bad, not bad," she amended hurriedly. "The council have tried to run me out once or twice, you know, but they all have wives and somehow it never quite happens. They say I'm not the right sort, but I say there'd be many a family in this town a good deal bigger and poorer if it wasn't for Madame Goatfounder's Pennyroyal Preventives. I know who

comes into my shop, I do. I remember who buys buckeroo drops and ShoNuff Ointment, I do. Life isn't bad. And how is it up in your village with the funny name?"

"Bad Ass," said Esk helpfully. She picked a small clay pot off the counter and sniffed at its contents.

"It is well enough," conceded Granny. "The handmaidens of nature are ever in demand."

Esk sniffed again at the powder, which seemed to be pennyroyal with a base she couldn't quite identify, and carefully replaced the lid. While the two women exchanged gossip in a kind of feminine code, full of eye contact and unspoken adjectives, she examined the other exotic potions on display. Or rather, not on display. In some strange way they appeared to be artfully half-hidden, as if Hilts wasn't entirely keen to sell.

"I don't recognise any of these," she said, half to herself. "What do they give to people?"

"Freedom," said Hilts, who had good hearing. She turned back to Granny. "How much have you taught her?"

"Not that much," said Granny. "There's power there, but what kind I'm not sure. Wizard power, it might be."

Hilts turned around very slowly and looked Esk up and down.

"Ah," she said, "That explains the staff. I wondered what the bees were talking about. Well, well. Give me your hand, child."

Esk held out her hand. Hilta's fingers were so heavy with rings it was like dipping into a sack of walnuts.

Granny sat upright, radiating disapproval, as Hilts began to inspect Esk's palm.

"I really don't think that is necessary," she said sternly. "Not between us."

"You do it, Granny," said Esk, "in the village. I've seen you. And teacups. And cards."

Granny shifted uneasily. "Yes, well," she said. "It's all according. You just hold their hand and people do their own fortune-telling. But there's no need to go around believing it, we'd all be in trouble if we went around believing everything."

"The Powers That Be have many strange qualities, and puzzling and varied are the ways in which they make their desires known in this circle of firelight we call the physical world," said Hilts solemnly. She winked at Esk.

"Well, really," snapped Granny.

"No, straight up," said Hilts. "It's true."

"Hmph."

"I see you going upon a long journey," said Hilts.

"Will I meet a tall dark stranger?" said Esk, examining her palm. "Granny always says that to women, she says -"

"No," said Hilts, while Granny snorted. "But it will be a very strange journey. You'll go a long way while staying in the same place. And the direction will be a strange one. It will be an exploration."

"You can tell all that from my hand?"

"Well, mainly I'm just guessing," said Hilts, sitting back and reaching for the teapot /the lead drummer, who had climbed halfway back, fell on to the toiling cymbalists/. She looked carefully at Esk and added, "A female wizard, eh?"

"Granny is taking me to Unseen University," said Esk.

Hilta raised her eyebrows. "Do you know where it is?"

Granny frowned. "Not in so many words," she admitted. "I was hoping you could give me more explicit directions, you being more familiar with bricks and things."

"They say it has many doors, but the ones in this world are in the city of Ankh-Morpork," said Hilta. Granny looked blank. "On the Circle Sea," Hilta added. Granny's look of polite enquiry persisted. "Five hundred miles away," said Hilta.

"Oh," said Granny.

She stood up and brushed an imaginary speck of dust off her dress.

"We'd better be going, then," she added.

Hilta laughed. Esk quite liked the sound. Granny never laughed, she merely let the corners of her mouth turn up, but Hilta laughed like someone who had thought hard about Life and had seen the joke.

"Start tomorrow, anyway," she said. "I've got room at home, you can stay with me, and tomorrow you'll have the light."

"We wouldn't want to presume," said Granny.

"Nonsense. Why not have a look around while I pack up the stall?"

Ohulan was the market town for a wide sprawling countryside and the market day didn't end at sunset. Instead, torches flared at every booth and stall and light blared forth from the open doorways of the inns. Even the temples put out coloured lamps to attract nocturnal worshippers.

Hilta moved through the crowd like a slim snake through dry grass, her entire stall and stock reduced to a surprisingly small bundle on her back, and her jewellery rattling like a sackful of flamenco dancers. Granny stumped along behind her, her feet aching from the unaccustomed prodding of the cobbles.

And Esk got lost.

It took some effort, but she managed it. It involved ducking between two stalls and then scurrying down a side alley. Granny had warned her at length about the unspeakable things that lurked in cities, which showed that the old woman was lacking in a complete understanding of headology, since Esk was- now determined to see one or two of them for herself.

In fact, since Ohulan was quite barbaric and uncivilised the only things that went on after dark to any degree were a little thievery, some amateurish trading in the courts of lust, and drinking until you fell over or started singing or both.

According to the standard poetic instructions one should move through a fair like the white swan at evening moves o'er the bay, but because of certain practical difficulties Esk settled for moving through the crowds like a small dodgem car, bumping from body to body with the tip of the staff waving a yard above her head. It caused some heads to turn, and not only because it had hit them; wizards occasionally passed through the town and it was the first time anyone had seen one four feet tall with long hair.

Anyone watching closely would have noticed strange things happening as she passed by.

There was, for example, the man with three upturned cups who was inviting a small crowd to explore with him the exciting world of chance and probability as it related to the position of a small dried pea. He was vaguely aware of a small figure watching him solemnly for a few moments, and then a sackful of peas cascaded out of every cup he picked up. Within seconds he was knee-deep in legumes. He was a lot deeper in trouble he suddenly owed everyone a lot of money.

There was a small and wretched monkey that for years had shuffled vaguely at the end of a chain while its owner played something dreadful on a pipe-organ. It suddenly turned, narrowed its little red eyes, bit its keeper sharply in the leg, snapped its chain and had it away over the rooftops with the night's takings in a tin cup. History is silent about what they were spent on.

A boxful of marzipan ducks on a nearby stall came to life and whirred past the stallholder to land, quacking happily, in the river (where, by dawn, they had all melted: that's natural selection for your.

The stall itself sidled off down an alley and was never seen again.

Esk, in fact, moved through the fair more like an arsonist moves through a hayfield or a neutron bounces through a reactor, poets notwithstanding, and the hypothetical watcher could have detected her random passage by tracing the outbreaks of hysteria and violence. But, like all good catalysts, she wasn't actually involved in the processes she initiated, and by the time all the non-hypothetical potential watchers took their eyes off them she had been buffeted somewhere else.

She was also beginning to tire. While Granny Weatherwax approved of night on general principles, she certainly didn't hold with promiscuous candlelight - if she had any reading to do after dark she generally persuaded the owl to come and sit on the back of her chair,

and read through its eyes. So Esk expected to go to bed around sunset, and that was long past.

There was a doorway ahead of her that looked friendly. Cheerful sounds were sliding out on the yellow light, and pooling on the cobbles. With the staff still radiating random magic like a demon lighthouse she headed for it, weary but determined.

The landlord of The Fiddler's Riddle considered himself to be a man of the world, and this was right, because he was too stupid to be really cruel, and too lazy to be really mean and although his body had been around quite a lot his mind had never gone further than the inside of his own head.

He wasn't used to being addressed by sticks. Especially when they spoke in a small piping voice, and asked for goat's milk.

Cautiously, aware that everyone in the inn was looking at him and grinning, he pulled himself across the bar top until he could see down. Esk stared up at him. Look 'em right in the eye, Granny had always said: focus your power on 'em, stare 'em out, no one can outstare a witch, 'cept a goat, of course.

The landlord, whose name was Skiller, found himself looking directly down at a small child who seemed to be squinting.

"What?" he said.

"Milk," said the child, still focussing furiously. "You get it out of goats. You know?"

Skiller sold only beer, which his customers claimed he got out of cats. No self-respecting goat would have endured the smell in the Fiddler's Riddle.

"We haven't got any," he said. He looked hard at the staff and his eyebrows met conspiratorially over his nose.

"You could have a look," said Esk.

Skiller eased himself back across the bar, partly to avoid the gaze, which was causing his eyes to water in sympathy, and partly because a horrible suspicion was congealing in his mind.

Even second-rate barmen tend to resonate with the beer they serve, and the vibrations coming from the big barrels behind him no longer had the twang of hop and head. They were broadcasting an altogether more lactic note.

He turned a tap experimentally, and watched a thin stream of milk curdle in the drip bucket.

The staff still poked up over the edge of the counter, like a periscope. He could swear that it was staring at him too.

"Don't waste it," said a voice. "You'll be grateful for it one day."

It was the same tone of voice Granny used when Esk was less than enthusiastic about a plateful of nourishing sallet greens, boiled yellow until the last few vitamins gave in, but to Skiller's hypersensitive ears it wasn't an injunction but a prediction. He shivered. He didn't know where he would have to be to make him grateful for a drink of ancient beer and curdled milk. He'd rather be dead first.

Perhaps he would be dead first.

He very carefully wiped a nearly clean mug with his thumb and filled it from the tap. He was aware that a large number of his guests were quietly leaving. No one liked magic,

especially n the hands of a woman. You never could tell what they might take it into their heads to do next.

"Your milk," he said, adding, "Miss."

"I've got some money," Esk said. Granny had always told her: always be ready to pay and you won't have to, people always like you to feel good about them, it's all headology.

"No, wouldn't dream of it," said Skiller hastily. He leaned over the bar. "If you could see, er, your way clear to turning the rest back, though? Not much call for milk in these parts."

He sidled along a little way. Esk had leaned the staff against the bar while she drank her milk, and it was making him uncomfortable.

Esk looked at him over a moustache of cream.

"I didn't turn it into milk, I just knew it would be milk because I wanted milk," she said. "What did you think it was?"

"Er. Beer."

Esk thought about this. She vaguely remembered trying beer once, and it had tasted sort of second-hand. But she could recall something which everyone in Bad Ass reckoned was much better than beer. It was one of Granny's most guarded recipes. It was good for you, because there was only fruit in it, plus lots of freezing and boiling and careful testing of little drops with a lighted flame.

Granny would put a very small spoonful in her milk if it was a really cold night. It had to be a wooden spoon, on account of what it did to metal.

She concentrated. She could picture the taste in her mind, and with the little skills that she was beginning to accept but couldn't understand she found she could take the taste apart into little coloured shapes ....

Skiller's thin wife came out of their back room to see why it had all gone so quiet, and he waved her into shocked silence as Esk stood swaying very slightly with her eyes closed and her lips moving .

. . . little shapes that you didn't need went back into the great pool of shapes, and then you found the extra ones you needed and put them together, and then there was a sort of hook thing which meant that they would turn anything suitable into something just like them, and then ....

Skiller turned very carefully and regarded the barrel behind him. The smell of the room had changed, he could feel the pure gold sweating gently out of that ancient woodwork.

With some care he took a small glass from his store under the counter and let a few splashes of the dark golden liquid escape from the tap. He looked at it thoughtfully in the lamplight,

turned the glass around methodically, sniffed it a few times, and tossed its contents back in one swallow.

His face remained unchanged, although his eyes went moist and his throat wobbled somewhat. His wife and Esk watched him as a thin beading of sweat broke out on his forehead. Ten seconds passed, and he was obviously out to break some heroic record. There may have been steam curling out of his ears, but that could have been a rumour. His fingers drummed a strange tattoo on the bartop.

At last he swallowed, appeared to reach a decision, turned solemnly to Esk, and said, "Hwarl,ish finish saaarghs ishghs oorgsh?"

His brow wrinkled as he ran the sentence past his mind again and made a second attempt.

"Aargh argh shaah gok?"

He gave up.

"Bharrgsh nargh!"

His wife snorted and took the glass out of his unprotesting hand. She sniffed it. She looked at the barrels, all ten of them. She met his unsteady eye. In a private paradise for two they soundlessly calculated the selling price of six hundred gallons of triple-distilled white mountain peach brandy and ran out of numbers.

Mrs Skiller was quicker on the uptake than her husband. She bent down and smiled at Esk, who was too tired to squint back. It wasn't a particularly good smile, because Mrs Skiller didn't get much practice.

"How did you get here, little girl?" she said, in a voice that suggested gingerbread cottages and the slamming of big stove doors.

"I got lost from Granny."

"And where's Granny now, dear? " Clang went the oven doors again; it was going to be a tough night for all wanderers in metaphorical forests.

"Just somewhere, I expect."

"Would you like to go to sleep in a big feather bed, all nice and warm?"

Esk looked at her gratefully, even while vaguely realizing that the woman had a face just like an eager ferret, and nodded.

You're right. It's going to take more than a passing woodchopper to sort this out.

Granny, meanwhile, was two streets away. She was also, by the standards of other people, lost. She would not see it like that. She knew where she was, it was just that everywhere else didn't.

It has already been mentioned that it is much harder to detect a human mind than, say, the mind of a fox. The human mind, seeing this as some kind of a slur, wants to know why. This is why.

Animal minds are simple, and therefore sharp. Animals never spend time dividing experience into little bits and speculating about all the bits they've missed. The whole panoply of the universe has been neatly expressed to them as things to (a) mate with, (b) eat, /c/ run away from, and /d) rocks. This frees the mind from unnecessary thoughts and gives it a cutting edge where it matters. Your normal animal, in fact, never tries to walk and chew gum at the same time.

The average human, on the other hand, thinks about all sorts of things around the clock, on all sorts of levels, with interruptions from dozens of biological calendars and timepieces. There's thoughts about to be said, and private thoughts, and real thoughts, and thoughts about thoughts, and a whole gamut of subconscious thoughts. To a telepath the human head is a din. It is a railway terminus with all the Tannoys talking at once. It is a complete FM waveband - and some of those stations aren't reputable, they're outlawed pirates on forbidden seas who play late-night records with limbic lyrics.

Granny, trying to locate Esk by mind magic alone, was trying to find a straw in a haystack.

She was not succeeding, but enough blips of sense reached her through the heterodyne wails of a thousand brains all thinking at once to convince her that the world was, indeed, as silly as she had always believed it was.

She met Hilta at the corner of the street. She was carrying her broomstick, the better to conduct an aerial search (with great stealth, however; the men of Ohulan were right behind Stay Long Ointment but drew the line at flying women). She was distraught.

"Not so much as a hint of her," said Granny.

"Have you been down to the river? She might have fallen in!"

"Then she'd have just fallen out again. Anyway, she can swim. I think she's hiding, drat her."

"What are we going to do?"

Granny gave her a withering look. "Hilta Goatfounder, I'm ashamed of you, acting like a cowin. Do I look worried?"

Hilta peered at her.

"You do. A bit. Your lips have gone all thin."

"I'm just angry, that's all."

"Gypsies always come here for the fair, they might have taken her."

Granny was prepared to believe anything about city folk but here she was on firmer ground.

"Then they're a lot dafter than I'd give them credit for," she snapped. "Look, she's got the staff."

"What good would that do?" said Hilta, who was close to tears.

"I don't think you've understood anything I've told you," said Granny severely. "All we need to do is go back to your place and wait."

"What for?"

"The screams or the bangs or the fireballs or whatever," Granny said vaguely.

"That's heartless!"

"Oh, I expect they've got it coming to them. Come on, you go on ahead and put the kettle on."

Hilta gave her a mystified look, then climbed on her broom and rose slowly and erratically into the shadows among the chimneys. If broomsticks were cars, this one would be a split window Morris Minor.

Granny watched her go, then stumped along the wet streets after her. She was determined that they wouldn't get her up in one of those things.

Esk lay in the big, fluffy and slightly damp sheets of the spare bed in the attic room of the Riddle. She was tired, but couldn't sleep. The bed was too chilly, for one thing. She wondered uneasily if she dared try to warm it up, but thought better of it. She couldn't seem to get the hang of fire spells, no matter how carefully she experimented. They either didn't work at all or worked only too well. The woods around the cottage were becoming treacherous with the holes left by disappearing fireballs; at least, if the wizardry thing didn't work then Granny said she'd have a fine future as a privy builder or well sinker.

She turned over and tried to ignore the bed's faint smell of mushrooms. Then she reached out in the darkness until her hand found the staff, propped against the bedhead. Mrs Skiller had been quite insistent about taking it downstairs, but Esk had hung on like grim death. It was the only thing in the world she was absolutely certain belonged to her.

The varnished surface with its strange carvings felt oddly comforting. Esk went to sleep, and dreamed bangles, and strange packages, and mountains. And distant stars above the mountains, and a cold desert where strange creatures lurched across the dry sand and stared at her through insect eyes ....

There was a creak on the stairs. Then another. Then a silence, the sort of choking, furry silence made by someone standing as still as possible.

The door swung open. Skiller made a blacker shadow against the candlelight on the stairs, and there was a faintly whispered conversation before he tiptoed as silently as he could towards the bedhead. The staff slipped sideways as his first cautious grope dislodged it, but he caught it quickly and let his breath out very slowly.

So he hardly had enough left to scream with when the staff moved in his hands. He felt the scaliness, the coil and muscle of it ....

Esk sat bolt upright in time to see Skiller roll backwards down the steep stairladder, still flailing desperately at something quite invisible that coiled around his arms. There was another scream from below as he landed on his wife.

The staff clattered to the floor and lay surrounded by a faint octarine glow.

Esk got out of the bed and padded across the floor. There was a terrible cursing; it sounded unhealthy. She peered around the door and looked down on the face of Mrs Skiller.

"Give me that staff!"

Esk reached down behind her and gripped the polished wood. "No," she said. "It's mine."

"It's not the right sort of thing for little girls," snapped the barman's wife.

"It belongs to me," said Esk, and quietly closed the door. She listened for a moment to the muttering from below and tried to think of what to do next. Turning the couple into something would probably only cause a fuss and, anyway, she wasn't quite certain how to do it.

The fact was the magic only really worked when she wasn't thinking about it. Her mind seemed to get in the way.

She padded across the room and pushed open the tiny window. The strange night-time smells of civilization drifted in - the damp smell of streets, the fragrance of garden flowers, the distant hint of an overloaded privy. There were wet tiles outside.

As Skiller started back up the stairs she pushed the staff out on to the roof and crawled after it, steadying herself on the carvings above the window. The roof dipped down to an outhouse and she managed to stay at least vaguely upright as she half-slid, half-scrambled down the uneven tiles. A six-foot drop on to a stack of old barrels, a quick scramble down the slippery wood, and she was trotting easily across the inn yard.

As she kicked up the street mists she could hear the sounds of argument coming from the Riddle.

Skiller rushed past his wife and laid a hand on the tap of the nearest barrel. He paused, and then wrenched it open.

The smell of peach brandy filled the room, sharp as knives. He shut off the flow and relaxed.

"Afraid it would turn into something nasty?" asked his wife. He nodded.

"If you hadn't been so clumsy -"she began.

"I tell you it bit me!"

"You could have been a wizard and we wouldn't have to bother with all this. Have you got no ambition?"

Skiller shook his head. "I reckon it takes more than a staff to make a wizard," he said. "Anyway, I heard where it said wizards aren't allowed to get married, they're not even allowed to -" He hesitated.

"To what? Allowed to what?"

Skiller writhed. "Well. You know. Thing."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," said Mrs Skiller briskly.

"No, I suppose not."

He followed her reluctantly out of the darkened bar-room. It seemed to him that perhaps wizards didn't have such a bad life, at that.

He was proved right when the following morning revealed that the ten barrels of peach brandy had, indeed, turned into something nasty.

Esk wandered aimlessly through the grey streets until she reached Ohulan's tiny river docks. Broad flat-bottomed barges bobbed gently against the wharves, and one or two of them curled wisps of smoke from friendly stovepipes. Esk clambered easily on to the nearest, and used the staff to lever up the oilcloth that covered most of it.

A warm smell, a mixture of lanolin and midden, drifted up. The barge was laden with wool.

It's silly to go to sleep on an unknown barge, not knowing what strange cliffs may be drifting past when you awake, not knowing that bargees traditionally get an early start (setting out before the sun is barely up), not knowing what new horizons might greet one on the morrow ....

You know that. Esk didn't.

Esk awoke to the sound of someone whistling. She lay quite still, reeling the evening's events across her mind until she remembered why she was here, and then rolled over very carefully and raised the oilcloth a fraction.

Here she was, then. But "here" had moved.

"This is what they call sailing, then," she said, watching the far bank glide past, "It doesn't seem very special."

It didn't occur to her to start worrying. For the first eight years of her life the world had been a particularly boring place and now that it was becoming interesting Esk wasn't about to act ungrateful.

The distant whistler was joined by a barking dog. Esk lay back in the wool and reached out until she found the animal's mind, and Borrowed it gently. From its inefficient and disorganised brain she learned that there were at least four people on this barge, and

many more on the others that were strung out in line with it on the river. Some of them seemed to be children.

She let the animal go and looked out at the scenery again for a long time - the barge was passing between high orange cliffs now, banded with so many colours of rock it looked as though some hungry God had made the all-time record club sandwich - and tried to avoid the next thought. But it persisted, arriving in her mind like the unexpected limbo dancer under the lavatory door of Life. Sooner or later she would have to go out. It wasn't her stomach that was pressing the point, but her bladder brooked no delay.

Perhaps if she

The oilcloth over her head was pulled aside swiftly and a big bearded head beamed down at her.

"Well, well," it said. "What have we here, then? A stowaway, yesno?"

Esk gave it a stare. "Yes," she said. There seemed no sense in denying it. "Could you help me out please?"

"Aren't you afraid I shall throw you to the - the pike?" said the head. It noticed her perplexed look. "Big freshwater fish," it added helpfully. "Fast. Lot of teeth. Pike."

The thought hadn't occurred to her at all. "No," she said truthfully. "Why? Will you?"

"No. Not really. There's no need to be frightened."

"I'm not."

"Oh." A brown arm appeared, attached to the head by the normal arrangements, and helped her out of her nest in the fleeces.

Esk stood on the deck of the barge and looked around. The sky was bluer than a biscuit barrel, fitting neatly over a broad valley through which the river ran as sluggishly as a planning inquiry.

Behind her the Ramtops still acted as a hitching rail for clouds, but they no longer dominated as they had done for as long as Esk had known them. Distance had eroded them.

"Where's this?" she said, sniffing the new smells of swamp and sedge.

"The Upper Valley of the River Ankh, " said her captor. "What do you think of it?"

Esk looked up and down the river. It was already much wider than it had been at Ohulan.

"I don't know. There's certainly a lot of it. Is this your ship?"

"Boat," he corrected. He was taller than her father, although not quite so old, and dressed like a gypsy. Most of his teeth had turned gold, but Esk decided it wasn't the time to ask why. He had the kind of real deep tan that rich people spend ages trying to achieve with expensive holidays and bits of tinfoil, when really all you need to do to obtain one is work your arse off in the open air every day. His brow crinkled.

"Yes, it's mine," he said, determined to regain the initiative. "And what are you doing on it, I would like to know? Running away from home, yesno? If you were a boy I'd say are you going to seek your fortune?"

"Can't girls seek their fortune?"

"I think they're supposed to seek a boy with a fortune," said the man, and gave a Zoo-carat grin. He extended a brown hand, heavy with rings. "Come and have some breakfast."

"I'd actually like to use your privy," she said. His mouth dropped open.

"This is a barge, yesno?"

"Yes?"

"That means there's only the river." He patted her hand. "Don't worry," he added. "It's quite used to it."

Granny stood on the wharf, her boot tap-tap-tapping on the wood. The little man who was the nearest thing Ohulan had to a dockmaster was being treated to the full force of one of her stares, and was visibly wilting. Her expression wasn't perhaps as vicious as thumbscrews, but it did seem to suggest that thumbscrews were a real possibility.

"They left before dawn, you say," she said.

"Yes-ss," he said. "Er. I didn't know they weren't supposed to."

"Did you see a little girl on board?" Tap-tap went her boot.

"Um. No. I'm sorry." He brightened. "They were Zoons," he said; "If the child was with them she won't come to harm. You can always trust a Zoon, they say. Very keen on family life."

Granny turned to Hilta, who was fluttering like a bewildered butterfly, and raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, yes," Hilta trilled. "The Zoons have a very good name."

"Mmph," said Granny. She turned on her heel and stumped back towards the centre of the town. The dockmaster sagged as though a coathanger had just been removed from his shirt.

Hilta's lodgings were over a herbalist's and behind a tannery, and offered splendid views of the rooftops of Ohulan. She liked it because it offered privacy, always appreciated by, as she put it, "my more discerning clients who prefer to make their very special purchases in an atmosphere of calm where discretion is forever the watchword".

Granny Weatherwax looked around the sitting room with barelyconcealed scorn. There were altogether too many tassels, bead curtains, astrological charts and black cats in the place. Granny couldn't abide cats. She sniffed.

"Is that the tannery?" she said accusingly.

"Incense," said Hilta. She rallied bravely in the face of Granny's scorn. "The customers appreciate it," she said. "It puts them in the right frame of mind. You know how it is."

"I would have thought one could carry out a perfectly respectable business, Hilta, without resorting to parlour tricks," said Granny, sitting down and beginning the long and tricky business of removing her hatpins.

"It's different in towns," said Hilta. "One has to move with the times."

"I'm sure I don't know why. Is the kettle on?" Granny reached across the table and took the velvet cover off Hilta's crystal ball, a sphere of quartz as big as her head.

"Never could get the hang of this damn silicon stuff," she said. "A bowl of water with a drop of ink in it was good enough when I was a girl. Let's see, now . . . ."

She peered into the dancing heart of the ball, trying to use it to focus her mind on the whereabouts of Esk. A crystal was a tricky thing to use at the best of times, and usually staring into it meant that the one thing the future could be guaranteed to hold was a severe migraine. Granny distrusted them, considering them to smack of wizardry; for two pins, it always seemed to her, the wretched thing would suck your mind out like a whelk from a shell.

"Damn thing's all sparkly," she said, huffing on it and wiping it with her sleeve. Hilta peered over her shoulder.

"That's not sparkle, that means something," she said slowly.

"What?"

"I'm not sure. Can I try? It's used to me." Hilta pushed a cat off the other chair and leaned forward to peer into the glass depths.

"Mnph. Feel free," said Granny, "but you won't find -"

"Wait. Something's coming through."

"Looks all sparkly from here," Granny insisted. "Little silver lights all floating around, like in them little snowstorm-in-abottle toys. Quite pretty, really."

"Yes, but look beyond the flakes . . . ."

Granny looked.

This was what she saw.

The viewpoint was very high up and a wide swathe of country lay below her, blue with distance, through which a broad river wriggled like a drunken snake. There were silver lights floating in the foreground but they were, in a manner of speaking, just a few flakes in the great storm of lights that turned in a great lazy spiral, like a geriatric tornado with a bad attack of snow, and funnelled down, down to the hazy landscape. By screwing up her eyes Granny could just make out some dots on the river.

Occasionally some sort of lighting would sparkle briefly inside the gently turning funnel of motes.

Granny blinked and looked up. The room seemed very dark.

"Odd sort of weather," she said, because she couldn't really think of anything better. Even with her eyes shut the glittering motes still danced across her vision.

"I don't think it's weather," said Hilta. "I don't actually think people can see it, but the crystal shows it. I think it's magic, condensing out of the air."

"Into the staff?"

"Yes. That's what a wizard's staff does. It sort of distils magic."

Granny risked another glance at the crystal.

"Into Esk," she said, carefully.

"Yes."

"There looks like quite a lot of it."

"Yes."

Not for the first time, Granny wished she knew more about how wizards worked their magic. She had a vision of Esk filling up with magic, until every tissue and pore was bloated with the stuff. Then it would start leaking - slowly at first, arcing to ground in little bursts, but then building up to a great discharge of occult potentiality. It could do all kinds of damage.

"Drat," she said. "I never did like that staff."

"At least she's heading towards the University place," said Hilta. "They'll know what to do."

"That's as may be. How far down river do you reckon they are?"

"Twenty miles or so. Those barges only go at walking pace. The Zoons aren't in any hurry."

"Right." Granny stood up, her jaw set defiantly. She reached for her hat and picked up her sack of possessions.

"Reckon I can walk faster than a barge," she said. "The river's all bendy but I can go in straight lines."

"You're going to walk after her?" said Hilta, aghast. "But there's forests and wild animals!"

"Good, I could do with getting back to civilisation. She needs me. That staff is taking over. I said it would, but did anyone listen?"

"Did they?" said Hilta, still trying to work out what Granny meant by getting back to civilisation.

"No," said Granny coldly.

His name was Amschat B'hal Zoon. He lived on the raft with his three wives and three children. He was a Liar.

What always annoyed the enemies of the Zoon tribe was not simply their honesty, which was infuriatingly absolute, but their total directness of approach. The Zoons had never heard about a euphemism, and wouldn't understand what to do with it if they had one, except that they would certainly have called it "a nice way of saying something nasty".

Their rigid adherence to the truth was apparently not enjoined on them by a god, as is usually the case, but appeared to have a genetic base. The average Zoon could no more tell a lie than breathe underwater and, in fact, the very concept was enough to upset them considerably; telling a Lie meant no less than totally altering the universe.

This was something of a drawback to a trading race and so, over the millennia, the elders of the Zoon studied this strange power that everyone else had in such abundance and decided that they should possess it too.

Young men who showed faint signs of having such a talent were encouraged, on special ceremonial occasions, to bend the Truth ever further on a competitive basis. The first recorded Zoon proto-lie was: "Actually my grandfather is quite tall," but eventually they got the hang of it and the office of tribal Liar was instituted.

It must be understood that while the majority of Zoon cannot lie they have great respect for any Zoon who can say that the world is other than it is, and the Liar holds a position of considerable eminence. He represents his tribe in all his dealings with the outside world, which the average Zoon long ago gave up trying to understand. Zoon tribes are very proud of their Liars.

Other races get very annoyed about all this. They feel that the Zoon ought to have adopted more suitable titles, like "diplomat" or "public relations officer". They feel they are poking fun at the whole thing.

"Is all that true?" said Esk suspiciously, looking around the barge's crowded cabin.

"No," said Amschat firmly. His junior wife, who was cooking porridge over a tiny ornate stove, giggled. His three children watched Esk solemnly over the edge of the table.

"Don't you ever tell the truth?"

"Do you?" Amschat grinned his goldmine grin, but his eyes were not smiling. "Why do I find you on my fleeces? Amschat is no kidnapper. There will be people at home who will worry, yesno?"

"I expect Granny will come looking for me," said Esk, "but I don't think she will worry much. Just be angry, I expect. Anyway, I'm going to Ankh-Morpork. You can put me off the ship -"

"- boat -"

"- if you like. I don't mind about the pike."

"I can't do that," said Amschat.

"Was that a lie?"

"No! There is wild country around us, robbers and - things."

Esk nodded brightly. "That's settled, then," she said. "I don't mind sleeping in the fleeces. And I can pay my way. I can do -" She hesitated; her unfinished sentence hung like a

little curl of crystal in the air while discretion made a successful bid for control of her tongue. "- helpful things," she finished lamely.

She was aware that Amschat was looking slightly sideways at his senior wife, who was sewing by the stove. By Zoon tradition she wore nothing but black. Granny would have thoroughly approved.

"What sort of helpful things?" he asked. "Washing and sweeping, yesno?"

"If you like," said Esk, "or distillation using the bifold or triple alembic, the making of varnishes, glazes, creams, zuumchats and punes, the rendering of waxes, the manufacture of candles, the proper selection of seeds, roots and cuttings, and most preparations from the Eighty Marvellous Herbs; I can spin, card, rett, Hallow and weave on the hand, frame, harp and Noble looms and I can knit if people start the wool on for me, I can read soil and rock, do carpentry up to the three-way mortise and tenon, predict weather by means of beastsign and skyreck, make increase in bees, brew five types of mead, make dyes and mordants and pigments, including a fast blue, I can do most types of whitesmithing, mend boots, cure and fashion most leathers, and if you have any goats I can look after them. I like goats."

Amschat looked at her thoughtfully. She felt she was expected to continue.

"Granny never likes to see people sitting around doing nothing," she offered. "She always says a girl who is good with her hands will never want for a living," she added, by way of further explanation.

"Or a husband, I expect," nodded Amschat, weakly.

"Actually, Granny had a lot to say about that -"

"I bet she did," said Amschat. He looked at the senior wife, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Very well," he said. "If you can make yourself useful you can stay. And can you play a musical instrument?"

Esk returned his steady gaze, not batting an eyelid. "Probably."

And so Esk, with the minimum of difficulty and only a little regret, left the Ramtops and their weather and joined the Zoons on their great trading journey down the Ankh.

There were at least thirty barges with at least one sprawling Zoon family on each, and no two vessels appeared to be carrying the same cargo; most of them were strung together, and the Zoons simply hauled on the cable and stepped on to the next deck if they fancied a bit of socialising.

Esk set up home in the fleeces. It was warm, smelled slightly of Granny's cottage and, much more important, meant that she was undisturbed.

She was getting a bit worried about magic.

It was definitely getting out of control. She wasn't doing magic, it was just happening around her. And she sensed that people probably wouldn't be too happy if they knew.

It meant that if she washed up she had to clatter and splash at length to conceal the fact that the dishes were cleaning themselves. If she did some darning she had to do it on some private part of the deck to conceal the fact that the edges of the hole ravelled themselves together as if . . . as if by magic. Then she woke up on the second day of her voyage to find that several of the fleeces around the spot where she had hidden the staff had combed, carded and spun themselves into neat skeins during the night.

She put all thoughts of lighting fires out of her head.

There were compensations, though. Every sluggish turn of the great brown river brought new scenes. There were dark stretches hemmed in with deep forest, through which the barges traveled in the dead centre of the river with the men armed and the women below - except for Esk, who sat listening with interest to the snortings and sneezings that followed them through the bushes on the banks. There were stretches of farmland. There were several towns much larger than Ohulan. There were even some mountains, although they were old and flat and not young and frisky like her mountains. Not that she was homesick, exactly, but sometimes she felt like a boat herself, drifting on the edge of an infinite rope but always attached to an anchor.

The barges stopped at some of the towns. By tradition only the men went ashore, and only Amschat, wearing his ceremonial Lying hat, spoke to non-Zoons. Esk usually went with him. He tried hinting that she should obey the unwritten rules of Zoon life and stay afloat, but a hint was to Esk what a mosquito bite was to the average rhino because she was already learning that if you ignore the rules people will, half the time, quietly rewrite them so that they don't apply to you.

Anyway, it seemed to Amschat that when Esk was with him he always got a very good price. There was something about a small child squinting determinedly at them from behind his legs that made even market-hardened merchants hastily conclude their business.

In fact, it began to worry him. When a market broker in the walled town of Zemphis offered him a bag of ultramarines in exchange for a hundred fleeces a voice from the level of his pockets said: "They're not ultramarines."

"Listen to the child!" said the broker, grinning. Amschat solemnly held one of the stones to his eye.

"I am listening," he said, "and they do indeed look like ultramarines. They have the glit and shimmy."

Esk shook her head. "They're just spircles," she said. She said it without thinking, and regretted it immediately as both men turned to stare at her.

Amschat turned the stone over in his palm. Putting the chameleon spircle stones into a box with some real gems so that they appeared to change their hue was a traditional trick, but these had the true inner blue fire. He looked up sharply at the broker. Amschat had been finely trained in the art of the Lie. He recognised the subtle signs, now that he came to think about it.

"There seems to be a doubt," he said, "but 'tis easily resolved, we need only take them to the assayer in Pine Street because the world knows that spircles will dissolve in hypactic fluid, yesno?"

The broker hesitated. Amschat had changed position slightly, and the set of his muscles suggested that any sudden movement on the broker's part would see him flat in the dust. And that damn child was squinting at him as though she could see through to the back of his mind. His nerve broke.

"I regret this unfortunate dispute," he said. "I had accepted the stones as ultramarines in good faith but rather than cause disharmony between us I will ask you to accept them as - as a gift, and for the fleeces may I offer this roseatte of the first sorting?"

He took a small red stone from a tiny velvet pouch. Amschat hardly looked at it but, without taking his eyes off the man, passed it down to Esk. She nodded.

When the merchant had hurried off Amschat took Esk's hand and half-dragged her to the assayer's stall, which was little more than a niche in the wall. The old man took the

smallest of the blue stones, listened to Amschat's hurried explanation, poured out a saucerful of hypactic fluid and dropped the stone in. It frothed into nothingness.

"Very interesting," he said. He took another stone in a tweezer and examined it under a glass.

"They are indeed spircles, but remarkably fine specimens in their own right," he concluded. "They are by no means worthless, and I for example would be prepared to offer you - is there something wrong with the little girl's eyes?"

Amschat nudged Esk, who stopped trying out another Look.

"- I would offer you, shall we say, two zats of silver?"

"Shall we say five?" said Amschat pleasantly.

"And I would like to keep one of the stones," said Esk. The old man threw up his hands.

"But they are mere curios!" he said. "Of value only to a collector!"

"A collector may yet sell them to an unsuspecting purchaser as finest roseattes or ultramarines," said Amschat, "especially if he was the only assayer in town."

The assayer grumbled a bit at this, but at last they settled on three zats and one of the spircles on a thin silver chain for Esk.

When they were out of earshot Amschat handed her the tiny silver coins and said: "These are yours. You have earned them. But -" he hunkered down so that his eyes were on a level with hers, "- you must tell me how you knew the stones were false."

He looked worried, but Esk sensed that he wouldn't really like the truth. Magic made people uncomfortable. He wouldn't like it if she said simply: spircles are spircles and ultramarines are ultramarines, and though you may think they look the same that is because most people don't use their eyes in the right way. Nothing can entirely disguise its true nature.

Instead she said: "The dwarves mine spircles near the village where I was born, and you soon learn to see how they bend light in a funny way."

Amschat looked into her eyes for some time. Then he shrugged.

"Okay," he said. "Fine. Well, I have some further business here. Why don't you buy yourself some new clothes, or something? I'd warn you against unscrupulous traders but, somehow, I don't know, I don't think you will have any trouble."

Esk nodded. Amschat strode off through the market place. At the first corner he turned, looked at her thoughtfully, and then disappeared among the crowds.

Well, that's the end of sailing, Esk told herself. He's not quite sure but he's going to be watching me now and before I know what's happening the staff will be taken away and there'll be all sorts of trouble. Why does everyone get so upset about magic?

She gave a philosophical sigh and set about exploring the possibilities of the town.

There was the question of the staff, though. Esk had rammed it deep among the fleeces, which were not going to be unloaded yet. If she went back for it people would start asking questions, and she didn't know the answers.

She found a convenient alleyway and scuttled down it until a deep doorway gave her the privacy she required.

If going back was out of the question then only one thing remained. She held out a hand and closed her eyes.

She knew exactly what she wanted to do-it lay in front of her eyes. The staff mustn't come flying through the air, wrecking the barge and drawing attention to itself. All she wanted, she told herself, was for there to be a slight change in the way the world was organised. It shouldn't be a world where the staff was in the fleeces, it should be a world where it was in her hand. A tiny change, an infinitesimal alteration to the Way Things Were.

If Esk had been properly trained in wizardry she would have known that this was impossible. All wizards knew how to move things about, starting with protons and working upwards, but the important thing about moving something from A to Z, according to basic physics, was that at some point it should pass through the rest of the alphabet. The only way one could cause something to vanish at A and appear at Z would be to shuffle the whole of Reality sideways. The problems this would cause didn't bear thinking about.

Esk, of course, had not been trained, and it is well known that a vital ingredient of success is not knowing that what you're attempting can't be done. A person ignorant of the possibility of failure can be a halfbrick in the path of the bicycle of history.

As Esk tried to work out how to move the staff the ripples spread out in the magical ether, changing the Discworld in thousands of tiny ways. Most went entirely unnoticed. Perhaps a few grains of sand lay on their beaches in a slightly different position, or the occasional leaf hung on its tree in a marginally different way. But then the wavefront of probability struck the edge of Reality and rebounded like the slosh off the side of the pond which, meeting the laggard ripples coming the other way, caused small but important whirlpools in the very fabric of existence. You can have whirlpools in the fabric of existence, because it is a very strange fabric.

Esk was completely ignorant of all this, of course, but was quite satisfied when the staff dropped out of thin air into her hand.

It felt warm.

She looked at it for some time. She felt that she ought to do something about it; it was too big, too distinctive, too inconvenient. It attracted attention.

"If I'm taking you to Ankh-Morpork," she said thoughtfully, "You've got to go in disguise."

A few late flickers of magic played around the staff, and then it went dark.

Eventually Esk solved the immediate problem by finding a stall in the main Zemphis marketplace that sold broomsticks, buying the largest, carrying it back to her doorway, removing the handle and ramming the staff deep into the birch twigs. It didn't seem right to treat a noble object in this way, and she silently apologised to it.

It made a difference, anyway. No one looked twice at a small girl carrying a broom.

She bought a spice pasty to eat while exploring (the stallholder carelessly shortchanged her, and only realised later that he had inexplicably handed over two silver pieces; also, rats mysteriously got in and ate all his stock during the night, and his grandmother was struck by lightning).

The town was smaller than Ohulan, and very different because it lay on the junction of three trade routes quite apart from the river itself. It was built around one enormous square which was a cross between a permanent exotic traffic jam and a tent village. Camels kicked mules, mules kicked horses, horses kicked camels and they all kicked humans; there was a riot of colours, a din of noise, a nasal orchestration of smells and the steady, heady sound of hundreds of people working hard at making money.

One reason for the bustle was that over large parts of the continent other people preferred to make money without working at all, and since the Disc had yet to develop a music recording industry they were forced to fall back on older, more traditional forms of banditry.

Strangely enough these often involved considerable effort. Rolling heavy rocks to the top of cliffs for a decent ambush, cutting down trees to block the road, and digging a pit lined with spikes while still keeping a wicked edge on a dagger probably involved a much greater expenditure of thought and muscle than more socially-acceptable professions but, nevertheless, there were still people misguided enough to endure all this, plus long nights in uncomfortable surroundings, merely to get their hands on perfectly ordinary large boxes of jewels.

So a town like Zemphis was the place where caravans split, mingled and came together again, as dozens of merchants and travellers banded together for protection against the socially disadvantaged on the trails ahead. Esk, wandering unregarded amidst the bustle, learned all this by the simple method of finding someone who looked important and tugging on the hem of his coat.

This particular man was counting bales of tobacco and would have succeeded but for the interruption.

"What?"

"I said, what happening here?"

The man meant to say: "Push off and bother someone else." He meant to give her a light cuff about the head. So he was astonished to find himself bending down and talking seriously to a small, grubby-faced child holding a large broomstick (which also, it seemed to him later, was in some indefinable way paying attention).

He explained about the caravans. The child nodded.

"People all get together to travel?"

"Precisely."

"Where to?"

"All sorts of places. Sto Lat, Pseudopolis . . . Ankh-Morpork, of course . . . ."

"But the river goes there," said Esk, reasonably. "Barges. The Zoons."

"Ah, yes," said the merchant, "but they charge high prices and they can't carry everything and, anyway, no one trusts them much."

"But they're very honest!"

"Huh, yes," he said. "But you know what they say: never trust an honest man." He smiled knowingly.

"Who says that?"

"They do. You know. People," he said, a certain uneasiness entering his voice.

"Oh," said Esk. She thought about it. "They must be very silly," she said primly. "Thank you, anyway."

He watched her wander off and got back to his counting. A moment later there was another tug at his coat.

"Fiftysevenfiftysevenfiftysevenwell?" he said, trying not to lose his place.

"Sorry to bother you again," said Esk, "but those bale things ...."

"What about them fiftysevenfiftysevenfiftyseven?"

"Well, are they supposed to have little white worm things in them?"

"Fiftysev - what?" The merchant lowered his slate and stared at Esk, "What little worms?"

"Wriggly ones. White," added Esk, helpfully. "All sort of burrowing about in the middle of the bales."

"You mean tobacco threadworm?" He looked wild-eyed at the stack of bales being unloaded by, now he came to think about it, a vendor with the nervous look of a midnight sprite who wants to get away before you find out what fairy gold turns into in the morning. "But he told me these had been well stored and - how do you know, anyway? "

The child had disappeared among the crowds. The merchant looked hard at the spot where she had been. He looked hard at the vendor, who was grinning nervously. He looked hard at the sky. Then took his sampling knife out of his pocket, stared at it for a moment, appeared to reach a decision, and sidled towards the nearest bale.

Esk, meanwhile, had by random eavesdropping found the caravan being assembled for Ankh-Morpork. The trail boss was sitting at a table made up of a plank across two barrels.

He was busy.

He was talking to a wizard.

Seasoned travellers know that a party setting out to cross possibly hostile country should have a fair number of swords in it but should definitely have a wizard in case there is any need for magic arts and, even if these do not become necessary, for lighting fires. A wizard of the third rank or above does not expect to pay for the privilege of joining the party. Rather, he expects to be paid. Delicate negotiations were even now coming to a conclusion.

"Fair enough, Master Treatle, but what of the young man?" said the trail boss, one Adab Gander, an impressive figure in a trollhide jerkin, rakishly floppy hat and a leather kilt. "He's no wizard, I can see."

"He is in training," said Treatle- a tall skinny wizard whose robes declared him to be a mage of the Ancient and Truly Original Brothers of the Silver Star, one of the eight orders of wizardry.

"Then no wizard he," said Gander. "I know the rules, and you're not a wizard unless you've got a staff. And he hasn't."

"Even now he travels to the Unseen University for that small detail," said Treatle loftily. Wizards parted with money slightly less readily than tigers parted with their teeth.

Gander looked at the lad in question. He had met a good many wizards in his time and considered himself a good judge and he had to admit that this boy looked like good wizard material. In other words, he was thin, gangling, pale from reading disturbing books in unhealthy rooms, and had watery eyes like two lightly-poached eggs. It crossed Gander's mind that one must speculate in order to accumulate.

All he needs to get right to the top, he thought, is a bit of a handicap. Wizards are martyrs to things like asthma and flat feet, it somehow seems to give them their drive.

"What's your name, lad?" he said, as kindly as possible.

"Sssssssssssss" said the boy. His Adam's apple bobbed like a captive balloon. He turned to his companion, full of mute appeal.

"Simon," said Trestle.

"- imon," agreed Simon, thankfully.

"Can you cast fireballs or whirling spells, such as might be hurled against an enemy?"

Simon looked sideways at Trestle.

"Nnnnnnnnn" he ventured.

"My young friend follows higher magic than the mere hurling of sorceries," said the wizard.

"-o," said Simon.

Gander nodded.

"Well," he said, "maybe you will indeed be a wizard, lad. Maybe when you have your fine staff you'll consent to travel with me one time, yes? I will make an investment in you, yes?"

"Just nod," said Gander, who was not naturally a cruel man.

Simon nodded gratefully. Treatle and Gander exchanged nods and then the wizard strode off, with his apprentice trailing behind under a weight of baggage.

Gander looked down at the list in front of him and carefully crossed out "wizard".

A small shadow fell across the page. He glanced up and gave an involuntary start.

"Well?" he said coldly.

"I want to go to Ankh-Morpork," said Esk, "please. I've got some money."

"Go home to your mother, child."

"No, really. I want to seek my fortune."

Gander sighed. "Why are you holding that broomstick?" he said.

Esk looked at it as though she had never seen it before.

"Everything's got to be somewhere," she said.

"Just go home, my girl," said Gander. "I'm not taking any runaways to Ankh-Morpork. Strange things can happen to little girls in big cities."

Esk brightened. "What sort of strange things?"

"Look, I said go home, right? Now!"

He picked up his chalk and went on ticking off items on his slate, trying to ignore the steady gaze that seemed to be boring through the top of his head.

"I can be helpful," said Esk, quietly.

Gander threw down the chalk and scratched his chin irritably.

"How old are you?" he said.

"Nine."

"Well, Miss nine-years-old, I've got two hundred animals and a hundred people that want to go to Ankh, and half of them hate the other half, and I've not got enough people who can fight, and they say the roads are pretty bad and the bandits are getting really cheeky up in the Paps and the trolls are demanding a bigger bridge toll this year and there's weevils in the supplies and I keep getting these headaches and where, in all this, do I need you?"

"Oh," said Esk. She looked around the crowded square. "Which one of these roads goes to Ankh, then?"

"The one over there, with the gate."

"Thank you," she said gravely. "Goodbye. I hope you don't have any more trouble and your head gets better."

"Right," said Gander uncertainly. He drummed his fingers on the tabletop as he watched Esk walk away in the direction of the Ankh road. A long, winding road. A road haunted by thieves and gnolls. A road that wheezed through high mountain passes and crawled, panting, over deserts.

"Oh bugger," he said, under his breath. "Hey! You!"

Granny Weatherwax was in trouble.

First of all, she decided, she should never have allowed Hilta to talk her into borrowing her broomstick. It was elderly, erratic, would fly only at night and even then couldn't manage a speed much above a trot.

Its lifting spells had worn so thin that it wouldn't even begin to operate until it was already moving at a fair lick. It was, in fact, the only broomstick ever to need bump-starting.

And it was while Granny Weatherwax, sweating and cursing, was running along a forest path holding the damn thing at shoulder height for the tenth time that she had found the bear trap.

The second problem was that a bear had found it first. In fact this hadn't been too much of a problem because Granny, already in a bad temper, hit it right between the eyes with the broomstick and it was now sitting as far away from her as it was possible to get in a pit, and trying to think happy thoughts.

It was not a very comfortable night and the morning wasn't much better for the party of hunters who, around dawn, peered over the edge of the pit.

"About time, too," said Granny. "Get me out."

The startled heads withdrew and Granny could hear a hasty whispered conversation. They had seen the hat and broomstick.

Finally a bearded head reappeared, rather reluctantly, as if the body it was attached to was being pushed forward.

"Um," it began, "look, mother -"

"Im not a mother," snapped Granny. "I'm certainly not your mother, if you ever had mothers, which I doubt. If I was your mother I'd have run away before you were born."

"It's only a figure of speech," said the head reproachfully.

"It's a damned insult is what it is!"

There was another whispered conversation.

"If I don't get out," said Granny in ringing tones, "there will be Trouble. Do you see my hat, eh? Do you see it?"

The head reappeared.

"That's the whole point, isn't it?" it said. "I mean, what will there be if we let you out? It seems less risky all round if we just sort of fill the pit in. Nothing personal, you understand."

Granny realized what it was that was bothering her about the head.

"Are you kneeling down?" she said accusingly. "You're not, are you! You're dwarves!"

Whisper, whisper.

"Well, what about it?" asked the head defiantly. "Nothing wrong with that, is there? What have you got against dwarves?"

"Do you know how to repair broomsticks?"

"Magic broomsticks?"

"Yes!"

Whisper, whisper.

"What if we do?"

"Well, we could come to some arrangement . . . ."

The dwarf halls rang to the sound of hammers, although mainly for effect. Dwarves found it hard to think without the sound of hammers, which they found soothing, so well-off dwarves in the clerical professions paid goblins to hit small ceremonial anvils, just to maintain the correct dwarvish image.

The broomstick lay between two trestles. Granny Weatherwax sat on a rock outcrop while a dwarf half her height, wearing an apron that was a mass of pockets, walked around the broom and occasionally poked it.

Eventually he kicked the bristles and gave a long intake of breath, a sort of reverse whistle, which is the secret sign of craftsmen across the universe and means that something expensive is about to happen.

"Weellll," he said. "I could get the apprentices in to look at this, I could. It's an education in itself. And you say it actually managed to get airborne?"

"It flew like a bird," said Granny.

The dwarf lit a pipe. "I should very much like to see that bird," he said reflectively. "I should imagine it's quite something to watch, a bird like that."

"Yes, but can you repair it?" said Granny. "I'm in a hurry."

The dwarf sat down, slowly and deliberately.

"As for repair," he said, "well, I don't know about repair. Rebuild, maybe. Of course, it's hard to get the bristles these days even if you can find people to do the proper binding, and the spells need -"

"I don't want it rebuilt, I just want it to work properly," said Granny.

"It's an early model, you see," the dwarf plugged on. "Very tricky, those early models. You can't get the wood -"

He was picked up bodily until his eyes were level with Granny's. Dwarves, being magical in themselves as it were, are quite resistant to magic but her expression looked as though she was trying to weld his eyeballs to the back of his skull.

"Just repair it," she hissed. "Please?"

"What, make a bodge job?" said the dwarf, his pipe clattering to the floor.

"Yes."

"Patch it up, you mean? Betray my training by doing half a job?"

"Yes," said Granny. Her pupils were two little black holes.

"Oh," said the dwarf. "Right, then."

Gander the trail boss was a worried man.

They were three mornings out from Zemphis, making good time, and were climbing now towards the rocky pass through the mountains known as the Paps of Scilla (there were

eight of them; Gander often wondered who Scilla had been, and whether he would have liked her/.

A party of gnolls had crept up on them during the night. The nasty creatures, a variety of stone goblin, had slit the throat of a guard and must have been poised to slaughter the entire party. Only....

Only no one knew quite what had happened next. The screams had woken them up, and by the time people had puffed up the fires and Treatle the wizard had cast a blue radiance over the campsite the surviving gnolls were distant, spidery shadows, running as if all the legions of Hell were after them.

Judging by what had happened to their colleagues, they were probably right. Bits of gnolls hung from the nearby rocks, giving them a sort of jolly, festive air. Gander wasn't particularly sorry about that - gnolls liked to capture travellers and practise hospitality of the red-hot-knife-and-bludgeon kind - but he was nervous of being in the same area as Something that went through a dozen wiry and wickedly armed gnolls like a spoon through a lightly-boiled egg but left no tracks.

In fact the ground was swept clean.

It had been a very long night, and the morning didn't seem to be an improvement. The only person more than half-awake was Esk, who had slept through the whole thing under one of the wagons and had complained only of odd dreams.

Still, it was a relief to get away from that macabre sight. Gander considered that gnolls didn't look any better inside than out. He hated their guts.

Esk sat on Treatle's wagon, talking to Simon who was steering inexpertly while the wizard caught up with some sleep behind them.

Simon did everything inexpertly. He was really good at it. He was one of those tall lads apparently made out of knees, thumbs and elbows. Watching him walk was a strain, you kept waiting for the strings to snap, and when he talked the spasm of agony on his face if he spotted an S or W looming ahead in the sentence made people instinctively say them for him. It was worth it for the grateful look which spread across his acned face like sunrise on the moon.

At the moment his eyes were streaming with hayfever.

"Did you want to be a wizard when you were a little boy?"

Simon shook his head. "I just www-"

"- wanted -"

"- tto find out how things www -"

"- worked? -"

"Yes. Then someone in my village told the University and Mmaster T-Treatle was sent to bring me. I shall be a www-"

"- wizard -"

"- one day. Master Treatle says I have an exceptional grasp of ththeory." Simon's damp eyes misted over and an expression almost of bliss drifted across his ravaged face.

"He t-tells me they've got thousands of b-books in the library at Unseen University," he said, in the voice of a man in love. "More bbooks than anyone could read in a lifetime."

"I'm not sure I like books," said Esk conversationally. "How can paper know things? My granny says books are only good if the paper is thin."

"No, that's not right," said Simon urgently. "Books are full of www" he gulped air and gave her a pleading look.

"- words? -"said Esk, after a moment's thought.

"- yes, and they can change th-things. Th-that's wuwuw, that wuwuwwhha-whha-"

"-what-"

"-I must f-find. I know it's th-there, somewhere in all the old books. They ssss-"

"-say

"there's no new spells but I know that it's there somewhere, hiding, the wwwwwuwu-"

"- words -"

"yes, that no wiwiwi-"

"- Wizard? -"said Esk, her face a frown of concentration.

"Yes, has ever found." His eyes closed and he smiled a beatific smile and added, "The Words that Will change the World."

"What?"

"Eh?" said Simon, opening his eyes in time to stop the oxen wandering off the track.

"You said all those wubbleyous!"

"Idid?"

"I heard you! Try again."

Simon took a deep breath. "The worworwor - the wuwuw -" he said. "The wowowoo-" he continued.

"It's no good, it's gone," he said. "It happens sometimes, if I don't think about it. Master Treatle says I'm allergic to something."

"Allergic to double-yous?"

"No, sisssisi-"

//-silly-" said Esk, generously.

"- there's sososo-"

"- something -"

"- in the air, p-pollen maybe, or g-grass dust. Master Treatle has tried to find the cause of it but no magic seems to h-help it."

They were passing through a narrow pass of orange rock. Simon looked at it disconsolately.

"My granny taught me some hayfever cures," Esk said. "We could try those."

Simon shook his head. It looked touch and go whether it would fall off.

"Tried everything," he said. "Fine wwiwwi-magician I'd make, eh, can't even sss-utter the wowo-name."

"I could see where that would be a problem," said Esk. She watched the scenery for a while, marshalling a train of thought.

"Is it, er, possible for a woman to be, you know, a wizard? " she said eventually.

Simon stared at her. She gave him a defiant look.

His throat strained. He was trying to find a sentence that didn't start with a W. In the end he was forced to make concessions.

"A curious idea," he said. He thought some more, and started to laugh until Esk's expression warned him.

"Rather funny, really," he added, but the laughter in his face faded and was replaced by a puzzled look. "Never really tthought about it, before."

"Well? Can they?" You could have shaved with Esk's voice.

"Of course they can't. It is self-evident, child. Simon, return to your studies."

Treatle pushed aside the curtain that led into the back of the wagon and climbed out on to the seat board.

The look of mild panic took up its familiar place on Simon's face. He gave Esk a pleading glance as Treatle took the reins from his hands, but she ignored him.

"Why not? What's so self-evident?"

Treatle turned and looked down at her. He hadn't really paid much attention before, she was simply just another figure around the campfires.

He was the Vice-Chancellor of Unseen University, and quite used to seeing vague scurrying figures getting on with essential but unimportant jobs like serving his meals and dusting his rooms. He was stupid, yes, in the particular way that very clever people can be stupid, and maybe he had all the tact of an avalanche and was as selfcentred as a tornado, but it would never have occurred to him that children were important enough to be unkind to.

From long white hair to curly boots, Treatle was a wizard's wizard. He had the appropriate long bushy eyebrows, spangled robe and patriarchal beard that was only slightly spoiled by the yellow nicotine stains (wizards are celibate but, nevertheless, enjoy a good cigar.

"It will all become clear to you when you grow up," he said. "It's an amusing idea, of course, a nice play on words. A female wizard! You might as well invent a male witch!"

"Warlocks," said Esk.

"Pardon me?"

"My granny says men can't be witches," said Esk. "She says if men tried to be witches they'd be wizards."

"She sounds a very wise woman," said Treatle.

"She says women should stick to what they're good at," Esk went on.

"Very sensible of her."

"She says if women were as good as men they'd be a lot better!"

Treatle laughed.

"She's a witch," said Esk, and added in her mind: there, what do you think of that, Mr so-called cleverwizard?

"My dear good young lady, am I supposed to be shocked? I happen to have a great respect for witches."

Esk frowned. He wasn't supposed to say that.

"You have?"

"Yes indeed. I happen to believe that witchcraft is a fine career, for a woman. A very noble calling."

"You do? I mean, it is?"

"Oh yes. Very useful in rural districts for, for people who are -having babies, and so forth. However, witches are not wizards. Witchcraft is Nature's way of allowing women access to the magical fluxes, but you must remember it is not high magic."

"I see. Not high magic," said Esk grimly.

"Oh, no. Witchcraft is very suitable for helping people through life, of course, but -"

"I expect women aren't really sensible enough to be wizards," said Esk. "I expect that's it, really."

"I have nothing but the highest respect for women," said Treatle, who hadn't noticed the fresh edge to Esk's tone. "They are without parallel when, when -"

"For having babies and so forth?"

"There is that, yes," the wizard conceded generously. "But they can be a little unsettling at times. A little too excitable. High magic requires great clarity of thought, you see, and women's talents do not lie in that direction. Their brains tend to overheat. I am sorry to say there is only one door into wizardry and that is the main gate at Unseen University and no woman has ever passed through it."

"Tell me," said Esk, "what good is high magic, exactly?"

Treatle smiled at her.

"High magic, my child," he said, "can give us everything we want."

"Oh."

"So put all this wizard nonsense out of your head, all right?" Treatle gave her a benevolent smile. "What is your name, child?"

"Eskarina."

"And why do you go to Ankh, my dear?"

"I thought I might seek my fortune," muttered Esk, "but I think perhaps girls don't have fortunes to seek. Are you sure wizards give people what they want?"

"Of course. That is what high magic is for."

"I see."

The whole caravan was travelling only a little faster than walking pace. Esk jumped down, pulled the staff from its temporary hiding place among the bags and pails on the side of the wagon, and ran back along the line of carts and animals. Through her tears she caught a glimpse of Simon peering from the back of the wagon, an open book in his hands. He gave her a puzzled smile and started to say something, but she ran on and veered off the track.

Scrubby whinbushes scratched her legs as she scrambled up a clay bank and then she was running free across a barren plateau, hemmed in by the orange cliffs.

She didn't stop until she was good and lost but the anger still burned brightly. She had been angry before, but never like this; normally anger was like the red flame you got when the forge was first lit, all glow and sparks, but this anger was different-it had the bellows behind it, and had narrowed to the tiny bluewhite flame that cuts iron.

It made her body tingle. She had to do something about it or burst.

Why was it that, when she heard Granny ramble on about witchcraft she longed for the cutting magic of wizardry, but whenever she heard Treatle speak in his high-pitched voice she would fight to the death for witchcraft? She'd be both, or none at all. And the more they intended to stop her, the more she wanted it.

She'd be a witch and a wizard too. And she would show them.

Esk sat down under a low-spreading juniper bush at the foot of a steep, sheer cliff, her mind seething with plans and anger. She could sense doors being slammed before she had barely begun to open them. Treatle was right; they wouldn't let her inside the University. Having a staff wasn't enough to be a wizard, there had to be training too, and no one was going to train her.

The midday sun beat down off the cliff and the air around Esk began to smell of bees and gin. She lay back, looking at the nearpurple dome of the sky through the leaves and, eventually, she fell asleep.

One side-effect of using magic is that one tends to have realistic and disturbing dreams. There is a reason for this, but even thinking about it is enough to give a wizard nightmares.

The fact is that the minds of wizards can give thoughts a shape. Witches normally work with what actually exists in the world, but a wizard can, if he's good enough, put flesh on his imagination. This wouldn't cause any trouble if it wasn't for the fact that the little circle of candlelight loosely called "the universe of time and space" is adrift in something much more unpleasant and unpredictable. Strange Things circle and grunt outside the flimsy stockades of normality; there are weird hootings and howlings in the deep crevices at the edge of Time. There are things so horrible that even the dark is afraid of them.

Most people don't know this and this is just as well because the world could not really operate if everyone stayed in bed with the blankets over their head, which is what would happen if people knew what horrors lay a shadow's width away.

The problem is people interested in magic and mysticism spend a lot of time loitering on the very edge of the light, as it were, which gets them noticed by the creatures from the Dungeon Dimensions who then try to use them in their indefatigable efforts to break into this particular Reality.

Most people can resist this, but the relentless probing by the Things is never stronger than when the subject is asleep.

Bel-Shamharoth, C'hulagen, the Insider - the hideous old dark gods of the Necrotelicomnicon, the book known to certain mad adepts by its true name of Liber

Paginarum Fulvarum, are always ready to steal into a slumbering mind. The nightmares are often colourful and always unpleasant.

Esk had got used to them ever since that first dream after her first Borrowing, and familiarity had almost replaced terror. When she found herself sitting on a glittering, dusty plain under unexplained stars she knew it was time for another one.

"Drat," she said. "All right, come on then. Bring on the monsters. I just hope it isn't the one with his winkle on his face."

But this time it seemed that the nightmare had changed. Esk looked around and saw, rearing up behind her, a tall black castle. Its turrets disappeared among the stars. Lights and fireworks and interesting music cascaded from its upper battlements. The huge double doors stood invitingly open. There seemed to be quite an amusing party going on in there.

She stood up, brushed the silver sand off her dress, and set off for the gates.

She had almost reached them when they slammed. They didn't appear to move; it was simply that in one instant they were lounging ajar, and the next they were tight shut with a clang that shook the horizons.

Esk reached out and touched them. They were black, and so cold that ice was beginning to form on them.

There was a movement behind her. She turned around and saw the staff, without its broomstick disguise, standing upright in the sand. Little worms of light crept around its polished wood and crept around the carvings no one could ever quite identify.

She picked it up and smashed it against the doors. There was a shower of octarine sparks, but the black metal was unscathed.

Esk's eyes narrowed. She held the staff at arm's length and concentrated until a thin line of fire leapt from the wood and burst against the gate. The ice flashed into steam but the darkness - she was sure now that it wasn't metal - absorbed the power without so much as glowing. She doubled the energy, letting the staff put all its stored magic into a beam that was now so bright that she had to shut her eyes /and could still see it as a brilliant line in her mind/.

Then it winked out.

After a few seconds Esk ran forward and touched the doors gingerly. The coldness nearly froze her fingers off.

And from the battlements above she could hear the sound of sniggering. Laughter wouldn't have been so bad, especially an impressive demonic laugh with lots of echo, but this was just -sniggering.

It went on for a long time. It was one of the most unpleasant sounds Esk had ever heard.

She woke up shivering. It was long after midnight and the stars looked damp and chilly; the air was full of the busy silence of the night, which is created by hundreds of small furry things treading very carefully in the hope of finding dinner while avoiding being the main course.

A crescent moon was setting and a thin grey glow towards the rim of the world suggested that, against all probability, another day was on the cards.

Someone had wrapped Esk in a blanket.

"I know you're awake," said the voice of Granny Weatherwax. "You could make yourself useful and light a fire. There's damn all wood in these parts."

Esk sat up, and clutched at the juniper bush. She felt light enough to float away.

"Fire?" she muttered.

"Yes. You know. Pointing the finger and whoosh," said Granny sourly. She was sitting on a rock, trying to find a position that didn't upset her arthritis.

"I - I don't think I can."

"You tell me?" said Granny cryptically.

The old witch leaned forward and put her hand on Esk's forehead; it was like being caressed by a sock full of warm dice.

"You're running a bit of a temperature," she added. "Too much hot sun and cold ground. That's forn parts for you."

Esk let herself slump forward until her head lay in Granny's lap, with its familiar smells of camphor, mixed herbs and a trace of goat. Granny patted her in what she hoped was a soothing way.

After a while Esk said, in a low voice, "They're not going to allow me into the University. A wizard told me, and I dreamed about it, and it was one of those true dreams. You know, like you told me, a maty-thing."

"Metterfor," said Granny calmly.

"One of them."

"Did you think it would be easy?" asked Granny. "Did you think you'd walk into their gates waving your staff? Here I am, I want to be a wizard, thank you very much?"

"He told me there's no women allowed in the University!"

"He's wrong."

"No, I could tell he was telling the truth. You know, Granny, you can tell how -"

"Foolish child. All you could tell was that he thought he was telling the truth. The world isn't always as people see it."

"I don't understand," said Esk.

"You'll learn," said Granny. "Now tell me. This dream. They wouldn't let you into their university, right?"

"Yes, and they laughed!"

"And then you tried to burn down the doors?"

Esk turned her head in Granny's lap and opened a suspicious eye.

"How did you know?"

Granny smiled, but as a lizard would smile.

"I was miles away," she said. "I was bending my mind towards you, and suddenly you seemed to be everywhere. You shone out like a beacon, so you did. As for the fire - look around."

In the halflight of dawn the plateau was a mass of baked clay. In front of Esk the cliff was glassy and must have flowed like tar under the onslaught; there were great gashes across it which had dripped molten rock and slag. When Esk listened she could hear the faint "pink, pink" of cooling rock.

"Oh," she said, "did I do that?"

"So it would appear," said Granny.

"But I was asleep! I was only dreaming!"

"It's the magic," said Granny. "It's trying to find a way out. The witch magic and the wizard magic are, I don't know, sort of feeding off each other. I think."

Esk bit her lip.

"What can I do?" she asked. "I dream of all sorts of things!"

"Well, for a start we're going straight to the University," decided Granny. "They must be used to apprentices not being able to control magic and having hot dreams, else the place would have burned down years ago."

She glanced towards the Rim, and then down at the broomstick beside her.

We will pass over the running up and down, the tightening of the broomstick's bindings, the muttered curses against dwarves, the brief moments of hope as the magic flickered fitfully, the horrible black feelings as it died, the tightening of the bindings again, the running again, the sudden catching of the spell, the scrambling aboard, the yelling, the takeoff ....

Esk clung to Granny with one hand and held her staff in the other as they, frankly, pottered along a few hundred feet above the ground. A few birds flew alongside them, interested in this new flying tree.

"Bugger off!" screamed Granny, taking off her hat and flapping it.

"We're not going very fast, Granny," said Esk meekly.

"We're going quite fast enough for me!"

Esk looked around. Behind them the Rim was a blaze of gold, barred with cloud.

"I think we ought to go lower, Granny," she said urgently. "You said the broomstick won't fly in sunlight." She glanced down at the landscape below them. It looked sharp and inhospitable. It also looked expectant.

"I know what I'm doing, Miss," snapped Granny, gripping the broomstick hard and trying to make herself as light as possible.

It has already been revealed that light on the Discworld travels slowly, the result of its passage through the Disc's vast and ancient magical field.

So dawn isn't the sudden affair that it is on other worlds. The new day doesn't erupt, it sort of sloshes gently across the sleeping landscape in the same way that the tide sneaks in across the beach, melting the sandcastles of the night. It tends to flow around mountains. If the trees are close together it comes out of woods cut to ribbons and sliced with shadows.

An observer on some suitable high point, let's say for the sake of argument a wisp of cirro-stratus on the edge of space, would remark on how lovingly the light spreads across

the land, how it leaps forward on the plains and slows down when it encounters high ground, how beautifully it ....

Actually, there are some kinds of observers who, faced with all this beauty, will whine that you can't have heavy light and certainly wouldn't be able to see it, even if you could. To which one can only reply, so how come you're standing on a cloud?

So much for cynicism. But down on the Disc itself the broomstick barrelled forward on the cusp of dawn, dropping ever backward in the shadow of night.

"Granny!"

Day burst upon them. Ahead of the broomstick the rocks seemed to flash into flame as the light washed over them. Granny felt the stick lurch and stared with horrified fascination at the little scudding shadow below them. It was getting closer.

"What will happen when we hit the ground?"

"That depends if I can find some soft rocks," said Granny in a preoccupied voice.

"The broomstick's going to crash! Can't we do anything?"

"Well, I suppose we could get off."

"Granny," said Esk, in the exasperated and remarkably adult voice children use to berate their wayward elders. "I don't think you quite understand. I don't want to hit the ground. It's never done anything to me."

Granny was trying to think of a suitable spell and regretting that headology didn't work on rocks, and had she detected the diamond edge to Esk's tone perhaps she wouldn't have said: "Tell the broomstick that, then."

And they would indeed have crashed. But she remembered in time to grab her hat and brace herself. The broomstick gave a shudder, tilted

- and the landscape blurred.

It was really quite a short trip but one that Granny knew she would always remember, generally around three o'clock in the morning after eating rich food. She would remember the rainbow colours that hummed in the rushing air, the horrible heavy feeling, the impression that something very big and heavy was sitting on the universe.

She would remember Esk's laughter. She would remember, despite her best efforts, the way the ground sped below them, whole mountain ranges flashing past with nasty zipping noises.

Most of all, she would remember catching up with the night. It appeared ahead of her, a ragged line of darkness running ahead of the remorseless morning. She stared in horrified fascination as the line became a blot, a stain, a whole continent of blackness that raced towards them.

For an instant they were poised on the crest of the dawn as it broke in silent thunder on the land. No surfer ever rode such a wave, but the broomstick broke through the broil of light and shot smoothly through into the coolness beyond.

Granny let herself breathe out.

Darkness took some of the terror out of the flight. It also meant that if Esk lost interest the broomstick ought to be able to fly under its own rather rusty magic.

"." Granny said, and cleared her bone-dry throat for a second try. "Esk?"

"This is fun, isn't it? I wonder how I make it happen?"

"Yes, fun," said Granny weakly. "But can I fly the stick, please? I don't want us to go over the Edge. Please?"

"Is it true that there's a giant waterfall all around the edge of the world, and you can look down and see stars?" said Esk.

"Yes. Can we slow down now?"

"I'd like to see it."

"No! I mean, no, not now."

The broomstick slowed. The rainbow bubble around it vanished with an audible pop. Without a jolt, without so much as a shudder, Granny found herself flying at a respectable speed again.

Granny had built a solid reputation on always knowing the answer to everything. Getting her to admit ignorance, even to herself, was an astonishing achievement. But the worm of curiosity was chewing at the apple of her mind.

"How," she said at last, "did you do that?"

There was a thoughtful silence behind her. Then Esk said: "I don't know. I just needed it, and it was in my head. Like when you remember something you've forgotten."

"Yes, but how?"

"I - I don't know. I just had a picture of how I wanted things to be, and, and I, sort of - went into the picture."

Granny stared into the night. She had never heard of magic like that, but it sounded awfully powerful and probably lethal. Went into the picture! Of course, all magic changed the world in some way, wizards thought there was no other use for it - they didn't truck with the idea of leaving the world as it was and changing the people -but this sounded more literal. It needed thinking about. On the ground.

For the first time in her life Granny wondered whether there might be something important in all these books people were setting such store by these days, although she was opposed to books on strict moral grounds, since she had heard that many of them were written by dead people and therefore it stood to reason reading them would be as bad as necromancy. Among the many things in the infinitely varied universe with which Granny did not hold was talking to dead people, who by all accounts had enough troubles of their own.

But not, she was inclined to feel, as many as her. She looked down bemusedly at the dark ground and wondered vaguely why the stars were below her.

For a cardiac moment she wondered if they had indeed flown over the edge, and then she realised that the thousands of little pinpoints below her were too yellow, and flickered. Besides, whoever heard of stars arranged in such a neat pattern?

"It's very pretty," said Esk. "Is it a city?"

Granny scanned the ground wildly. If it was a city, then it was too big. But now she had time to think about it, it certainly smelled like a lot of people.

The air around them reeked of incense and grain and spices and beer, but mainly of the sort of smell that was caused by a high water table, thousands of people, and a robust approach to drainage.

She mentally shook herself. The day was hard on their heels. She looked for an area where the torches were dim and widely spaced, reasoning that this would mean a poor district and poor people did not object to witches, and gently pointed the broom handle downwards.

She managed to get within five feet of the ground before dawn arrived for the second time.

The gates were indeed big and black and looked as if they were made out of solid darkness.

Granny and Esk stood among the crowds that thronged the square outside the University and stared up at them. Finally Esk said: "I can't see how people get in."

"Magic, I expect," said Granny sourly. "That's wizards for you. Anyone else would have bought a doorknocker."

She waved her broomstick in the direction of the tall doors.

"You've got to say some hocuspocus word to get in, I shouldn't wonder," she added.

They had been in Ankh-Morpork for three days and Granny was beginning to enjoy herself, much to her surprise. She had found them lodgings in The Shades, an ancient part of the city whose inhabitants were largely nocturnal and never enquired about one another's business because curiosity not only killed the cat but threw it in the river with weights tied to its feet. The lodgings were on the top floor next to the well-guarded premises of a respectable dealer in stolen property because, as Granny had heard, good fences make good neighbors.

The Shades, in brief, were an abode of discredited gods and unlicensed thieves, ladies of the night and peddlers in exotic goods, alchemists of the mind and strolling mummers; in short, all the grease on civilization's axle.

And yet, despite the fact that these people tend to appreciate the soft magics, there was a remarkable shortage of witches. Within hours the news of Granny's arrival had seeped through the quarter and a stream of people crept, sidled or strutted towards her door, seeking potions and charms and news of the future and various personal and specialised services that witches traditionally provide for those whose lives are a little clouded or full of stormy weather.

She was at first annoyed, and then embarrassed, and then flattered; her clients had money, which was useful, but they also paid in respect, and that was a rock-hard currency.

In short, Granny was even wondering about the possibility of acquiring slightly larger premises with a bit of garden and sending for her goats. The smell might be a problem, but the goats would just have to put up with it.

They had visited the sights of Ankh-Morpork, its crowded docks, its many bridges, its souks, its casbahs, its streets lined with nothing but temples. Granny had counted the temples with a thoughtful look in her eyes; gods were always demanding that their followers acted other than according to their true natures, and the human fallout this caused made plenty of work for witches.

The terrors of civilisation had so far failed to materialise, although a cutpurse had tried to make off with Granny's handbag. To the amazement of passers-by Granny called him back, and back he came, fighting his feet which had totally ceased to obey him. No one quite saw what happened to her eyes when she stared into his face or heard the words she whispered in his cowering ear, but he gave her back all her money plus quite a lot of money belonging to other people, and before she let him go had promised to have a

shave, stand up straight, and be a better person for the rest of his life. By nightfall Granny's description was circulated to all the chapter houses of the Guild of Thieves, Cutpurses, Housebreakers and Allied Trades[6], with strict instructions to avoid her at all costs.

Thieves, being largely creatures of the night themselves, know trouble when it stares them in the face.

Granny had also written two more letters to the University. There had been no reply.

"I liked the forest best," said Esk.

"I dunno," said Granny. "This is a bit like the forest, really. Anyway, people certainly appreciate a witch here."

"They're very friendly," Esk conceded. "You know the house down the street, where that fat lady lives with all those young ladies you said were her relatives?"

A very respectable body which in fact represented the major law enforcement agency in the city. The reason for this is as follows: the Guild was given an annual quota which represented a socially acceptable level of thefts, muggings and assassinations, and in return saw to it in very definite and final ways that unofficial crime was not only rapidly

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"Mrs Palm," said Granny cautiously. "Very respectable lady."

"People come to visit them all night long. I watched. I'm surprised they get any sleep."

"Um," said Granny.

"It must be a trial for the poor woman with all those daughters to feed, too. I think people could be more considerate."

"Well now," said Granny, "I'm not sure that -"

She was rescued by the arrival at the gates of the University of a large, brightly painted wagon. Its driver reined in the oxen a few feet from Granny and said: "Excuse me, my good woman, but would you be so kind as to move, please?"

Granny stepped aside, affronted by this display of downright politeness and particularly upset at being thought of as anyone's good woman, and the driver saw Esk.

It was Treatle. He grinned like a worried snake.

"I say. It's the young lady who thinks women should be wizards, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Esk, ignoring a sharp kick on the ankle from Granny.

"What fun. Come to join us, have you?"

"Yes," said Esk, and then because something about Treatle's manner seemed to demand it, she added, "sir. Only we can't get in."

"We?" said Treatle, and then glanced at Granny, "Oh, yes, of course. This would be your aunt?"

"My granny. Only not really my granny, just sort of everyone's granny."

Granny gave a stiff nod.

"Well, we cannot have this," said Treatle, in a voice as hearty as a plum pudding. "My word, no. Our first lady wizard left on the doorstep? That would be a disgrace. May I accompany you?"

Granny grasped Esk firmly by the shoulder.

"If it's all the same to you -"she began. But Esk twisted out of her grip and ran towards the cart.

"You can really take me in?" she said, her eyes shining.

"Of course. I am sure the heads of the Orders will be most gratified to meet you. Most astonished and astounded," he said, and gave a little laugh.

"Eskarina Smith -" said Granny, and then stopped. She looked at Treatle.

"I don't know what is in your mind, Mr Wizard, but I don't like it," she said. "Esk, you know where we live. Be a fool if you must, but you might at least be your own fool."

She turned on her heel and strode off across the square.

"What a remarkable woman," said Treatle, vaguely. "I see you still have your broomstick. Capital."

He let go of the reins for a moment and made a complicated sign in the air with both hands.

The big doors swung back, revealing a wide courtyard surrounded by lawns. Behind them was a great rambling building, or buildings: it was hard to tell, because it didn't look so much as if it had been designed as that a lot of buttresses, arches, towers, bridges, domes, cupolas and so forth had huddled together for warmth.

"Is that it?" said Esk. "It looks sort of - melted."

"Yes, that's it," said Trestle. "Alma mater, gaudy armours eagle tour and so on. Of course, it's a lot bigger inside than out, like an iceberg or so I'm given to understand, I've never seen the things. Unseen University, only of course a lot of it is unseen. Just go in the back and fetch Simon, will you?"

Esk pushed aside the heavy curtains and peered into the back of the wagon. Simon was lying on a pile of rugs, reading a very large book and making notes on scraps of paper.

He looked up, and gave her a worried smile.

"Is that you?" he said.

"Yes," said Esk, with conviction.

"We thought you'd left us. Everyone thought you were riding with everyone else and then wwwwhen we stopped -"

"I sort of caught up. I think Mr Trestle wants you to come and look at the University."

"We're here?" he said, and gave her an odd look: "You're here?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Mr Treatle invited me in, he said everyone would be astounded to meet me." Uncertainty flashed a fin in the depths of her eyes. "Was he right?"

Simon looked down at his book, and dabbed at his running eyes with a red handkerchief.

"He has t-these little f-fancies", he muttered, "bbbut he's not a bad person."

Bewildered, Esk looked down at the yellowed pages open in front of the boy. They were full of complicated red and black symbols which in some inexplicable way were as potent and unpleasant as a ticking parcel, but which nevertheless drew the eye in the same way that a really bad accident does. One felt that one would like to know their purpose, while at the same time suspecting that if you found out you would really prefer not to have done.

Simon saw her expression and hastily shut the book.

"Just some magic," he mumbled. "Something I'm wwwww-"

"- working -"said Esk, automatically.

"Thank you. On."

"It must be quite interesting, reading books," said Esk.

"Sort of. Can't you read, Esk?"

The astonishment in his voice stung her.

"I expect so," she said defiantly. "I've never tried."

Esk wouldn't have known what a collective noun was if it had spat in her eye, but she knew there was a herd of goats and a coven of witches. She didn't know what you called a lot of wizards. An order of wizards? A conspiracy? A circle?

Whatever it was, it filled the University. Wizards strolled among the cloisters and sat on benches under the trees. Young wizards scuttled along pathways as bells rang, with their arms full of books or - in the case of senior students - with their books flapping through the air after them. The air had the greasy feel of magic and tasted of tin.

Esk walked along between Trestle and Simon and drank it all in. It wasn't just that there was magic in the air, but it was tamed and working, like a millrace. It was power, but it was harnessed.

Simon was as excited as she was, but it showed only because his eyes watered more and his stutter got worse. He kept stopping to point out the various colleges and research buildings.

One was quite low and brooding, with high narrow windows.

"T-that's the l-l-library," said Simon, his voice bursting with wonder and respect. "Can I have a l-l-look?"

"Plenty of time for that later," said Treatle. Simon gave the building a wistful look.

"All the b-books of magic ever written," he whispered.

"Why are the windows barred?" said Esk.

Simon swallowed. "Um, b-because b-books of m-magic aren't like other b-books, they lead a -"

"That's enough," snapped Treatle. He looked down at Esk as if he had just noticed her, and frowned.

"Why are you here?"

"You invited me in," said Esk.

"Me? Oh, yes. Of course. Sorry, mind wandering. The young lady who wants to be a wizard. Let us see, shall we?"

He led the way up a broad flight of steps to an impressive pair of doors. At least, they were designed to be impressive. The designer had invested deeply in heavy locks, curly hinges, brass studs and an intricately-carved archway to make it absolutely clear to anyone entering that they were not very important people at all.

He was a wizard. He had forgotten the doorknocker.

Treatle rapped on the door with his staff. It hesitated for a while, and then slowly slid back its bolts and swung open.

The hall was full of wizards and boys. And boys' parents.

There are two ways of getting into Unseen University (in fact there are three, but at this time wizards hadn't realised it.

The first is to achieve some great work of magic, such as the recovery of an ancient and powerful relic or the invention of a totally new spell, but in these times it was seldom done. In the past there had been great wizards capable of forming whole new spells from the chaotic raw magic of the world, wizards from whom as it were all the spells of wizardry had flowed, but those days had gone; there were no more sourcerers.

So the more typical method was to be sponsored by a senior and respected wizard, after a suitable period of apprenticeship.

Competition was stiff for a University place and the honour and privileges an Unseen degree could bring. Many of the boys milling around the hall, and launching minor spells at each other, would fail and have to spend their lives as lowly magicians, mere magical technologists with defiant beards and leather patches on their elbows who congregated in small jealous groups at parties.

Not for them the coveted pointy hat with optional astrological symbols, or the impressive robes, or the staff of authority. But at least they could look down on conjurers, who tended to be jolly and fat and inclined to drop their aitches and drink beer and go around with sad thin women in spangly tights and really infuriate magicians by not realising how lowly they were and kept telling them jokes. Lowliest of all - apart from witches, of course - were thaumaturgists, who never got any schooling at all. A thaumaturgist could just about be trusted to wash out an alembic. Many spells required things like mould from a corpse dead of crushing, or the semen of a living tiger, or the root of a plant that gave an ultrasonic scream when it was uprooted. Who was sent to get them? Right.

It is a common error to refer to the lower magical ranks as hedge wizards. In fact hedge wizardry is a very honoured and specialised form of magic that attracts silent, thoughtful

men of the druidical persuasion and topiaric inclinations. If you invited a hedge wizard to a party he would spend half the evening talking to your potted plant. And he would spend the other half listening.

Esk noticed that there were some women in the hall, because even young wizards had mothers and sisters. Whole families had turned up to bid the favoured sons farewell. There was a considerable blowing of noses, wiping of tears and the clink of coins as proud fathers tucked a little spending money into their offspring's hands.

Very senior wizards were perambulating among the crowds, talking to the sponsoring wizards and examining the prospective students.

Several of them pushed through the throng to meet Treatle, moving like gold-trimmed galleons under full sail. They bowed gravely to him and looked approvingly at Simon.

"This is young Simon, is it?" said the fattest of them, beaming at the boy. "We've heard great reports of you, young man. Eh? What?"

"Simon, bow to Archchancellor Cutangle, Archmage of the Wizards of the Silver Star," said Treatle. Simon bowed apprehensively.

Cutangle looked at him benevolently. "We've heard great things about you, my boy," he said. "All this mountain air must be good for the brain, eh?"

He laughed. The wizards around him laughed. Treatle laughed. Which Esk thought was rather funny, because there wasn't anything particularly amusing happening.

"I ddddon't know, ssss-"

"From what we hear it must be the only thing you don't know, lad!" said Cutangle, his jowls waggling. There was another carefully timed bout of laughter.

Cutangle patted Simon on the shoulder.

"This is the scholarship boy," he said. "Quite astounding results, never seen better. Self-taught, too. Astonishing, what? Isn't that so, Treatle?"

"Superb, Archchancellor."

Cutangle looked around at the watching wizards.

"Perhaps you could give us a sample," he said. "A little demonstration, perhaps?"

Simon looked at him in animal panic.

"A-actually I'm not very g-g-g-"

"Now, now," said Cutangle, in what he probably really did think was an encouraging tone of voice. "Do not be afraid. Take your time. When you are ready."

Simon licked his dry lips and gave Treatle a look of mute appeal.

"Um," he said, "y-you s-s-s-s-." He stopped and swallowed hard. "The f-f-f-f-"

His eyes bulged. The tears streamed from his eyes, and his shoulders heaved.

Treatle patted him reassuringly on the back.

"Hayfever," he explained. "Don't seem to be able to cure it. Tried everything."

Simon swallowed, and nodded. He waved Treatle away with his long white hands and closed his eyes.

For a few seconds nothing happened. He stood with his lips moving soundlessly, and then silence spread out from him like candlelight. Ripples of noiselessness washed across the crowds in the hall, striking the walls with all the force of a blown kiss and then curling back in waves. People watched their companions mouthing silently and then went red with effort when their own laughter was as audible as a gnat's squeak.

Tiny motes of light winked into existence around his head. They whirled and spiralled in a complex three-dimensional dance, and then formed a shape.

In fact it seemed to Esk that the shape had been there all the time, waiting for her eyes to see it, in the same way that a perfectly innocent cloud can suddenly become, without changing in any way, a whale or a ship or a face.

The shape around Simon's head was the world.

That was quite clear, although the glitter and rush of the little lights blurred some of the detail. But there was Great A'Tuin the sky turtle, with the four Elephants on its back, and on them the Disc itself. There was the sparkle of the great waterfall around the edge of the world, and there at the very hub a tiny needle of rock that was the great mountain Cori Celesti, where the gods lived.

The image expanded and homed in on the Circle Sea and then on Ankh itself, the little lights flowing away from Simon and winking out of existence a few feet from his head. Now they showed the city from the air, rushing towards the watchers. There was the University itself, growing larger. There was the Great Hall

- there were the people, watching silent and open-mouthed, and Simon himself, outlined in specks of silver light. And a tiny sparkling image in the air around him, and that image contained an image and another and another

There was a feeling that the universe had been turned inside out in all dimensions at once. It was a bloated, swollen sensation. It sounded as though the whole world had said "gloop".

The walls faded. So did the floor. The paintings of former great mages, all scrolls and beards and slightly constipated frowns, vanished. The tiles underfoot, a rather nice black and white pattern, evaporated - to be replaced by fine sand, grey as moonlight and cold as ice. Strange and unexpected stars glittered overhead; on the horizon were low hills, eroded not by wind or rain in this weatherless place but by the soft sandpaper of Time itself.

No one else seemed to have noticed. No one else, in fact, seemed alive. Esk was surrounded by people as still and silent as statues.

And they weren't alone. There were other-Things-behind them, and more were appearing all the time. They had no shape, or rather they seemed to be taking their shapes at random from a variety of creatures; they gave the impression that they had heard about arms and legs and jaws and claws and organs but didn't really know how they all fitted together. Or didn't care. Or were so hungry they hadn't bothered to find out.

They made a sound like a swarm of flies.

They were the creatures out of her dreams, come to feed on magic. She knew they weren't interested in her now, except in the nature of an after-dinner mint. Their whole concentration was focused on Simon, who was totally unaware of their presence.

Esk kicked him smartly on the ankle.

The cold desert vanished. The real world rushed back. Simon opened his eyes, smiled faintly, and gently fell backwards into Esk's arms.

A buzz went up from the wizards, and several of them started to clap. No one seemed to have noticed anything odd, apart from the silver lights.

Cutangle shook himself, and raised a hand to quell the crowd.

"Quite - astonishing," he said to Treatle. "You say he worked it out all by himself?"

"Indeed, lord."

"No one helped him at all?"

"There was no one to help him," said Treatle. "He was just wandering from village to village, doing small spells. But only if people paid him in books or paper."

Cutangle nodded. "It was no illusion," he said, "yet he didn't use his hands. What was he saying to himself? Do you know?"

"He says it's just words to make his mind work properly," said Treatle, and shrugged. "I can't understand half of what he says and that's a fact. He says he's having to invent words because there aren't any for the things he's doing."

Cutangle glanced sideways at his fellow mages. They nodded.

"It will be an honour to admit him to the University," he said. "Perhaps you would tell him so when he wakes up."

He felt a tugging at his robe, and looked down.

"Excuse me," said Esk.

"Hallo, young lady," said Cutangle, in a sugarmouse voice. "Have you come to see your brother enter the University?"

"He's not my brother," said Esk. There were times when the world had seemed to be full of brothers, but this wasn't one of them.

"Are you important?" she said.

Cutangle looked at his colleagues, and beamed. There were fashions in wizardry, just like anything else; sometimes wizards were thin and gaunt and talked to animals (the animals didn't listen, but it's the thought that counts) while at other times they tended towards the dark and saturnine, with little black pointed beards. Currently Aldermanic was in. Cutangle swelled with modesty.

"Quite important," he said. "One does one's best in the service of one's fellow man. Yes. Quite important, I would say."

"I want to be a wizard," said Esk.

The lesser wizards behind Cutangle stared at her as if she was a new and interesting kind of beetle. Cutangle's face went red and his eyes bulged. He looked down at Esk and seemed to be holding his breath. Then he started to laugh. It started somewhere down in his extensive stomach regions and worked its way up, echoing from rib to rib and causing minor wizardquakes across his chest until it burst forth in a series of strangled snorts. It was quite fascinating to watch, that laugh. It had a personality all of its own.

But he stopped when he saw Esk's stare. If the laugh was a music hall clown then Esk's determined squint was a whitewash bucket on a fast trajectory.

"A wizard?" he said; "You want to be a wizard?"

"Yes," said Esk, pushing the dazed Simon into Trestle's reluctant arms. "I'm the eighth son of an eighth son. I mean daughter."

The wizards around her were looking at one another and whispering. Esk tried to ignore them.

"What did she say?"

"Is she serious?"

"I always think children are so delightful at that age, don't you?"

"You're the eighth son of an eighth daughter?" said Cutangle. "Really?"

"The other way around, only not exactly," said Esk, defiantly.

Cutangle dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief.

"This is quite fascinating," he said. "I don't think I've ever heard of something quite like this before. Eh?"

He looked around at his growing audience. The people at the back couldn't see Esk and were craning to check if some interesting magic was going on. Cutangle was at a loss.

"Well, now," he said. "You want to be a wizard?"

"I keep telling everyone but no one seems to listen," said Esk.

"How old are you, little girl?"

"Nearly nine."

"And you want to be a wizard when you grow up."

"I want to be a wizard now," said Esk firmly. "This is the right place, isn't it?"

Cutangle looked at Trestle and winked.

"I saw that," said Esk.

"I don't think there's ever been a lady wizard before," said Cutangle. "I rather think it might be against the lore. Wouldn't you rather be a witch? I understand it's a fine career for girls."

A minor wizard behind him started to laugh. Esk gave him a look.

"Being a witch is quite good," she conceded. "But I think wizards have more fun. What do you think?"

"I think you are a very singular little girl," said Cutangle.

"What does that mean?"

"It means there's only one of you," said Trestle.

"That's right," said Esk, "and I still want to be a wizard."

Words failed Cutangle. "Well, you can't," he said. "The very idea!"

He drew himself up to his full width and turned away. Something tugged at his robe.

"Why not?" said a voice.

He turned.

"Because", he said, slowly and deliberately, "because . . . the whole idea is completely laughable, that's why. And it's absolutely against the lore!"

"But I can do wizard magic!" said Esk, the faintest suggestion of a tremble in her voice.

Cutangle bent down until his face was level with hers.

"No you can't," he hissed. "Because you are not a wizard. Women aren't wizards, do I make myself clear?"

"Watch," said Esk.

She extended her right hand with the fingers spread and sighted along it until she spotted the statue of Malich the Wise, the founder of the University. Instinctively the wizards between her and it edged out of the way, and then felt rather silly.

"I mean it," she said.

"Go away, little girl," said Cutangle.

"Right," said Esk. She squinted hard at the statue and concentrated ....

The great doors of Unseen University are made of octiron, a metal so unstable that it can only exist in a universe saturated with raw magic. They are impregnable to all force save magic: no fire, no battering ram, no army can breach them.

Which is why most ordinary visitors to the University use the back door, which is made of perfectly normal wood and doesn't go around terrorising people, or even stand still terrorising people. It had a proper knocker and everything.

Granny examined the doorposts carefully and gave a grunt of satisfaction when she spotted what she was looking for. She hadn't doubted that it would be there, cunningly concealed by the natural grain of the wood.

She grasped the knocker, which was shaped like a dragon's head, and rapped smartly, three times. After a while the door was opened by a young woman with her mouth full of clothespegs.

"Ot o0 00 ont?" she enquired.

Granny bowed, giving the girl a chance to take in the pointy black hat with the batwing hatpins. It had an impressive effect: she blushed and, peering out into the quiet alley-way, hurriedly motioned Granny inside. There was a big mossy courtyard on the other side of the wall, crisscrossed with washing lines. Granny had the chance to become one of the very few women to learn what it really is that wizards wear under their robes, but modestly averted her eyes and followed the girl across the flagstones and down a wide flight of steps.

They led into a long, high tunnel lined with archways and, currently, full of steam. Granny caught sight of long lines of washtubs in the big rooms off to the sides; the air had the warm fat smell of ironing. A gaggle of girls carrying washbaskets pushed past her and hurried up the steps - then stopped, halfway up, and turned slowly to look at her.

Granny set her shoulders back and tried to look as mysterious as possible.

Her guide, who still hadn't got rid of her clothes-pegs, led her down a side-passage into a room that was a maze of shelves piled with laundry. In the very centre of the maze, sitting at a table, was a very fat woman with a ginger wig. She had been writing in a very large laundry book-it was still open in front of her-but was currently inspecting a large stained vest.

"Have you tried bleaching?" she asked.

"Yes, m'm," said the maid beside her.

"What about tincture of myrryt?"

"Yes, m'm. It just turned it blue, m'm."

"Well, it's a new one on me," said the laundry woman. "And Ay've seen brimstone and soot and dragon blood and demon blood and Aye don't know what else." She turned the vest over and read the nametape carefully sewn inside. "Hmm. Granpone the White. He's going to be Granpone the Grey if he doesn't take better care of his laundry. Aye tell you, girl, a white magician is just a black magician with a good housekeeper. Take it -"

She caught sight of Granny, and stopped.

"Ee ocked hat hee oor," said Granny's guide, dropping a hurried curtsey. "Oo ed hat -"

"Yes, yes, thank you, Ksandra, you may go," said the fat woman. She stood up and beamed at Granny, and with an almost perceptible click wound her voice up several social classes.

"Pray hexcuse us," she said. "You find us hall at sixes and sevens, it being washing day and heverything. His this a courtesy call or may I make so bold as to ask -"she lowered her voice -" his there a message from the Hother Sade?"

Granny looked blank, but only a fraction of a second. The witchmarks on the doorpost had said that the housekeeper welcomed witches and was particularly anxious for news of her four husbands; she was also in random pursuit of a fifth, hence the ginger wig and, if Granny's ears weren't deceiving her, the creak of enough whalebone to infuriate an entire ecology movement. Gullible and foolish, the signs had said. Granny withheld judgment, because city witches didn't seem that bright themselves.

The housekeeper must have mistaken her expression.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "May staff have distinct instructions to welcome witches, although of course they upstairs don't approve. No doubt you would like a cup of tea and something to eat?"

Granny bowed solemnly.

"And Aye will see if we can't find a nice bundle of old clothes for you, too," the housekeeper beamed.

"Old clothes? Oh. Yes. Thank you, m'm."

The housekeeper swept forward with a sound like an elderly tea clipper in a gale, and beckoned Granny to follow her.

"Aye'll have the tea brought to my flat. Tea with a lot of tealeaves."

Granny stumped along after her. Old clothes? Did this fat woman really mean it? The nerve! Of course, if they were good quality ....

There seemed to be a whole world under the University. It was a maze of cellars, coldrooms, stillrooms, kitchens and sculleries, and every inhabitant was either carrying

something, pumping something, pushing something or just standing around and shouting. Granny caught glimpses of rooms full of ice, and others glowing with the heat from red-hot cooking stoves, wall-sized. Bakeries smelled of new bread and taprooms smelled of old beer. Everything smelled of sweat and woodsmoke:

The housekeeper led her up an old spiral staircase and unlocked the door with one of the large number of keys that hung from her belt.

The room inside was pink and frilly. There were frills on things that no one in their right mind would frill. It was like being inside candyfloss.

"Very nice," said Granny. And, because she felt it was expected of her, "Tasteful." She looked around for something unfrilly to sit on, and gave up.

"Whatever am Aye thinking of?" the housekeeper trilled. "Aye'm Mrs Whitlow but I expect you know, of course. And Aye have the honour to be addressing - ?"

"Eh? Oh, Granny Weatherwax," said Granny. The frills were getting to her. They gave pink a bad name.

"Ay'm psychic myself, of course," said Mrs Whitlow.

Granny had nothing against fortune-telling provided it was done badly by people with no talent for it. It was a different matter if people who ought to know better did it, though. She considered that the future was a frail enough thing at best, and if people looked at it hard they changed it. Granny had some quite complex theories about space and time and why they shouldn't be tinkered with, but fortunately good fortune-tellers were rare and anyway people preferred bad fortune-tellers, who could be relied upon for the correct dose of uplift and optimism.

Granny knew all about bad fortune-telling. It was harder than the real thing. You needed a good imagination.

She couldn't help wondering if Mrs Whitlow was a born witch who somehow missed her training. She was certainly laying siege to the future. There was a crystal ball under a sort of pink frilly tea cosy, and several sets of divinatory cards, and a pink velvet bag of rune stones, and one of those little tables on wheels that no prudent witch would touch with a ten-foot broomstick, and -Granny wasn't sure on this point - either some special dried monkey turds from a llamassary or some dried llama turds from a monastery, which apparently could be thrown in such a way as to reveal the sum total of knowledge and wisdom in the universe. It was all rather sad. .

"Or there's the tea-leaves, of course," said Mrs Whitlow, indicating the big brown pot on the table between them. "Aye know witches often prefer them, but they always seem so, well, common to me. No offence meant."

There probably wasn't any offence meant, at that, thought Granny. Mrs Whitlow was giving her the sort of look generally used by puppies when they're not sure what to expect next, and are beginning to worry that it may be the rolled-up newspaper.

She picked up Mrs Whitlow's cup and had started to peer into it when she caught the disappointed expression that floated across the housekeeper's face like a shadow across a snowfield. Then she remembered what she was doing, and turned the cup widdershins three times, made a few vague passes over it and mumbled a charm which she normally used to cure mastitis in elderly goats, but never mind. This display of obvious magical talent seemed to cheer up Mrs. Whitlow no end.

Granny wasn't normally very good at tea-leaves, but she squinted at the sugar-encrusted mess at the bottom of the cup and let her mind wander. What she really needed now was a handy rat or even a cockroach that happened to be somewhere near Esk, so that she could Borrow its mind.

What Granny actually found was that the University had a mind of its own.

It is well known that stone can think, because the whole of electronics is based on that fact, but in some universes men spend ages looking for other intelligences in the sky without once looking under their feet. That is because they've got the time-span all wrong. From stone's point of view the universe is hardly created and mountain ranges are bouncing up and down like organ-stops while continents zip backwards and forwards in general high spirits, crashing into each other from the sheer joy of momentum and getting their rocks off. It is going to be quite some time before stone notices its disfiguring little skin disease and starts to scratch, which is just as well.

The rocks from which Unseen University was built, however, have been absorbing magic for several thousand years and all that random power has had to go somewhere.

The University has, in fact, developed a personality.

Granny could sense it like a big and quite friendly animal, just waiting to roll over on its roof and have its floor scratched. It was paying no attention to her, however. It was watching Esk.

Granny found the child by following the threads of the University's attention and watched in fascination as the scenes unfolded in the Great Hall ....

"- in there?"

The voice came from a long way away.

"Mmph 7 "

"Aye said, what do you see in there?" repeated Mrs Whitlow.

"Eh?"

"Aye said, what do -"

"Oh." Granny reeled her mind in, quite confused. The trouble with Borrowing another mind was, you always felt out of place when you got back to your own body, and Granny was the first person ever to read the mind of a building. Now she was feeling big and gritty and full of passages.

"Are you all right?"

Granny nodded, and opened her windows. She extended her east and west wings and tried to concentrate on the tiny cup held in her pillars.

Fortunately Mrs Whitlow put her plaster complexion and stony silence down to occult powers at work, while Granny found that a brief exposure to the vast silicon memory of the University had quite stimulated her imagination.

In a voice like a draughty corridor, which made the housekeeper very impressed, she wove a future full of keen young men fighting for Mrs Whitlow's ample favours. She also spoke very quickly, because what she had seen in the Great Hall made her anxious to go around to the main gates again.

"There is another thing," she added.

"Yes? Yes?"

"I see you hiring a new servant - you do hire the servants here, don't you? Right - and this one is a young girl, very economical, very good worker, can turn her hand to anything."

"What about her, then?" said Mrs Whitlow, already savouring Granny's surprisingly graphic descriptions of her future and drunk with curiosity.

"The spirits are a little unclear on this point," said Granny, "But it is very important that you hire her."

"No problem there," said Mrs Whitlow, "can't keep servants here, you know, not for long. It's all the magic. It leaks down here, you know. Especially from the library, where they keep all them magical books. Two of the top floor maids walked out yesterday, actually, they said they were fed up going to bed not knowing what shape they would wake up in the morning. The senior wizards turn them back, you know. But it's not the same."

"Yes, well, the spirits say this young lady won't be any trouble as far as that is concerned," said Granny grimly.

"If she can sweep and scrub she's welcome, Aye'm sure," said Mrs Whitlow, looking puzzled.

"She even brings her own broom. According to the spirits, that is."

"How very helpful. When is this young lady going to arrive?"

"Oh, soon, soon - that's what the spirits say."

A faint suspicion clouded the housekeeper's face. "This isn't the sort of thing spirits normally say. Where do they say that, exactly?"

"Here," said Granny. "Look, the little cluster of tea-leaves between the sugar and this crack here. Am I right?"

Their eyes met. Mrs Whitlow might have had her weaknesses but she was quite tough enough to rule the below-stairs world of the University. However, Granny could outstare a snake; after a few seconds the housekeeper's eyes began to water.

"Yes, Aye expect you are," she said meekly, and fished a handkerchief from the recesses of her bosom.

"Well then," said Granny, sitting back and replacing the teacup in its saucer.

"There are plenty of opportunities here for a young woman willing to work hard," said Mrs Whitlow. "Aye myself started as a maid, you know."

"We all do," said Granny vaguely. "And now I must be going." She stood up and reached for her hat.

"But -"

"Must hurry. Urgent appointment," said Granny over her shoulder as she hurried down the steps.

"There's a bundle of old clothes -"

Granny paused, her instincts battling for mastery.

"Any black velvet?"

"Yes, and some silk."

Granny wasn't sure she approved of silk, she'd heard it came out of a caterpillar's bottom, but black velvet had a powerful attraction. Loyalty won.

"Put it on one side, I may call again," she shouted, and ran down the corridor.

Cooks and scullery maids darted for cover as the old woman pounded along the slippery flagstones, leapt up the stairs to the courtyard and skidded out into the lane, her shawl flying out behind her and her boots striking sparks from the cobbles. Once out into the open she hitched up her skirts and broke into a full gallop, turning the corner into the main square in a screeching two-boot drift that left a long white scratch across the stones.

She was just in time to see Esk come running through the gates, in tears.

"The magic just wouldn't work! I could feel it there but it just wouldn't come out!"

"Perhaps you were trying too hard," said Granny. "Magic's like fishing. Jumping around and splashing never caught any fish, you have to bide quiet and let it happen natural."

"And then everyone laughed at me! Someone even gave me a sweet!"

"You got some profit out of the day, then," said Granny.

"Granny!" said Esk accusingly.

"Well, what did you expect?" she asked. "At least they only laughed at you. Laughter don't hurt. You walked up to chief wizard and showed off in front of everyone and only got laughed at? You're doing well, you are. Have you eaten the sweet?"

Esk scowled. "Yes."

"What kind was it?"

"Toffee."

"Can't abide toffee."

"Huh," said Esk, "I suppose you want me to get peppermint next time?"

"Don't you sarky me, young-fellow-me-lass. Nothing wrong with peppermint. Pass me that bowl."

Another advantage of city life, Granny had discovered, was glassware. Some of her more complicated potions required apparatus which either had to be bought from the dwarves at extortionate rates or, if ordered from the nearest human glassblower, arrived in straw and, usually, pieces. She had tried blowing her own and the effort always made her cough, which produced some very funny results. But the city's thriving alchemy profession meant that there were whole shops full of glass for the buying, and a witch could always arrange bargain prices.

She watched carefully as yellow steam surged along a twisty maze of tubing and eventually condensed as one large, sticky droplet. She caught it neatly on the end of a glass spoon and very carefully tipped it into a tiny glass phial.

Esk watched her through her tears.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a neveryoumind," said Granny, sealing the phial's cork with wax.

"A medicine?"

"In a manner of speaking." Granny pulled her writing set towards her and selected a pen. Her tongue stuck out of the corner of her mouth as she very carefully wrote out a label, with much scratching and pausing to work out the spellings.

"Who's it for?"

"Mrs Herapath, the glassblower's wife."

Esk blew her nose. "He's the one who doesn't blow much glass, isn't he?"

Granny looked at her over the top of the desk.

"How do you mean?"

"When she was talking to you yesterday she called him Old Mister Once A Fortnight."

"Mmph," said Granny. She carefully finished the sentence: "Dylewt in won pint warter and won droppe in hys tee and be Shure to wear loose clowthing allso that no vysitors exspected."

One day, she told herself, I'm going to have to have that talk with her.

The child seemed curiously dense. She had already assisted at enough births and taken the goats to old Nanny Annaple's billy without drawing any obvious conclusions. Granny wasn't quite certain what she should do about it, but the time never seemed appropriate to bring up the subject. She wondered whether, in her hearts of hearts, she was too embarrassed; she felt like a farrier who could shoe horses, cure them, rear them and judge them, but had only the sketchiest idea about how one rode them.

She pasted the label on to the phial and wrapped it carefully in plain paper.

Now.

"There is another way into the University," she said, looking sidelong at Esk, who was making a disgruntled job of mashing herbs in a mortar. "A witches' way."

Esk looked up. Granny treated herself to a thin smile and started work on another label; writing labels was always the hard part of magic, as far as she was concerned.

"But I don't expect you'd be interested," she went on. "It's not very glamorous."

"They laughed at me," Esk mumbled.

"Yes. You said. So you won't be wanting to try again, then. I quite understand."

There was silence broken only by the scratching of Granny's pen. Eventually Esk said: "This way -"

"Mmph?"

"It'll get me into the University?"

"Of course," said Granny haughtily. "I said I'd find a way, didn't I? A very good way, too. You won't have to bother with lessons, you can go all over the place, no one will notice you you'll be invisible really - and, well, you can really clean up. But of course, after all that laughing, you won't be interested. Will you?"

"Pray have another cup of tea, Mrs Weatherwax?" said Mrs Whitlow.

"Mistress," said Granny.

"Pardon?"

"It's Mistress Weatherwax," said Granny. "Three sugars, please."

Mrs Whitlow pushed the bowl towards her. Much as she looked forward to Granny's visits it came expensive in sugar. Sugar lumps never seemed to last long around Granny.

"Very bad for the figure," she said. "And the teeth, so Aye hear."

"I never had a figure to speak of and my teeth take care of themselves," said Granny. It was true, mores the pity. Granny suffered from robustly healthy teeth, which she considered a big drawback in a witch. She really envied Nanny Annaple, the witch over the mountain, who managed to lose all her teeth by the time she was twenty and had real crone-credibility. It meant you ate a lot of soup, but you also got a lot of respect. And then there was warts. Without any effort Nanny managed to get a face like a sockful of marbles, while Granny had tried every reputable wart-causer and failed to raise even the obligatory nose wart. Some witches had all the luck.

"Mmph?" she said, aware of Mrs Whitlow's fluting.

"Aye said," said Mrs Whitlow, "that young Eskarina is a real treasure. Quate the little find. She keeps the floors spotless, spotless. No task too big. Aye said to her yesterday, Aye said, that broom of yours might as well have a life of its own, and do you know what she said?"

"I couldn't even venture a guess," said Granny, weakly.

"She said the dust was afraid of it! Can you imagine?"

"Yes," said Granny.

Mrs Whitlow pushed her teacup towards her and gave her an embarrassed smile.

Granny sighed inwardly and squinted into the none-too-clean depths of the future. She was definitely beginning to run out of imagination.

The broom whisked down the corridor raising a great cloud of dust which, if you looked hard at it, seemed somehow to be sucked back into the broomstick. If you looked even harder you'd see that the broom handle had strange markings on it, which were not so much carved as clinging and somehow changed shape as you watched.

But no one looked.

Esk sat at one of the high deep windows and stared out over the city. She was feeling angrier than usual, so the broom attacked the dust with unusual vigour. Spiders ran desperate eight-legged dashes for safety as ancestral cobwebs disappeared into the void. In the walls mice clung to each other, legs braced against the inside of their holes. Woodworm scrabbled in the ceiling beams as they were drawn, inexorably, backwards down their tunnels.

"'You can really clean up'," said Esk. "Huh!"

There were some good points, she had to admit. The food was simple but there was plenty of it, and she had a room to herself somewhere in the roof and it was quite luxurious because here she could lie in until five a. m., which to Granny's way of thinking was practically noon. The work certainly wasn't hard. She just started sweeping until the staff realised what was expected of it, and then she could amuse herself until it was finished. If anyone came the staff would immediately lean itself nonchalantly against a wall.

But she wasn't learning any wizardry. She could wander into empty classrooms and look at the diagrams chalked on the board, and on the floor too in the more advanced classes, but the shapes were meaningless. And unpleasant.

They reminded Esk of the pictures in Simon's book. They looked alive.

She gazed out across the rooftops of Ankh-Morpork and reasoned like this: writing was only the words that people said, squeezed between layers of paper until they were fossilized. Fossils were well-known on the Discworld, great spiralled shells and badly-constructed creatures that were left over from the time when the Creator hadn't really decided what He wanted to make and was, as it were, just idly messing around with the Pleistocene). And the words people said were just shadows of real things. But some things were too big to be really trapped in words, and even the words were too powerful to be completely tamed by writing.

So it followed that some writing was actually trying to become things. Esk's thoughts became confused things at this point, but she was certain that the really magic words were the ones that pulsed angrily, trying to escape and become real.

They didn't look very nice.

But then she remembered the previous day.

It had been rather odd. The University classrooms were designed on the funnel principle, with tiers of seats - polished by the bottoms of the Disc's greatest mages - looking precipitously down into a central area where there was a workbench, a couple of blackboards and enough floor space for a decent-sized instructional octogram. There was a lot of dead space under the tiers and Esk had found it a quite useful observation post, peering around between the apprentice wizards' pointy boots at the instructor. It was very restful, with the droning of the lecturers drifting over her as gently as the buzzing of the slightly zonked bees in Granny's special herb garden. There never seemed to be any practical magic, it always seemed to be just words. Wizards seemed to like words.

But yesterday had been different. Esk had been sitting in the dusty gloom, trying to do even some very simple magic, when she heard the door open and boots clump across the floor. That was surprising in itself. Esk knew the timetable, and the Second Year students who normally occupied this room were down for Beginners' Dematerialisation with

Jeophal the Spry in the gym. (Students of magic had little use for physical exercise; the gym was a large room lined with lead and rowan wood, where neophytes could work out at High magic without seriously unbalancing the universe, although not always without seriously unbalancing themselves. Magic had no mercy on the ham-fisted. Some clumsy students were lucky enough to walk out, others were removed in bottles.)

Esk peeped between the slats. These weren't students, they were wizards. Quite high ones, to judge by their robes. And there was no mistaking the figure that climbed on to the lecturer's dais like a badlystrung puppet, bumping heavily into the lectern and absent-mindedly apologising to it. It was Simon. No one else had eyes like two raw eggs in warm water and a dose bright red from blowing. For Simon, the pollen count always went to infinity.

It occurred to Esk that, minus his general allergy to the whole of Creation and with a decent haircut and a few lessons in deportment, the boy could look quite handsome. It was an unusual thought, and she squirrelled it away for future consideration.

When the wizards had settled down, Simon began to talk. He read from notes, and every time he stuttered over a word the wizards, as one man, without being able to stop themselves, chorused it for him.

After a while a stick of chalk rose from the lectern and started to write on the blackboard behind him. Esk had picked up enough about wizard magic to know that this was an astounding achievement- Simon had been at the University for a couple of weeks, and most students hadn't mastered Light Levitation by the end of their second year.

The little white stub skittered and squeaked across the blackness to the accompaniment of Simon's voice. Even allowing for the stutter, he was not a very good speaker. He dropped notes. He corrected himself. He ummed and ahhed. And as far as Esk was concerned he wasn't saying anything very much. Phrases filtered down to her hiding place. "Basic fabric of the universe" was one, and she didn't understand what that was, unless he meant

denim, or maybe flannelette. "Mutability of the possibility matrix" she couldn't guess at all.

Sometimes he seemed to be saying that nothing existed unless people thought it did, and the world was really only there at all because people kept on imagining it. But then he seemed to be saying that there was lots of worlds, all nearly the same and all sort of occupying the same place but all separated by the thickness of a shadow, so that everything that ever could happen would have somewhere to happen in.

(Esk could get to grips with this. She had half-suspected it ever since she cleaned out the senior wizards' lavatory, or ratherwhile the staff got on with the job while Esk examined the urinals and, with the assistance of some half-remembered details of her brothers in the tin bath in front of the fire at home, formulated her unofficial General Theory of comparative anatomy. The senior wizards' lavatory was a magical place, with real running water and interesting tiles and, most importantly, two big silver mirrors fixed to opposite walls so that someone looking into one could see themselves repeated again and again until the image was too small to see. It was Esk's first introduction to the idea of infinity. More to the point, she had a suspicion that one of the mirror Esks, right on the edge of sight, was waving at her.)

There was something disturbing about the phrases Simon used. Half the time he seemed to be saying that the world was about as real as a soap bubble, or a dream.

The chalk shrieked its way across the board behind him. Sometimes Simon had to stop and explain symbols to the wizards, who seemed to Esk to be getting excited at some very silly sentences. Then the chalk would start again, curving across the darkness like a comet, trailing its dust behind it.

The light was fading out of the sky outside. As the room grew more gloomy the chalked words glowed and the blackboard appeared to Esk to be not so much dark as simply not there at all, but just a square hole cut out of the world.

Simon talked on, about the world being made up of tiny things whose presence could only be determined by the fact that they were not there, little spinning balls of nothingness that magic could shunt together to make stars and butterflies and diamonds. Everything was made up of emptiness.

The funny thing was, he seemed to find this fascinating.

Esk was only aware that the walls of the room grew as thin and insubstantial as smoke, as if the emptiness in them was expanding to swallow whatever it was that defined them as walls, and instead there was nothing but the familiar cold, empty, glittering plain with its distant worn hills, and the creatures that stood as still as statues, looking down. There were a lot more of them now. They seemed for all the world to be clustering like moths around a light.

One important difference was that a moth's face, even close up, was as friendly as a bunny rabbit's compared to the things watching Simon.

Then a servant came in to light the lamps and the creatures vanished, turning into perfectly harmless shadows that lurked in the corners of the room.

At some time in the recent past someone had decided to brighten the ancient corridors of the University by painting them, having some vague notion that Learning Should Be Fun. It hadn't worked. It's a fact known throughout the universes that no matter how carefully the colours are chosen, institutional decor ends up as either vomit green, unmentionable brown, nicotine yellow or surgical appliance pink. By some little understood process of sympathetic resonance, corridors painted in those colours always smell slightly of boiled cabbage-even if no cabbage is ever cooked in the vicinity.

Somewhere in the corridors a bell rang. Esk dropped lightly from her windowsill, grabbed the staff and started to sweep industriously as doors were flung open and the

corridors filled with students. They streamed past her on two sides, like water around a rock. For a few minutes there was utter confusion. Then doors slammed, a few laggard feet pattered away in the distance, and Esk was by herself again.

Not for the first time, Esk wished that the staff could talk. The other servants were friendly enough, but you couldn't talk to them. Not about magic, anyway.

She was also coming to the conclusion that she ought to learn to read. This reading business seemed to be the key to wizard magic, which was all about words. Wizards seemed to think that names were the same as things, and that if you changed the name, you changed the thing. At least, it seemed to be something like that ....

Reading. That meant the library. Simon had said there were thousands of books in it, and amongst all those words there were bound to be one or two she could read. Esk put the staff over her shoulder and set off resolutely for Mrs Whitlow's office.

She was nearly there when a wall said "Psst!" When Esk stared at it it turned out to be Granny. It wasn't that Granny could make herself invisible, it was just that she had this talent for being able to fade into the foreground so that she wasn't noticed.

"How are you getting on, then?" asked Granny. "How's the magic coming along?"

"What are you doing here, Granny?" said Esk.

"Been to tell Mrs Whitlow her fortune," said Granny, holding up a large bundle of old clothes with some satisfaction. Her smile faded under Esk's stern gaze.

"Well, things are different in the city," she said. "City people are always worried about the future, it comes from eating unnatural food. Anyway," she added, suddenly realising that she was whining, "Why shouldn't I tell fortunes?"

"You always said Hilta was playing on the foolishness of her sex," said Esk. "You said that them as tell fortunes should be ashamed of themselves, and anyway, you don't need old clothes."

"Waste not, want not," said Granny primly. She had spent her entire life on the old-clothes standard and wasn't about to let temporary prosperity dislodge her: "Are you getting enough to eat?"

"Yes," said Esk. "Granny, about this wizard magic, it's all words -"

"Always said it was," said Granny.

"No, I mean -" Esk began, but Granny waved a hand irritably.

"Can't be bothered with this at the moment," she said. "I've got some big orders to fill by tonight, if it goes on like this I'm going to have to train someone up. Can't you come and see me when you get an afternoon off, or whatever it is they give you?"

"Train someone up?" said Esk, horrified. "You mean as a witch?"

"No," said Granny. "I mean, perhaps."

"But what about me?"

"Well, you're going your own way," said Granny. "Wherever that is."

"Mmph," said Esk. Granny stared at her.

"I'll be off, then," she said at last. She turned and strode off towards the kitchen entrance. As she did so her cloak swirled out, and Esk saw that it was now lined with red. A dark,

winy red, but red nevertheless. On Granny, who had never been known to wear any visible clothing that was other than a serviceable black, it was quite shocking.

"The library?" said Mrs Whitlow. "Aye don't think anyone cleans the library!" She looked genuinely puzzled.

"Why?" said Esk, "Doesn't it get dusty?"

"Well," said Mrs Whitlow. She thought for a while. "Aye suppose it must do, since you come to mention it. Aye never really thought about it."

"You see, I've cleaned everywhere else," said Esk, sweetly.

"Yes," said Mrs Whitlow, "You have, haven't you."

"Well, then."

"It's just that we've never - done it before," said Mrs Whitlow, "but for the life of me, Aye can't think why."

"Well, then," said Esk.

"Ook?" said the Head Librarian, and backed away from Esk. But she had heard about him and had come prepared. She offered him a banana.

The orang-outan reached out slowly and then snatched it with a grin of triumph.

There may be universes where librarianship is considered a peaceful sort of occupation, and where the risks are limited to large volumes falling off the shelves on to one's head, but the keeper of a magic library is no job for the unwary. Spells have power, and merely writing them down and shoving them between covers doesn't do anything to reduce it.

The stuff leaks. Books tend to react with one another, creating randomised magic with a mind of its own. Books of magic are usually chained to their shelves, but not to prevent them being stolen ....

One such accident had turned the librarian into an ape, since when he had resisted all attempts to turn him back, explaining in sign language that life as an orang-outan was considerably better than life as a human being, because all the big philosophical questions resolved themselves into wondering where the next banana was coming from. Anyway, long arms and prehensile feet were ideal for dealing with high shelves.

Esk gave him the whole bunch of bananas and scurried away amongst the books before he could object.

Esk had never seen more than one book at a time and so the library was, for all she knew, just like any other library. True, it was a bit odd the way the floor seemed to become the wall in the distance, and there was something strange about the way the shelves played tricks on the eyes and seemed to twist through rather more dimensions than the normal three, and it was quite surprising to look up and see shelves on the ceiling, with the occasional student wandering unconcernedly among them.

The truth was that the presence of so much magic distorted the space around it. Down in the stacks the very denim, or possibly flannelette, of the universe was tortured into very peculiar shapes. The millions of trapped words, unable to escape, bent reality around them.

It seemed logical to Esk that among all these books should be one that told you how to read all the others. She wasn't sure how to find it, but deep in her soul she felt it would probably have pictures of cheerful rabbits and happy kittens on the cover.

The library certainly wasn't silent. There was the occasional zip and sizzle of a magical discharge, and an octarine spark would flash from shelf to shelf. Chains clinked, faintly.

And, of course, there was the faint rustle of thousands of pages in their leather-bound prisons.

Esk made sure no one was paying her any attention and pulled at the nearest volume. It sprang open in her hands, and she saw gloomily that there were the same unpleasant types of diagram that she had noticed in Simon's book. The writing was entirely unfamiliar, and she was glad about that - it would be horrible to know what all those letters, which seemed to be made up of ugly creatures doing complicated things to each other, actually meant. She forced the cover shut, even though the words seemed to be desperately pushing back. There was a drawing of a creature on the front; it looked suspiciously like one of the things from the cold desert. It certainly didn't look like a happy kitten.

"Hallo! Esk, isn't it? H-how d-did you get h-here?"

It was Simon, standing there with a book under each arm. Esk blushed.

"Granny won't tell me," she said. "I think it's something to do with men and women."

Simon looked at her blankly. Then he grinned. Esk thought about the question a second time.

"I work here. I sweep up." She waved the staff in explanation.

"Inhere?"

Esk stared at him. She felt alone, and lost, and more than a little betrayed. Everyone seemed to be busy living their own lives, except her. She would spend the rest of her life cleaning up after wizards. It wasn't fair, and she'd had enough.

"Actually I don't. Actually I'm learning to read so I can be a wizard."

The boy regarded her through his damp eyes for some seconds. Then he gently took the book out of Esk's hands and read its title.

"Demonylogie Malyfycorum of Henchanse thee Unsatyfactory. How did you think you could learn to r-read this?"

"Um," said Esk, "Well, you just keep trying until you can, don't you? Like milking, or knitting, or . . . ." Her voice faded away.

"I don't know about that. These books can be a bit, well, aggressive. If you d-don't be careful they start reading you."

"What do you mean?"

"T-they ssss-"

"- say -"said Esk, automatically.

"- that there was once a wwww-"

"- wizard -"

"- who started to r-read the Necrotelecomnicon and let his m-mind wwwwww-"

"- wander -"

"- and next morning they f-found all his clothes on the chair and hhis hat on t-top of them and the b-book had -"

Esk put her fingers in her ears, but not too hard in case she missed anything.

"I don't want to know about it if it's horrid."

"- had a lot more pages."

Esk took her fingers out of her ears. "Was there anything on the pages?"

Simon nodded solemnly. "Yes. On every sssingle one of ththem there www-"

"No," said Esk. "I don't even want to imagine it. I thought reading was more peaceful than that, I mean, Granny read her Almanack every day and nothing ever happened to her."

"I d-daresay ordinary tame www-"

"- words -"

"- are all right," Simon conceded, magnanimously.

"Are you absolutely certain?" said Esk.

"It's just that words can have power," said Simon, slotting the book firmly back on its shelf, where it rattled its chains at him. "And they do say the p-pen is mightier than the sss-"

"- sword," said Esk. "All right, but which would you rather be hit with?"

"Um, I d-don't think it's any use m-me t-telling you you shouldn't be in here, is it?" said the young wizard.

Esk gave this due consideration. "No," she said, "I don't think it is."

"I could send for the p-porters and have you t-taken away."

"Yes, but you won't."

"I just d-don't www-"

"- want -"

"- you to get hurt, you see. I r-really don't. This can b-be a ddddangerou-"

Esk caught a faint swirling in the air above his head. For a moment she saw them, the great grey shapes from the cold place. Watching. And in the calm of the Library, when the weight of magic was wearing the Universe particularly thin, they had decided to Act.

Around her the muted rustling of the books rose to a desperate riffling of pages. Some of the more powerful books managed to jerk out of their shelves and swung, flapping madly, from the end of their chains. A huge grimoire plunged from its eyrie on the topmost shelf - tearing itself free of its chain in the process - and flopped away like a frightened chicken, scattering its pages behind it.

A magical wind blew away Esk's headscarf and her hair streamed out behind her. She saw Simon trying to steady himself against a bookshelf as books exploded around him. The air was thick and tasted of tin. It buzzed.

"They're trying to get in!" she screamed.

Simon's tortured face turned to her. A fear-crazed incunable hit him heavily in the small of the back and knocked him to the heaving floor before it bounced high over the shelves. Esk ducked as a flock of thesauri wheeled past, towing their shelf behind them, and scuttled on hands and knees towards him.

"That's what's making the books so frightened!" she shrieked in his ear. "Can't you see them up there?"

Simon mutely shook his head. A book burst its bindings over them, showering them in pages.

Horror can steal into the mind via all the senses. There's the sound of the little meaningful chuckle in the locked dark room, the sight of half a caterpillar in your forkful of salad, the curious smell from the lodger's bedroom, the taste of slug in the cauliflower cheese. Touch doesn't normally get a look-in.

But something happened to the floor under Esk's hands. She looked down, her face a rictus of horror, because the dusty floorboards suddenly felt gritty. And dry. And very, very cold.

There was fine silver sand between her fingers.

She grabbed the staff and, sheltering her eyes against the wind, waved it at the towering figures above her. It would have been nice to report that a searing flash of pure white fire cleansed the greasy air. It failed to materialise ....

The staff twisted like a snake in her hand and caught Simon a crack on the side of the head.

The grey Things wavered and vanished.

Reality returned, and tried to pretend that it had never left. Silence settled like thick velvet, wave after wave of it. A heavy, echoing silence. A few books dropped heavily out of the air, feeling silly.

The floor under Esk's feet was undoubtedly wooden. She kicked it hard to make sure.

There was blood on the floor, and Simon lay very quietly in the centre of it. Esk stared down at him, and then up at the still air, and then at the staff. It looked smug.

She was aware of distant voices and hurrying feet.

A hand like a fine leather glove slipped gently into hers and a voice behind said "Ook," very softly. She turned, and found herself staring down into the gentle, inner-tube face of the librarian. He put his finger to his lips in an unmistakable gesture and tugged gently at her hand.

"I've killed him!" she whispered.

The librarian shook his head, and tugged insistently.

"Ook," he explained, "Ook."

He dragged her reluctantly down a side alley-way in the maze of ancient shelving a few seconds before a party of senior wizards, drawn by the noise, rounded the corner.

"The books have been fighting again . . . ."

"Oh, no! It'll take ages to capture all the spells again, you know they go and find places to hide . . . ."

"Who's that on the floor?"

There was a pause.

"He's knocked out. A shelf caught him, by the looks of it."

"Who is he?"

"That new lad. You know; the one they say has got a whole head full of brains?"

"If that shelf had been a bit closer we'd be able to see if they were right."

"You two, get him along to the infirmary. The rest of you better get these books rounded up. Where's the damn librarian? He ought to know better than to let a Critical Mass build up."

Esk glanced sideways at the orang-outan, who waggled his eyebrows at her. He pulled a dusty volume of gardening spells out of the shelves beside him, extracted a soft brown banana from the recess behind it, and ate it with the quiet relish of one who knows that whatever the problems are, they belong firmly to human beings.

She looked the other way, at the staff in her hand, and her lips went thin. She knew her grip hadn't slipped. The staff had lunged at Simon, with murder in its heartwood.

The boy lay on a hard bed in a narrow room, a cold towel folded across his forehead. Treatle and Cutangle watched him carefully.

"How long has it been?" said Cutangle.

Trestle shrugged. "Three days."

"And he hasn't come around once?"

"No."

Cutangle sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, and pinched the bridge of his nose wearily. Simon had never looked particularly healthy, but now his face had a horrible sunken look.

"A. brilliant mind, that one," he said. "His explanation of the fundamental principles of magic and matter - quite astounding."

Trestle nodded.

"The way he just absorbs knowledge," said Cutangle: "I've been a working wizard all my life, and somehow I never really understood magic until he explained it. So clear. So, well, obvious."

"Everyone says that," said Trestle gloomily. "They say it's like having a hoodwink pulled off and seeing the daylight for the first time."

"That's exactly it," said Cutangle, "He's sourcerer material, sure enough. You were right to bring him here."

There was a thoughtful pause.

"Only -"said Trestle.

"Only what?" asked Cutangle.

"Only what was it you understood?" said Trestle. "That's what's bothering me. I mean, can you explain it?"

"How do you mean, explain?" Cutangle looked worried.

"What he keeps talking about," said Trestle, a hint of desperation in his voice. "Oh, it's the genuine stuff, I know. But what exactly is it?"

Cutangle looked at him, his mouth open. Eventually he said, "Oh, that's easy. Magic fills the universe, you see, and every time the universe changes, no, I mean every time magic is invoked, the universe changes, only in every direction at once, d'you see, and -" he moved his hands uncertainly, trying to recognise a spark of comprehension in Trestle's face. "To put it another way, any piece of matter, like an orange or the world or, or -"

"- a crocodile?" suggested Trestle.

"Yes, a crocodile, or - whatever, is basically shaped like a carrot."

"I don't remember that bit," said Trestle.

"I'm sure that's what he said," said Cutangle. He was starting to sweat.

"No, I remember the bit where he seemed to suggest that if you went far enough in any direction you would see the back of your head," Trestle insisted.

"You're sure he didn't mean someone else's head?"

Trestle thought for a bit.

"No, I'm pretty sure he said the back of your own head," he said. "I think he said he could prove it."

They considered this in silence.

Finally Cutangle spoke, very slowly and carefully.

"I look at it all like this," he said. "Before I heard him talk, I was like everyone else. You know what I mean? I was confused and uncertain about all the little details of life. But now," he brightened up, "while I'm still confused and uncertain it's on a much higher plane, d'you see, and at least I know I'm bewildered about the really fundamental and important facts of the universe."

Trestle nodded. "I hadn't looked at it like that," he said, "but you're absolutely right. He's really pushed back the boundaries of ignorance. There's so much about the universe we don't know."

They both savoured the strange warm glow of being much more ignorant than ordinary people, who were ignorant of only ordinary things.

Then Trestle said: "I just hope he's all right. He's over the fever but he just doesn't seem to want to wake up."

A couple of servants came in with a bowl of water and fresh towels. One of them carried a rather tatty broomstick. As they began to change the sweat-soaked sheets under the boy the two wizards left, still discussing the vast vistas of unknowingness that Simon's genius had revealed to the world.

Granny waited until their footsteps had died away and took off her headscarf.

"Damn thing," she said. "Esk, go and listen at the door." She removed the towel from Simon's head and felt his temperature.

"It was very good of you to come," said Esk. "And you so busy with your work, and everything."

"Mmmph." Granny pursed her lips. She pulled up Simon's eyelids and sought his pulse. She laid an ear on his xylophone chest and listened to his heart. She sat for some time quite motionless, probing around inside his head.

She frowned.

"Is he all right?" said Esk anxiously.

Granny looked at the stone walls.

"Drat this place," she said. "It's no place for sick people."

"Yes, but is he all right?"

"What?" Granny was startled out of her thoughts. "Oh. Yes. Probably. Wherever he is."

Esk stared at her, and then at Simon's body.

"Nobody's home," said Granny, simply.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen to the child," said Granny. "You'd think I taught her nothing. I mean his mind's Wandering. He's gone Out of his Head."

She looked at Simon's body with something verging on admiration.

"Quite surprisin', really," she added. "I never yet met a wizard who could Borrow."

She turned to Esk, whose mouth was a horrified O.

"I remember when I was a girl, old Nanny Annaple went Wanderin'. Got too wrapped up with being a vixen, as I recall. Took us days to find her. And then there was you, too. I never would have found you if it wasn't for that staff thing, and what have you done with it, girl?"

"It hit him," Esk muttered. "It tried to kill him. I threw it in the river."

"Not a nice thing to do to it after it saved you," said Granny.

"It saved me by hitting him?"

"Didn't you realise? He was callin' to - them Things."

"That's not true!"

Granny stared into Esk's defiant eyes and the thought came to her mind: I've lost her. Three years of work down the privy. She couldn't be a wizard but she might have been a witch.

"Why isn't it true, Miss Clever?" she said.

"He wouldn't do something like that!" Esk was near to tears. "I heard him speak, he's - well, he's not evil, he's a brilliant person, he nearly understands how everything works, he's -"

"I expect he's a very nice boy," said Granny sourly. "I never said he was a black wizard, did I?"

"They're horrible Things!" Esk sobbed. "He wouldn't call out to them, he wants everything that they're not, and you're a wicked old -"

The slap rang like a bell. Esk staggered back, white with shock. Granny stood with her hand upraised, trembling.

She'd struck Esk once before - the blow a baby gets to introduce it to the world and give it a rough idea of what to expect from life. But that had been the last time. In three years under the same roof there had been cause enough, when milk had been left to boil over or the goats had been carelessly left without water, but a sharp word or a sharper silence had done more than force ever could and left no bruises.

She grabbed Esk firmly by the shoulders and stared into her eyes.

"Listen to me," she said urgently. "Didn't I always say to you that if you use magic you should go through the world like a knife goes through water? Didn't I say that?"

Esk, mesmerised like a cornered rabbit, nodded.

"And you thought that was just old Granny's way, didn't you? But the fact is that if you use magic you draw attention to yourself. From Them. They watch the world all the time. Ordinary minds are just vague to them, they hardly bother with them, but a mind with magic in it shines out, you see, it's a beacon to them. It's not darkness that calls Them, it's light, light that creates the shadows!"

"But - but - why are They interested? What do They wwant?"

"Life and shape," said Granny.

She sagged, and let go of Esk.

"They're pathetic, really," she said. "They've got no life or shape themselves but what they can steal. They could no more survive in this world than a fish could live in a fire,

but that doesn't stop them trying. And they're just bright enough to hate us because we're alive."

Esk shivered. She remember the gritty feel of the cold sand.

"What are They? I always thought they were just a sort - a sort of demon?"

"Nah. No one really knows. They're just the Things from the Dungeon Dimensions outside the universe, that's all. Shadow creatures."

She turned back to the prone form of Simon.

"You wouldn't have any idea where he is, would you?" she said, looking shrewdly at Esk. "Not gone off flying with the seagulls, has he?"

Esk shook her head.

"No," said Granny, "I didn't think so. They've got him, haven't they."

It wasn't a question. Esk nodded, her face a mask of misery.

"It's not your fault," said Granny, "His mind gave them an opening, and when he was knocked out they took it back with them. Only. . . ."

She drummed her fingers on the edge of the bed, and appeared to reach a decision.

"Who's the most important wizard around here?" she demanded.

"Um, Lord Cutangle," said Esk. "He's the Archchancellor. He was one of the ones who was in here."

"The fat one, or the one like a streak of vinegar?"

Esk dragged her mind from the image of Simon on the cold desert and found herself saying: "He's an Eighth Level wizard and a 33° mage, actually."

"You mean he's bent?" said Granny. "All this hanging around wizards has made you take them seriously, my girl. They all call themselves the Lord High this and the Imperial That, it's all part of the game. Even magicians do it, you'd think they'd be more sensible at least, but no, they call around saying they're the Amazing-Bonko-and-Doris. Anyway, where is this High Rumtiddlypo?"

"They'll be at dinner in the Great Hall," said Esk. "Can he bring Simon back, then?"

"That's the difficult part," said Granny. "I daresay we could all get something back easily enough, walking and talking just like anyone. Whether it would be Simon is quite another sack of ferrets."

She stood up. "Let's find this Great Hall, then. No time to waste."

"Um, women aren't allowed in," said Esk.

Granny stopped in the doorway. Her shoulders rose. She turned around very slowly.

"What did you say?" she said. "Did these old ears deceive me, and don't say they did because they didn't."

"Sorry," said Esk. "Force of habit."

"I can see you've been getting ideas below your station," said Granny coldly. "Go and find someone to watch over the lad, and let's see what's so great about this hall that I mustn't set foot in it."

And thus it was that while the entire faculty of Unseen University were dining in the venerable hall the doors were flung back with a dramatic effect that was rather spoiled when one of them rebounded off a waiter and caught Granny a crack on the shin. Instead of the defiant strides she had intended to make across the chequered floor she was forced to half-hop, half-limp. But she hoped that she hopped with dignity.

Esk hurried along behind her, acutely aware of the hundreds of eyes that were turned towards them.

The roar of conversation and the clatter of cutlery faded away. A couple of chairs were knocked over. At the far end of the hall she could see the most senior wizards at their high table, which in fact bobbed a few feet off the floor. They were staring.

A medium-grade wizard - Esk recognised him as a lecturer in Applied Astrology - rushed towards them, waving his hands.

"Nononono," he shouted. "Wrong door. You must go away."

"Don't mind me," said Granny calmly, pushing past him.

"Nonono, it's against the lore, you must go away now. Ladies are not allowed in here!"

"I'm not a lady, I'm a witch," said Granny. She turned to Esk. "Is he very important?"

"I don't think so," said Esk.

"Right." Granny turned to the lecturer: "Go and find me an important wizard, please. Quickly."

Esk tapped her on the back. A couple of wizards with a rather greater presence of mind had nipped smartly out of the door behind them, and now several college porters were advancing threateningly up the hall, to the cheers and catcalls of the students. Esk had never much liked the porters, who lived a private life in their lodge, but now she felt a pang of sympathy for them.

Two of them reached out hairy hands and grabbed Granny's shoulders. Her arm disappeared behind her back and there was a brief flurry of movement that ended with the men hopping away, clutching bits of themselves and swearing.

"Hatpin," said Granny. She grabbed Esk with her free hand and swept towards the high table, glaring at anyone who so much as looked as if they were going to get in her way. The younger students, who knew free entertainment when they saw it, stamped and cheered and banged their plates on the long tables. The high table settled on the tiles with a thump and the senior wizards hurriedly lined up behind Cutangle as he tried to summon up his reserves of dignity. His efforts didn't really work; it is very hard to look dignified with a napkin tucked into one's collar.

He raised his hands for silence, and the hall waited expectantly as Granny and Esk approached him. Granny was looking interestedly at the ancient paintings and statues of bygone mages.

"Who are them buggers?" she said out of the corner of her mouth.

"They used to be chief wizards," whispered Esk.

"They look constipated. I never met a wizard who was regular," said Granny.

"They're a nuisance to dust, that's all I know," said Esk.

Cutangle stood with legs planted wide apart, arms akimbo and stomach giving an impression of a beginners' ski slope, the whole of him therefore adopting a pose usually associated with Henry VIII but with an option on Henry IX and X as well.

"Well?" he said, "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

"Is he important?" said Granny to Esk.

"I, madam, am the Archchancellor! And I happen to run this University! And you, madam, are trespassing in very dangerous territory indeed! I warn you that - stop looking at me like that!"

Cutangle staggered backwards, his hands raised to ward off Granny's gaze. The wizards behind him scattered, turning over tables in their haste to avoid the stare.

Granny's eyes had changed.

Esk had never seen them like this before. They were perfectly silver, like little round mirrors, reflecting all they saw. Cutangle was a vanishingly small dot in their depths, his mouth open, his tiny matchstick arms waving in desperation.

The Archchancellor backed into a pillar, and the shock made him recover. He shook his head irritably, cupped a hand and sent a stream of white fire streaking towards the witch.

Without dropping her iridescent stare Granny raised a hand and deflected the flames towards the roof. There was an explosion and a shower of tile fragments.

Her eyes widened.

Cutangle vanished. Where he had been standing a huge snake coiled, poised to strike.

Granny vanished. Where she had been standing was a large wicker basket.

The snake became a giant reptile from the mists of time.

The basket became the snow wind of the Ice Giants, coating the struggling monster with ice.

The reptile became a sabre-toothed tiger, crouched to spring.

The gale became a bubbling tar pit.

The tiger managed to become an eagle, stooping.

The tar pits became a tufted hood.

Then the images began to flicker as shape replaced shape. Stroboscope shadows danced around the hall. A magical wind sprang up, thick and greasy, striking octarine sparks from beards and fingers. In the middle of it all Esk, peering through streaming eyes, could just make out the two figures of Granny and Cutangle, glossy statues in the midst of the hurtling images.

She was also aware of something else, a high-pitched sound almost beyond hearing.

She had heard it before, on the cold plain - a busy chittering noise, a beehive noise, an anthill sound ....

"They're coming!" she screamed about the din. "They're coming now!"

She scrambled out from behind the table where she had taken refuge from the magical duel and tried to reach Granny. A gust of raw magic lifted her off her feet and bowled her into a chair.

The buzzing was louder now, so that the air roared like a three-week corpse on a summer's day. Esk made another attempt to reach Granny and recoiled when green fire roared along her arm and singed her hair.

She looked around wildly for the other wizards, but those who had fled from the effects of the magic were cowering behind overturned furniture while the occult storm raged over their heads.

Esk ran down the length of the hall and out into the dark corridor. Shadows curled around her as she hurried, sobbing, up the steps and along the buzzing corridors towards Simon's narrow room.

Something would try to enter the body, Granny had said. Something that would walk and talk like Simon, but would be something else ....

A cluster of students were hovering anxiously outside the door. They turned pale faces towards Esk as she darted towards them, and were sufficiently shaken to draw back nervously in the face of her determined progress.

"Something's in there," said one of them.

"We can't open the door!"

They looked at her expectantly. Then one of them said: "You wouldn't have a pass key, by any chance?"

Esk grabbed the doorhandle and turned it. It moved slightly, but then spun back with such force it nearly took the skin off her hands. The chittering inside rose to a crescendo and there was another noise, too, like leather flapping.

"You're wizards!" she screamed. "Bloody well wizz!"

"We haven't done telekinesis yet," said one of them.

"I was ill when we did Firethrowing -"

"Actually, I'm not very good at Dematerialisation -"

Esk went to the door, and then stopped with one foot in the air. She remembered Granny talking about how even buildings had a mind, if they were old enough. The University was very old.

She stepped carefully to one side and ran her hands over the ancient stones. It had to be done carefully, so as not to frighten it - and now she could feel the mind in the stones, slow and simple, but still mind. It pulsed around her; she could feel the little sparkles deep in the rock.

Something was hooting behind the door.

The three students watched in astonishment as Esk stood rock still with her hands and forehead pressed against the wall.

She was almost there. She could feel the weight of herself, the ponderousness of her body, the distant memories of the dawn of time when rock was molten and free. For the first time in her life she knew what it was like to have balconies.

She moved gently through the building-mind, refining her impressions, looking as fast as she dared for this corridor, this door.

She stretched out one arm, very carefully. The students watched as she uncurled one finger, very slowly.

The door hinges began to creak.

There was a moment of tension and then the nails sprang from the hinges and clattered into the wall behind her. The planks began to bend as the door still tried to force itself open against the strength of -whatever was holding it shut.

The wood billowed.

Beams of blue light lanced out into the corridor, moving and dancing as indistinct shapes shuffled through the blinding brilliance inside the room. The light was misty and actinic, the sort of light to make Steven Spielberg reach for his copyright lawyer.

Esk's hair leapt from her head so that she looked like an ambulant dandelion. Little firesnakes of magic crackled across her skin as she stepped through the doorway.

The students outside watched in horror as she disappeared into the light.

It vanished in a silent explosion.

When they eventually found enough courage to look inside the room, they saw nothing there but the sleeping body of Simon. And Esk, silent and cold on the floor, breathing very slowly. And the floor was covered with a fine layer of silver sand.

Esk floated through the mists of the world, noticing with a curious impersonal feeling the precise way in which she passed through solid matter.

There were others with her. She could hear their chittering.

Fury rose like bile. She turned and set out after the noise, fighting the seductive forces that kept telling her how nice it would be just to relax her grip on her mind and sink into a

warm sea of nothingness. Being angry, that was the thing. She knew it was most important to stay really angry.

The Discworld fell away, and lay below her as it did on the day she had been an eagle. But this time the Circle Sea was below her - it certainly was circular, as if God had run out of ideas - and beyond it lay the arms of the continent, and the long chain of the Ramtops marching all the way to the Hub. There were other continents she had never heard of, and tiny island chains.

As her point of view changed, the Rim came into sight. It was night time and, since the Disc's orbiting sun was below the world, it lit up the long waterfall that girdled the Edge.

It also lit up Great A'Tuin the World Turtle. Esk had often wondered if the Turtle was really a myth. It seemed a lot of trouble to go to just to move a world. But there It was, almost as big as the Disc it carried, frosted with stardust and pocked with meteor craters.

Its head passed in front of her and she looked directly into an eye big enough to float all the fleets in the world. She had heard it said that if you could look far enough into the direction that Great A'Tuin was staring, you would see the end of the universe. Maybe it was just the set of its beak, but Great A'Tuin looked vaguely hopeful, even optimistic. Perhaps the end of everything wasn't as bad as all that.

Dreamlike, she reached out and tried to Borrow the biggest mind in the universe.

She stopped herself just in time, like a child with a toy toboggan who expected a little gentle slope and suddenly looks out of the magnificent mountains, snow-covered, stretching into the icefields of infinity. No one would ever Borrow that mind, it would be like trying to drink all the sea. The thoughts that moved through it were as big and as slow as glaciers.

Beyond the Disc were the stars, and there was something wrong with them. They were swirling like snowflakes. Every now and again they would settle down and look as immobile as they always did, and then they'd suddenly take it into their heads to dance.

Real stars shouldn't do that, Esk decided. Which meant she wasn't looking at real stars. Which meant she wasn't exactly in a real place. But a chittering close at hand reminded her that she could almost certainly really die if she once lost track of those noises. She turned and pursued the sounds through the stellar snowstorm.

And the stars jumped, and settled, jumped, and settled ....

As she swooped upward Esk tried to concentrate on everyday things, because if she let her mind dwell on precisely what it was she was following then she knew she would turn back, and she wasn't sure she knew the way. She tried to remember the eighteen herbs that cured ear-ache, which kept her occupied for a while because she could never recall the last four.

A star swooped past, and then was violently jerked away; it was about twenty feet across.

When she ran out of herbs she started on the diseases of goats, which took quite a long time because goats can catch a lot of things that cows can catch plus a lot of things plus that sheep plus catch plus a complete range of horrible ailments of their very own. When she had finished listing wooden udder, ear wilt and the octarine garget she tried to recall the complex code of dots and lines that they used to cut in the trees around Bad Ass, so that lost villagers could find their way home on snowy nights.

She was only as far as dot dot dot dash dot dash (Hub-byTurnwise, one mile from the village) when the universe around her vanished with a faint pop. She fell forward, hit something hard and gritty and rolled to a halt.

The grittiness was sand. Fine, dry, cold sand. You could tell that even if you dug down several feet it would be just as cold and just as dry.

Esk lay with her face in it for a moment, summoning the courage to look up. She could just see, a few feet away from her, the hem of someone's dress: Something's dress, she corrected herself. Unless it was a wing. It could be a wing, a particularly tatty and leathery one.

Her eyes followed it up until she found a face, higher than a house, outlined against the starry sky. Its owner was obviously trying to look nightmarish, but had tried too hard. The basic appearance was that of a chicken that had been dead for about two months, but the unpleasant effect was rather spoiled by warthog tusks, moth antennae, wolf ears and a unicorn spike. The whole thing had a selfassembled look, as if the owner had heard about anatomy but couldn't quite get to grips with the idea.

It was staring, but not at her. Something behind her occupied all its interest. Esk turned her head very slowly.

Simon was sitting cross-legged in the centre of a circle of Things. There were hundreds of them, as still and silent as statues, watching him with reptilian patience.

There was something small and angular held in his cupped hands. It gave off a fuzzy blue light that made his face look strange.

Other shapes lay on the ground beside him, each in its little soft glow. They were the regular sort of shapes that Granny dismissed airily as jommetry-cubes, many-sided diamonds, cones, even a globe. Each one was transparent and inside was ....

Esk edged closer. No one was taking any notice of her.

Inside a crystal sphere that had been tossed aside on to the sand floated a blue-green ball, crisscrossed with tiny white cloud patterns and what could almost have been continents if anyone was silly enough to try to live on a ball. It might have been a sort of model, except something about its glow told Esk that it was quite real and probably very big and not - in every sense - totally inside the sphere.

She put it down very gently and sidled over to a ten-sided block in which floated a much more acceptable world. It was properly discshaped, but instead of the Rimfall there was a wall of ice and instead of the Hub there was a gigantic tree, so big that its roots merged into mountain ranges.

A prism beside it held another slowly-turning disc, surrounded by little stars. But there were no ice walls around this one, just a red-gold thread that turned out on closer inspection to be a snake - a snake big enough to encircle a world. For reasons best known to itself it was biting its own tail.

Esk turned the prism over and over curiously, noticing how the little disc inside stayed resolutely upright.

Simon giggled softly. Esk replaced the snake-disc and peered carefully over his shoulder.

He was holding a small glass pyramid. There were stars in it, and occasionally he would give it a little shake so that the stars swirled up like snow in the wind, and then settled back in their places. Then he would giggle.

And beyond the stars ....

It was the Discworld. A Great A'Tuin no bigger than a small saucer toiled along under a world that looked like the work of an obsessive jeweller.

Jiggle, swirl. Jiggle, swirl, giggle. There were already hairline cracks in the glass.

Esk looked at Simon's blank eyes and then up into the hungry faces of the nearest Things, and then she reached across and pulled the pyramid out of his hands and turned and ran.

The Things didn't stir as she scurried towards them, bent almost double, with the pyramid clasped tightly to her chest. But suddenly her feet were no longer running over the sand and she was being lifted into the frigid air, and a Thing with a face like a drowned rabbit turned slowly towards her and extended a talon.

You're not really here, Esk told herself. It's only a sort of dream, what Granny calls an annaloggy. You can't really be hurt, it's all imagination. There's absolutely no harm that can come to you, it's all really inside your mind.

I wonder if it knows that?

The talon picked her out of the air and the rabbit face split like a banana skin. There was no mouth, just a dark hole, as if the Thing was itself an opening to an even worse dimension, a place by comparison with which freezing sand and moonless moonlight would be a jolly afternoon at the seaside.

Esk held the Disc-pyramid and flailed with her free hand at the claw around her. It had no effect. The darkness loomed over her, a gateway to total oblivion.

She kicked it as hard as she could.

Which was not, given the circumstances, very hard. But where her foot struck there was an explosion of white sparks and a pop -which would have been a much more satisfying bang if the thin air here didn't suck the sound away.

The Thing screeched like a chainsaw encountering, deep inside an unsuspecting sapling, a lurking and long-forgotten nail. The others around it set up a sympathetic buzzing.

Esk kicked again and the Thing shrieked and dropped her to the sand. She was bright enough to roll, with the tiny world hugged protectively to her, because even in a dream a broken ankle can be painful.

The Thing lurched uncertainly above her. Esk's eyes narrowed. She put the world down very carefully, hit the Thing very hard around the point where its shins would be, if there were shins under that cloak, and picked up the world again in one neat movement.

The creature howled, bent double, and then toppled slowly, like a sackful of coathangers. When it hit the ground it collapsed into a mass of disjointed limbs; the head rolled away and rocked to a standstill.

Is that all? thought Esk. They can hardly walk, even! When you hit them they just fall over?

The nearest Things chittered and tried to back away as she marched determinedly towards them, but since their bodies seemed to be held together more or less by wishful thinking they weren't very good at it. She hit one, which had a face like a small family of squid, and it deflated into a pile of twitching bones and bits of fur and odd ends of tentacle, very much like a Greek meal. Another was slightly more successful and had begun to shamble uncertainly away before Esk caught it a crack on one of its five shins.

It flailed desperately as it fell and brought down another two.

By then the others had managed to lurch out of her way and stood watching from a distance.

Esk took a few steps towards the nearest one. It tried to move away, and fell over.

They may have been ugly. They may have been evil. But when it came to poetry in motion, the Things had all the grace and coordination of a deck-chair.

Esk glared at them, and took a look at the Disc in its glass pyramid. All the excitement didn't seem to have disturbed it a bit.

She'd been able to get out, if this indeed was out and if the Disc could be said to be in. But how was one supposed to get back?

Somebody laughed. It was the sort of laugh

Basically, it was p'ch'zarni'chiwkov. This epiglottis-throttling word is seldom used on the Disc except by highly-paid stunt linguists and, of course, the tiny tribe of the K'turni, who invented it. It has no direct synonym, although the Cumhoolie word "squemt" ('the feeling upon finding that the previous occupant of the privy has used all the paper') begins to approach it in general depth of feeling. The closest translation is as follows:

The nasty little sound of a sword being unsheathed right behind one at just the point when one thought one had disposed of one's enemies.

Although K'tumi speakers say that this does not convey the cold sweating, heart-stopping, gut-freezing sense of the original.

It was that kind of laugh.

Esk turned around slowly. Simon drifted towards her across the sand, with his hands cupped in front of him. His eyes were tight shut.

"Did you really think it would be as easy as that? " he said. Or something said; it didn't sound like Simon's voice, but like dozens of voices speaking'at once.

"Simon?" she said, uncertainly.

"He is of no further use to us," said the Thing with Simon's shape. "He has shown us the way, child. Now give us our property."

Esk backed away.

"I don't think it belongs to you," she said, "whoever you are."

The face in front of her opened its eyes. There was nothing there but blackness - not a colour, just holes into some other space.

"We could say that if you gave it to us we would be merciful. We could say we would let you go from here in your own shape. But there wouldn't really be much point in us saying that, would there?"

"I wouldn't believe you," said Esk.

"Well, then."

The Simon-thing grinned.

"You're only putting off the inevitable," it said.

"Suits me."

"We could take it anyway."

"Take it, then. But I don't think you can. You can't take anything unless it's given to you, can you?"

They circled round.

"You'll give it to us," said the Simon-thing.

Some of the other Things were approaching now, striding back across the desert with horrible jerky motions.

"You'll get tired," it continued. "We can wait. We're very good at waiting."

It made a feint to the left, but Esk swung around to face it.

"That doesn't matter," she said. "I'm only dreaming this, and you can't get hurt in dreams."

The Thing paused, and looked at her with its empty eyes.

"Have you got a word in your world, I think it's called 'psychosomatic'?"

"Never heard of it," snapped Esk.

"It means you can get hurt in your dreams. And what is so interesting is that if you die in your dreams you stay here. That would be niiiiice."

Esk glanced sideways at the distant mountains, sprawled on the chilly horizon like melted mud pies. There were no trees, not even any rocks. Just sand and cold stars and

She felt the movement rather than heard it and turned with the pyramid held between her hands like a club. It hit the Simon-thing in mid-leap with a satisfying thump, but as soon as it hit the ground it somersaulted forward and bounced upright with unpleasant ease. But it had heard her gasp and had seen the brief pain in her eyes. It paused.

"Ah, that hurt you, Did it not? You don't like to see another one suffer, yes? Not this one, it seems."

It turned and beckoned, and two of the tall Things lurched over to it and gripped it firmly by the arms.

Its eyes changed. The darkness faded, and then Simon's own eyes looked out of his face. He stared up at the Things on either side of him and struggled briefly, but one had several pairs of tentacles wrapped around his wrist and the other was holding his arm in the world's largest lobster claw.

Then he saw Esk, and his eyes fell to the little glass pyramid.

"Run away!" he hissed. "Take it away from here! Don't let them get it!" He grimaced as the claw tightened on his arm.

"Is this a trick?" said Esk. "Who are you really?"

"Don't you recognise me?" he said wretchedly. "What are you doing in my dream?"

"If this is a dream then I'd like to wake up, please," said Esk.

"Listen. You must run away now, do you understand? Don't stand there with your mouth open."

GIVE IT To us, said a cold voice inside Esk's head.

Esk looked down at the glass pyramid with its unconcerned little world and stared up at Simon, her mouth an O of puzzlement.

"But what is it?"

"Look hard at it!"

Esk peered through the glass. If she squinted it seemed that the little Disc was granular, as if it was made up of millions of tiny specks. If she looked hard at the specks

"It's just numbers!" she said. "The whole world - it's all made up of numbers . . . ."

"It's not the world, it's an idea of the world," said Simon. "I created it for them. They can't get through to us, do you see, but ideas have got a shape here. Ideas are real!"

GIVE IT TO US.

"But ideas can't hurt anyone!"

"I turned things into numbers to understand them, but they just want to control," Simon said bitterly. "They burrowed into my numbers like -"

He screamed.

GIVE IT TO US OR WE WILL TAKE HIM TO BITS.

Esk looked up at the nearest nightmare face.

"How do I know I can trust you?" she said.

YOU CAN'T TRUST US. BUT YOU HAVE NO CHOICE.

Esk looked at the ring of faces that not even a necrophile could love, faces put together from a fishmonger's midden, faces picked randomly from things that lurked in deep

ocean holes and haunted caves, faces that were not human enough to gloat or leer but had all the menace of a suspiciously v-shaped ripple near an incautious bather.

She couldn't trust them. But she had no choice.

Something else was happening, in a place as far away as the thickness of a shadow.

The student wizards had run back to the Great Hall, where Cutangle and Granny Weatherwax were still locked in the magical equivalent of Indian arm wrestling. The flagstones under Granny were halfmelted and cracked and the table behind Cutangle had taken root and already bore a rich crop of acorns.

One of the students had earned several awards for bravery by daring to tug at Cutangle's cloak ....

And now they were crowded into the narrow room, looking at the two bodies.

Cutangle summoned doctors of the body and doctors of the mind, and the room buzzed with magic as they got to work.

Granny tapped him on the shoulder.

"A word in your ear, young man," she said.

"Hardly young, madam," sighed Cutangle, "hardly young." He felt drained. It had been decades since he'd duelled in magic, although it was common enough among students. He had a nasty feeling that Granny would have won eventually. Fighting her was like swatting a fly on your own nose. He couldn't think what had come over him to try it.

Granny led him out into the passage and around the corner to a window-seat. She sat down, leaning her broomstick against the wall. Rain drummed heavily on the roofs

outside, and a few zigzags of lightning indicated a storm of Ramtop proportions approaching the city.

"That was quite an impressive display," she said: "You nearly won once or twice there."

"Oh," said Cutangle, brightening up. "Do you really think so?"

Granny nodded.

Cutangle patted at various bits of his robe until he located a tarry bag of tobacco and a roll of paper. His hands shook as he fumbled a few shreds of second-hand pipeweed into a skinny homemade. He ran the wretched thing across his tongue, and barely moistened it. Then a dim remembrance of propriety welled up in the back of his mind.

"Um," he said, "do you mind if I smoke?"

Granny shrugged. Cutangle struck a match on the wall and tried desperately to navigate the flame and the cigarette into approximately the same position. Granny gently took the match from his trembling hand and lit it for him.

Cutangle sucked on the tobacco, had a ritual cough and settled back, the glowing end of the rollup the only light in the dim corridor.

"They've gone Wandering," said Granny at last.

"I know," said Cutangle.

"Your wizards won't be able to get them back."

"I know that, too."

"They might get something back, though."

"I wish you hadn't said that."

There was a pause while they contemplated what might come back, inhabiting living bodies, acting almost like the original inhabitants.

"It's probably my fault -"they said in unison, and stopped in astonishment.

"You first, madam," said Cutangle.

"Them cigaretty things," asked Granny, "are they good for the nerves?"

Cutangle opened his mouth to point out very courteously that tobacco was a habit reserved for wizards, but thought better of it. He extended the tobacco pouch towards Granny.

She told him about Esk's birth, and the coming of the old wizard, and the staff, and Esk's forays into magic. By the time she had finished she had succeeded in rolling a tight, thin cylinder that burned with a small blue flame and made her eyes water.

"I don't know that shaky nerves wouldn't be better," she wheezed.

Cutangle wasn't listening.

"This is quite astonishing," he said. "You say the child didn't suffer in any way?"

"Not that I noticed," said Granny. "The staff seemed - well, on her side, if you know what I mean."

"And where is this staff now?"

"She said she threw it in the river . . . ."

The old wizard and the elderly witch stared at each other, their faces illuminated by a flare of lightning outside.

Cutangle shook his head. "The river's flooding," he said. "It's a million-to-one chance."

Granny smiled grimly. It was the sort of smile that wolves ran away from. Granny grasped her broomstick purposefully.

"Million-to-one chances," she said, "crop up nine times out of ten."

There are storms that are frankly theatrical, all sheet lightning and metallic thunder rolls. There are storms that are tropical and sultry, and incline to hot winds and fireballs. But this was a storm of the Circle Sea plains, and its main ambition was to hit the ground with as much rain as possible. It was the kind of storm that suggests that the whole sky has swallowed a diuretic. The thunder and lightning hung around in the background, supplying a sort of chorus, but the rain was the star of the show. It tap-danced across the land.

The grounds of the University stretched right down to the river. By day they were a neat formal pattern of gravel paths and hedges, but in the middle of a wet wild night the hedges seemed to have moved and the paths had simply gone off somewhere to stay dry.

A weak wyrdlight shone inefficiently among the dripping leaves. But most of the rain found its way through anyway.

"Can you use one of them wizard fireballs?"

"Have a heart, madam."

"Are you sure she would have come this way?"

"There's a sort of jetty thing down here somewhere, unless I'm lost."

There was the sound of a heavy body blundering wetly into a bush, and then a splash.

"I've found the river, anyway."

Granny Weatherwax peered through the soaking darkness. She could hear a roaring and could dimly make out the white crests of floodwater. There was also the distinctive river smell of the Ankh, which suggested that several armies had used it first as a urinal and then as a sepulchre.

Cutangle splashed dejectedly towards her.

"This is foolishness," he said, "meaning no offence, madam. But it'll be out to sea on this flood. And I'll die of cold."

"You can't get any wetter than you are now. Anyway, you walk wrong for rain."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You go all hunched up, you fight it, that's not the way. You shouldwell, move between the drops." And, indeed, Granny seemed to be merely damp.

"I'll bear that in mind. Come on, madam. It's me for a roaring fire and a glass of something hot and wicked."

Granny sighed. "I don't know. Somehow I expected to see it sticking out of the mud, or something. Not just all this water."

Cutangle patted her gently on the shoulder.

"There may be something else we can do -" he began, and was interrupted by a zip of lightning and another roll of thunder.

"I said maybe there's something -" he began again.

"What was that I saw?" demanded Granny.

"What was what?" said Cutangle, bewildered.

"Give me some light!"

The wizard sighed wetly, and extended a hand. A bolt of golden fire shot out across the foaming water and hissed into oblivion.

"There!" said Granny triumphantly.

"It's just a boat," said Cutangle. "The boys use them in the summer -"

He waded after Granny's determined figure as fast as he could.

"You can't be thinking of taking it out on a night like this," he said. "It's madness!"

Granny slithered along the wet planking of the jetty, which was already nearly under water.

"You don't know anything about boats!" Cutangle protested.

"I shall have to learn quickly, then," replied Granny calmly.

"But I haven't been in a boat since I was a boy!"

"I wasn't actually asking you to come. Does the pointy bit go in front?"

Cutangle moaned.

"This is all very creditable," he said, "but perhaps we can wait till morning?"

A flash of lightning illuminated Granny's face.

"Perhaps not," Cutangle conceded. He lumbered along the jetty and pulled the little rowing boat towards him. Getting in was a matter of luck but he managed it eventually, fumbling with the painter in the darkness.

The boat swung out into the flood and was carried away, spinning slowly.

Granny clung to the seat as it rocked in the turbulent waters, and looked expectantly at Cutangle through the murk.

"Well?" she said.

"Well what?" said Cutangle.

"You said you knew all about boats."

"No. I said you didn't."

"Oh."

They hung on as the boat wallowed heavily, miraculously righted itself, and was carried backwards downstream.

"When you said you hadn't been in a boat since you were a boy. . ." Granny began.

"I was two years old, I think."

The boat caught on a whirlpool, spun around, and shot off across the flow.

"I had you down as the sort of boy who was in and out of boats all day long."

"I was born up in the mountains. I get seasick on damp grass, if you must know," said Cutangle.

The boat banged heavily against a submerged tree trunk, and a wavelet lapped the prow.

"I know a spell against drowning," he added miserably.

"I'm glad about that."

"Only you have to say it while you're standing on dry land."

"Fake your boots off." Granny commanded.

"What?"

"Take your boots off, man!"

Cutangle shifted uneasily on his bench.

"What have you in mind?" he said.

"The water is supposed to be outside the boat, I know that much!" Granny pointed to the dark tide sloshing around the bilges: "Fill your boots with water and tip it over the side!"

Cutangle nodded. He felt that the last couple of hours had somehow carried him along without him actually touching the sides, and for a moment he nursed the strangely consoling feeling that his life was totally beyond his control and whatever happened no one could blame him. Filling his boots with water while adrift on a flooded river at midnight with what he could only describe as a woman seemed about as logical as anything could be in the circumstances.

A fine figure of a woman, said a neglected voice at the back of his mind. There was something about the way she used the tattered broomstick to scull the boat across the choppy water that troubled long-forgotten bits of Cutangle's subconscious.

Not that he could be certain about the fine figure, of course, what with the rain and the wind and Granny's habit of wearing her entire wardrobe in one go. Cutangle cleared his throat uncertainly. Metaphorically a fine figure, he decided.

"Um, look," he said. "This is all very creditable, but consider the facts, I mean, the rate of drift and so forth, you see? It could be miles out on the ocean by now. It might never come to shore again. It might even go over the Rimfall."

Granny, who had been staring out across the water, turned around.

"Can't you think of anything else at all helpful that we could be doing?" she demanded.

Cutangle baled for a few moments.

"No," he said.

"Have you ever heard of anyone coming Back?"

"No."

"Then it's worth a try, isn't it?"

"I never liked the ocean," said Cutangle. "It ought to be paved over. There's dreadful things in it, down in the deep bits. Ghastly sea monsters. Or so they say."

"Keep baling, my lad, or you'll be able to see if they're right."

The storm rolled backwards and forwards overhead. It was lost here on the flat river plains; it belonged in the high Ramtops, where they knew how to appreciate a good storm. It grumbled around, looking for even a moderately high hill to throw lightning at.

The rain settled down to the gentle patter of rain that is quite capable of keeping it up for days. A sea fog also rolled in to assist it.

"If we had some oars we could row, if we knew where we were going," said Cutangle. Granny didn't answer.

He heaved a few more bootfuls of water over the side, and it occurred to him that the gold braiding on his robe would probably never be the same again. It would be nice to think it might matter, one day.

"I don't suppose you do know which way the Hub is, by any chance?" he ventured. "Just making conversation."

"Look for the mossy side of trees," said Granny without turning her head.

"Ali, " said Cutangle, and nodded.

He peered down gloomily at the oily waters, and wondered which particular oily waters they were. Judging by the salty smell they were out in the bay now.

What really terrified him about the sea was that the only thing between him and the horrible things that lived at the bottom of it was water. Of course, he knew that logically the only thing that separated him from, say, the man-eating tigers in the jungles of Klatch was mere distance, but that wasn't the same thing at all. Tigers didn't rise up out of the chilly depths, mouths full of needle teeth ....

He shivered.

"Can't you feel it?" asked Granny. "You can taste it in the air. Magic! It's leaking out from something."

"It's not actually water soluble," said Cutangle. He smacked his lips once or twice. There was indeed a tinny taste to the fog, he had to admit, and a faint greasiness to the air.

"You're a wizard," said Granny, severely. "Can't you call it up or something?"

"The question has never arisen," said Cutangle. "Wizards never throw their staffs away."

"It's around here somewhere," snapped Granny. "Help me look for it, man!"

Cutangle groaned. It had been a busy night, and before he tried any more magic he really needed twelve hours sleep, several good meals, and a quiet afternoon in front of a big fire. He was getting too old, that was the trouble. But he closed his eyes and concentrated.

There was magic around, all right. There are some places where magic naturally accumulates. It builds up around deposits of the transmundane metal octiron, in the wood

of certain trees, in isolated lakes, it sleets through the world and those skilled in such things can catch it and store it. There was a store of magic in the area.

"It's potent," he said. "Very potent." He raised his hands to his temples.

"It's getting bloody cold," said Granny. The insistent rain had turned to snow.

There was a sudden change in the world. The boat stopped, not with a jar, but as if the sea had suddenly decided to become solid. Granny looked over the side.

The sea had become solid. The sound of the waves was coming from a long way away and getting further away all the time.

She leaned over the side of the boat and tapped on the water.

"Ice," she said. The boat was motionless in an ocean of ice. It creaked ominously.

Cutangle nodded slowly.

"It makes sense," he said. "If they are . . . where we think they are, then it's very cold. As cold as the night between the stars, it is said. So the staff feels it too."

"Right," said Granny, and stepped out of the boat. "All we have to do is find the middle of the ice and there's the staff, right?"

"I knew you were going to say that. Can I at least put my boots on?"

They wandered across the frozen waves, with Cutangle stopping occasionally to try and sense the exact location of the staff. His robes were freezing on him. His teeth chattered.

"Aren't you cold?" he said to Granny, whose dress fairly crackled as she walked.

"I'm cold," she conceded, "I just ain't shivering."

"We used to have winters like this when I was a lad," said Cutangle, blowing on his fingers. "It doesn't snow in Ankh, hardly."

"Really," said Granny, peering ahead through the freezing fog.

"There was snow on the tops of the mountains all year round, I recall. Oh, you don't get temperatures like you did when I was a boy."

"At least, until now," he added, stamping his feet on the ice. It creaked menacingly, reminding him that it was all that lay between him and the bottom of the sea. He stamped again, as softly as possible.

"What mountains were these?" asked Granny.

"Oh, the Ramtops. Up towards the Hub, in fact. Place called Brass Neck."

Granny's lips moved. "Cutangle, Cutangle," she said softly. "Any relation to old Acktur Cutangle? Used to live in a big old house under Leaping Mountain, had a lot of sons."

"My father. How on disc d'you know that?"

"I was raised up there," said Granny, resisting the temptation merely to smile knowingly. "Next valley. Bad Ass. I remember your mother. Nice woman, kept brown and white chickens, I used to go up there to buy eggs for me mam. That was before I was called to witching, of course."

"I don't remember you," said Cutangle. "Of course, it was a long time ago. There was always a lot of children around our house." He sighed. "I suppose it's possible I pulled your hair once. It was the sort of thing I used to do."

"Maybe. I remember a fat little boy. Rather unpleasant."

"That might have been me. I seem to recall a rather bossy girl, but it was a long time ago. A long time ago."

"I didn't have white hair in those days," said Granny.

"Everything was a different colour in those days."

"That's true."

"It didn't rain so much in the summer time."

"The sunsets were redder."

"There were more old people. The world was full of them," said the wizard.

"Yes, I know. And now it's full of young people. Funny, really. I mean, you'd expect it to be the other way round."

"They even had a better kind of air. It was easier to breathe," said Cutangle. They stamped on through the swirling snow, considering the curious ways of time and Nature.

"Ever been home again?" said Granny.

Cutangle shrugged. "When my father died. It's odd, I've never said this to anyone, but-well, there were my brothers, because I am an eighth son of course, and they had children

and even grandchildren, and not one of them can hardly write his name. I could have bought the whole village. And they treated me like a king, but- I mean, I've been to places and seen things that would curdle their minds, I've faced down creatures wilder than their nightmares, I know secrets that are known to a very few -"

"You felt left out," said Granny. "There's nothing strange in that. It happens to all of us. It was our choice."

"Wizards should never go home," said Cutangle.

"I don't think they can go home," agreed Granny. "You can't cross the same river twice, I always say."

Cutangle gave this some thought.

"I think you're wrong there," he said. "I must have crossed the same river, oh, thousands of times."

"Ah, but it wasn't the same river."

"It wasn't?"

"No."

Cutangle shrugged. "It looked like the same bloody river."

"No need to take that tone," said Granny. "I don't see why I should listen to that sort of language from a wizard who can't even answer letters!"

Cutangle was silent for a moment, except for the castanet chatter of his teeth.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, I see. They were from you, were they?"

"That's right. I signed them on the bottom. It's supposed to be a sort of clue, isn't it?"

"All right, all right. I just thought they were a joke, that's all," said Cutangle sullenly.

"A joke?"

"We don't get many applications from women. We don't get any."

"I wondered why I didn't get a reply," said Granny.

"I threw them away, if you must know."

"You could at least have - there it is!"

"Where? Where? Oh, there."

The fog parted and they now saw it clearly - a fountain of snowflakes, a ornamental pillar of frozen air. And below it....

The staff wasn't locked in ice, but lay peacefully in a seething pool of water.

One of the unusual aspects of a magical universe is the existence of opposites. It has already been remarked that darkness isn't the opposite of light, it is simply the absence of light. In the same way absolute zero is merely the absence of heat. If you want to know what real cold is, the cold so intense that water can't even freeze but anti-boils, look no further than this pool.

They looked in silence for some seconds, their bickering forgotten. Then Cutangle said slowly: "If you stick your hand in that, your fingers'll snap like carrots."

"Do you think you can lift it out by magic?" said Granny.

Cutangle started to pat his pockets and eventually produced his rollup bag. With expert fingers he shredded the remains of a few dogends into a fresh paper and licked it into shape, without taking his eyes off the staff.

"No," he said. "but I'll try anyway."

He looked longingly at the cigarette and then poked it behind his ear. He extended his hands, fingers splayed, and his lips moved soundlessly as he mumbled a few words of power.

The staff spun in its pool and then rose gently away from the ice, where it immediately became the centre of a cocoon of frozen air. Cutangle groaned with the effort - direct levitation is the hardest of the practical magics, because of the ever-present danger of the wellknown principles of action and reaction, which means that a wizard attempting to lift a heavy item by mind power alone faces the prospect of ending up with his brains in his boots.

"Can you stand it upright?" said Granny.

With great delicacy the staff turned slowly in the air until it hung in front of Granny a few inches above the ice. Frost glittered on its carvings, but it seemed to Cutangle - through the red haze of migraine that hovered in front of his eyes - to be watching him. Resentfully.

Granny adjusted her hat and straightened up purposefully.

"Right," she said. Cutangle swayed. The tone of voice cut through him like a diamond saw. He could dimly remember being scolded by his mother when he was small; well,

this was that voice, only refined and concentrated and edged with little bits of carborundum, a tone of command that would have a corpse standing to attention and could probably have marched it halfway across its cemetery before it remembered it was dead.

Granny stood in front of the hovering staff, almost melting its icy covering by the sheer anger in her gaze.

"This is your idea of proper behaviour, is it? Lying around on the sea while people die? Oh, very well done!"

She stomped around in a semi-circle. To Cutangle's bewilderment, the staff turned to follow her.

"So you were thrown away," snapped Granny. "So what? She's hardly more than a child, and children throw us all away sooner or later. Is this loyal service? Have you no shame, lying around sulking when you could be of some use at last?"

She leaned forward, her hooked nose a few inches from the staff. Cutangle was almost certain that the staff tried to lean backwards out of her way.

"Shall I tell you what happens to wicked staffs?" she hissed. "If Esk is lost to the world, shall I tell you what I will do to you? You were saved from the fire once, because you could pass on the hurt to her. Next time it won't be the fire."

Her voice sank to a whiplash whisper.

"First it'll be the spokeshave. And then the sandpaper, and the auger, and the whittling knife -"

"I say, steady on," said Cutangle, his eyes watering.

"- and what's left I'll stake out in the woods for the fungus and the woodlice and the beetles. It could take years."

The carvings writhed. Most of them had moved around the back, out of Granny's gaze.

"Now," she said. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to pick you up and we are all going back to the University, aren't we? Otherwise it's blunt saw time."

She rolled up her sleeves and extended a hand.

"Wizard," she said, "I shall want you to release it."

Cutangle nodded miserably.

"When I say now, now! Now!"

Cutangle opened his eyes again.

Granny was standing with her left arm extended full length in front of her, her hand clamped around the staff.

The ice was exploding off it, in gouts of steam.

"Right," finished Granny, "and if this happens again I shall be very angry, do I make myself clear?"

Cutangle lowered his hands and hurried towards her.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "It's like holding a hot icicle," she said. "Come on, we haven't got time to stand around chatting."

"How are we going to get back?"

"Oh, show some backbone, man, for goodness sake. We'll fly,"

Granny waved her broomstick. The Archchancellor looked at it doubtfully.

"On that?"

"Of course. Don't wizards fly on their staffs?"

"It's rather undignified."

"If I can put up with that, so can you."

"Yes, but is it safe?"

Granny gave him a withering look.

"Do you mean in the absolute sense?" she asked. "Or, say, compared with staying behind on a melting ice floe?"

"This is the first time I have ever ridden on a broomstick," said Cutangle.

"Really."

"I thought you just had to get on them and they flew," said the wizard. "I didn't know you had to do all that running up and down and shouting at them."

"It's a knack," said Granny.

"I thought they went faster," Cutangle continued, "and, to be frank, higher."

"What do you mean, higher?" asked Granny, trying to compensate for the wizard's weight on the pillion as they turned back upriver. Like pillion passengers since the dawn of time, he persisted in leaning the wrong way.

"Well, more sort of above the trees," said Cutangle, ducking as a dripping branch swept his hat away.

"There's nothing wrong with this broomstick that you losing a few stone wouldn't cure," snapped Granny. "Or would you rather get off and walk?"

"Apart from the fact that half the time my feet are touching the ground anyway," said Cutangle. "I wouldn't want to embarrass you. If someone had asked me to list all the perils of flying, you know, it would never have occurred to me to include having one's legs whipped to death by tall bracken."

"Are you smoking?" said Granny, staring grimly ahead. "Something's burning."

"It was just to calm my nerves what with all this headlong plunging through the air, madam."

"Well, put it out this minute. And hold on."

The broomstick lurched upwards and increased its speed to that of a geriatric jogger.

"Mr Wizard."

"Hallo?"

"When I said hold on -"

"Yes?"

"I didn't mean there."

There was a pause.

"Oh. Yes. I see. I'm terribly sorry."

"That's all right."

"My memory isn't what it was . . . I assure you . . . no offence meant."

"None taken."

They flew in silence for a moment.

"Nevertheless," said Granny thoughtfully, "I think that, on the whole, I would prefer you to move your hands."

Rain gushed across the leads of Unseen University and poured into the gutters where ravens' nests, abandoned since the summer, floated like very badly-built boats. The water gurgled along ancient, crusted pipes. It found its way under tiles and said hallo to the spiders under the eaves. It leapt from gables and formed secret lakes high amongst the spires.

Whole ecologies lived in the endless rooftops of the University, which by comparison made Gormenghast look like a toolshed on a railway allotment; birds sang in tiny jungles

grown from apple pips and weed seeds, little frogs swam in the upper gutters, and a colony of ants were busily inventing an interesting and complex civilisation.

One thing the water couldn't do was gurgle out of the ornamental gargoyles ranged around the roofs. This was because the gargoyles wandered off and sheltered in the attics at the first sign of rain. They held that just because you were ugly it didn't mean you were stupid.

It rained streams. It rained rivers. It rained seas. But mainly it rained through the roof of the Great Hall, where the duel between Granny and Cutangle had left a very large hole, and Treatle felt that it was somehow raining on him personally.

He stood on a table organising the teams of students who were taking down the paintings and ancient tapestries before they got soaked. It had to be a table, because the floor was already several inches deep in water.

Not rainwater, unfortunately. This was water with real personality, the kind of distinctive character water gets after a long journey through silty countryside. It had the thick texture of authentic Ankh water - too stiff to drink, too runny to plough.

The river had burst its banks and a million little watercourses were flowing backwards, bursting in through the cellars and playing peekaboo under the flagstones. There was the occasional distant boom as some forgotten magic in a drowned dungeon shorted out and surrendered up its power; Treatle wasn't at all keen on some of the unpleasant bubblings and hissings that were escaping to the surface.

He thought again how nice it would be to be the sort of wizard who lived in a little cave somewhere and collected herbs and thought significant thoughts and knew what the owls were saying. But probably the cave would be damp and the herbs would be poisonous and Treatle could never be sure, when all was said and done, exactly what thoughts were really significant.

He got down awkwardly and paddled through the dark swirling waters. Well, he had done his best. He'd tried to organise the senior wizards into repairing the roof by magic, but there was a general argument over the spells that could be used and a consensus that this was in any case work for artisans.

That's wizards for you, he thought gloomily as he waded between the dripping arches, always probing the infinite but never noticing the definite, especially in the matter of household chores. We never had this trouble before that woman came.

He squelched up the steps, lit by a particularly impressive flash of lightning. He had a cold certainty that while of course no one could possibly blame him for all this, everybody would. He seized the hem of his robe and wrung it out wretchedly, then he reached for his tobacco pouch.

It was a nice green waterproof one. That meant that all the rain that had got into it couldn't get out again. It was indescribable.

He found his little clip of papers. They were fused into one lump, like the legendary pound note found in the back pockets of trousers after they have been washed, spun, dried and ironed.

"Bugger," he said, with feeling.

"I say! Treatle!"

Treatle looked around. He had been the last to leave the hall, where even now some of the benches were beginning to float. Whirlpools and patches of bubble marked the spots where magic was leaking from the cellars, but there was no one to be seen.

Unless, of course, one of the statues had spoken. They had been too heavy to move, and Trestle remembered telling the students that a thorough wash would probably do them good.

He looked at their stern faces and regretted it. The statues of very powerful dead mages were sometimes more lifelike than statues had any right to be. Maybe he should have kept his voice down.

"Yes?" he ventured, acutely aware of the stony stares.

"Up here, you fool!"

He looked up. The broomstick descended heavily through the rain in a series of swoops and jerks. About five feet above the water it lost its few remaining aerial pretensions, and flopped noisily into a whirlpool.

"Don't stand there, idiot!"

Treatle peered nervously into the gloom.

"I've got to stand somewhere," he said.

"I mean give us a hand!" snapped Cutangle, rising from the wavelets like a fat and angry Venus. "The lady first, of course."

He turned to Granny, who was fishing around in the water.

"I've lost my hat," she said.

Cutangle sighed. "Does that really matter at a time like this?"

"A witch has got to have a hat, otherwise who's to know?" said Granny. She made a grab as something dark and sodden drifted by, cackled triumphantly, tipped out the water and rammed the hat on her head. It had lost its stiffening and flopped rather rakishly over one eye.

"Right," she said, in a tone of voice that suggested the whole universe had just better watch out.

There was another brilliant flash of lightning, which shows that even the weather gods have a well-developed sense of theatre.

"It rather suits you," said Cutangle.

"Excuse me," said Trestle, "but isn't she the w-"

"Never mind that," said Cutangle, taking Granny's hand and helping her up the steps. He flourished the staff.

"But it's against the lore to allow w-"

He stopped and stared as Granny reached out and touched the damp wall by the door. Cutangle tapped him on the chest.

"Show me where it's written down," said Cutangle.

"They're in the Library," Granny interrupted.

"It was the only dry place," said Treatle, "but -"

"This building is frightened of thunderstorms," said Granny. "It could do with comforting."

"But the lore -"repeated Treatle desperately.

Granny was already striding down the passage, with Cutangle hopping along behind. He turned.

"You heard the lady," he said.

Treatle watched them go, with his mouth hanging open. When their footsteps had died away in the distance he stood silently for a moment, thinking about life and where his could have gone wrong.

However, he wasn't going to be accused of disobedience.

Very carefully, without knowing exactly why, he reached out and gave the wall a friendly pat.

"There, there," he said.

Strangely enough, he felt a lot better.

It occurred to Cutangle that he ought to lead the way in his own premises, but Granny in a hurry was no match for a nearterminal nicotine addict and he kept up only by a sort of crabwise leaping.

"It's this way," he said, splashing through the puddles.

"I know. The building told me."

"Yes, I was meaning to ask about that," said Cutangle, "because you see it's never said anything to me and I've lived here for years."

"Have you ever listened to it?"

"Not exactly listened, no," Cutangle conceded. "Not as such."

"Well then," said Granny, edging past a waterfall where the kitchen steps used to be (Mrs Whitlow's washing would never be the same again). "I think it's up here and along the passage, isn't it?"

She swept past a trio of astonished wizards, who were surprised by her and completely startled by her hat.

Cutangle panted after her and caught her arm at the doors to the Library.

"Look," he said desperately, "No offence, Miss - um, Mistress -"

"I think Esmerelda will suffice now. What with us having shared a broomstick and everything."

"Can I go in front? It is my Library," he begged.

Granny turned around, her face a mask of surprise. Then she smiled.

"Of course. I'm so sorry."

"For the look of the thing, you see," said Cutangle apologetically. He pushed the door open.

The Library was full of wizards, who care about their books in the same way that ants care about their eggs and in time of difficulty carry them around in much the same way. The water was getting in even here, and turning up in rather odd places because of the

Library's strange gravitational effects. All the lower shelves had been cleared and relays of wizards and students were piling the volumes on every available table and dry shelf. The air was full of the sound of angry rustling pages, which almost drowned out the distant fury of the storm.

This was obviously upsetting the librarian, who was scurrying from wizard to wizard, tugging ineffectually at their robes and shouting "ook".

He spotted Cutangle and knuckled rapidly towards him. Granny had never seen an orang-outan before, but wasn't about to admit it, and remained quite calm in the face of a small potbellied man with extremely long arms and a size IZ skin on a size 8 body.

"Ook," it explained, "ooook."

"I expect so," said Cutangle shortly, and grabbed the nearest wizard, who was tottering under the weight of a dozen grimoires. The man stared at him as if he was a ghost, looked sideways at Granny, and dropped the books on the floor. The librarian winced.

"Archchancellor?" gasped the wizard, "you're alive? I mean -we heard you'd been spirited away by -" he looked at Granny again, "- I mean, we thought - Treatle told us -"

"Oook," said the librarian, shooing some pages back between their covers.

"Where are young Simon and the girl? What have you done with them?" Granny demanded.

"They - we put them over here," said the wizard, backing away. "Um -"

"Show us," said Cutangle. "And stop stuttering, man, you'd think you'd never seen a woman before."

The wizard swallowed hard and nodded vigorously.

"Certainly. And - I mean - please follow me - um -"

"You weren't going to say anything about the lore, were you?" asked Cutangle.

"Um - no, Archchancellor."

"Good."

They followed hard on his trodden-down heels as he scurried between the toiling wizards, most of whom stopped working to stare as Granny strode past.

"This is getting embarrassing," said Cutangle, out of the corner of his mouth. "I shall have to declare you an honorary wizard."

Granny stared straight ahead and her lips hardly moved.

"You do," she hissed, "and I will declare you an honorary witch."

Cutangle's mouth snapped shut.

Esk and Simon were lying on a table in one of the side readingrooms, with half a dozen wizards watching over them. They drew back nervously as the trio approached, with the librarian swinging along behind.

"I've been thinking," said Cutangle. "Surely it would be better to give the staff to Simon? He is a wizard, and -"

"Over my dead body," said Granny. "Yours, too. They're getting their power through him, do you want to give them more?"

Cutangle sighed. He had been admiring the staff, it was one of the best he had seen.

"Very well. You're right, of course."

He leaned down and laid the staff on Esk's sleeping form, and then stood back dramatically.

Nothing happened.

One of the wizards coughed nervously.

Nothing continued to happen.

The carvings on the staff appeared to be grinning.

"It's not working," said Cutangle, "is it?"

"Ook."

"Give it time," said Granny.

They gave it time. Outside the storm strode around the sky, trying to lift the lids off houses.

Granny sat down on a pile of books and rubbed her eyes. Cutangle's hands strayed towards his tobacco pocket. The wizard with the nervous cough was helped out of the room by a colleague.

"Ook," said the librarian.

"I know!" said Granny, so that Cutangle's half-rolled homemade shot out of his nerveless fingers in a shower of tobacco.

"What?"

"It's not finished!"

"What?"

"She can't use the staff, of course," said Granny, standing up.

"But you said she swept the floors with it and it protects her and -" Cutangle began.

"Nonono," said Granny. "That means the staff uses itself or it uses her, but she's never been able to use it, d'you see?"

Cutangle stared at the two quiet bodies. "She should be able to use it. It's a proper wizard's staff."

"Oh," said Granny. "So she's a proper wizard, is she?"

Cutangle hesitated.

"Well, of course not. You can't ask us to declare her a wizard. Where's the precedent?"

"The what?" asked Granny, sharply.

"It's never happened before."

"Lots of things have never happened before. We're only born once."

Cutangle gave her a look of mute appeal. "But it's against the I-"

He began to say "lore", but the word mumbled into silence.

"Where does it say it?" said Granny triumphantly. "Where does it say women can't be wizards?"

The following thoughts sped through Cutangle's mind:

. . . It doesn't say it anywhere, it says it everywhere.

. . . But young Simon seemed to say that everywhere is so much like nowhere that you can't really tell the difference .

. . . Do I want to be remembered as the first Archchancellor to allow women into the University? Still . . . I'd be remembered, that's for sure .

. . . She really is a rather impressive woman when she stands in that sort of way .

. . . That staff has got ideas of its own .

. . . There's a sort of sense to it .

. . . I would be laughed at .

. . . It might not work .

. . . It might work.

She couldn't trust them. But she had no choice.

Esk stared at the terrible faces peering down at her, and the lanky bodies, mercifully cloaked.

Her hands tingled.

In the shadow-world, ideas are real. The thought seemed to travel up her arms.

It was a buoyant sort of thought, a thought full of fizz. She laughed, and moved her hands apart, and the staff sparkled in her hands like solid electricity.

The Things started to chitter nervously and one or two at the back started to lurch away. Simon fell forward as his captors hastily let go, and he landed on his hands and knees in the sand.

"Use it!" he shouted. "That's it! They're frightened!"

Esk gave him a smile, and continued to examine the staff. For the first time she could see what the carvings actually were.

Simon snatched up the pyramid of the world and ran towards her.

"Come on!" he said. "They hate it!"

"Pardon?" said Esk.

"Use the staff," said Simon urgently, and reached out for it. "Hey! It bit me!"

"Sorry," said Esk. "What were we talking about?" She looked up and regarded the keening Things as it were for the first time.

"Oh, those. They only exist inside our heads. If we didn't believe in them, they wouldn't exist at all."

Simon looked around at them.

"I can't honestly say I believe you," he said.

"I think we should go home now," said Esk. "People will be worrying. "

She moved her hands together and the staff vanished, although for a moment her hands glowed as though they were cupped around a candle.

The Things howled. A few of them fell over.

"The important thing about magic is how you don't use it," said Esk, taking Simon's arm.

He stared at the crumbling figures around him, and grinned foolishly.

"You don't use it?" he queried.

"Oh, yes," said Esk, as they walked towards the Things. "Try it yourself."

She extended her hands, brought the staff out of the air, and offered it to him. He went to take it, then drew back his hand.

"Uh, no," he said, "I don't think it likes me much."

"I think it's all right if I give it to you. It can't really argue with that," said Esk.

"Where does it go?"

"It just becomes an idea of itself, I think."

He reached out his hand again and closed his fingers around the shining wood.

"Right," he said, and raised it in the classical revengeful wizard's pose. "I'll show them!"

"No, wrong."

"What do you mean, wrong? I've got the power!"

"They're sort of-reflections of us," said Esk. "You can't beat your reflections, they'll always be as strong as you are. That's why they draw nearer to you when you start using magic. And they don't get tired. They feed off magic, so you can't beat them with magic. No, the thing is . . . well, not using magic because you can't, that's no use at all. But not using magic because you can, that really upsets them. They hate the idea. If people stopped using magic they'd die."

The Things ahead of them fell over each other in their haste to back away.

Simon looked at the staff, then at Esk, then at the Things, then back at the staff.

"This needs a lot of thinking about," he said uncertainly. "I'd really like to work this out."

"I expect you'll do it very well."

"Because you're saying that the real power is when you go right through magic and out the other side."

"It works, though, doesn't it?"

They were alone on the cold plain now. The Things were distant stick-figures.

"I wonder if this is what they mean by sourcery?" said Simon.

I don't know. It might be."

"I'd really like to work this out," said Simon again, turning the staff over and over in his hands. "We could set up some experiments, you know, into deliberately not using magic. We could carefully not draw an octogram on the floor, and we could deliberately not call up all sorts of things, and - it makes me sweat just to think about it!"

"I'd like to think about how to get home," said Esk, looking down at the pyramid.

"Well, that is supposed to be my idea of the world. I should be able to find a way. How do you do this thing with the hands?"

He moved his hands together. The staff slid between them, the light glowing through his fingers for a moment, and then vanished. He grinned. "Right. Now all we have to do is look for the University . . . ."

Cutangle lit his third rollup from the stub of the second. This last cigarette owed a lot to the creative powers of nervous energy, and looked like a camel with the legs cut off.

He had already watched the staff lift itself gently from Esk and land on Simon.

Now it had floated up into the air again.

Other wizards had crowded into the room. The librarian was sitting under the table.

"If only we had some idea what is going on," said Cutangle. "It's the suspense I can't stand."

"Think positively, man," snapped Granny. "And put out that bloody cigarette, I can't imagine anyone wanting to come back to a room that smells like a fireplace."

As one man the assembled college of wizards turned their faces towards Cutangle, expectantly.

He took the smouldering mess out of his mouth and, with a glare that none of the assembled wizards cared to meet, trod it underfoot.

"Probably time I gave it up anyway," he said. "That goes for the rest of you, too. Worse than an ashpit in this place, sometimes."

Then he saw the staff. It was

The only way Cutangle could describe the effect was that it seemed to be going very fast while staying in exactly the same place.

Streamers of gas flared away from it and vanished, if they were gas. It blazed like a comet designed by an inept special effects man. Coloured sparks leapt out and disappeared somewhere.

It was also changing colour, starting with a dull red and then climbing through the spectrum until it was a painful violet. Snakes of white fire coruscated along its length.

There should be a word for words that sound like things would sound like if they made a noise, he thought. The word "glisten" does indeed gleam oily, and if there was ever a word that sounded exactly the way sparks look as they creep across burned paper, or the way the lights of cities would creep across the world if the whole of human civilisation was crammed into one night, then you couldn't do better than "coruscate".

He knew what would happen next.

"Look out," he whispered. "It's going to go -"

In total silence, in the kind of silence in fact that sucks in sounds and stifles them, the staff flashed into pure octarine along the whole of its length.

The eighth colour, produced by light falling through a strong magical field, blazed out through bodies and bookshelves and walls. Other colours blurred and ran together, as though the light was a glass of gin poured over the watercolour painting of the world. The clouds over the University glowed, twisted into fascinating and unexpected shapes, and streamed upwards.

An observer above the Disc would have seen a little patch of land near the Circle Sea sparkle like a jewel for several seconds, then wink out.

The silence of the room was broken by a wooden clatter as the staff dropped out of the air and bounced on the table.

Someone said "Ook", very faintly.

Cutangle eventually remembered how to use his hands and raised them to where he hoped his eyes would be. Everything had gone black.

"Is - anyone else there?" he said.

"Gods, you don't know how glad I am to hear you say that," said another voice. The silence was suddenly full of babble.

"Are we still where we were?"

"I don't know. Where were we?"

"Here, I think."

"Can you reach out?"

"Not unless I am quite certain about what I'm going to touch, my good man," said the unmistakable voice of Granny Weatherwax.

"Everyone try and reach out," said Cutangle, and choked down a scream as a hand like a warm leather glove closed around his ankle. There was a satisfied little "ook", which managed to convey relief, comfort and the sheer joy of touching a fellow human being or, in this case, anthropoid.

There was a scratch and then a blessed flare of red light as a wizard on the far side of the room lit a cigarette.

"Who did that?"

"Sorry, Archchancellor, force of habit."

"Smoke all you like, that man."

"Thank you, Archchancellor."

"I think I can see the outline of the door now," said another voice.

"Granny?"

"Yes, I can definitely see -"

"Esk?"

"I'm here, Granny."

"Can I smoke too, sir?"

"Is the boy with you?"

"Yes."

"Ook."

"I'm here."

"What's happening?"

"Everyone stop talking!"

Ordinary light, slow and easy on the eye, sidled back into the Library.

Esk sat up, dislodging the staff. It rolled under the table. She felt something slip over her eyes, and reached up for it.

"Just a moment," said Granny, darting forward. She gripped the girl's shoulders and peered into her eyes.

"Welcome back," she said, and kissed her.

Esk reached up and patted something hard on her head. She lifted it down to examine it.

It was a pointed hat, slightly smaller than Granny's, but bright blue with a couple of silver stars painted on it.

"A wizard hat?" she said.

Cutangle stepped forward.

"Ah, yes,"he said, and cleared his throat: "You see, we thought - it seemed - anyway, when we considered it -"

"You're a wizard," said Granny, simply. "The Archchancellor changed the lore. Quite a simple ceremony, really."

"There's the staff somewhere about here," said Cutangle. "I saw it fall down - oh."

He stood up with the staff in his hand, and showed it to Granny.

"I thought it had carvings on," he said. "This looks just like a stick." And that was a fact. The staff looked as menacing and potent as a piece of kindling.

Esk turned the hat around in her hands, in the manner of one who, opening the proverbial brightly-wrapped package, finds bath salts.

"It's very nice," she said uncertainly.

"Is that all you can say?" said Granny.

"It's pointed, too." Somehow being a wizard didn't feel any different from not being a wizard.

Simon leaned over.

"Remember," he said, "you've got to have been a wizard. Then you can start looking on the other side. Like you said."

Their eyes met, and they grinned.

Granny stared at Cutangle. He shrugged.

"Search me," he said. "What's happened to your stutter, boy?"

"Seems to have gone, sir," said Simon brightly. "Must have left it behind, somewhere."

The river was still brown and swollen but at least it resembled a river again.

It was unnaturally hot for late autumn, and across the whole of the lower part of Ankh-Morpork the steam rose from thousands of carpets and blankets put out to dry. The streets were filled with silt, which on the whole was an improvement - AnkhMorpork's impressive civic collection of dead dogs had been washed out to sea.

The steam also rose from the flagstones of the Archchancellor's personal verandah, and from the teapot on the table.

Granny lay back in an ancient cane chair and let the unseasonal warmth creep around her ankles. She idly watched a team of city ants, who had lived under the flagstones of the University for so long that the high levels of background magic had permanently altered their genes, anthandling a damp sugar lump down from the bowl on to a tiny trolley. Another group was erecting a matchstick gantry at the edge of the table.

Granny may or may not have been interested to learn that one of the ants was Drum Billet, who had finally decided to give Life another chance.

"They say," she said, "that if you can find an ant on Hogswatch Day it will be very mild for the rest of the winter."

"Who says that?" said Cutangle.

"Generally people who are wrong," said Granny. "I makes a note in my Almanack, see. I checks. Most things most people believe are wrong."

"Like `red sky at night, the city's alight'," said Cutangle. "And you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"I don't think that's what old dogs are for," said Granny. The sugar lump had reached the gantry now, and a couple of ants were attaching it to a microscopic block and tackle.

"I can't understand half the things Simon says," said Cutangle, "although some of the students get very excited about it.

"I understand what Esk says all right, I just don't believe it," said Granny. "Except the bit about wizards needing a heart."

"She said that witches need a head, too," said Cutangle. "Would you like a scone? A bit damp, I'm afraid."

"She told me that if magic gives people what they want, then not using magic can give them what they need," said Granny, her hand hovering over the plate.

"So Simon tells me. I don't understand it myself, magic's for using, not storing up. Go on, spoil yourself."

"Magic beyond magic," snorted Granny. She took the scone and spread jam on it. After a pause she spread cream on it too.

The sugar lump crashed to the flagstones and was immediately surrounded by another team of ants, ready to harness it to a long line of red ants enslaved from the kitchen garden.

Cutangle shifted uneasily in his seat, which creaked.

"Esmerelda," he began, "I've been meaning to ask -"

"No," said Granny.

"Actually I was going to say that we think we might allow a few more girls into the University. On an experimental basis. Once we get the plumbing sorted out," said Cutangle.

"That's up to you, of course."

"And, and, it occurred to me that since we seem destined to become a co-educational establishment, as it were, it seemed to me, that is -"

"Well?"

"If you might see your way clear to becoming, that is, whether you would accept a Chair."

He sat back. The sugar lump passed under his chair on matchstick rollers, the squeaking of the slavedriver ants just at the edge of hearing.

"Hmm," said Granny, "I don't see why not. I've always wanted one of those big wicker ones, you know, with the sort of sunshade bit on the top. If that's not too much trouble."

"That isn't exactly what I meant," said Cutangle, adding quickly, "although I'm sure that could be arranged. No, I mean, would you come and lecture the students? Once in a while?"

"What on?"

Cutangle groped for a subject.

"Herbs?" he hazarded. "We're not very good on herbs here. And headology. Esk told me a lot about headology. It sounds fascinating."

The sugar lump disappeared through a crack in a nearby wall with a final jerk. Cutangle nodded towards it.

"They're very heavy on the sugar," he said, "but we haven't got the heart to do anything about it."

Granny frowned, and then nodded across the haze over the city to the distant glitter of the snow on the Ramtops.

"It's a long way," she said. "I can't be keeping on going backwards and forwards at my time of life."

"We could buy you a much better broomstick," said Cutangle. "One you don't have to bump start. And you, you could have a flat here. And all the old clothes you can carry," he added, using the secret weapon. He had wisely invested in some conversation with Mrs Whitlow.

"Mmph," said Granny, "Silk?"

"Black and red," said Cutangle. An image of Granny in black and red silk trotted across his mind, and he bit heavily into his scone.

"And maybe we can bring some students out to your cottage in the summer," Cutangle went on, "for extra-mural studies."

"Who's Extra Muriel?"

"I mean, there's lots they can learn, I'm sure."

Granny considered this. Certainly the privy needed a good seeing-to before the weather got too warm, and the goat shed was ripe for the mucking-out by spring. Digging over the Herb bed was a chore, too. The bedroom ceiling was a disgrace, and some of the tiles needed fixing.

"Practical things?" she said, thoughtfully.

"Absolutely," said Cutangle.

"Mmph. Well, I'll think about it," said Granny, dimly aware that one should never go too far on a first date.

"Perhaps you would care to dine with me this evening and let me know?" said Cutangle, his eyes agleam.

"What's to eat?"

"Cold meat and potatoes." Mrs Whitlow had done her work well.

There was.

Esk and Simon went on to develop a whole new type of magic that no one could exactly understand but which nevertheless everyone considered very worthwhile and somehow comforting.

Perhaps more importantly, the ants used all the sugar lumps they could steal to build a small sugar pyramid in one of the hollow walls, in which, with great ceremony, they entombed the mummified body of a dead queen. On the wall of one tiny hidden chamber they inscribed, in insect hieroglyphs, the true secret of longevity.

They got it absolutely right and it would probably have important implications for the universe if it hadn't, next time the University flooded, been completely washed away.

The End

Mort

This is the bright candlelit room where the life-timers are stored – shelf upon shelf of them, squat hourglasses, one for every living person, pouring their fine sand from the future into the past. The accumulated hiss of the falling grains makes the room roar like the sea.

This is the owner of the room, stalking through it with a preoccupied air. His name is Death.

But not any Death. This is the Death whose particular sphere of operations is, well, not a sphere at all, but the Discworld, which is flat and rides on the back of four giant elephants who stand on the shell of the enormous star turtle Great A'Tuin, and which is bounded by a waterfall that cascades endlessly into space.

Scientists have calculated that the chance of anything so patently absurd actually existing are millions to one.

But magicians have calculated that million-to-one chances crop up nine times out of ten.

Death clicks across the black and white tiled floor on toes of bone, muttering inside his cowl as his skeletal fingers count along the rows of busy hourglasses.

Finally he finds one that seems to satisfy him, lifts it carefully from its shelf and carries it across to the nearest candle. He holds it so that the light lints off it, and stares at the little point of reflected brilliance.

The steady gaze from those twinkling eye-sockets encompasses the world turtle, sculling through the deeps of space, carapace scarred by comets and pitted by meteors. One day even Great A'Tuin will die, Death knows; now, that *would* be a challenge.

But the focus of his gaze dives onwards towards the blue-green magnificence of the Disc itself, turning slowly under its tiny orbiting sun.

Now it curves away towards the great mountain range called the Ramtops. The Ramtops are full of deep valleys and unexpected crags and considerably more geography than they know what to do with. They have their own peculiar weather, full of shrapnel rain and whiplash winds and permanent thunder-storms. Some people say it's all because the Ramtops are the home of old, wild magic. Mind you, some people will say anything.

Death blinks, adjusts for depth of vision. Now he sees the grassy country on the turnwise slopes of the mountains.

Now he sees a particular hillside.

Now he sees a field.

Now he sees a boy, running.

Now he watches.

Now, in a voice like lead slabs being dropped on granite, he says: YES.

There was no doubt that there was something magical in the soil of that hilly, broken area which – because of the strange tint that it gave to the local flora – was known as the octarine grass country. For example, it was one of the few places on the Disc where plants produced reannual varieties.

Reannuals are plants that grow backwards in time. You sow the seed this year and they grow last year.

Mort's family specialised in distilling the wine from reannual grapes. These were very powerful and much sought after by fortune-tellers, since of course they enabled them to see the future. The only snag was that you got the hangover the morning *before,* and had to drink a lot to get over it.

Reannual growers tended to be big, serious men, much given to introspection and close examination of the calendar. A farmer who neglects to sow ordinary seeds only loses the crop, whereas anyone who forgets to sow seeds of a crop that has already been harvested twelve months before risks disturbing the entire fabric of causality, not to mention acute embarrassment.

It was also acutely embarrassing to Mort's family that the youngest son was not at all serious and had about the same talent for horticulture that you would find in a dead starfish. It wasn't that he was unhelpful, but he had the land of vague, cheerful helpfulness that serious men soon learn to dread. There was something infectious, possibly even fatal, about it. He was tall, red-haired and freckled, with the sort of body that seems to be only marginally under its owner's control; it appeared to have been built out of knees.

On this particular day it was hurtling across the high fields, waving its hands and yelling.

Mort's father and uncle watched it disconsolately from the stone wall.

'What I don't understand,' said father Lezek, 'is that the birds don't even fly away. I'd fly away, if I saw it coining towards me.'

'Ah. The human body's a wonderful thing. I mean, his legs go all over the place but there's a fair turn of speed there.'

Mort reached the end of a furrow. An overfull woodpigeon lurched slowly out of his way.

'His heart's in the right place, mind,' said Lezek, carefully.

'Ah. 'Course, 'tis the rest of him that isn't.'

'He's clean about the house. Doesn't eat much,' said Lezek.

'No, I can see that.'

Lezek looked sideways at his brother, who was staring fixedly at the sky.

'I did hear you'd got a place going up at your farm, Hamesh,' he said.

'Ah. Got an apprentice in, didn't I?'

'Ah,' said Lezek gloomily, 'when was that, then?'

'Yesterday,' said his brother, lying with rattlesnake speed. 'All signed and sealed. Sorry. Look, I got nothing against young Mort, see, he's as nice a boy as you could wish to meet, it's just that —'

'I know, I know,' said Lezek. 'He couldn't find his arse with both hands.'

They stared at the distant figure. It had fallen over. Some pigeons had waddled over to inspect it.

'He's not stupid, mind,' said Hamesh. 'Not what you'd call stupid.'

'There's a brain there all right,' Lezek conceded. 'Sometimes he starts thinking so hard you has to hit him round the head to get his attention. His granny taught him to read, see. I reckon it overheated his mind.'

Mort had got up and tripped over his robe.

'You ought to set him to a trade,' said Hamesh, reflectively. 'The priesthood, maybe. Or wizardry. They do a lot of reading, wizards.'

They looked at each other. Into both their minds stole an inkling of what Mort might be capable of if he got his well-meaning hands on a book of magic.

'All right,' said Hamesh hurriedly. 'Something else, then. There must be lots of things he could turn his hand to.'

'He starts thinking too much, that's the trouble,' said Lezek. 'Look at him now. You don't think about how to scare birds, you just does it. A normal boy, I mean.'

Hamesh scratched his chin thoughtfully.

'It could be someone else's problem,' he said.

Lezek's expression did not alter, but there was a subtle change around his eyes.

'How do you mean?' he said.

'There's the hiring fair at Sheepridge next week. You set him as a prentice, see, and his new master'll have the job of knocking him into shape. 'Tis the law. Get him indentured, and 'tis binding.'

Lezek looked across the field at his son, who was examining a rock.

'I wouldn't want anything to happen to him, mind,' he said doubtfully. 'We're quite fond of him, his mother and me. You get used to people.'

'It'd be for his own good, you'll see. Make a man of him.'

'Ah. Well. There's certainly plenty of raw material,' sighed Lezek.

Mort was getting interested in the rock. It had curly shells in it, relics of the early days of the world when the Creator had made creatures out of stone, no-one knew why.

Mort was interested in lots of things. Why people's teeth fitted together so neatly, for example. He'd given that one a lot of thought. Then there was the puzzle of why the sun came out during the day, instead of at night when the light would come in useful. He knew the standard explanation, which somehow didn't seem satisfying.

In short, Mort was one of those people who are more dangerous than a bag full of rattlesnakes. He was determined to discover the underlying logic behind the universe.

Which was going to be hard, because there wasn't one. The Creator had a lot of remarkably good ideas when he put the world together, but making it understandable hadn't been one of them.

Tragic heroes always moan when the gods take an interest in them, but it's the people the gods ignore who get the really tough deals.

His father was yelling at him, as usual. Mort threw the rock at a pigeon, which was almost too full to lurch out of the way, and wandered back across the field.

And that was why Mort and his father walked down through the mountains into Sheepridge on Hogswatch Eve, with Mort's rather sparse possessions in a sack on the back of a donkey. The town wasn't much more than four sides to a cobbled square, lined with shops that provided all the service industry of the farming community.

After five minutes Mort came out of the tailors wearing a loose fitting brown garment of imprecise function, which had been understandably unclaimed by a previous owner and had plenty of room for him to grow, on the assumption that he would grow into a nineteen-legged elephant.

His father regarded him critically.

'Very nice,' he said, 'for the money.'

'It itches,' said Mort. 'I think there's *things* in here with me.'

There's thousands of lads in the world'd be very thankful for a nice warm —' Lezek paused, and gave up – 'garment like that, my lad.'

'I could share it with them?' Mort said hopefully.

'You've got to look smart,' said Lezek severely. 'You've got to make an impression, stand out in the crowd.'

There was no doubt about it. He would. They set out among the throng crowding the square, each listening to his own thoughts. Usually Mort enjoyed visiting the town, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere and strange dialects from villages as far away as five, even ten miles, but this time he felt unpleasantly apprehensive, as if he could remember something that hadn't happened yet.

The fair seemed to work like this: men looking for work stood in ragged lines in the centre of the square. Many of them sported little symbols in their hats to tell the world the kind of work they were trained in – shepherds wore a wisp of wool, carters a hank of horsehair, interior decorators a strip of rather interesting hessian wallcovering, and so on.

The boys seeking apprenticeships were clustered on the Hub side of the square.

'You just go and stand there, and someone comes and offers you an apprenticeship,' said Lezek, his voice trimmed with uncertainty. 'If they like the look of you, that is.'

'How do they do that?' said Mort.

'Well,' said Lezek, and paused. Hamesh hadn't explained about this bit. He drew on his limited knowledge of the marketplace, which was restricted to livestock sales, and ventured, 'I suppose they count your teeth and that. And make sure you don't wheeze and your feet are all right. I shouldn't let on about the reading, it unsettles people.'

'And then what?' said Mort.

'Then you go and learn a trade,' said Lezek.

'What trade in particular?'

'Well . . . carpentry is a good one,' Lezek hazarded. 'Or thievery. Someone's got to do it.'

Mort looked at his feet. He was a dutiful son, when he remembered, and if being an apprentice was what was expected of him then he was determined to be a good one. Carpentry didn't sound very promising, though – wood had a stubborn life of its own, and a tendency to split. And official thieves were rare in the Ramtops, where people weren't rich enough to afford them.

'All right,' he said eventually, 'I'll go and give it a try. But what happens if I don't get prenticed?'

Lezek scratched his head.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I expect you just wait until the end of the fair. At midnight. I suppose.'

And now midnight approached.

A light frost began to crisp the cobblestones. In the ornamental clock tower that overlooked the square a couple of delicately-carved little automatons whirred out of trapdoors in the clockface and struck the quarter hour.

Fifteen minutes to midnight. Mort shivered, but the crimson fires of shame and stubbornness flared up inside him, hotter than the slopes of Hell. He blew on his fingers for something to do and stared up at the freezing sky, trying to avoid the stares of the few stragglers among what remained of the fair.

Most of the stallkeepers had packed up and gone. Even the hot meat pie man had stopped crying his wares and, with no regard for personal safety, was eating one.

The last of Mort's fellow hopefuls had vanished hours ago. He was a wall-eyed young man with a stoop and a running nose, and Sheepridge's one licensed beggar had pronounced him to be ideal aterial. The lad on the other side of Mort had gone off to be a toymaker. One by one they had trooped off – the masons, the farriers, the assassins, the mercers, coopers, hoodwinkers and ploughmen. In a few minutes it would be the new

year and a hundred boys would be starting out hopefully on their careers, new worthwhile lives of useful service rolling out in front of them.

Mort wondered miserably why he hadn't been picked. He'd tried to look respectable, and had looked all prospective masters squarely in the eye to impress them with his excellent nature and extremely likeable qualities. This didn't seem to have the right effect.

'Would you like a hot meat pie?' said his father.

'No.'

'He's selling them cheap.'

'No. Thank you.'

'Oh.'

Lezek hesitated.

'I could ask the man if he wants an apprentice,' he said, helpfully. 'Very reliable, the catering trade.'

'I don't think he does,' said Mort.

'No, probably not,' said Lezek. 'Bit of a one-man business, I expect. He's gone now, anyway. Tell you what, I'll save you a bit of mine.'

'I don't actually feel very hungry, dad.'

'There's hardly any gristle.'

'No. But thanks all the same.'

'Oh.' Lezek deflated a little. He danced about a bit to stamp some life back into his feet, and whistled a few tuneless bars between his teeth. He felt he ought to say something, to offer some kind of advice, to point out that life had its ups and downs, to put his arm around his son's shoulder and talk expansively about the problems of growing up, to indicate – in short – that the world is a funny old lace where one should never, metaphorically speaking, be so proud as to turn down the offer of a perfectly good hot meat pie.

They were alone now. The frost, the last one of the year, tightened its grip on the stones.

High in the tower above them a cogged wheel went *clonk*, tripped a lever, released a ratchet and let a heavy lead weight drop down. There was a dreadful metallic wheezing noise and the trapdoors in the clock face slid open, releasing the clockwork men. Swinging their hammers jerkily, as if they were afflicted with robotic arthritis, they began to ring in the new day.

'Well, that's it,' said Lezek, hopefully. They'd have to find somewhere to sleep – Hogswatch-night was no time to be walking in the mountains. Perhaps there was a stable somewhere. . . .

'It's not midnight until the last stroke,' said Mort, distantly.

Lezek shrugged. The sheer strength of Mort's obstinacy was defeating him.

'All right,' he said. 'We'll wait, then.'

And then they heard the clip-clop of hooves, which boomed rather more loudly around the chilly square than common acoustics should really allow. In fact clip-clop was an astonishingly inaccurate word for the kind of noise which rattled around Mort's head;

clip-clop suggested a rather jolly little pony, quite possibly wearing a straw hat with holes cut out for its ears. An edge to *this* sound made it very clear that straw hats weren't an option.

The horse entered the square by the Hub road, steam curling off its huge damp white flanks and sparks striking up from the cobbles beneath it. It trotted proudly, like a war charger. It was definitely not wearing a straw hat.

The tall figure on its back was wrapped up gainst the cold. When the horse reached the centre of the square the rider dismounted, slowly, and fumbled with something behind the saddle. Eventually he – or she – produced a nosebag, fastened it over the horse's ears, and gave it a friendly pat on the neck.

The air took on a thick, greasy feel, and the deep shadows around Mort became edged with blue and purple rainbows. The rider strode towards him, black cloak billowing and feet making little clicking sounds on the cobbles. They were the only noises – silence clamped down on the square like great drifts of cotton wool.

The impressive effect was rather spoilt by a patch of ice.

OH, BUGGER.

It wasn't exactly a voice. The words were there all right, but they arrived in Mort's head without bothering to pass through his ears.

He rushed forward to help the fallen figure, and found himself grabbing hold of a hand that was nothing more than polished bone, smooth and rather yellowed like an old billiard ball. The figure's hood fell back, and a naked skull turned its empty eyesockets towards him.

Not quite empty, though. Deep within them, as though they were windows looking across the gulfs of space, were two tiny blue stars.

It occurred to Mort that he ought to feel horrified, so he was slightly shocked to find that he wasn't. It was a skeleton sitting in front of him, rubbing its knees and grumbling, but it was a live one, curiously impressive but not, for some strange reason, very f rightening.

THANK YOU, BOY, said the skull. WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

'Uh,' said Mort, 'Mortimer . . . sir. They call me Mort.'

WHAT A COINCIDENCE, said the skull. HELP ME UP, PLEASE.

The figure rose unsteadily, brushing itself down. Now Mort could see there was a heavy belt around its waist, from which was slung a white-handled sword.

'I hope you are not hurt, sir,' he said politely.

The skull grinned. Of course, Mort thought, it hasn't much of a choice.

NO HARM DONE, I AM SURE. The skull looked around and seemed to see Lezek, who appeared to be frozen to the spot, for the first time. Mort thought an explanation was called for.

'My father,' he said, trying to move protectively in front of Exhibit A without causing any offence. 'Excuse me, sir, but are you Death?'

CORRECT. FULL MARKS FOR OBSERVATION, THAT BOY.

Mort swallowed.

'My father is a good man,' he said. He thought for a while, and added, 'Quite good. I'd rather you left him alone, if it's all the same to you. I don't know what you have done to him, but I'd like you to stop it. No offence meant.'

Death stepped back, his skull on one side.

I HAVE MERELY PUT US OUTSIDE TIME FOR A MOMENT, he said. HE WILL SEE AND HEAR NOTHING THAT DISTURBS HIM. NO, BOY, IT WAS YOU I CAME FOR.

'Me?'

YOU ARE HERE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT?

Light dawned on Mort. 'You are looking for an *apprentice*?' he said.

The eyesockets turned towards him, their actinic pinpoints flaring.

OF COURSE.

Death waved a bony hand. There was a wash of purple light, a sort of visible 'pop', and Lezek unfroze. Above his head the clockwork automatons got on with the job of proclaiming midnight, as Time was allowed to come creeping back.

Lezek blinked.

'Didn't see you there for a minute,' he said. 'Sorry – mind must have been elsewhere.'

I WAS OFFERING YOUR BOY A POSITION, Said Death. I TRUST THAT MEETS WITH YOUR APPROVAL?

'What was your job again?' said Lezek, talking to a black-robed skeleton without showing even a flicker of surprise.

I USHER SOULS INTO THE NEXT WORLD, Said Death.

'Ah,' said Lezek, 'of course, sorry, should have guessed from the clothes. Very necessary work, very steady. Established business?'

I'HAVE BEEN GOING FOR SOME TIME, YES, said Death.

'Good. Good. Never really thought of it as a job for Mort, you know, but it's good work, good work, always very reliable. What's your name?'

DEATH.

'Dad —' said Mort urgently.

'Can't say I recognise the firm,' said Lezek. 'Where are you based exactly?'

FROM THE UTTERMOST DEPTHS OF THE SEA TO THE HEIGHTS WHERE EVEN THE EAGLE MAY NOT GO, said Death.

'That's fair enough,' nodded Lezek. 'Well, I —'

'Dad —' said Mort, pulling at his father's coat.

Death laid a hand on Mort's shoulder.

WHAT YOUR FATHER SEES AND HEARS IS NOT WHAT YOU SEE AND HEAR, he said. DO NOT WORRY HIM. DO YOU THINK HE WOULD WANT TO SEE ME – IN THE FLESH, AS IT WERE?

'But you're Death,' said Mort. 'You go around killing people!'

I? KILL? said Death, obviously offended. CERTAINLY NOT. PEOPLE *GET* KILLED, BUT THAT'S THEIR BUSINESS. I JUST TAKE OVER FROM THEN ON. AFTER ALL, IT'D BE A BLOODY STUPID WORLD IF PEOPLE GOT KILLED WITHOUT DYING, WOULDN'T IT?

'Well, yes —' said Mort, doubtfully.

Mort had never heard the word 'intrigued'. It was not in regular use in the family vocabulary. But a spark in his soul told him that here was something weird and fascinating and not entirely horrible, and that if he let this moment go he'd spend the rest of his life regretting it. And he remembered the humiliations of the day, and the long walk back home. . . .

'Er,' he began, 'I don't have to die to get the job, do I?'

BEING DEAD IS NOT COMPULSORY.

'And . . . the bones . . .?'

NOT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO.

Mort breathed out again. It had been starting to prey on his mind.

'If father says it's all right,' he said.

They looked at Lezek, who was scratching his beard.

'How do you feel about this, Mort?' he said, with the brittle brightness of a fever victim. 'It's not everyone's idea of an occupation. It's not what I had in mind, I admit. But they do say that undertaking is an honoured profession. It's your choice.'

'Undertaking?' said Mort. Death nodded, and raised his finger to his lips in a conspiratorial gesture.

'It's interesting,' said Mort slowly. 'I think I'd like to try it.'

'Where did you say your business was?' said Lezek. 'Is it far?'

NO FURTHER THAN THE THICKNESS OF A SHADOW, aid Death. WHERE THE FIRST PRIMAL CELL WAS, THERE WAS I ALSO. WHERE MAN IS, THERE AM I.

WHEN THE LAST LIFE CRAWLS UNDER FREEZING STARS, THERE WILL I BE.

'Ah,' said Lezek, 'you get about a bit, then.' He looked puzzled, like a man struggling to remember something important, and then obviously gave up.

Death patted him on the shoulder in a friendly fashion and turned to Mort.

HAVE YOU ANY POSSESSIONS, BOY?

'Yes,' said Mort, and then remembered. 'Only I think I left them in the shop. Dad, we left the sack in the clothes shop!'

'It'll be shut,' said Lezek. 'Shops don't open on Hogswatch Day. You'll have to go back the day after tomorrow – well, tomorrow now.'

IT is OF LITTLE ACCOUNT, said Death. WE WILL LEAVE NOW. NO DOUBT I WILL HAVE BUSINESS HERE SOON ENOUGH.

'I hope you'll be able to drop in and see us soon,' said Lezek. He seemed to be struggling with his thoughts.

'I'm not sure that will be a good idea,' said Mort.

'Well, goodbye, lad,' said Lezek. 'You're to do what you're told, you understand? And – excuse me, sir, do you have a son?'

Death looked rather taken aback.

NO, he said, I HAVE NO SONS.

'I'll just have a last word with my boy, if you've no objection.'

THEN I WILL GO AND SEE TO THE HORSE, said Death, with more than normal tact.

Lezek put his arm around his son's shoulders, with some difficulty in view of their difference in height, and gently propelled him across the square.

'Mort, you know your uncle Hemesh told me about this prenticing business?' he whispered.

'Yes?'

'Well, he told me something else,' the old man confided. 'He said it's not unknown for an apprentice to inherit his master's business. What do you think of that, then?'

'Uh. I'm not sure,' said Mort.

'It's worth thinking about,' said Lezek.

'I *am* thinking about it, father.'

'Many a young lad has started out that way, Hemesh said. He makes himself useful, earns his master's confidence, and, well, if there's any daughters in the house . . . did Mr, er, Mr say anything about daughters?'

'Mr who?' said Mort.

'Mr . . . your new master.'

'Oh. Him. No. No, I don't think so,' said Mort slowly. 'I don't think he's the marrying type.'

'Many a keen young man owes his advancement to his nuptials,' said Lezek.

'He does?'

'Mort, I don't think you're really listening.'

'What?'

Lezek came to a halt on the frosty cobbles and spun the boy around to face him.

'You're really going to have to do better than this,' he said. 'Don't you understand, boy? If you're going to amount to anything in this world then you've got to *listen*. I'm your father telling you these things.'

Mort looked down at his father's face. He wanted to say a lot of things: he wanted to say how much he loved him, how worried he was; he wanted to ask what his father really

thought he'd just seen and heard. He wanted to say that he felt as though he stepped on a molehill and found that it was really a volcano. He wanted to ask what 'nuptials' meant.

What he actually said was, 'Yes. Thank you. I'd better be going. I'll try and write you a letter.'

'There's bound to be someone passing who can read it to us,' said Lezek. 'Goodbye, Mort.' He blew his nose.

'Goodbye, dad. I'll come back to visit,' said Mort. Death coughed tactfully, although it sounded like the pistol-crack of an ancient beam full of death-watch beetle.

WE HAD BETTER BE GOING, he said. HOP UP, MORT.

As Mort scrambled behind the ornate silver saddle Death leaned down and shook Lezek's hand.

THANK YOU, he said.

'He's a good lad at heart,' said Lezek. 'A bit dreamy, that's all. I suppose we were all young once.'

Death considered this.

No, he said, I DON'T THINK so.

He gathered up the reins and turned the horse towards the Rim road. From his perch behind the black-robed figure Mort waved desperately.

Lezek waved back. Then, as the horse and its two riders disappeared from view, he lowered his hand and looked at it. The handshake . . . it had felt strange. But, somehow, he couldn't remember exactly why.

Mort listened to the clatter of stone under the horse's hooves. Then there was the soft thud of packed earth as they reached the road, and then there was nothing at all.

He looked down and saw the landscape spread out below him, the night etched with moonlight silver. If he fell off, the only thing he'd hit was air.

He redoubled his grip on the saddle.

Then Death said, ARE YOU HUNGRY, BOY?

'Yes, sir.' The words came straight from his stomach without the intervention of his brain.

Death nodded, and reined in the horse. It stood on the air, the great circular panorama of the Disc glittering below it. Here and there a city was an range glow; in the warm seas nearer the Rim there was a hint of phosphorescence. In some of thedeep valleys the trapped daylight of the Disc, which is slow and slightly heavy[1], was evaporating like silver steam.

[1] Practically anything can go faster than Disc light, which is lazy and tame, unlike ordinary light. The only thing known to go faster than ordinary light is monarchy, according to the philosopher Ly Tin Wheedle. He reasoned like this: you can't have more than one king, and tradition demands that there is no gap between kings, so when a king dies the succession must therefore pass to the heir instantaneously. Presumably, he said, there must be some elementary particles – kingons, or possibly queons – that do this job, but of course succession sometimes fails if, in mid-flight, they strike an anti-particle, or republicon. His ambitious plans to use his discovery to send messages, involving the careful torturing of a small king in order to modulate the signal, were never fully expounded because, at that point, the bar closed.

But it was outshone by the glow that rose towards the stars from the Rim itself. Vast streamers of light shimmered and glittered across the night. Great golden walls surrounded the world.

'It's beautiful,' said Mort softly. 'What is it?'

THE SUN is UNDER THE Disc, said Death.

'Is it like this every night?'

EVERY NIGHT, said Death. NATURE'S LIKE THAT.

'Doesn't anyone know?'

ME. You. THE GODS. GOOD, IS IT?

'Gosh!'

Death leaned over the saddle and looked down at the kingdoms of the world.

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, he Said, BUT I COULD MURDER A CURRY.

Although it was well after midnight the twin city of Ankh-Morpork was roaring with life. Mort had thought Sheepridge looked busy, but compared to the turmoil of the street around him the town was, well, a morgue.

Poets have tried to describe Ankh-Morpork. They have failed. Perhaps it's the sheer zestful vitality of the place, or maybe it's just that a city with a million inhabitants and no

sewers is rather robust for poets, who prefer daffodils and no wonder. So let's just say that Ankh-Morpork is as full of life as an old cheese on a hot day, as loud as a curse in a cathedral, as bright as an oil slick, as colourful as a bruise and as full of activity, industry, bustle and sheer exuberant busyness as a dead dog on a termite mound.

There were temples, their doors wide open, filling the streets with the sounds of gongs, cymbals and, in the case of some of the more conservative fundamentalist religions, the brief screams of the victims. There were shops whose strange wares spilled out on to the pavement. There seemed to be rather a lot of friendly young ladies who couldn't afford many clothes. There were flares, and jugglers, and assorted sellers of instant transcendence.

And Death stalked through it all. Mort had half expected him to pass through the crowds like smoke, but it wasn't like that at all. The simple truth was that wherever Death walked, people just drifted out of the way.

It didn't work like that for Mort. The crowds that gently parted for his new master closed again just in time to get in his way. His toes got trodden on, his ribs were bruised, people kept trying to sell him unpleasant spices and suggestively-shaped vegetables, and a rather elderly lady said, against all the evidence, that he looked a well set-up young lad who would like a nice time.

He thanked her very much, and said that he hoped he was having a nice time already.

Death reached the street corner, the light from the flares raising brilliant highlights on the olished dome of his skull, and sniffed the air. A drunk staggered up, and without quite realising why made a slight detour in his erratic passage for no visible reason. THIS IS THE CITY, BOY, said Death. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

'It's very big,' said Mort, uncertainly. 'I mean, why does everyone want to live all squeezed together like this?'

Death shrugged.

I LIKE IT, he said. IT'S FULL OF LIFE.

'Sir?'

YES?

'What's a curry?'

The blue fires flared deep in the eyes of Death.

HAVE YOU EVER BITTEN A RED-HOT ICE CUBE?

'No, sir,' said Mort.

CURRY'S LIKE THAT.

'Sir?'

YES?

Mort swallowed hard. 'Excuse me, sir, but my dad said, if I don't understand, I was to ask questions, sir?'

VERY COMMENDABLE, said Death. He set off down a side street, the crowds parting in front of him like random molecules.

'Well, sir, I can't help noticing, the point is, well, the plain fact of it, sir, is —'

OUT WITH IT, BOY.

'How can you eat things, sir?'

Death pulled up short, so that Mort walked into him. When the boy started to speak he waved him into silence. He appeared to be listening to something.

THERE ARE TIMES, YOU KNOW, he said, half to himself, WHEN I GET REALLY UPSET.

He turned on one heel and set off down an alleyway at high speed, his cloak flying out behind him. The alley wound between dark walls and sleeping buildings, not so much a thoroughfare as a meandering gap.

Death stopped by a decrepit water butt and plunged his arm in at full length, bringing out a small sack with a brick tied to it. He drew his sword, a line of flickering blue fire in the darkness, and sliced through the string.

I GET VERY ANGRY INDEED, he said. He upended the sack and Mort watched the pathetic scraps of sodden fur slide out, to lie in their spreading puddle on the cobbles. Death reached out with his white fingers and stroked them gently.

After a while something like grey smoke curled up from the kittens and formed three small cat-shaped clouds in the air. They billowed occasionally, unsure of their shape, and blinked at Mort with puzzled grey eyes. When he tried to touch one his hand went straight through it, and tingled.

YOU DON'T SEE PEOPLE AT THEIR BEST IN THIS JOB, aid Death. He blew on a kitten, sending it gently tumbling. Its miaow of complaint sounded as though it had come from a long way away via a tin tube.

They're souls, aren't they?' said Mort. 'What do people look like?'

PEOPLE SHAPED, said Death. IT'S BASICALLY ALL OWN TO THE CHARACTERISTIC MORPHOGENETIC FIELD.

He sighed like the swish of a shroud, picked the kittens out of the air, and carefully stowed them away somewhere in the dark recesses of his robe. He stood up.

CURRY TIME, he said.

It was crowded in the *Curry Gardens* on the corner of God Street and Blood Alley, but only with the cream of society – at least, with those people who are found floating on the top and who, therefore, it's wisest to call the cream. Fragrant bushes planted among the tables nearly concealed the basic smell of the city itself, which has been likened to the nasal equivalent of a foghorn.

Mort ate ravenously, but curbed his curiosity and didn't watch to see how Death could possibly eat anything. The food was there to start with and wasn't there later, so presumably something must have happened in between. Mort got the feeling that Death wasn't really used to all this but was doing it to put him at his ease, like an elderly bachelor uncle who has been landed with his nephew for a holiday and is terrified of getting it wrong.

The other diners didn't take much notice, even when Death leaned back and lit a rather fine pipe. Someone with smoke curling out of their eye sockets takes some ignoring, but everyone managed it.

'Is it magic?' said Mort.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? said Death. AM I REALLY HERE, BOY?

'Yes,' said Mort slowly. 'I . . . I've watched people. They look at you but they don't see you, I think. You do something to their minds.'

Death shook his head.

THEY DO IT ALL THEMSELVES, he said. THERE'S NO MAGIC. PEOPLE CANT SEE ME, THEY SIMPLY WONT ALLOW THEMSELVES TO DO IT. UNTIL IT'S TIME, OF COURSE. WIZARDS CAN SEE ME, AND CATS. BUT YOUR AVERAGE HUMAN . . . NO, NEVER. He blew a smoke ring at the sky, and added, STRANGE BUT TRUE.

Mort watched the smoke ring wobble into the sky and drift away towards the river.

'*I* can see you,' he said.

THAT'S DIFFERENT.

The Klatchian waiter arrived with the bill, and placed it in front of Death. The man was squat and brown, with a hairstyle like a coconut gone nova, and his round face creased into a puzzled frown when Death nodded politely to him. He shook his head like someone trying to dislodge soap from his ears, and walked away.

Death reached into the depths of his robe and brought out a large leather bag full of assorted copper coinage, most of it blue and green with age. He inspected the bill carefully. Then he counted out a dozen coins.

COME, he said, standing up. WE MUST GO.

Mort trotted along behind him as he stalked out of the garden and into the street, which was still fairly busy even though there were the first suggestions of dawn on the horizon.

'What are we going to do now?'

BUY YOU SOME NEW CLOTHES.

'These were new today – yesterday, I mean.' REALLY?

'Father said the shop was famous for its budget clothing,' said Mort, running to keep up.

IT CERTAINLY ADDS A NEW TERROR TO POVERTY.

They turned into a wider street leading into a more affluent part of the city (the torches were closer together and the middens further apart). There were no stalls and alley corner traders here, but proper buildings with signs hanging outside. They weren't mere shops, they were emporia; they had purveyors in them, and chairs, and spittoons. Most of them were open even at this time of night, because the average Ankhian trader can't sleep for thinking of the money he's not making.

'Doesn't anyone ever go to bed around here?' said Mort.

THIS IS A CITY, said Death, and pushed open the door of a clothing store. When they came out twenty minutes later Mort was wearing a neatly— itting black robe with faint silver embroidery, and the shopkeeper was looking at a handful of antique copper coins and wondering precisely how he came to have them.

'How do you get all those coins?' asked Mort.

IN PAIRS.

An all-night barber sheared Mort's hair into the latest fashion among the city's young bloods while Death relaxed in the next chair, humming to himself. Much to his surprise, he felt in a good humour.

In fact after a while he pushed his hood back and glanced up at the barber's apprentice, who tied a towel around his neck in that unseeing, hypnotised way that Mort was coming to recognise, and said, A SPLASH OF TOILET WATER AND A POLISH, MY GOOD MAN.

An elderly wizard having a beard-trim on the other side stiffened when he heard those sombre, leaden tones and swung around. He blanched and muttered a few protective incantations after Death turned, very slowly for maximum effect, and treated him to a grin.

A few minutes later, feeling rather self-conscious and chilly around the ears, Mort was heading back towards the stables where Death had lodged his horse. He tried an experimental swagger; he felt his new suit and haircut rather demanded it. It didn't quite work.

Mort awoke.

He lay looking at the ceiling while his memory did a fast-rewind and the events of the previous day crystallised in his mind like little ice cubes.

He couldn't have met Death. He couldn't have eaten a meal with a skeleton with glowing blue eyes. It had to be a weird dream. He couldn't have ridden pillion on a great white horse that had cantered up into the sky and then went . . .

. . . where?

The answer flowed into his mind with all the inevitability of a tax demand.

Here.

His searching hands reached up to his cropped hair, and down to sheets of some smooth slippery material. It was much finer than the wool he was used to at home, which was coarse and always smelled of sheep; it felt like warm, dry ice.

He swung out of the bed hastily and stared around the room.

First of all it was large, larger than the entire house back home, and dry, dry as old tombs under ancient deserts. The air tasted as though it had been cooked for hours and then allowed to cool. The carpet under his feet was deep enough to hide a tribe of pygmies and crackled electrically as he padded through it. And everything had been designed in shades of purple and black.

He looked down at his own body, which was wearing a long white nightshirt. His clothes had been neatly folded on a chair by the bed; the chair, he couldn't help noticing, was delicately carved with a skull-and-bones motif.

Mort sat down on the edge of the bed and began to dress, his mind racing.

He eased open the heavy oak door, and felt oddly disappointed when it failed to creak ominously.

There was a bare wooden corridor outside, with big yellow candles set in holders on the far wall. Mort crept out and sidled along the boards until he reached a staircase. He negotiated that successfully without anything ghastly happening, arriving in what looked like an entrance hall full of doors. There were a lot of funereal drapes here, and a

grandfather clock with a tick like the heartbeat of a mountain. There was an umbrella stand beside it.

It had a scythe in it.

Mort looked around at the doors. They looked important. Their arches were carved in the now-familiar bones motif. He went to try the nearest one, and a voice behind him said:

'You mustn't go in there, boy.'

It took him a moment to realise that this wasn't a voice in his head, but real human words that had been formed by a mouth and transferred to his ears by a convenient system of air compression, as nature intended. Nature had gone to a lot of trouble for six words with a slightly petulant tone to them.

He turned around. There was a girl there, about his own height and perhaps a few years older than him. She had silver hair, and eyes with a pearly sheen to them, and the kind of interesting but impractical long dress that tends to be worn by tragic heroines who clasp single roses to their bosom while gazing soulfully at the moon. Mort had never heard the phrase 'Pre-Raphaelite', which was a pity because it would have been almost the right description. However, such girls tend to be on the translucent, consumptive side, whereas this one had a slight suggestion of too many chocolates.

She stared at him with her head on one side, and one foot tapping irritably on the floor. Then she reached out quickly and pinched him sharply on the arm.

'Ow!'

'Hmm. So you're really real,' she said. 'What's your name, boy?'

'Mortimer. They call me Mort,' he said, rubbing his elbow. 'What did you do that for?'

'I shall call you Boy,' she said. 'And I don't really have to explain myself, you understand, but if you must know I thought you were dead. You *look* dead.'

Mort said nothing.

'Lost your tongue?'

Mort was, in fact, counting to ten.

'I'm not dead,' he said eventually. 'At least, I don't think so. It's a little hard to tell. Who are you?'

'You may call me Miss Ysabell,' she said haughtily. 'Father told me you must have something to eat. Follow me.'

She swept away towards one of the other doors. Mort trailed behind her at just the right distance to have it swing back and hit his other elbow.

There was a kitchen on the other side of the door – long, low and warm, with copper pans hanging from the ceiling and a vast black iron stove occupying the whole of one long wall. An old man was standing in front of it, frying eggs and bacon and whistling between his teeth.

The smell attracted Mort's taste buds from across the room, hinting that if they got together they could really enjoy themselves. He found himself moving forward without even consulting his legs.

'Albert,' snapped Ysabell, 'another one for breakfast.'

The man turned his head slowly, and nodded at her without saying a word. She turned back to Mort.

'I must say,' she said, 'that with the whole Disc to choose from, I should think Father could have done rather better than you. I suppose you'll just have to do.'

She swept out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

'Have to do what?' said Mort, to no-one in particular.

The room was silent, except for the sizzle of the frying pan and the crumbling of coals in the molten heart of the stove. Mort saw that it had the words 'The Little Moloch (Ptntd)' embossed on its oven door.

The cook didn't seem to notice him, so Mort pulled up a chair and sat down at the white scrubbed table.

'Mushrooms?' said the old man, without looking around.

'Hmm? What?'

'I said, do you want mushrooms?'

'Oh. Sorry. No, thank you,' said Mort.

'Right you are, young sir.'

He turned around and set out for the table.

Even after he got used to it, Mort always held his breath when he watched Albert walking. Death's manservant was one of those stick-thin, raw-nosed old men who always

look as though they are wearing gloves with the fingers cut out – even when they're not – and his walking involved a complicated sequence of movements. Albert leaned forward and his left arm started to swing, slowly at first but soon evolving into a wild jerking movement that finally and suddenly, at about the time when a watcher would have expected the arm to fly off at the elbow, transferred itself down the length of his body to his legs and propelled him forward like a high-speed stilt walker. The frying pan followed a series of intricate curves in the air and was brought to a halt just over Mort's plate.

Albert did indeed have exactly the right type of half-moon spectacles to peer over the top of.

'There could be some porridge to follow,' he said, and winked, apparently to include Mort in the world porridge conspiracy.

'Excuse me', said Mort, 'but where am I, exactly?'

'Don't you know? This is the house of Death, lad. He brought you here last night.'

'I – sort of remember. Only. . . .

'Hmm?'

'Well. The bacon and eggs,' said Mort, vaguely. 'It doesn't seem, well, appropriate.'

'I've got some black pudding somewhere,' said Albert.

'No, I mean . . .' Mort hesitated. 'It's just that I can't see *him* sitting down to a couple of rashers and a fried slice.'

Albert grinned. 'Oh, he doesn't, lad. Not as a regular thing, no. Very easy to cater for, the master. I just cook for me and —' he paused – 'the young lady, of course.'

Mort nodded. 'Your daughter,' he said.

'Mine? Ha,' said Albert. 'You're wrong there. She's his.'

Mort stared down at his fried eggs. They stared back from their lake of fat. Albert had heard of nutritional values, and didn't hold with them.

'Are we talking about the same person?' he said at last. Tall, wears black, he's a bit . . . skinny.

'Adopted,' said Albert, kindly. 'It's rather a long story —'

A bell jangled by his head.

'— which will have to wait. He wants to see you in his study. I should run along if I were you. He doesn't like to be kept waiting. Understandable, really. Up the steps and first on the left. You can't miss it —'

'It's got skulls and bones around the door?' said Mort, pushing back his chair.

They all have, most of them,' sighed Albert. 'It's only his fancy. He doesn't mean anything by it.'

Leaving his breakfast to congeal, Mort hurried up the steps, along the corridor and paused in front of the first door. He raised his hand to knock.

ENTER.

The handle turned of its own accord. The door swung inward.

Death was seated behind a desk, peering intently into a vast leather book almost bigger than the desk itself. He looked up as Mort came in, keeping one calcareous finger marking his place, and grinned. There wasn't much of an alternative.

AH, he said, and then paused. Then he scratched his chin, with a noise like a fingernail being pulled across a comb.

WHO ARE YOU, BOY?

'Mort, sir,' said Mort. 'Your apprentice. You remember?'

Death stared at him for some time. Then the pinpoint blue eyes turned back at the book.

OH YES, he said, MORT. WELL, BOY, DO YOU SINCERELY WISH TO LEARN THE UTTERMOST SECRETS OF TIME AND SPACE?

'Yes, sir. I think so, sir.'

GOOD. THE STABLES ARE AROUND THE BACK. THE SHOVEL HANGS JUST INSIDE THE DOOR.

He looked down. He looked up. Mort hadn't moved.

IS IT BY ANY CHANCE POSSIBLE THAT YOU FAIL TO UNDERSTAND ME?

'Not fully, sir,' said Mort.

DUNG, BOY. DUNG. ALBERT HAS A COMPOST HEAP IN THE GARDEN. I IMAGINE THERE'S A WHEELBARROW SOMEWHERE ON THE PREMISES. GET ON WITH IT.

Mort nodded mournfully. 'Yes, sir. I see, sir. Sir?'

YES?

'Sir, I don't see what this has to do with the secrets of time and space.'

Death did not look up from his book.

THAT, he said, is BECAUSE YOU ARE HERE TO LEARN.

It is a fact that although the Death of the Discworld is, in his own words, an ANTHROPOMORPHIC PERSONIFICATION, he long ago gave up using the traditional skeletal horses, because of the bother of having to stop all the time to wire bits back on. Now his horses were always flesh-and-blood beasts, from the finest stock.

And, Mort learned, very well fed.

Some jobs offer increments. This one offered – well, quite the reverse, but at least it was in the warm and fairly easy to get the hang of. After a while he got into the rhythm of it, and started playing the private little quantity-surveying game that everyone plays in these circumstances. Let's see, he thought, I've done nearly a quarter, let's call it a third, so when I've done that corner by the hayrack it'll be more than half, call it five-eighths, which means three more wheelbarrow loads. . . . It doesn't prove anything very much except that the awesome splendour of the universe is much easier to deal with if you think of it as a series of small chunks.

The horse watched him from its stall, occasionally trying to eat his hair in a friendly sort of way.

After a while he became aware that someone else was watching him. The girl Ysabell was lean-big on the half-door, her chin in her hands.

'Are you a servant?' she said.

Mort straightened up.

'No,' he said, 'I'm an apprentice.'

That's silly. Albert said you can't be an apprentice.'

Mort concentrated on hefting a shovelful into the wheelbarrow. Two more shovelfuls, call it three if it's well pressed down, and that means four more barrows, all right, call it five, before I've done halfway to the . . .

'He says,' said Ysabell in a louder voice, 'that apprentices become masters, and you can't have more than one Death. So you're just a servant and you have to do what I say.'

. . . and then eight more barrows means it's all done all the way to the door, which is nearly two-thirds of the whole thing, which means. . . .

'Did you hear what I said, boy?'

Mort nodded. And then it'll be fourteen more barrows, only call it fifteen because I haven't swept up properly in the corner, and. . . .

'Have you lost your tongue?'

'Mort,' said Mort mildly.

She looked at him furiously. 'What?'

'My name is Mort,' said Mort. 'Or Mortimer. Most people call me Mort. Did you want to talk to me about something?'

She was speechless for a moment, staring from his face to the shovel and back again.

'Only I've been told to get on with this,' said Mort.

She exploded.

'Why are you here? Why did Father bring you here?'

'He hired me at the hiring fair,' said Mort. 'All the boys got hired. And me.'

'And you wanted to be hired?' she snapped. 'He's Death, you know. The Grim Reaper. He's very important. He's not something you *become*, he's something you *are*.'

Mort gestured vaguely at the wheelbarrow.

'I expect it'll turn out for the best,' he said. 'My father always says things generally do.'

He picked up the shovel and turned away, and grinned at the horse's backside as he heard Ysabell snort and walk away.

Mort worked steadily through the sixteenths, eighths, quarters and thirds, wheeling the barrow out through the yard to the heap by the apple tree.

Death's garden was big, neat and well-tended. It was also very, very black. The grass was black. The flowers were black. Black apples gleamed among the black leaves of a black apple tree. Even the air looked inky.

Alter a while Mort thought he could see – no, he couldn't possibly imagine he could see . . . different colours of black.

That's to say, not simply very dark tones of red and green and whatever, but real shades of black. A whole spectrum of colours, all different and all – well, black. He tipped out the last load, put the barrow away, and went back to the house.

ENTER.

Death was standing behind a lectern, poring over a map. He looked at Mort as if he wasn't entirely there.

YOU HAVEN'T HEARD OF THE BAY OF MANTE, HAVE YOU? he said.

'No, sir,' said Mort. FAMOUS SHIPWRECK THERE.

'Was there?'

THERE WILL BE, said Death, IF I CAN FIND THE DAMN PLACE.

Mort walked around the lectern and peered at the map.

'You're going to sink the ship?' he said.

Death looked horrified.

CERTAINLY NOT. THERE WILL BE A COMBINATION OF BAD SEAMANSHIP, SHALLOW WATER AND A CONTRARY WIND.

'That's horrible,' said Mort. 'Will there be many drowned?'

THAT'S UP TO FATE, said Death, turning to the bookcase behind him and pulling out a heavy gazetteer. THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT. WHAT Is THAT SMELL?

'Me,' said Mort, simply.

AH. THE STABLES. Death paused, his hand on the spine of the book. AND WHY DO YOU THINK I DIRECTED YOU TO THE STABLES? THINK CAREFULLY, NOW.

Mort hesitated. He *had* been thinking carefully, in between counting wheelbarrows. He'd wondered if it had been to coordinate his hand and eye, or teach him the habit of obedience, or bring home to him the importance, on the human scale, of small tasks, or make him realise that even great men must start at the bottom. None of these explanations seemed exactly right.

'I think . . .' he began.

YES?

'Well, I think it was because you were up to your knees in horseshit, to tell you the truth.'

Death looked at him for a long time. Mort shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

ABSOLUTELY CORRECT, snapped Death. CLARITY OF THOUGHT. REALISTIC APPROACH. VERY IMPORTANT IN A JOB LIKE OURS.

'Yes, sir. Sir?'

HMM? Death was struggling with the index.

'People die all the time, sir, don't they? Millions. You must be very busy. But —'

Death gave Mort the look he was coming to be familiar with. It started off as blank surprise, flickered briefly towards annoyance, called in for a drink at recognition and settled finally on vague forbearance.

BUT?

'I'd have thought you'd have been, well, out and about a bit more. You know. Stalking the streets. My granny's almanack's got a picture of you with a scythe and stuff.'

I SEE. I AM AFRAID IT IS HARD TO EXPLAIN UNLESS YOU KNOW ABOUT POINT INCARNATION AND NODE FOCUSING. I DON'T EXPECT YOU DO?

'I don't think so.'

GENERALLY I'M ONLY EXPECTED TO MAKE AN ACTUAL APPEARANCE ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS.

'Like a king, I suppose,' said Mort. 'I mean, a king is reigning even when he's doing something else or asleep, even. Is that it, sir?'

IT'LL DO, said Death, rolling up the maps. AND NOW, BOY, IF YOU'VE FINISHED THE STABLE YOU CAN GO AND SEE IF ALBERT HAS ANY JOBS HE WANTS DOING. IF YOU LIKE, YOU CAN COME OUT ON THE ROUND WITH ME THIS EVENING.

Mort nodded. Death went back to his big leather book, took up a pen, stared at it for a moment, and then looked up at Mort with his skull on one side.

HAVE YOU MET MY DAUGHTER? he said.

'Er. Yes, sir,' said Mort, his hand on the doorknob.

SHE IS A VERY PLEASANT GIRL, said Death, BUT I THINK SHE QUITE LIKES HAVING SOMEONE OF HER OWN AGE AROUND TO TALK TO.

'Sir?'

AND, OF COURSE, ONE DAY ALL THIS WILL BELONG TO HER.

Something like a small blue supernova flared for a moment in the depths of his eyesockets. It dawned on Mort that, with some embarrassment and complete lack of expertise, Death was trying to wink.

In a landscape that owed nothing to time and space, which appeared on no map, which existed only in those far reaches of the multiplexed cosmos known to the few astrophysicists who have taken really bad acid, Mort spent the afternoon helping Albert plant out broccoli. It was black, tinted with purple.

'He tries, see,' said Albert, flourishing the dibber. 'It's just that when it comes to colour, he hasn't got much imagination.'

'I'm not sure I understand all this,' said Mort. 'Did you say he *made* all this?'

Beyond the garden wall the ground dropped towards a deep valley and then rose into dark moorland that marched all the way to distant mountains, jagged as cats' teeth.

'Yeah,' said Albert. 'Mind what you're doing with that watering can.'

'What was here before?'

'I dunno,' said Albert, starting a fresh row. 'Firmament, I suppose. That's the fancy name for raw nothing. It's not a very good job of work, to tell the truth. I mean, the garden's okay, but the mountains are downright shoddy. They're all fuzzy when you get up close. I went and had a look once.'

Mort squinted hard at the trees nearest him. They seemed commendably solid.

'What'd he do it all for?' he said.

Albert grunted. 'Do you know what happens to lads who ask too many questions?'

Mort thought for a moment.

'No,' he said eventually, 'what?'

There was silence.

Then Albert straightened up and said, 'Damned if I know. Probably they get answers, and serve 'em right.'

'He said I could go out with him tonight,' said Mort.

'You're a lucky boy then, aren't you,' said Albert vaguely, heading back for the cottage.

'Did he *really* make all this?' said Mort, tagging along after him.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I suppose he wanted somewhere where he could feel at home.'

'Are you dead, Albert?'

'Me? Do I look dead?' The old man snorted when Mort started to give him a slow, critical look, 'and you can stop that. I'm as alive as you are. Probably more.'

'Sorry.'

'Right.' Albert pushed open the back door, and turned to regard Mort as kindly as he could manage.

'It's best not to ask all these questions,' he said, 'it upsets people. Now, how about a nice fry-up?'

The bell rang while they were playing dominoes. Mort sat to attention.

'He'll want the horse made ready,' said Albert. 'Come on.'

They went out to the stable in the gathering dusk, and Mort watched the old man saddle up Death's horse.

'His name's Binky,' said Albert, fastening the girth. 'It just goes to show, you never can tell.'

Bulky tried to eat his scarf in an affectionate way.

Mort remembered the woodcut in his grandmother's almanack, between the page on planting times and the phases of the moon section, showing Dethe thee Great Levyller Comes To Alle Menne. He'd stared at it hundreds of times when learning his letters. It wouldn't have been half so impressive if it had been generally known that the flame-breathing horse the spectre rode was called Binky.

'I would have thought something like Fang or Sabre or Ebony,' Albert continued, 'but the master will have his little fancies, you know. Looking forward to it, are you?'

'I think so,' said Mort uncertainly. 'I've never seen Death actually at work.'

'Not many have,' said Albert. 'Not twice, at any rate.'

Mort took a deep breath.

'About this daughter of his —' he began.

AH. GOOD EVENING, ALBERT, BOY.

'Mort,' said Mort automatically.

Death strode into the stable, stooping a little to clear the ceiling. Albert nodded, not in any subservient way, Mort noticed, but simply out of form. Mort had met one or two servants, on the rare occasions he'd been taken into town, and Albert wasn't like any of them. He seemed to act as though the house really belonged to him and its owner was just a passing guest, something to be tolerated like peeling paintwork or spiders in the

lavatory. Death put up with it too, as though he and Albert had said everything that needed to be said a long time ago and were simply content, now, to get on with their jobs with the minimum of inconvenience all round. To Mort it was rather like going for a walk after a really bad thunderstorm – everything was quite fresh, nothing was particularly unpleasant, but there was the sense of vast energies just expended.

Finding out about Albert tagged itself on to the end of his list of things to do.

HOLD THIS, said Death, and pushed a scythe into his hand while he swung himself up on to Binky. The scythe looked normal enough, except for the blade: it was so thin that Mort could see through it, a pale blue shimmer in the air that could slice flame and chop sound. He held it very carefully.

RIGHT, BOY, said Death. COME ON UP. ALBERT. DON'T WAIT UP.

The horse trotted out of the courtyard and into the sky.

There should have been a flash or rush of stars. The air should have spiralled and turned into speeding sparks such as normally happens in the common, everyday trans-dimensional hyper-jumps. But this was Death, who has mastered the art of going everywhere without ostentation and could slide between dimensions as easily as he could slip through a locked door, and they moved at an easy gallop through cloud canyons, past great billowing mountains of cumulus, until the wisps parted in front of them and the Disc lay below, basking in sunlight.

THAT'S BECAUSE TIME IS ADJUSTABLE, said Death, hen Mort pointed this out. IT'S NOT REALLY IMPORTANT.

'I always thought it was.'

PEOPLE THINK IT'S IMPORTANT ONLY BECAUSE THEY INVENTED IT, said Death sombrely. Mort considered this rather trite, but decided not to argue.

'What are we going to do now?' he said.

THERE'S A PROMISING WAR IN KLATCHISTAN, said Death. SEVERAL PLAGUE OUTBREAKS. ONE RATHER IMPORTANT ASSASSINATION, IF YOU'D PREFER.

'What, a murder?'

AYE, A KING.

'Oh, kings,' said Mort dismissively. He knew about kings. Once a year a band of strolling players, or at any rate ambling ones, came to Sheepridge and the plays they performed were invariably about kings. Kings were always killing one another, or being killed. The plots were quite complicated, involving mistaken identity, poisons, battles, long-lost sons, ghosts, witches and, usually, lots of daggers. Since it was clear that being a king was no picnic it was amazing that half the cast were apparently trying to become one. Mort's idea of palace life was a little hazy, but he imagined that no-one got much sleep.

'I'd quite like to see a real king,' he said. 'They wear crowns all the time, my granny said. Even when they go to the lavatory.'

Death considered this carefully.

THERE'S NO TECHNICAL REASON WHY NOT, he conceded. IN MY EXPERIENCE, HOWEVER, IT IS GENERALLY NOT THE CASE.

The horse wheeled, and the vast flat checkerboard of the Sto plain sped underneath them at lightning speed. This was rich country, full of silt and rolling cabbage fields and neat little kingdoms whose boundaries wriggled like snakes as small, formal wars, marriage

pacts, complex alliances and the occasional bit of sloppy cartography changed the political shape of the land.

'This king,' said Mort, as a forest zipped beneath them, 'is he good or bad?'

I NEVER CONCERN MYSELF WITH SUCH THINGS, said Death. HE'S NO WORSE THAN ANY OTHER KING, I IMAGINE.

'Does he have people put to death?' said Mort, and remembering who he was talking to added, 'Saving y'honour's presence, of course.'

SOMETIMES. THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU HAVE TO DO, WHEN YOU'RE A KING.

A city slid below them, clustered around a castle built on a rock outcrop that poked up out of the plain like a geological pimple. It was one huge rock from the distant Ramtops, Death said, left there by the retreating ice in the legendary days when the Ice Giants waged war on the gods and rode their glaciers across the land in an attempt to freeze the whole world. They'd given up in the end, however, and driven their great glittering flocks back to their hidden lands among the razor-backed mountains near the Hub. No-one on the plains knew why they had done this; it was generally considered by the younger generation in the city of Sto Lat, the city around the rock, that it was because the place was dead boring.

Binky trotted down over nothingness and touched down on the flagstones of the castle's topmost tower. Death dismounted and told Mort to sort out the nosebag.

'Won't people notice there's a horse up here?' he said, as they strolled to a stairwell.

Death shook his head.

WOULD YOU BELIEVE THERE COULD BE A HORSE AT THE TOP OF THIS TOWER? he Said.

'No. You couldn't get one up these stairs,' said Mort.

WELL, THEN?

'Oh. I see. People don't want to see what can't possibly exist.'

WELL DONE.

Now they were walking along a wide corridor hung with tapestries. Death reached into his robe and pulled out an hourglass, peering closely at it in the dim light.

It was a particularly fine one, its glass cut into intricate facets and imprisoned in an ornate framework of wood and brass. The words 'King Olerve the Bastard' were engraved deeply into it.

The sand inside sparkled oddly. There wasn't a lot left.

Death hummed to himself and stowed the glass away in whatever mysterious recess it had occupied.

They turned a corner and hit a wall of sound. There was a hall full of people there, under a cloud of smoke and chatter that rose all the way up into the banner-haunted shadows in the roof. Up in a gallery a trio of minstrels were doing their best to be heard and not succeeding.

The appearance of Death didn't cause much of a stir. A footman by the door turned to him, opened his mouth and then frowned in a distracted way and thought of something

else. A few courtiers glanced in their direction, their eyes instantly unfocusing as common sense overruled the other five.

WE'VE GOT A FEW MINUTES, said Death, taking a drink from a passing tray, LET'S MINGLE.

'They can't see me either!' said Mort. 'But I'm real!'

REALITY is NOT ALWAYS WHAT IT SEEMS, said Death. ANYWAY, IF THEY DON'T WANT TO SEE ME, THEY CERTAINLY DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU. THESE ARE ARISTOCRATS, BOY. THEY'RE *GOOD* AT NOT SEEING THINGS. WHY IS THERE A CHERRY ON A STICK IN THIS DRINK?

'Mort,' said Mort automatically.

IT'S NOT AS IF IT DOES ANYTHING FOR THE FLAVOUR. WHY DOES ANYONE TAKE A PERFECTLY GOOD DRINK AND THEN PUT IN A CHERRY ON A POLE?

'What's going to happen next?' said Mort. An elderly earl bumped into his elbow, looked everywhere but directly at him, shrugged and walked away.

TAKE THESE THINGS, NOW, said Death, fingering a passing canape. I MEAN, MUSHROOMS YES, CHICKEN YES, CREAM YES, I'VE NOTHING AGAINST ANY OF THEM, BUT WHY IN THE NAME OF SANITY MINCE THEM ALL UP AND PUT THEM IN LITTLE PASTRY CASES?

'Pardon?' said Mort.

THAT'S MORTALS FOR YOU, Death continued. THEY'VE ONLY GOT A FEW YEARS IN THIS WORLD AND THEY SPEND THEM ALL IN MAKING THINGS COMPLICATED FOR THEMSELVES. FASCINATING. HAVE A GHERKIN.

'Where's the king?' said Mort, craning to look over the heads of the court.

CHAP WITH THE GOLDEN BEARD, said Death. He tapped a flunky on the shoulder, and as the man turned and looked around in puzzlement deftly piloted another drink from his tray.

Mort cast around until he saw the figure standing in a little group in the centre of the crowd, leaning over slightly the better to hear what a rather short courtier was saying to him. He was a tall, heavily-built man with the kind of stolid, patient face that one would confidently buy a used horse from.

'He doesn't look a *bad* king,' said Mort. 'Why would anyone want to kill him?'

SEE THE MAN NEXT TO HIM? WITH THE LITTLE MOUSTACHE AND THE GRIN LIKE A LIZARD? Death ointed with his scythe. 'Yes?' HIS COUSIN, THE DUKE OF STO HELIT. NOT THE NICEST OF PEOPLE, said Death. A HANDY MAN WITH A BOTTLE OF POISON. FIFTH IN LINE TO THE THRONE LAST YEAR, NOW SECOND IN LINE. BIT OF A SOCIAL CLIMBER, YOU MIGHT SAY. He fumbled inside his robe and produced an hourglass in which black sand coursed between a spiked iron latticework. He gave it an experimental shake. AND DUE TO LIVE ANOTHER THIRTY, THIRTY-FIVE YEARS, he said, with a sigh.

'And he goes around killing people?' said Mort. He shook his head. There's no justice.'

Death sighed. No, he said, handing his drink to a page who was surprised to find he was suddenly holding an empty glass, THERE'S JUST ME.

He drew his sword, which had the same ice blue, shadow-thin blade as the scythe of office, and stepped forward.

'I thought you used the scythe,' whispered Mort.

KINGS GET THE SWORD, said Death. IT'S A ROYAL WHATSNAME, PREROGATIVE.

His free hand thrust its bony digits beneath his robe again and brought out King Olerve's glass. In the top half the last few grains of sand were huddling together.

PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION, said Death, YOU MAY BE ASKED QUESTIONS AFTERWARDS.

'Wait,' said Mort, wretchedly. 'It's not fair. Can't you stop it?'

FAIR? said Death. WHO SAID ANYTHING ABOUT FAIR?

'Well, if the other man is such a —'

LISTEN, said Death, FAIR DOESN'T COME INTO IT.

YOU CANT TAKE SIDES. GOOD GRIEF. WHEN IT'S TIME, IT'S TIME. THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT, BOY.

'Mort,' moaned Mort, staring at the crowd.

And then he saw her. A random movement in the people opened up a channel between Mort and a slim, red-haired girl seated among a group of older women behind the king. She wasn't exactly beautiful, being over-endowed in the freckle department and, frankly, rather on the skinny side. But the sight of her caused a shock that hot-wired Mort's hindbrain and drove it all the way to the pit of his stomach, laughing nastily.

IT'S TIME, said Death, giving Mort a nudge with a sharp elbow. FOLLOW ME.

Death walked toward the king, weighing his sword in his hand. Mort blinked, and started to follow. The girl's eyes met his for a second and immediately looked away – then swivelled back, dragging her head around, her mouth starting to open in an 'o' of horror.

Mort's backbone melted. He started to run towards the king.

'Look out!' he screamed. 'You're in great danger!'

And the world turned into treacle. It began to fill up with blue and purple shadows, like a heatstroke dream, and sound faded away until the roar of the court became distant and scritchy, like the music in someone else's headphones. Mort saw Death standing companionably by the king, his eyes turned up towards —

— the minstrel gallery.

Mort saw the bowman, saw the bow, saw the bolt now winging through the air at the speed of a sick snail. Slow as it was, he couldn't outrun it. It seemed like hours before he could bring his leaden legs under control, but finally he managed to get both feet to touch the floor at the same time and kicked away with all the apparent acceleration of continental drift.

As he twisted slowly through the air Death said, without rancour, IT WON'T WORK, YOU KNOW. IT'S ONLY NATURAL THAT YOU SHOULD WANT TO TRY, BUT IT WON'T WORK.

Dream-like, Mort drifted through a silent world. . . .

The bolt struck. Death brought his sword around in a double-handed swing that passed gently through the king's neck without leaving a mark. To Mort, spiralling gently through the twilight world, it looked as though a ghostly shape had dropped away.

It couldn't be the king, because he was manifestly still standing there, looking directly at Death with an expression of extreme surprise. There was a shadowy *something* around his feet, and a long way away people were reacting with shouts and screams.

A GOOD CLEAN JOB, said Death. ROYALTY ARE ALWAYS A PROBLEM. THEY TEND TO WANT TO HANG ON. YOUR AVERAGE PEASANT, NOW, HE CAN'T WAIT.

'Who the hell are you?' said the king. 'What are you doing here? Eh? Guards! I deman —' The insistent message from his eyes finally battered through to his brain. Mort was impressed. King Olerve had held on to his throne for many years and, even when dead, knew how to behave. 'Oh,' he said, 'I see. I didn't expect to see you so oon.'

YOUR MAJESTY, said Death, bowing, FEW DO.

The king looked around. It was quiet and dim in this shadow world, but outside there seemed to be a lot of excitement.

'That's me down there, is it?'

I AM AFRAID SO, SIRE.

'Clean job. Crossbow, was it?'

YES. AND NOW, SIRE, IF YOU WOULD —

'Who did it?' said the king. Death hesitated.

A HIRED ASSASSIN FROM ANKH-MORPORK, he said.

'Hmm. Clever. I congratulate Sto Helit. And here's me filling myself with antidotes. No antidote to cold steel, eh? Eh?'

INDEED NOT, SIRE.

'The old rope ladder and fast horse by the drawbridge trick, eh?'

SO IT WOULD APPEAR, SIRE, said Death, taking the king's shade gently by the arm. IF IT'S ANY CONSOLATION, THOUGH, THE HORSE *NEEDS* TO BE FAST.

'Eh?'

Death allowed his fixed grin to widen a little.

I HAVE AN APPOINTMENT WITH ITS RIDER TOMORROW IN ANKH, said Death. YOU SEE, HE ALLOWED THE DUKE TO PROVIDE HIM WITH A PACKED LUNCH.

The king, whose eminent suitability for his job meant that he was not automatically quick on the uptake, considered this for a moment and then gave a short laugh. He noticed Mort for the first time.

'Who's this?' he said, 'He dead too?'

MY APPRENTICE, said Death. WHO WILL BE GETTING A GOOD TALKING-TO BEFORE HE'S MUCH OLDER, THE SCALLYWAG.

'Mort,' said Mort automatically. The sound of their talking washed around him, but he couldn't take his eyes off the scene around them. He felt real. Death looked solid. The king looked surprisingly fit and well for someone who was dead. But the rest of the world

was a mass of sliding shadows. Figures were bent over the slumped body, moving through Mort as if they were no more substantial than a mist.

The girl was kneeling down, weeping.

'That's my daughter,' said the king. 'I ought to feel sad. Why don't I?'

EMOTIONS GET LEFT BEHIND. IT'S ALL A MATTER OF GLANDS.

'Ah. That would be it, I suppose. She can't see us, can she?'

NO.

'I suppose there's no chance that I could —?'

NONE, said Death.

'Only she's going to be queen, and if I could only let her—'

SORRY.

The girl looked up and through Mort. He watched the duke walk up behind her and lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. A fault smile hovered around the man's lips. It was the sort of smile that lies on sandbanks waiting for incautious swimmers.

I can't make you hear me, Mort said. Don't trust him!

She peered at Mort, screwing up her eyes. He reached out, and watched his hand pass straight through hers.

COME ALONG, BOY. NO LALLYGAGGING.

Mort felt Death's hand tighten on his shoulder, not in an unfriendly fashion. He turned away reluctantly, following Death and the king.

They walked out through the wall. He was halfway after them before he realised that walking through walls was impossible.

The suicidal logic of this nearly killed him. He felt the chill of the stone around his limbs before a voice in his ear said:

LOOK AT IT THIS WAY. THE WALL CANT BE THERE. OTHERWISE YOU WOULDN'T BE WALKING THROUGH IT. WOULD YOU, BOY?

'Mort,' said Mort.

WHAT?

'My name is Mort. Or Mortimer,' said Mort angrily, pushing forward. The chill fell behind him.

THERE. THAT WASN'T so HARD, WAS IT?

Mort looked up and down the length of the corridor, and slapped the wall experimentally. He must have walked through it, but it felt solid enough now. Little specks of mica glittered at him.

'How do you do that stuff?' he said. 'How do I do it? Is it magic?'

MAGIC IS THE ONE THING IT ISN'T, BOY. WHEN YOU CAN DO IT BY YOURSELF, THERE WILL BE NOTHING MORE THAT I CAN TEACH YOU.

The king, who was considerably more diffuse now, said, 'It's impressive, I'll grant you. By the way, I seem to be fading.'

IT'S THE MORPHOGENETIC FIELD WEAKENING, said Death.

The king's voice was no louder than a whisper. 'Is that what it is?'

IT HAPPENS TO EVERYONE. TRY TO ENJOY IT.

'How?' Now the voice was no more than a shape in the air. JUST BE YOURSELF.

At that moment the king collapsed, growing smaller and smaller in the air as the field finally collapsed into a tiny, brilliant pinpoint. It happened so quickly that Mort almost missed it. From ghost to mote in half a second, with a faint sigh.

Death gently caught the glittering thing and stowed it away somewhere under his robe.

'What's happened to him?' said Mort.

ONLY HE KNOWS, said Death. COME.

'My granny says that dying is like going to sleep,' Mort added, a shade hopefully.

I WOULDN'T KNOW. I HAVE DONE NEITHER.

Mort took a last look along the corridor. The big doors had been flung back and the court was spilling out. Two older women were endeavouring to comfort the princess, but she was striding ahead of them so that they bounced along behind her like a couple of fussy balloons. They disappeared up another corridor.

ALREADY A QUEEN, said Death, approvingly. Death liked style.

They were on the roof before he spoke again.

You TRIED TO WARN HIM, he said, removing Binky's nosebag.

'Yes, sir. Sorry.'

YOU CANNOT INTERFERE WITH FATE. WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE WHO SHOULD LIVE AND WHO SHOULD DIE?

Death watched Mort's expression carefully.

ONLY THE GODS ARE ALLOWED TO DO THAT, he added. To TINKER WITH THE FATE OF EVEN ONE INDIVIDUAL COULD DESTROY THE WHOLE WORLD. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

Mort nodded miserably. 'Are you going to send me home?' he said. Death reached down and swung him up behind the saddle. BECAUSE YOU SHOWED COMPASSION? No. I MIGHT HAVE DONE IF YOU HAD SHOWN PLEASURE. BUT YOU MUST LEARN THE COMPASSION PROPER TO YOUR TRADE.

'What's that?' A *SHARP* EDGE.

Days passed, although Mort wasn't certain how many. The gloomy sun of Death's world rolled regularly across the sky, but the visits to mortal space seemed to adhere to no particular system. Nor did Death visit only kings and important battles; most of the personal visits were to quite ordinary people.

Meals were served up by Albert, who smiled to himself a lot and didn't say anything much. Ysabell kept to her room most of the time, or rode her own pony on the black moors above the cottage. The sight of her with her hair streaming in the wind would have been more impressive if she was a better horse-woman, or if the pony had been rather larger, or if her hair was the sort that streams naturally. Some hair has got it, and some hasn't. Hers hadn't.

When he wasn't out on what Death referred to as THE DUTY Mort assisted Albert, or found jobs in the garden or stable, or browsed through Death's extensive library, reading with the speed and omnivorousness common to those who discover the magic of the written word for the first time.

Most of the books in the library were biographies, of course.

They were unusual in one respect. They were writing themselves. People who had already died, obviously, filled their books from cover to cover, and those who hadn't been born yet had to put up with blank pages. Those in between . . . Mort took note, marking the place and counting the extra lines, and estimated that some books were adding paragraphs at the rate of four or five every day. He didn't recognise the handwriting.

And finally he plucked up his courage.

A WHAT? said Death in astonishment, sitting behind his ornate desk and turning his scythe-shaped paperknife over and over in his hands.

'An afternoon off,' repeated Mort. The room suddenly seemed to be oppressively big, with himself very exposed in the middle of a carpet about the size of a field.

BUT WHY? said Death. IT CANT BE TO ATTEND YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S FUNERAL, he added. I WOULD KNOW.

'I just want to, you know, get out and meet people,' said Mort, trying to outstare that unflinching blue gaze.

BUT YOU MEET PEOPLE EVERY DAY, protested Death.

'Yes, I know, only, well, not for very long,' said Mort. 'I mean, it'd be nice to meet someone with a life expectancy of more than a few minutes. Sir,' he added.

Death drummed his fingers on the desk, making a sound not unlike a mouse tap-dancing, and gave Mort another few seconds of stare. He noticed that the boy seemed rather less elbows than he remembered, stood a little more upright and, bluntly, could use a word like 'expectancy'. It was all that library.

ALL RIGHT, he said grudgingly. BUT IT SEEMS TO ME YOU HAVE EVERYTHING YOU NEED RIGHT HERE. THE DUTY IS NOT ONEROUS, IS IT?

'No, sir.'

AND YOU HAVE GOOD FOOD AND A WARM BED AND RECREATION AND PEOPLE YOUR OWN AGE.

'Pardon, sir?' said Mort.

MY DAUGHTER, said Death. YOU HAVE MET HER, I BELIEVE.

'Oh. Yes, sir.'

SHE HAS A VERY WARM PERSONALITY WHEN YOU GET TO KNOW HER.

'I am sure she has, sir.'

NEVERTHELESS, YOU WISH – Death launched the words with a spin of distaste – AN AFTERNOON OFF? 'Yes, sir. If you please, sir.'

VERY WELL. So BE IT. You MAY HAVE UNTIL SUNSET.

Death opened his great ledger, picked up a pen, and began to write. Occasionally he'd reach out and flick the beads of an abacus.

After a minute he looked up.

YOU'RE STILL HERE, he said. AND IN YOUR OWN TIME, TOO, he added sourly.

'Um,' said Mort, 'will people be able to see me, sir?'

I IMAGINE SO, I'M SURE, said Death. Is THERE ANYTHING ELSE I MIGHT BE ABLE TO ASSIST YOU WITH BEFORE YOU LEAVE FOR THIS DEBAUCH?

'Well, sir, there is one thing, sir, I don't know how to get to the mortal world, sir,' said Mort desperately.

Death sighed loudly, and pulled open a desk drawer.

JUST WALK THERE.

Mort nodded miserably, and took the long walk to the study door. As he pulled it open Death coughed.

BOY! he called, and tossed something across the room.

Mort caught it automatically as the door creaked open.

The doorway vanished. The deep carpet underfoot became muddy cobbles. Broad daylight poured over him like quick-silver.

'Mort,' said Mort, to the universe at large.

'What?' said a stallholder beside him. Mort stared around. He was in a crowded market place, packed with people and animals. Every kind of thing was being sold from needles to (via a few itinerant prophets) visions of salvation. It was impossible to hold any conversation quieter than a shout.

Mort tapped the stallholder in the small of the back.

'Can you see me?' he demanded.

The stallholder squinted critically at him.

'I reckon so,' he said, 'or someone very much like you.'

Thank you,' said Mort, immensely relieved.

'Don't mention it. I see lots of people every day, no charge. Want to buy any bootlaces?'

'I don't think so,' said Mort. 'What place is this?'

'You don't know?'

A couple of people at the next stall were looking at Mort thoughtfully. His mind went into overdrive.

'My master travels a lot,' he said, truthfully. 'We arrived last night, and I was asleep on the cart. Now I've got the afternoon off.'

'Ah,' said the stallholder. He leaned forward conspiratorially. 'Looking for a good time, are you? I could fix you up.'

'I'd quite enjoy knowing where I am,' Mort conceded.

The man was taken aback.

'This is Ankh-Morpork,' he said. 'Anyone ought to be able to see that. Smell it, too.'

Mort sniffed. There was a certain something about the air in the city. You got the feeling that it was air that had seen life. You couldn't help noting with every breath that thousands of other people were very close to you and nearly all of them had armpits.

The stallholder regarded Mort critically, noting the pale face, well-cut clothes and strange presence, a sort of coiled spring effect.

'Look, I'll be frank,' he said. 'I could point you in the direction of a great brothel.'

'I've already had lunch,' said Mort, vaguely. 'But you can tell me if we're anywhere near, I think it's called Sto Lat?'

'About twenty miles Hubwards, but there's nothing there for a young man of your kidney,' said the trader hurriedly. 'I know, you're out by yourself, you want new experiences, you want excitement, romance —'

Mort, meanwhile, had opened the bag Death had given him. It was full of small gold coins, about the size of sequins.

An image formed again in his mind, of a pale young face under a head of red hair who had somehow known he was there. The unfocused feelings that had haunted his mind for the last few days suddenly sharpened to a point.

'I want,' he said firmly, 'a very fast horse.'

Five minutes later, Mort was lost.

This part of Ankh-Morpork was known as The Shades, an inner-city area sorely in need either of governmental help or, for preference, a flamethrower. It couldn't be called squalid because that would be stretching the word to breaking point. It was beyond squalor and out the other side, where by a sort of Einsteinian reversal it achieved a magnificent horribleness that it wore like an architectural award. It was noisy and sultry and smelled like a cowshed floor.

It didn't so much have a neighbourhood as an ecology, like a great land-based coral reef. There were the humans, all right, humanoid equivalents of lobsters, squid, shrimps and so on. And sharks.

Mort wandered hopelessly along the winding streets. Anyone hovering at rooftop height would have noticed a certain pattern in the crowds behind him, suggesting a number of men converging nonchalantly on a target, and would rightly have concluded that Mort and his gold had about the same life expectancy as a three-legged hedgehog on a six-lane motorway.

It is probably already apparent that The Shades was not the sort of place to have inhabitants. It had denizens. Periodically Mort would try to engage one in conversation, to find the way to a good horse dealer. The denizen would usually mutter something and hurry away, since anyone wishing to live in The Shades for longer than maybe three

hours developed very specialised senses indeed and would no more hang around near Mort than a peasant would stand near a tall tree in thundery weather.

And so Mort came at last to the river Ankh, greatest of rivers. Even before it entered the city it was slow and heavy with the silt of the plains, and by the time it got to The Shades even an agnostic could have walked across it. It was hard to drown in the Ankh, but easy to suffocate.

Mort looked at the surface doubtfully. It seemed to be moving. There were bubbles in it. It had to be water.

He sighed, and turned away.

Three men had appeared behind him, as though extruded from the stonework. They had the heavy, stolid look of those thugs whose appearance in any narrative means that it's time for the hero to be menaced a bit, although not too much, because it's also obvious that they're going to be horribly surprised.

They were leering. They were good at it.

One of them had drawn a knife, which he waved in little circles in the air. He advanced slowly towards Mort, while the other two hung back to provide immoral support.

'Give us the money,' he rasped.

Mort's hand went to the bag on his belt.

'Hang on a minute,' he said. 'What happens then?'

'What?'

'I mean, is it my money or my life?' said Mort. 'That's the sort of thing robbers are supposed to demand. Your money or your life. I read that in a book once,' he added.

'Possibly, possibly,' conceded the robber. He felt he was losing the initiative, but rallied magnificently. 'On the other hand, it could be your money *and* your life. Pulling off the double, you might say.' The man looked sideways at his colleagues, who sniggered on cue.

'In that case —' said Mort, and hefted the bag in one hand preparatory to chucking it as far out into the Ankh as he could, even though there was a reasonable chance it would bounce.

'Hey, what are you doing,'said the robber. He started to run forward, but halted when Mort gave the bag a threatening jerk.

'Well,' said Mort, 'I look at it like this. If you're going to kill me anyway, I might as well get rid of the money. It's entirely up to you.' To illustrate his point he took one coin out of the bag and flicked it out across the water, which accepted it with an unfortunate sucking noise. The thieves shuddered.

The leading thief looked at the bag. He looked at his knife. He looked at Mort's face. He looked at his colleagues.

'Excuse me,' he said, and they went into a huddle.

Mort measured the distance to the end of the alley. He wouldn't make it. Anyway, these three looked as though chasing people was another thing they were good at. It was only logic that left them feeling a little stretched.

Their leader turned back to Mort. He gave a final glance at the other two. They both nodded decisively.

'I think we kill you and take a chance on the money,' he said. 'We don't want this sort of thing to spread.'

The other two drew their knives.

Mort swallowed. 'This could be unwise,' he said.

'Why?'

'Well, *I* won't like it, for one.'

'You're not supposed to like it, you're supposed to – die,' said the thief, advancing.

'I don't think I'm due to die,' said Mort, backing away. 'I'm sure I would have been told.'

'Yeah,' said the thief, who was getting fed up with this. 'Yeah, well, you have been, haven't you? Great steaming elephant turds!'

Mort had just stepped backwards again. Through a wall.

The leading thief glared at the solid stone that had swallowed Mort, and then threw down his knife.

'Well, – – – – me,' he said. 'A – – – – ing wizard. I *hate* – – – – ing wizards!'

'You shouldn't – – – – them, then,' muttered one of his henchmen, effortlessly pronouncing a row of dashes.

The third member of the trio, who was a little slow of thinking, said, 'Here, he walked through the wall!'

'And we bin following him for ages, too,' muttered the second one. 'Fine one you are, Pilgarlic. I said I thought he was a wizard, only wizards'd walk round here by themselves. Dint I say he looked like a wizard? I said —'

'You're saying a good deal too much,' growled the leader.

'*I saw him, he walked right through the wall there* —'

'Oh, yeah?'

'Yeah!'

'*Right through it, dint you see*?'

'Think you're sharp, do you?'

'Sharp enough, come to that!'

The leader scooped his knife out of the dirt in one snaky movement.

'Sharp as this?'

The third thief lurched over to the wall and kicked it hard a few times, while behind him there were the sounds of scuffle and some damp bubbling noises.

'Yep, it's a wall okay,' he said. That's a wall if ever I saw one. How d'you think they do it, lads?'

'Lads?'

He tripped over the prone bodies.

'Oh,' he said. Slow as his mind was, it was quick enough to realise something very important. He was in a back alley in The Shades, and he was alone. He ran for it, and got quite a long way.

Death walked slowly across tiles in the lifetimer room, inspecting the serried rows of busy hourglasses. Albert followed dutifully behind with the great ledger open in his arms.

The sound roared around them, a vast grey waterfall of noise.

It came from the shelves where, stretching away into the infinite distance, row upon row of hourglasses poured away the sands of mortal time. It was a heavy sound, a dull sound, a sound that poured like sullen custard over the bright roly-poly pudding of the soul.

VERY WELL, said Death at last. I MAKE IT THREE.

A QUIET NIGHT.

'That'd be Goodie Hamstring, the Abbott Lobsang again, and this Princess Keli,' said Albert.

Death looked at the three hourglasses in his hand.

I WAS THINKING OF SENDING THE LAD OUT, he said.

Albert consulted his ledger. 'Well, Goodie wouldn't be any trouble and the Abbott is what you might call experienced,' he said. 'Shame about the princess. Only fifteen. Could be tricky.'

YES. IT is A PITY.

'Master?'

Death stood with the third glass in his hand, staring thoughtfully at the play of light across its surface. He sighed.

ONE so YOUNG. . . .

'Are you feeling all right, master?' said Albert, his voice full of concern.

TIME LIKE AN EVER-ROLLING STREAM BEARS ALL ITS. . . .

'Master!'

WHAT? said Death, snapping out of it. 'You've been overdoing it, master, that's what it is—'

WHAT ARE YOU BLATHERING ABOUT, MAN?

'You had a bit of a funny turn there, master.'

NONSENSE. I HAVE NEVER FELT BETTER. NOW, WHAT WERE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Albert shrugged, and peered down at the entries in the book.

'Goodie's a witch,' he said. 'She might get a bit annoyed if you send Mort.'

All practitioners of magic earned the right, once their own personal sands had run out, of being claimed by Death himself rather than his minor functionaries.

Death didn't appear to hear Albert. He was staring at Princess Keli's hourglass again.

WHAT is THAT SENSE INSIDE YOUR HEAD OF WISTFUL REGRET THAT THINGS ARE THE WAY THEY APPARENTLY ARE?

'Sadness, master. I think. Now —'

I AM SADNESS.

Albert stood with his mouth open. Finally he got a grip on himself long enough to blurt out, 'Master, we were talking about Mort!'

MORT WHO?

'Your apprentice, master,' said Albert patiently. Tall young lad.'

OF COURSE. WELL, WE'LL SEND HIM.

'Is he ready to go solo, master?' said Albert doubtfully.

Death thought about it. HE CAN DO IT, he said at ast. HE'S KEEN, HE'S QUICK TO LEARN AND, REALLY, e added, PEOPLE CANT EXPECT TO HAVE ME RUNNING AROUND AFTER THEM ALL THE TIME.

Mort stared blankly at the velvet wall hangings a few inches from his eyes.

I've walked through a wall, he thought. And that's impossible.

He gingerly moved the hangings aside to see if a door was lurking somewhere, but there was nothing but crumbling plaster which had cracked away in places to reveal some dampish but emphatically solid brickwork.

He prodded it experimentally. It was quite clear that he wasn't going back out that way.

'Well,' he said to the wall. 'What now?'

A voice behind him said, 'Um. Excuse please?'

He turned around slowly.

Grouped around a table in the middle of the room was a Klatchian family of father, mother and half a dozen children of dwindling size. Eight pairs of round eyes were fixed on Mort. A ninth pair belonging to an aged grandparent of indeterminate sex weren't, because their owner had taken advantage of the interruption to get some elbow room at the communal rice bowl, taking the view that a boiled fish in the hand was worth any amount of unexplained manifestations, and the silence was punctuated by the sound of determined mastication.

In one corner of the crowded room was a little shrine to Offler, the six-armed Crocodile God of Klatch. It was grinning just like Death, except of course Death didn't have a flock of holy birds that brought him news of his worshippers and also kept his teeth clean.

Klatchians prize hospitality above all other virtues. As Mort stared the woman took another plate off the shelf behind her and silently began to fill it from the big bowl, snatching a choice cut of catfish from the ancient's hands after a brief struggle. Her kohl-rimmed eyes remained steadily on Mort, however.

It was the father who had spoken. Mort bowed nervously.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Er, I seem to have walked through this wall.' It was rather lame, he had to admit.

'Please?' said the man. The woman, her bangles jangling, carefully arranged a few slices of pepper across the plate and sprinkled it with a dark green sauce that Mort was afraid he recognised. He'd tried it a few weeks before, and although it was a complicated recipe one taste had been enough to know that it was made out of fish entrails marinated for several years in a vat of shark bile. Death had said that it was an acquired taste. Mort had decided not to make the effort.

He tried to sidle around the edge of the room towards the bead-hung doorway, all the heads turning to watch him. He tried a grin.

The woman said: 'Why does the demon show his teeth, husband of my life?'

The man said: 'It could be hunger, moon of my desire. Pile on more fish!'

And the ancestor grumbled: 'I was eating that, wretched child. Woe unto the world when there is no respect for age!'

Now the fact is that while the words entered Mort's ear in their spoken Klatchian, with all the curlicues and subtle diphthongs of a language so ancient and sophisticated that it had fifteen words meaning 'assassination' before the rest of the world had caught on to the idea of bashing one another over the head with rocks, they arrived in his brain as clear and understandable as his mother tongue.

'I'm no demon! I'm a human!' he said, and stopped in shock as his words emerged in perfect Klatch.

'You're a thief?' said the father. 'A murderer? To creep in thus, are you a *tax-gatherer*?' His hand slipped under the table and came up holding a meat cleaver honed to paper thinness. His wife screamed and dropped the plate and clutched the youngest children to her.

Mort watched the blade weave through the air, and gave in.

'I bring you greetings from the uttermost circles of hell,' he hazarded.

The change was remarkable. The cleaver was lowered and the family broke into broad smiles.

'There is much luck to us if a demon visits,' beamed the father. 'What is your wish, O foul spawn of Offler's loins?'

'Sorry?' said Mort.

'A demon brings blessing and good fortune on the man that helps it,' said the man. 'How may we be of assistance, O evil dogsbreath of the nether pit?'

'Well, I'm not very hungry,' said Mort, 'but if you know where I can get a fast horse, I could be in Sto Lat before sunset.'

The man beamed and bowed. 'I know the very place, noxious extrusion of the bowels, if you would be so good as to follow me.'

Mort hurried out after him. The ancient ancestor watched them go with a critical expression, its jowls rhythmically chewing.

'That was what they call a demon around here?' it said. 'Offler rot this country of dampness, even their demons are third-rate, not a patch on the demons we had in the Old Country.'

The wife placed a small bowl of rice in the folded middle pair of hands of the Offler statue (it would be gone in the morning) and stood back.

'Husband did say that last month at the *Curry Gardens* he served a creature who was not there,' she said. 'He was impressed.'

Ten minutes later the man returned and, in solemn silence, placed a small heap of gold coins on the table. They represented enough wealth to purchase quite a large part of the city.

'He had a bag of them,' he said.

The family stared at the money for some time. The wife sighed.

'Riches bring many problems,' she said. 'What are we to do?'

'We return to Klatch,' said the husband firmly, 'where our children can grow up in a proper country, true to the glorious traditions of our ancient race and men do not need to work as waiters for wicked masters but can stand tall and proud. And we must leave right now, fragrant blossom of the date palm.'

'Why so soon, O hard-working son of the desert?'

'Because,' said the man, 'I have just sold the Patrician's champion racehorse.'

The horse wasn't as fine or as fast as Binky, but it swept the miles away under its hooves and easily outdistanced a few mounted guards who, for some reason, appeared anxious to talk to Mort. Soon the shanty suburbs of Morpork were left behind and the road ran out into rich black earth country of the Sto plain, constructed over eons by the periodic flooding of the great slow Ankh that brought to the region prosperity, security and chronic arthritis.

It was also extremely boring. As the light distilled from silver to gold Mort galloped across a flat, chilly landscape, chequered with cabbage fields from edge to edge. There are many things to be said about cabbages. One may talk at length about their high vitamin content, their vital iron contribution, the valuable roughage and commendable food value. In the mass, however, they lack a certain something; despite their claim to immense nutritional and moral superiority over, say, daffodils, they have never been a sight to inspire the poet's muse. Unless he was hungry, of course. It was only twenty miles to Sto Lat, but in terms of meaningless human experience it seemed like two thousand.

There were guards on the gates of Sto Lat, although compared to the ones that patrolled Ankh they had a sheepish, amateurish look. Mort trotted past and one of them, feeling a bit of a fool, asked him who went there.

'I'm afraid I can't stop,' said Mort.

The guard was new to the job, and quite keen. Guarding wasn't what he'd been led to expect. Standing around all day in chain mail with an axe on a long pole wasn't what he'd volunteered for; he'd expected excitement and challenge and a crossbow and a uniform that didn't go rusty in the rain.

He stepped forward, ready to defend the city against people who didn't respect commands given by duly authorised civic employees. Mort considered the pike blade hovering a few inches from his face. There was getting to be too much of this.

'On the other hand,' he said calmly, 'how would you like it if I made yon a present of this rather fine horse?'

It wasn't hard to find the entrance to the castle. There were guards there, too, and they had crossbows and a considerably more unsympathetic outlook on life and, in any case, Mort had run out of horses. He loitered a bit until they started paying him a generous amount of attention, and then wandered disconsolately away into the streets of the little city, feeling stupid.

After all this, after miles of brassicas and a backside that now felt like a block of wood, he didn't even know why he was there. So she'd seen him even when he was invisible? Did it mean anything? Of course it didn't. Only he kept seeing her face, and the flicker of hope in her eyes. He wanted to tell her that everything was going to be all right. He wanted to tell her about himself and everything he wanted to be. He wanted to find out which was her room in the castle and watch it all night until the light went out. And so on.

A little later a blacksmith, whose business was in one of the narrow streets that looked out on to the castle walls, glanced up from his work to see a tall, gangling young man, rather red in the face, who kept trying to walk through the walls.

Rather later than that a young man with a few superficial bruises on his head called in at one of the city's taverns and asked for directions to the nearest wizard.

And it was later still that Mort turned up outside a peeling plaster house which announced itself on a blackened brass plaque to be the abode of Igneous Cutwell, DM (Unseen), Marster of the Infinit, Illuminartus, Wyzard to Princes, Gardian of the Sacred Portalls, If Out leave Maile with Mrs Nugent Next Door.

Suitably impressed despite his pounding heart, Mort lifted the heavy knocker, which was in the shape of a repulsive gargoyle with a heavy iron ring in its mouth, and knocked twice.

There was a brief commotion from within, the series of hasty domestic sounds that might, in a less exalted house, have been made by, say, someone shovelling the lunch plates into the sink and tidying the laundry out of sight.

Eventually the door swung open, slowly and mysteriously.

'You'd fbetter pretend to be impreffed,' said the doorknocker conversationally, but hampered somewhat by the ring. 'He does it with pulleys and a bit of ftring. No good at opening-fpells, fee?'

Mort looked at the grinning metal face. I work for a skeleton who can walk through walls, he told himself. Who am I to be surprised at anything?

'Thank you,' he said.

'You're welcome. Wipe your feet on the doormat, it's the bootfcraper's day off.'

The big low room inside was dark and shadowy and smelled mainly of incense but slightly of boiled cabbage arid elderly laundry and the kind of person who throws all his socks at the wall and wears the ones that don't stick. There was a large crystal ball with a crack in it, an astrolabe with several bits missing, a rather scuffed octogram on the floor, and a stuffed alligator hanging from the ceiling. A stuffed alligator is absolutely standard equipment in any properly-run magical establishment. This one looked as though it hadn't enjoyed it much.

A bead curtain on the far wall was flung aside with a dramatic gesture and a hooded figure stood revealed.

'Beneficent constellations shine on the hour of our meeting!' it boomed.

'Which ones?' said Mort.

There was a sudden worried silence.

'Pardon?'

'Which constellations would these be?' said Mort.

'Beneficent ones,' said the figure, uncertainly. It rallied. 'Why do you trouble Igneous Cutwell, Holder of the Eight Keys, Traveller in the Dungeon Dimensions, Supreme Mage of —'

'Excuse me,' said Mort, 'are you really?'

'Really what?'

'Master of the thingy, Lord High Wossname of the Sacred Dungeons?'

Cutwell pushed back his hood with an annoyed flourish. Instead of the grey-bearded mystic Mort had expected he saw a round, rather plump face, pink and white like a pork pie, which it somewhat resembled in other respects. For example, like most pork pies, it didn't have a beard and, like most pork pies, it looked basically good-humoured.

'In a figurative sense,' he said.

'What does that mean?'

'Well, it means no,' said Cutwell.

'But you said —'

'That was advertising,' said the wizard. 'It's a kind of magic I've been working on. What was it you were wanting, anyway?' He leered suggestively. 'A love philtre, yes? Something to encourage the young ladies?'

'Is it possible to walk through walls?' said Mort desperately. Cutwell paused with his hand already halfway to a large bottle full of sticky liquid.

'Using magic?'

'Um,' said Mort, 'I don't think so.'

Then pick very thin walls,' said Cutwell. 'Better still, use the door. The one over there would be favourite, if you've just come here to waste my time.'

Mort hesitated, and then put the bag of gold coins on the table. The wizard glanced at them, made a little whinnying noise in the back of his throat, and reached out, Mort's hand shot across and grabbed his wrist.

'I've walked through walls,' he said, slowly and deliberately.

'Of course you have, of course you have,' mumbled Cutwell, not taking his eyes off the bag. He flicked the cork out of the bottle of blue liquid and took an absent-minded swig.

'Only before I did it I didn't know that I could, and when I was doing it I didn't know I was, and now I've done it I can't remember how it was done. And I want to do it again.'

'Why?'

'Because,' said Mort, 'if I could walk through walls I could do anything.'

'Very deep,' agreed Cutwell. 'Philosophical. And the name of the young lady on the other side of this wall?'

'She's —' Mort swallowed. 'I don't know her name. Even if there is a girl,' he added haughtily, 'and I'm not saying there is.'

'Right,' said Cutwell. He took another swig, and shuddered. 'Fine. How to walk through walls. I'll do some research. It might be expensive, though.'

Mort carefully picked up the bag and pulled out one small gold coin.

'A down payment,' he said, putting it on the table.

Cutwell picked up the coin as if he expected it to go bang or evaporate, and examined it carefully.

'I've never seen this sort of coin before,' he said accusingly. 'What's all this curly writing?'

'It's gold, though, isn't it?' said Mort. 'I mean, you don't have to accept it —'

'Sure, sure, it's gold,' said Cutwell hurriedly. 'It's gold all right. I just wondered where it had come from, that's all.'

'You wouldn't believe me,' said Mort. 'What time's sunset around here?'

'We normally manage to fit it in between night and day,' said Cutwell, still staring at the coin and taking little sips from the blue bottle. 'About now.'

Mort glanced out of the window. The street outside already had a twilight look to it.

'I'll be back,' he muttered, and made for the door. He heard the wizard call out something, but Mort was heading down the street at a dead run.

He started to panic. Death would be waiting for him forty miles away. There would be a row. There would be a terrible —

AH, BOY.

A familiar figure stepped out from the flare around a jellied eel stall, holding a plate of winkles.

THE VINEGAR IS PARTICULARLY PIQUANT. HELP YOURSELF, I HAVE AN EXTRA PIN.

But, of course, just because he was forty miles away didn't mean he wasn't here as well. . . .

And in his untidy room Cutwell turned the gold coin over and over in his fingers, muttering 'walls' to himself, and draining the bottle.

He appeared to notice what he was doing only when there was no more to drink, at which point his eyes focused on the bottle and, through a rising pink mist, read the label which said 'Granny Weatherwax's Ramrub Invigoratore and Passion's Philtre, Onne Spoonful Onlie before bed and that Smalle'.

'By myself?' said Mort.

CERTAINLY. I HAVE EVERY FAITH IN YOU.

'Gosh!'

The suggestion put everything else out of Mort's mind, and he was rather surprised to find that he didn't feel particularly squeamish. He'd seen quite a few deaths in the last week or so, and all the horror went out of it when you knew you'd be speaking to the victim afterwards. Most of them were relieved, one or two of them were angry, but they were all glad of a few helpful words.

THINK YOU CAN DO IT?

'Well, sir. Yes. I think.'

THAT'S THE SPIRIT. I'VE LEFT BlNKY BY THE HORSETROUGH ROUND THE CORNER. TAKE HIM STRAIGHT HOME WHEN YOU'VE FINISHED.

'You're staying here, sir?' Death looked up and down the street. His eye-sockets flared.

I THOUGHT I MIGHT STROLL AROUND A BIT, he said mysteriously. I DON'T SEEM TO FEEL QUITE RIGHT. I COULD DO WITH THE FRESH AIR. He seemed to remember something, reached into the mysterious shadows of his cloak, and pulled out three hourglasses. ALL STRAIGHTFORWARD, he said. ENJOY YOURSELF.

He turned and strode off down the street, humming.

'Um. Thank you,' said Mort. He held the hourglasses up to the light, noting the one that was on its very last few grains of sand.

'Does this mean I'm in charge?' he called, but Death had turned the corner.

Binky greeted him with a faint whinny of recognition. Mort mounted up, his heart pounding with apprehension and responsibility. His fingers worked automatically, taking the scythe out of its sheath and adjusting and locking the blade (which flashed steely blue in the night, slicing the starlight like salami). He mounted carefully, wincing at the stab from his saddlesores, but Binky was like riding a pillow. As an afterthought, drunk with delegated authority, he pulled Death's riding cloak out of its saddlebag and fastened it by its silver brooch.

He took another look at the first hourglass, and nudged Binky with his knees. The horse sniffed the chilly air, and began to trot.

Behind them Cutwell burst out of his doorway, accelerating down the frosty street with his robes flying out behind him.

Now the horse was cantering, widening the distance between its hooves and the cobbles. With a swish of its tail it cleared the housetops and floated up into the chilly sky.

Cutwell ignored it. He had more pressing things on his mind. He took a flying leap and landed full length in the freezing waters of the horsetrough, lying back gratefully among the bobbing ice splinters. After a while the water began to steam. Mort kept low for the sheer exhilaration of the speed. The sleeping countryside roared soundlessly underneath. Binky moved at an easy gallop, his great muscles sliding under his skin as easily as alligators off a sandbank, his mane whipping in Mort's face. The night swirled away from the speeding edge of the scythe, cut into two curling halves.

They sped under the moonlight as silent as a shadow, visible only to cats and people who dabbled in things men were not meant to wot of.

Mort couldn't remember afterwards, but very probably he laughed.

Soon the frosty plains gave way to the broken lands around the mountains, and then the marching ranks of the Ramtops themselves raced across the world towards them. Binky put his head down and opened his stride, aiming for a pass between two mountains as sharp as goblins' teeth in the silver light. Somewhere a wolf howled.

Mort took another look at the hourglass. Its frame was carved with oak leaves and mandrake roots, and the sand inside, even by moonlight, was pale gold. By turning the glass this way and that, he could just make out the name 'Ammeline Hamstring' etched in the faintest of lines.

Binky slowed to a canter. Mort looked down at the roof of a forest, dusted with snow that was either early or very, very late; it could have been either, because the Ramtops hoarded their weather and doled it out with no real reference to the time of year.

A gap opened up beneath them. Binky slowed again, wheeled around and descended towards a clearing that was white with drifted snow. It was circular, with a tiny cottage in the exact middle. If the ground around it hadn't been covered in snow, Mort would have noticed that there were no tree stumps to be seen; the trees hadn't been cut down in the circle, they'd simply been discouraged from growing there. Or had moved away.

Candlelight spilled from one downstairs window, making a pale orange pool on the snow.

Binky touched down smoothly and trotted across the freezing crust without sinking. He left no hoofprints, of course.

Mort dismounted and walked towards the door, muttering to himself and making experimental sweeps with the scythe.

The cottage roof had been built with wide eaves, to shed snow and cover the logpile. No dweller in the high Ramtops would dream of starting a winter without a logpile on three

sides of the house. But there wasn't a logpile here, even though spring was still a long way off.

There was, however, a bundle of hay in a net by the door. It had a note attached, written in big, slightly shaky capitals: FOR THEE HORS.

It would have worried Mort if he'd let it. Someone was expecting him. He'd learned in recent days, though, that rather than drown in uncertainty it was best to surf right over the top of it. Anyway, Binky wasn't worried by moral scruples and bit straight in.

It did leave the problem of whether to knock. Somehow, it didn't seem appropriate. Supposing no-one answered, or told him to go away?

So he lifted the thumb latch and pushed at the door. It swung inwards quite easily, without a creak.

There was a low-ceilinged kitchen, its beams at trepanning height for Mort. The light from the solitary candle glinted off crockery on a long dresser and flagstones that had been scrubbed and polished into iridescence. The fire in the cave-like inglenook didn't add much light, because it was no more than a heap of white ash under the remains of a log. Mort knew, without being told, that it was the last log.

An elderly lady was sitting at the kitchen table, writing furiously with her hooked nose only a few inches from the paper. A grey cat curled on the table beside her blinked calmly at Mort.

The scythe bumped off a beam. The woman looked up.

'Be with you in a minute,' she said. She frowned at the paper. 'I haven't put in the bit about being of sound mind and body yet, lot of foolishness anyway, no-one sound in mind and body would be dead. Would you like a drink?'

'Pardon?' said Mort. He recalled himself, and repeated 'PARDON?'

'If you drink, that is. It's raspberry port. On the dresser. You might as well finish the bottle.'

Mort eyed the dresser suspiciously. He felt he'd rather lost the initiative. He pulled out the hourglass and glared at it. There was a little heap of sand left.

There's still a few minutes yet,' said the witch, without looking up.

'How, I mean, HOW DO YOU KNOW?'

She ignored him, and dried the ink in front of the candle, sealed the letter with a drip of wax, and tucked it under the candlestick. Then she picked up the cat.

'Granny Beedle will be around directly tomorrow to tidy up and you're to go with her, understand? And see she lets Gammer Nutley have the pink marble washstand, she's had her eye on it for years.'

The cat yawped knowingly.

'I haven't, that is, I HAVEN'T GOT ALL NIGHT, YOU KNOW,' said Mort reproachfully.

'You have, I haven't, and there's no need to shout,' said the witch. She slid off her stall and then Mort saw how bent she was, like a bow. With some difficulty she unhooked a tall pointed hat from its nail on the wall, skewered it into place on her white hair with a battery of hatpins, and grasped two walking sticks.

She tottered across the floor towards Mort, and looked up at him with eyes as small and bright as blackcurrants.

'Will I need my shawl? Shall I need a shawl, d'you think? No, I suppose not. I imagine it's quite warm where I'm going.' She peered closely at Mort, and frowned.

'You're rather *younger* than I imagined,' she said. Mort said nothing. Then Goodie Hamstring said, quietly, 'You know, I don't think you're who I was expecting at all.'

Mort cleared his throat.

'Who were you expecting, precisely?' he said.

'Death,' said the witch, simply. 'It's part of the arrangement, you see. One gets to know the time of one's death in advance, and one is guaranteed – personal attention.'

'I'm it,'said Mort.

'It?'

'The personal attention. He sent me. I work for him. No-one else would have me.' Mort paused. This was all wrong. He'd be sent home again in disgrace. His first bit of responsibility, and he'd ruined it. He could already hear people laughing at him.

The wail started in the depths of his embarrassment and blared out like a foghorn. 'Only this is my first real job and it's all gone wrong!'

The scythe fell to the floor with a clatter, slicing a piece off the table leg and cutting a flagstone in half.

Goodie watched him for some time, with her head on one side. Then she said, 'I see. What is your name, young man?'

'Mort,' sniffed Mort. 'Short for Mortimer.'

'Well, Mort, I expect you've got an hourglass somewhere about your person,'

Mort nodded vaguely. He reached down to his belt and produced the glass. The witch inspected it critically.

'Still a minute or so,' she said. 'We don't have much time to lose. Just give me a moment to lock p.'

'But you don't understand!' Mort wailed. 'I'll mess it all up! I've never done this before!'

She patted his hand. 'Neither have I,' she said. 'We can learn together. Now pick up the scythe and try to act your age, there's a good boy.'

Against his protestations she shooed him out into the snow and followed behind him, pulling the door shut and locking it with a heavy iron key which she hung on a nail by the door.

The frost had tightened its grip on the forest, squeezing it until the roots creaked. The moon was setting, but the sky was full of hard white stars that made the winter seem colder still. Goodie Hamstring shivered.

'There's an old log over there,' she said conversationally. 'There's quite a good view across the valley. In the summertime, of course. I should like to sit down.'

Mort helped her through the drifts and brushed as much snow as possible off the wood. They sat down with the hourglass between them. Whatever the view might have been in

the summer, it now consisted of black rocks against a sky from which little flakes of snow were now tumbling.

'I can't believe all this,' said Mort. 'I mean you sound as if you want to die.'

'There's some things I shall miss,' she said. 'But it gets thin, you know. Life, I'm referring to. You can't trust your own body any more, and it's time to move on. I reckon it's about time I tried something else. Did he tell you magical folk can see him all the time?'

'No,' said Mort, inaccurately.

'Well, we can.'

'He doesn't like wizards and witches much,' Mort volunteered.

'Nobody likes a smartass,' she said with some satisfaction. 'We give him trouble, you see. Priests don't, so he likes priests.'

'He's never said,' said Mort.

'Ah. They're always telling folk how much better it's going to be when they're dead. *We* tell them it could be pretty good right here if only they'd put their minds to it.'

Mort hesitated. He wanted to say: you're wrong, he's not like that at all, he doesn't care if people are good or bad so long as they're punctual. And kind to cats, he added.

But he thought better of it. It occurred to him that people needed to believe things.

The wolf howled again, so near that Mort looked around apprehensively. Another one across the valley answered it. The chorus was picked up by a couple of others in the depths of the forest. Mort had never heard anything so mournful.

He glanced sideways at the still figure of Goodie Hamstring and then, with mounting panic, at the hourglass. He sprang to his feet, snatched up the scythe, and brought it around in a two-handed swing.

The witch stood up, leaving her body behind.

'Well done,' she said. 'I thought you'd missed it, for a minute, there.'

Mort leaned against a tree, panting heavily, and watched Goodie walk around the log to look at herself.

'Hmm,' she said critically. Time has got a lot to answer for.' She raised her hand and laughed to see the stars through it.

Then she changed. Mort had seen this happen before, when the soul realised it was no longer bound by the body's morphic field, but never under such control. Her hair unwound itself from its tight bun, changing colour and lengthening. Her body straightened up. Wrinkles dwindled and vanished. Her grey woollen dress moved like the surface of the sea and ended up tracing entirely different and disturbing contours.

She looked down, giggled, and changed the dress into something leaf-green and clingy.

'What do you think, Mort?' she said. Her voice had sounded cracked and quavery before. Now it suggested musk and maple syrup and other things that set Mort's adam's apple bobbing like a rubber ball on an elastic band.

'. . .' he managed, and gripped the scythe until his knuckles went white.

She walked towards him like a snake in a four-wheel drift.

'I didn't hear you,' she purred.

'V-v-very nice,' he said. 'Is that who you were?'

'It's who I've always been.'

'Oh.' Mort stared at his feet. 'I'm supposed to take you away,' he said.

'I know,' she said, 'but I'm going to stay.'

'You can't do that! I mean —' he fumbled for words – 'you see, if you stay you sort of spread out and get thinner, until —'

'I shall enjoy it,' she said firmly. She leaned forward and gave him a kiss as insubstantial as a mayfly's sigh, fading as she did so until only the kiss was left, just like a Cheshire cat only much more erotic.

'Have a care, Mort,' said her voice in his head. 'You may want to hold on to your job, but will you ever be able to let go?'

Mort stood idiotically holding his cheek. The trees around the clearing trembled for a moment, there was the sound of laughter on the breeze, and then the freezing silence closed in again.

Duty called out to him through the pink mists in his head. He grabbed the second glass and stared at it. The sand was nearly all gone.

The glass itself was patterned with lotus petals. When Mort flicked it with his finger it went 'Ommm'.

He ran across the crackling snow to Binky and hurled himself into the saddle. The horse threw up his head, reared, and launched itself towards the stars.

Great silent streamers of blue and green flame hung from the roof of the world. Curtains of octarine glow danced slowly and majestically over the Disc as the fire of the Aurora Coriolis, the vast discharge of magic from the Disc's standing field, earthed itself in the green ice mountains of the Hub.

The central spire of Cori Celesti, home of the gods, was a ten mile high column of cold coruscating fire.

It was a sight seen by few people, and Mort wasn't one of them, because he lay low over Binky's neck and clung on for his life as they pounded through the night sky ahead of a comet trail of steam.

There were other mountains clustered around Cori. By comparison they were no more than termite mounds, although in reality each one was a majestic assortment of cols, ridges, faces, cliffs, screes and glaciers that any normal mountain range would be happy to associate with.

Among the highest of them, at the end of a funnel-shaped valley, dwelt the Listeners.

They were one of the oldest of the Disc's religious sects, although even the gods themselves were divided as to whether Listening was really a proper religion, and all that prevented their temple being wiped out by a few well-aimed avalanches was the fact that even the gods were curious as to what it was that the Listeners might Hear. If there's one thing that really annoys a god, it's not knowing something.

It'll take Mort several minutes to arrive. A row of dots would fill in the time nicely, but the reader will already be noticing the strange shape of the temple – curled like a great white ammonite at the end of the valley – and will probably want an explanation.

The fact is that the Listeners are trying to work out precisely what it was that the Creator said when He made the universe.

The theory is quite straightforward.

Clearly, nothing that the Creator makes could ever be destroyed, which means that the echoes of those first syllables must still be around somewhere, bouncing and rebounding off all the matter in the cosmos but still audible to a really good listener.

Eons ago the Listeners had found that ice and chance had carved this one valley into the perfect acoustic opposite of an echo valley, and had built their multi-chambered temple in the exact position that the one comfy chair always occupies in the home of a rabid hi-fi fanatic. Complex baffles caught and amplified the sound that was funnelled up the chilly valley, steering it ever inwards to the central chamber where, at any hour of the day or night, three monks always sat.

Listening.

There were certain problems caused by the fact that they didn't hear only the subtle echoes of the first words, but every other sound made on the Disc. In order to recognise the sound of the Words, they had to learn to recognise all the other noises. This called for a certain talent, and a novice was only accepted for training if he could distinguish by sound alone, at a distance of a thousand yards, which side a dropped coin landed. He wasn't actually accepted into the order until he could tell what colour it was.

And although the Holy Listeners were so remote, many people took the extremely long and dangerous path to their temple, travelling through frozen, troll-haunted lands, fording

swift icy rivers, climbing forbidding mountains, trekking across inhospitable tundra, in order to climb the narrow stairway that led into the hidden valley and seek with an open heart the secrets of being.

And the monks would cry unto them, 'Keep the bloody noise down!'

Binky came through the mountain tops like a white blur, touching down in the snowy emptiness of a courtyard made spectral by the disco light from the sky. Mort leapt from his back and ran through the silent cloisters to the room where the 88th abbot lay dying, surrounded by his devout followers.

Mort's footsteps boomed as he hurried across the intricate mosaic floor. The monks themselves wore woollen overshoes.

He reached the bed and waited for a moment, leaning on the scythe, until he could get his breath back.

The abbot, who was small and totally bald and had more wrinkles than a sackful of prunes, opened his eyes.

'You're late,' he whispered, and died.

Mort swallowed, fought for breath, and brought the scythe around in a slow arc. Nevertheless, it was accurate enough; the abbot sat up, leaving his corpse behind.

'Not a moment too soon,' he said, in a voice only Mort could hear. 'You had me worried for a moment there.'

'Okay?' said Mort. 'Only I've got to rush —'

The abbot swung himself off the bed and walked towards Mort through the ranks of his bereaved followers.

'Don't rush off,' he said. 'I always look forward to these talks. What's happened to the usual fellow?'

'Usual fellow?' said Mort, bewildered.

Tall chap. Black cloak. Doesn't get enough to eat, by the look of him,' said the abbot.

'Usual fellow? You mean *Death*?' said Mort.

'That's him,' said the abbot, cheerfully. Mort's mouth hung open.

'Die a lot, do you?' he managed.

'A fair bit. A fair bit. Of course,' said the abbot, 'once you get the hang of it, it's only a matter of practice.'

'It is?'

'We must be off,' said the abbot. Mort's mouth snapped shut.

'That's what I've been trying to say,' he said.

'So if you could just drop me off down in the valley,' the little monk continued placidly. He swept past Mort and headed for the courtyard. Mort stared at the floor for a moment, and then ran after him in a way which he knew to be extremely unprofessional and undignified.

'Now look —' he began.

'The other one had a horse called Binky, I remember,' said the abbot pleasantly. 'Did you buy the round off him?'

The round?' said Mort, now completely lost.

'Or whatever. Forgive me,' said the abbot, 'I don't really know how these things are organised, lad.'

'Mort,' said Mort, absently. 'And I think you're supposed to come back with me, sir. If you don't mind,' he added, in what he hoped was a firm and authoritative manner. The monk turned and smiled pleasantly at him.

'I wish I could,' he said. 'Perhaps one day. Now, if you could give me a lift as far as the nearest village, I imagine I'm being conceived about now.'

'Conceived? But you've just died!' said Mort.

'Yes, but, you see, I have what you might call a season ticket,' the abbot explained.

Light dawned on Mort, but very slowly.

'Oh,' he said, 'I've read about this. Reincarnation, yes?'

That's the word. Fifty-three times so far. Or fifty-four.'

Binky looked up as they approached and gave a short neigh of recognition when the abbot patted his nose. Mort mounted up and helped the abbot up behind him.

'It must be very interesting,' he said, as Binky climbed away from the temple. On the absolute scale of small talk this comment must rate minus quite a lot, but Mort couldn't think of anything better.

'No, it mustn't,' said the abbot. 'You think it must be because you believe I can remember all my lives, but of course I can't. Not while I'm alive, anyway.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' Mort conceded.

'Imagine toilet training fifty times.'

'Nothing to look back on, I imagine,' said Mort.

'You're right. If I had my time all over again I wouldn't reincarnate. And just when I'm getting the hang of things, the lads come down from the temple looking for a boy conceived at the hour the old abbot died. Talk about unimaginative. Stop here a moment, please.'

Mort looked down.

'We're in mid-air,'he said doubtfully.

'I won't keep you a minute.' The abbot slid down from Binky's back, walked a few steps on thin air, and shouted.

It seemed to go on for a long time. Then the abbot climbed back again.

'You don't know how long I've been looking forward to that,' he said.

There was a village in a lower valley a few miles from the temple, which acted as a sort of service industry. From the air it was a random scattering of small but extremely well-soundproofed huts.

'Anywhere will do,' the abbot said. Mort left him standing a few feet above the snow at a point where the huts appeared to be thickest.

'Hope the next lifetime improves,' he said. The abbot shrugged.

'One can always hope,' he said. 'I get a nine-month break, anyway. The scenery isn't much, but at least it's in the warm.'

'Goodbye, then,' said Mort. 'I've got to rush.'

'Au revoir,' said the abbot, sadly, and turned away.

The fires of the Hub Lights were still casting their flickering illumination across the landscape. Mort sighed, and reached for the third glass.

The container was silver, decorated with small crowns. There was hardly any sand left.

Mort, feeling that the night had thrown everything at him and couldn't get any worse, turned it around carefully to get a glimpse of the name. . . .

Princess Keli awoke.

There had been a sound like someone making no noise at all. Forget peas and mattresses – sheer natural selection had established over the years that the royal families that survived longest were those whose members could distinguish an assassin in the dark by

the noise he was clever enough not to make, because, in court circles, there was always someone ready to cut the heir with a knife.

She lay in bed, wondering what to do next. There was a dagger under her pillow. She started to slide one hand up the sheets, while peering around the room with half-closed eyes in search of unfamiliar shadows. She was well aware that if she indicated in any way that she was not asleep she would never wake up again.

Some light came into the room from the big window at the far end, but the suits of armour, tapestries and assorted paraphernalia that littered the room could have provided cover for an army.

The knife had dropped down behind the bedhead. She probably wouldn't have used it properly anyway.

Screaming for the guards, she decided, was not a good idea. If there was anyone in the room then the guards must have been overpowered, or at least stunned by a large sum of money.

There was a warming pan on the flagstones by the fire. Would it make a weapon?

There was a faint metallic sound.

Perhaps screaming wouldn't be such a bad idea after all. . . .

The window imploded. For an instant Keli saw, framed against a hell of blue and purple flames, a hooded figure crouched on the back of the largest horse she had ever seen.

There *was* someone standing by the bed, with a knife half raised.

In slow motion, she watched fascinated as the arm went up and the horse galloped at glacier speed across the floor. Now the knife was above her, starting its descent, and the horse was rearing and the rider was standing in the stirrups and swinging some sort of weapon and its blade tore through the slow air with a noise like a finger on the rim of a wet glass —

The light vanished. There was a soft thump on the floor, followed by a metallic clatter.

Keli took a deep breath.

A hand was briefly laid across her mouth and a worried voice said, 'If you scream, I'll regret it. Please? I'm in enough trouble as it is.'

Anyone who could get that amount of bewildered pleading into their voice was either genuine or such a good actor they wouldn't have to bother with assassination for a living. She said, 'Who are you?'

'I don't know if I'm allowed to tell you,' said the voice. 'You are still alive, aren't you?'

She bit down the sarcastic reply just in time. Something about the tone of the question worried her.

'Can't you tell?' she said.

'It's not easy. . . .' There was a pause. She strained to see in the darkness, to put a face around that voice. 'I may have done you some terrible harm,'it added.

'Haven't you just saved my life?'

'I don't know what I have saved, actually. Is there some light around here?'

The maid sometimes leaves matches on the mantelpiece,' said Keli. She felt the presence beside her move away. There were a few hesitant footsteps, a couple of thumps, and finally a clang, although the word isn't sufficient to describe the real ripe cacophony of falling metal that filled the room. It was even followed by the traditional little tinkle a couple of seconds after you thought it was all over.

The voice said, rather indistinctly, 'I'm under a suit of armour. Where should I be?'

Keli slid quietly out of bed, felt her way towards the fireplace, located the bundle of matches by the faint light from the dying fire, struck one in a burst of sulphurous smoke, lit a candle, found the pile of dismembered armour, pulled its sword from its scabbard and then nearly swallowed her tongue.

Someone had just blown hot and wetly in her ear.

That's Binky,' said the heap. 'He's just trying to be friendly. I expect he'd like some hay, if you've got any.'

With royal self-control, Keli said, This is the fourth floor. It's a lady's bedroom. You'd be amazed at how many horses we don't get up here.'

'Oh. Could you help me up, please?'

She put the sword down and pulled aside a breastplate. A thin white face stared back at her.

'First, you'd better tell me why I shouldn't send for the guards anyway,' she said. 'Even being in my bedroom could get you tortured to death.'

She glared at him.

Finally he said, 'Well – could you let my hand free, please? Thank you – firstly, the guards probably wouldn't see me, secondly, you'll never find out why I'm here and you look as though you'd hate not to know, and thirdly. . . .'

Thirdly what?' she said.

His mouth opened and shut. Mort wanted to say: thirdly, you're so beautiful, or at least very attractive, or anyway far more attractive than any other girl I've ever met, although admittedly I haven't met very many. From this it will be seen that Mort's innate honesty will never make him a poet; if Mort ever compared a girl to a summer's day, it would be followed by a thoughtful explanation of what day he had in mind and whether it was raining at the time. In the circumstances, it was just as well that he couldn't find his voice.

Keli held up the candle and looked at the window.

It was whole. The stone frames were unbroken. Every pane, with its stained-glass representatives of the Sto Lat coat of arms, was complete. She looked back at Mort.

'Never mind thirdly,' she said, 'let's get back to secondly.'

An hour later dawn reached the city. Daylight on the Disc flows rather than rushes, because light is slowed right down by the world's standing magical field, and it rolled across the flat lands like a golden sea. The city on the mound stood out like a sandcastle in the tide for a moment, until the day swirled around it and crept onwards.

Mort and Keli sat side by side on her bed. The hourglass lay between them. There was no sand left in the top bulb.

From outside came the sounds of the castle waking up.

'I still don't understand this,' she said. 'Does it mean I'm dead, or doesn't it?'

'It means you ought to be dead,' he said, 'according to fate or whatever. I haven't really studied the theory,'

'And you should have killed me?'

'No! I mean, no, the assassin should have killed you. I did try to explain all that,' said Mort.

'Why didn't you let him?'

Mort looked at her in horror.

'Did you *want* to die?'

'Of course I didn't. But it looks as though what people want doesn't come into it, does it? I'm trying to be sensible about this.'

Mort stared at his knees. Then he stood up.

'I think I'd better be going,' he said coldly.

He folded up the scythe and stuck it into its sheath behind the saddle. Then he looked at the window.

'You came through that,' said Keli, helpfully. 'Look, when I said —'

'Does it open?'

'No. There's a balcony along the passage. But people will see you!'

Mort ignored her, pulled open the door and led Binky out into the corridor. Keli ran after them. A maid stopped, curtsied, and frowned slightly as her brain wisely dismissed the sight of a very large horse walking along the carpet.

The balcony overlooked one of the inner courtyards. Mort glanced over the parapet, and then mounted.

'Watch out for the duke,' he said. 'He's behind all this.'

'My father always warned me about him,' said the princess. 'I've got a foodtaster.'

'You should get a bodyguard as well,' said Mort. 'I must go. I have important things to do. Farewell,' he added, in what he hoped was the right tone of injured pride.

'Shall I see you again?' said Keli. 'There's lots I want to —'

That might not be a good idea, if you think about it,' said Mort haughtily. He clicked his tongue, and Binky leapt into the air, cleared the parapet and cantered up into the blue morning sky.

'I wanted to say thank you!' Keli yelled after him.

The maid, who couldn't get over the feeling that something was wrong and had followed her, said, 'Are you all right, ma'am?'

Keli looked at her distractedly.

'What?' she demanded.

'I just wondered if – everything was all right?'

Keli's shoulders sagged.

'No,' she said. 'Everything's all wrong. There's a dead assassin in my bedroom. Could you please have something done about it?

'And —' she held up a hand – 'I don't want you to say "Dead, ma'am?" or "Assassin, ma'am?" or scream or anything, I just want you to get something done about it. Quietly. I think I've got a headache. So just nod.'

The maid nodded, bobbed uncertainly, and backed away.

Mort wasn't sure how he got back. The sky simply changed from ice blue to sullen grey as Binky eased himself into the gap between dimensions. He didn't land on the dark soil of Death's estate, it was simply *there*, underfoot, as though an aircraft carrier had gently manoeuvred itself under a jump jet to save the pilot all the trouble of touching down.

The great horse trotted into the stableyard and halted outside the double door, swishing his tail. Mort slid off and ran for the house.

And stopped, and ran back, and filled the hayrack, and ran for the house, and stopped and muttered to himself and ran back and rubbed the horse down and checked the water bucket, and ran for the house, and ran back and fetched the horseblanket down from its hook on the wall and buckled it on. Binky gave him a dignified nuzzle.

No-one seemed to be about as Mort slipped in by the back door and made his way to the library, where even at this time of night the air seemed to be made of hot dry dust. It seemed to take years to locate Princess Keli's biography, but he found it eventually. It was a depressingly slim volume on a shelf only reachable by the library ladder, a wheeled rickety structure that strongly resembled an early siege engine.

With trembling fingers he opened it at the last page, and groaned.

'The princess's assassination at the age of fifteen,' he read, 'was followed by the union of Sto Lat with Sto Helit and, indirectly, the collapse of the city states of the central plain and the rise of—'

He read on, unable to stop. Occasionally he groaned again.

Finally he put the book back, hesitated, and then shoved it behind a few other volumes. He could still feel it there as he climbed down the ladder, shrieking its incriminating existence to the world.

There were few ocean-going ships on the Disc. No captain liked to venture out of sight of a coastline. It was a sorry fact that ships which looked from a distance as though they were going over the edge of the world weren't in fact disappearing over the horizon, they were in fact dropping over the edge of the world.

Every generation or so a few enthusiastic explorers doubted this and set out to prove it wrong. Strangely enough, none of them had ever come back to announce the result of their researches.

The following analogy would, therefore, have been meaningless to Mort.

He felt as if he'd been shipwrecked on the *Titanic* but in the nick of time had been rescued. By the *Lusitonia*.

He felt as though he'd thrown a snowball on the spur of the moment and watched the ensuing avalanche engulf three ski resorts.

He felt history unravelling all around him.

He felt he needed someone to talk to, quickly.

That had to mean either Albert or Ysabell, because the thought of explaining everything to those tiny blue pinpoints was not one he cared to contemplate after a long night. On the rare occasions Ysabell deigned to look in his direction she made it clear that the only difference between Mort and a dead toad was the colour. As for Albert. . . .

All right, not the perfect confidant, but definitely the best in a field of one.

Mort slid down the steps and threaded his way back through the bookshelves. A few hours' sleep would be a good idea, too.

Then he heard a gasp, the brief patter of running feet, and the slam of a door. When he peered around the nearest bookcase there was nothing there except a stool with a couple of books on it. He picked one up and glanced at the name, then read a few pages. There was a damp lace handkerchief lying next to it.

Mort rose late, and hurried towards the kitchen expecting at any moment the deep tones of disapproval. Nothing happened.

Albert was at the stone sink, gazing thoughtfully at his chip pan, probably wondering whether it was time to change the fat or let it bide for another year. He turned as Mort slid into a chair.

'You had a busy tune of it, then,' he said. 'Gallivanting all over the place until all hours, I heard. I could do you an egg. Or there's porridge.'

'Egg, please,' said Mort. He'd never plucked up the courage to try Albert's porridge, which led a private life of its own in the depths of its saucepan and ate spoons.

'The master wants to see you after,' Albert added, 'but he said you wasn't to rush.'

'Oh.' Mort stared at the table. 'Did he say anything else?'

'He said he hadn't had an evening off in a thousand years,' said Albert. 'He was humming. I don't like it. I've never seen him like this.'

'Oh.' Mort took the plunge. 'Albert, have you been here long?'

Albert looked at him over the top of his spectacles.

'Maybe,' he said. 'It's hard to keep track of outside time, boy. I bin here since just after the old king died.'

'Which king, Albert?'

'Artorollo, I think he was called. Little fat man. Squeaky voice. I only saw him the once, though.'

'Where was this?'

'In Ankh, of course.'

'What?' said Mort. They don't have kings in Ankh-Morpork, everyone knows that!'

'This was back a bit, I said,' said Albert. He poured himself a cup of tea from Death's personal teapot and sat down, a dreamy look in his crusted eyes. Mort waited expectantly.

'And they was kings in those days, real kings, not like the sort you get now. They was *monarchs*,' continued Albert, carefully pouring some tea into his saucer and fanning it primly with the end of his muffler. 'I mean, they was wise and fair, well, fairly wise. And they wouldn't think twice about cutting your head off soon as look at you,' he added approvingly. 'And all the queens were tall and pale and wore them balaclava helmet things —'

'Wimples?' said Mort.

'Yeah, them, and the princesses were beautiful as the day is long and so noble they, they could pee through a dozen mattresses —'

'What?'

Albert hesitated. 'Something like that, anyway,' he conceded. 'And there was balls and tournaments and executions. Great days.' He smiled dreamily at his memories.

'Not like the sort of days you get now,' he said, emerging from his reverie with bad grace.

'Have you got any other names, Albert?' said Mort. But the brief spell had been broken and the old man wasn't going to be drawn.

'Oh, I know,' he snapped, 'get Albert's name and you'll go and look him up in the library, won't you? Prying and poking. I know you, skulking in there at all hours reading the lives of young wimmen —'

The heralds of guilt must have flourished their tarnished trumpets in the depths of Mort's eyes, because Albert cackled and prodded him with a bony finger.

'You might at least put them back where you find 'em,' he said, 'not leave piles of 'em around for old Albert to put back. Anyway, it's not right, ogling the poor dead things. It probably turns you blind.'

'But I only —' Mort began, and remembered the damp lace handkerchief in his pocket, and shut up.

He left Albert grumbling to himself and doing the washing up, and slipped into the library. Pale sunlight lanced down from the high windows, gently fading the covers on the patient, ancient volumes. Occasionally a speck of dust would catch the light as it floated through the golden shafts, and flare like a miniature supernova.

Mort knew that if he listened hard enough he could hear the insect-like scritching of the books as they wrote themselves.

Once upon a time Mort would have found it eerie. Now it was – reassuring. It demonstrated that the universe was running smoothly. His conscience, which had been looking for the opening, gleefully reminded him that, all right, it might be running smoothly but it certainly wasn't heading in the right direction.

He made his way through the maze of shelves to the mysterious pile of books, and found it was gone. Albert had been in the kitchen, and Mort had never seen Death himself enter the library. What was Ysabell looking for, then?

He glanced up at the cliff of shelves above him, and his stomach went cold when he thought of what was starting to happen. . . .

There was nothing for it. He'd have to tell someone.

Keli, meanwhile, was also finding life difficult.

This was because causality had an incredible amount of inertia. Mort's misplaced thrust, driven by anger and desperation and nascent love, had sent it down a new track but it hadn't noticed yet. He'd kicked the tail of the dinosaur, but it would be some time before the other end realised it was time to say 'ouch'.

Bluntly, the universe knew Keli was dead and was therefore rather surprised to find that she hadn't stopped walking and breathing yet.

It showed it in little ways. The courtiers who gave her furtive odd looks during the morning would not have been able to say why the sight of her made them feel strangely uncomfortable. To their acute embarrassment and her annoyance they found themselves ignoring her, or talking in hushed voices.

The Chamberlain found he'd instructed that the royal standard be flown at half mast and for the life of him couldn't explain why. He was gently led off to his bed with a mild nervous affliction after ordering a thousand yards of black bunting for no apparent reason.

The eerie, unreal feeling soon spread throughout the castle. The head coachman ordered the state bier to be brought out again and polished, and then stood in the stable yard and wept into his chamois leather because he couldn't remember why. Servants walked softly along the corridors. The cook had to fight an overpowering urge to prepare simple banquets of cold meat. Dogs howled and then stopped, feeling rather stupid. The two black stallions who traditionally pulled the Sto Lat funeral cortege grew restive in their stalls and nearly kicked a groom to death.

In his castle in Sto Helit, the duke waited in vain for a messenger who had in fact set out, but had stopped halfway down the street, unable to remember what it was he was supposed to be doing.

Through all this Keli moved like a solid and increasingly more irritated ghost.

Things came to a head at lunchtime. She swept into the great hall and found no place had been set in front of the royal chair. By speaking loudly and distinctly to the butler she managed to get that rectified, then saw dishes being passed in front of her before she could get a fork into them. She watched in sullen disbelief as the wine was brought in and poured first for the Lord of the Privy Closet.

It was an unregal thing to do, but she stuck out a foot and tripped the wine waiter. He stumbled, muttered something under his breath, and stared down at the flagstones.

She leaned the other way and shouted into the ear of the Yeoman of the Pantry: 'Can you see me, man? Why are we reduced to eating cold pork and ham?'

He turned aside from his hushed conversation with the Lady of the Small Hexagonal Room in the North Turret, gave her a long look in which shock made way for a sort of unfocused puzzlement, and said, 'Why, yes . . . I can . . . er. . . .'

'Your Royal Highness,' prompted Keli.

'But . . . yes . . . Highness,' he muttered. There was a heavy pause.

Then, as if switched back on, he turned his back on her and resumed his conversation.

Keli sat for a while, white with shock and anger, then pushed the chair back and stormed away to her chambers. A couple of servants sharing a quick rollup in the passage outside were knocked sideways by something they couldn't quite see.

Keli ran into her room and hauled on the rope that should have sent the duty maid running in from the sitting room at the end of the corridor. Nothing happened for some time, and then the door was pushed open slowly and a face peered in at her.

She recognised the look this time, and was ready for it. She grabbed the maid by the shoulders and hauled her bodily into the room, slamming the door shut behind her. As the frightened woman stared everywhere but at Keli she hauled off and fetched her a stinging slap across the cheek.

'Did you feel that? Did you feel it?' she shrieked.

'But . . . you . . .' the maid whimpered, staggering backwards until she hit the bed and sitting down heavily on it.

'Look at me! Look at me when I talk to you!' yelled Keli, advancing on her. 'You can see me, can't you? Tell me you can see me or I'll have you executed!'

The maid stared into her terrified eyes.

'I can see you,' she said, 'but. . . .'

'But what? But what?'

'Surely you're . . . I heard . . . I thought. . . .'

'What did you think?' snapped Keli. She wasn't shouting any more. Her words came out like white-hot whips.

The maid collapsed into a sobbing heap. Keli stood tapping her foot for a moment, and then shook the woman gently.

'Is there a wizard in the city?' she said. 'Look at me, *at me*. There's a wizard, isn't there? You girls are always skulking off to talk to wizards! Where does he live?'

The woman turned a tear-stained face towards her, fighting against every instinct that told her the princess didn't exist.

'Uh . . . wizard, yes . . . Cutwell, in Wall Street.

Keli's lips compressed into a thin smile. She wondered where her cloaks were kept, but cold reason told her it was going to be a damn sight easier to find them herself than try to make her presence felt to the maid. She waited, watching closely, as the woman stopped sobbing, looked around her in vague bewilderment, and hurried out of the room.

She's forgotten me already, she thought. She looked at her hands. She seemed solid enough.

It had to be magic.

She wandered into her robing room and experimentally opened a few cupboards until she found a black cloak and hood. She slipped them on and darted out into the corridor and down the servants' stairs.

She hadn't been this way since she was little. This was the world of linen cupboards, bare floors and dumb-waiters. It smelled of slightly stale crusts.

Keli moved through it like an earthbound spook. She was aware of the servants' quarters, of course, in the same way that people are aware at some level in their minds of the drains or the guttering, and she would be quite prepared to concede that although servants all looked pretty much alike they must have some distinguishing features by which their nearest and dearest could, presumably, identify them. But she was not prepared for sights like Moghedron the wine butler, whom she had hitherto seen only as a stately presence

moving like a galleon under full sail, sitting in his pantry with his jacket undone and smoking a pipe.

A couple of maids ran past her without a second glance, giggling. She hurried on, aware that in some strange way she was trespassing in her own castle.

And that, she realised, was because it wasn't her castle at all. The noisy world around her, with its steaming laundries and chilly stillrooms, was its own world. She couldn't own it. Possibly it owned her.

She took a chicken leg from the table in the biggest kitchen, a cavern lined with so many pots that by the light of its fires it looked like an armoury for tortoises, and felt the unfamiliar thrill of theft. Theft! In her own kingdom! And the cook looked straight through her, eyes as glazed as jugged ham.

Keli ran across the stable yards and out of the back gate, past a couple of sentries whose stern gaze quite failed to notice her.

Out in the streets it wasn't so creepy, but she still felt oddly naked. It was unnerving, being among people who were going about their own affairs and not bothering to look at one, when one's entire experience of the world hitherto was that it revolved around one. Pedestrians bumped into one and rebounded away, wondering briefly what it was they had hit, and one several times had to scurry away out of the path of wagons.

The chicken leg hadn't gone far to fill the hole left by the absence of lunch, and she filched a couple of apples from a stall, making a mental note to have the chamberlain find out how much apples cost and send some money down to the stallholder.

Dishevelled, rather grubby and smelling slightly of horse dung, she came at last to Cutwell's door. The knocker gave her some trouble. In her experience doors opened for you; there were special people to arrange it.

She was so distraught she didn't even notice that the knocker winked at her.

She tried again, and thought she heard a distant crash. After some time the door opened a few inches and she caught a glimpse of a round flustered face topped with curly hair. Her right foot surprised her by intelligently inserting itself in the crack.

'I demand to see the wizard,' she announced. 'Pray admit me this instant.'

'He's rather busy at present,' said the face. 'Were you after a love potion?'

'A what?'

'I've – we've got a special on Cutwell's Shield of Passion ointment,' said the face, and winked in a startling fashion. 'Provides your wild oats while guaranteeing a crop failure, if you know what I mean.'

Keli bridled. 'No,' she lied coldly, 'I do not.'

'Ramrub? Maidens' Longstop? Belladonna eyedrops?'

'I demand —'

'Sorry, we're closed,' said the face, and shut the door. Keli withdrew her foot just in time.

She muttered some words that would have amazed and shocked her tutors, and thumped on the woodwork.

The tattoo of her hammering suddenly slowed as realisation dawned.

He'd seen her! He'd heard her!

She beat on the door with renewed vigour, yelling with all the power in her lungs.

A voice by her ear said, 'It won't work. He 'eef very fstubborn.'

She looked around slowly and met the impertinent gaze of the doorknocker. It waggled its metal eyebrows at her and spoke indistinctly through its wrought-iron ring.

'I am Princess Keli, heir to the throne of Sto Lat,' she said haughtily, holding down the lid on her terror. 'And I don't talk to door furniture.'

'Fwell, *I'm* just a doorknocker and I can talk to fwhoever I please,' said the gargoyle pleasantly. 'And I can ftell you the fmaster iff having a trying day and duff fnot fwant to be disturbed. But you could ftry to use the magic word,' it added. 'Coming from an attractiff fwoman it works nine times out of eight.'

'Magic word? What's the magic word?'

The knocker perceptibly sneered. 'Haff you been taught nothing, miss?'

She drew herself up to her full height, which wasn't really worth the effort. She felt she'd had a trying day too. Her father had personally executed a hundred enemies in battle. She should be able to manage a doorknocker.

'I have been *educated*,' she informed it with icy precision, 'by some of the finest scholars in the land.'

The doorknocker did not appear to be impressed.

'Iff they didn't teach you the magic word,' it said calmly, 'they couldn't haff fbeen all that fine.'

Keli reached out, grabbed the heavy ring, and pounded it on the door. The knocker leered at her.

'Ftreat me rough,' it lisped. 'That'f the way I like it!'

'You're disgusting!'

'Yeff. Ooo, that waff nife, do it again. . . .'

The door opened a crack. There was a shadowy glimpse of curly hair.

'Madam, I said we're cl —'

Keli sagged.

'Please help me,' she said. 'Please!'

'See?' said the doorknocker triumphantly. 'Sooner or later *everyone* remembers the magic word!'

Keli had been to official functions in Ankh-Morpork and had met senior wizards from Unseen University, the Disc's premier college of magic. Some of them had been tall, and most of them had been fat, and nearly all of them had been richly dressed, or at least thought they were richly dressed.

In fact there are fashions in wizardry as in more mundane arts, and this tendency to look like elderly aldermen was only temporary. Previous generations had gone in for looking pale and interesting, or druidical and grubby, or mysterious and saturnine. But Keli was

used to wizards as a sort of fur-trimmed small mountain with a wheezy voice, and Igneous Cutwell didn't quite fit the mage image.

He was young. Well, that couldn't be helped; presumably even wizards had to start off young. He didn't have a beard, and the only thing his rather grubby robe was trimmed with was frayed edges.

'Would you like a drink or something?' he said, surreptitiously kicking a discarded vest under the table.

Keli looked around for somewhere to sit that wasn't occupied with laundry or used crockery, and shook her head. Cutwell noticed her expression.

'It's a bit alfresco, I'm afraid,' he added hurriedly, elbowing the remains of a garlic sausage on to the floor. 'Mrs Nugent usually comes in twice a week and does for me but she's gone to see her sister who's had one of her turns. Are you sure? It's no trouble. I saw a spare cup here only yesterday.'

'I have a problem, Mr Cutwell,' said Keli.

'Hang on a moment.' He reached up to a hook over the fireplace and took down a pointy hat that had seen better days, although from the look of it they hadn't been very much better, and then said, 'Right. Fire away.'

'What's so important about the hat?'

'Oh, it's very 'essential. You've got to have the proper hat for wizarding. We wizards know about this sort of thing.'

'If you say so. Look, can you see me?'

He peered at her. 'Yes. Yes, I would definitely say I can see you.'

'And hear me? You can hear me, can you?'

'Loud and clear. Yes. Every syllable tinkling into place. No problems.'

'Then would you be surprised if I told you that no-one else in this city can?'

'Except me?'

Keli snorted. 'And your doorknocker.'

Cutwell pulled out a chair and sat down. He squirmed a little. A thoughtful expression passed over his face. He stood up, reached behind him and produced a flat reddish mass which might have once been half a pizza.[2] He stared at it sorrowfully.

'I've been looking for that all morning, would you believe?' he said. 'It was an Ail-On with extra peppers, too.' He picked sadly at the squashed shape, and suddenly remembered Keli.

'Gosh, sorry,' he said, 'where's my manners? Whatever will you think of me? Here. Have an anchovy. Please.'

'Have you been listening to me?' snapped Keli.

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[2] The first pizza was created on the Disc by the Klatchian mystic Ronron 'Revelation Joe' Shuwadhi, who claimed to have been given the recipe in a dream by the Creator of the Discworld Himself, Who had apparently added that it was what He had intended all along. Those desert travellers who had seen the original, which is reputedly miraculously preserved in the Forbidden City of Ee, say that what the Creator had in mind then was a fairly small cheese and pepperoni affair with a few black olives* and things like mountains and seas got added out of last-minute enthusiasm, as so often happens.

'Do you feel invisible? In yourself, I mean?' said Gutwell, indistinctly.

'Of course not. I just feel angry. So I want you to tell my fortune.'

'Well, I don't know about that, it all sounds rather *medical* to me and —'

'I can pay.'

'It's illegal, you see,' said Cutwell wretchedly. 'The old king expressly forbade fortune telling in Sto Lat. He didn't like wizards much.'

'I can pay a *lot*.'

'Mrs Nugent was telling me this new girl is likely to be worse. A right haughty one, she said. Not the sort to look kindly on practitioners of the subtle arts, I fear.'

Keli smiled. Members of the court who had seen that smile before would have hastened to drag Gutwell out of the way and into a place of safety, like the next continent, but he just sat there trying to pick bits of mushroom out of his robe.

'I understand she's got a foul temper on her,' said Keli. 'I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't turn you out of the city anyway.'

'Oh dear,' said Cutwell, 'do you really think so?'

'Look,' said Keli, 'you don't have to tell my future, just my present. Even she couldn't object to that. I'll have a word with her if you like,' she added magnanimously.

Cutwell brightened. 'Oh, do you know her?' he said.

'Yes. But sometimes, I think, not very well.'

Cutwell sighed and burrowed around in the debris on the table, dislodging cascades of elderly plates and the long-mummified remains of several meals. Eventually he unearthed a fat leather wallet, stuck to a cheese slice.

'Well,' he said doubtfully, 'these are Caroc cards. Distilled wisdom of the Ancients and all that. Or there's the Ching Aling of the Hublandish. It's all the rage in the smart set. I don't do tealeaves.'

'I'll try the Ching thing.'

'You throw these yarrow stalks in the air, then.'

She did. They looked at the ensuing pattern.

'Hmm,' said Cutwell after a while. 'Well, that's one in the fireplace, one in the cocoa mug, one in the street, shame about the window, one on the table, and one, no, *two* behind the dresser. I expect Mrs Nugent will be able to find the rest.'

'You didn't say how hard. Shall I do it again?'

'No-ooo, I don't think so.' Cutwell thumbed through the pages of a yellowed book that had previously been supporting the table leg. 'The pattern seems to make sense. Yes, here we are, Octogram 8,887: Illegality, the Unatoning Goose. Which we cross reference here . . . hold on . . . hold on . . . yes. Got it.'

'Well?'

'*Without vertically, wisely the cochineal emperor goes forth at teatime; at evening the mollusc is silent among the almond blossom.*'

'Yes?' said Keli, respectfully. 'What does that mean?'

'Unless you're a mollusc, probably not a lot,' said Cutwell. 'I think perhaps it lost something in translation.'

'Are you sure you know how to do this?'

'Let's try the cards,' said Cutwell hurriedly, fanning them out. 'Pick a card. Any card.'

'It's Death,'said Keli.

'Ah. Well. Of course, the Death card doesn't actually mean *death* in all circumstances,' Cutwell said quickly.

'You mean, it doesn't mean death in those circumstances where the subject is getting over-excited and you're too embarrassed to tell the truth, hmm?'

'Look, take another card.'

'This one's Death as well,' said Keli.

'Did you put the other one back?'

'No. Shall I take another card?'

'May as well.'

'Well, there's a coincidence!'

'Death number three?'

'Right. Is this a special pack for conjuring tricks?' Keli tried to sound composed, but even she could detect the faint tinkle of hysteria in her voice.

Cutwell frowned at her and carefully put the cards back in the pack, shuffled it, and dealt them out on to the table. There was only one Death.

'Oh dear,' he said, 'I think this is going to be serious. May I see the palm of your hand, please?'

He examined it for a long time. Alter a while he went to the dresser, took a jeweller's eyeglass out of a drawer, wiped the porridge off it with the sleeve of his robe, and spent another few minutes examining her hand in minutest detail. Eventually he sat back, removed the glass, and stared at her.

'You're dead,' he said.

Keli waited. She couldn't think of any suitable reply. 'I'm not' lacked a certain style, while 'Is it serious?' seemed somehow too frivolous.

'Did I say I thought this was going to be serious?' said Cutwell.

'I think you did,' said Keli carefully, keeping her tone totally level.

'I was right.'

'Oh.'

'It could be fatal.'

'How much more fatal,' said Keli, 'than being dead?'

'I didn't mean for you.'

'Oh.'

'Something very fundamental seems to have gone wrong, you see. You're dead in every sense but the, er, actual. I mean, the cards think you're dead. Your lifeline thinks you're dead. Everything and everyone thinks you're dead.'

'*I* don't,' said Keli, but her voice was less than confident.

'I'm afraid your opinion doesn't count.'

'But people can see and hear me!'

The first thing you learn when you enroll at Unseen University, I'm afraid, is that people don't pay much attention to that sort of thing. It's what their minds tell them that's important.'

'You mean people don't see me because their minds tell them not to?'

' 'Fraid so. It's called predestination, or something.' Cutwell looked at her wretchedly. 'I'm a wizard. We know about these things.'

'Actually it's not the *first* thing you learn when you enroll,' he added, 'I mean, you learn where the lavatories are and all that sort of thing before that. But after all that, it's the first thing.'

'*You* can see me, though.'

'Ah. Well. Wizards are specially trained to see things that are there and not to see things that aren't. You get these special exercises —'

Keli drummed her fingers on the table, or tried to. It turned out to be difficult. She stared down in vague horror.

Cutwell hurried forward and wiped the table with his sleeve.

'Sorry,' he muttered, 'I had treacle sandwiches for supper last night.'

'What can I *do*?'

'Nothing.'

'*Nothing*?'

'Well, you could certainly become a very successful burglar . . . sorry. That was tasteless of me.'

'*I* thought so.'

Cutwell patted her ineptly on the hand, and Keli was too preoccupied even to notice such flagrant *lesè majesté*.

'You see, everything's fixed. History is all worked out, from start to finish. What the facts actually *are* is beside the point; history just rolls straight over the top of them. You can't change anything because the changes are already part of it. You're dead. It's fated. You'll just have to accept it.'

He gave an apologetic grin. 'You're a lot luckier than most dead people, if you look at it objectively,' he said. 'You're alive to enjoy it.'

'I don't want to accept it. Why should I accept it? It's not my fault!'

'You don't understand. History is moving on. You can't get involved in it any more. There isn't a part in it for you, don't you see? Best to let things take their course.' He patted her hand again. She looked at him. He withdrew his hand.

'What am I supposed to do then?' she said. 'Not eat, because the food wasn't destined to be eaten by me? Go and live in a crypt somewhere?'

'Bit of a poser, isn't it?' agreed Cutwell. 'That's fate for you, I'm afraid. If the world can't sense you, you don't exist. I'm a wizard. We know —'

'Don't say it.'

Keli stood up.

Five generations ago one of her ancestor had halted his band of nomadic cutthroats a few miles from the mound of Sto Lat and had regarded the sleeping city with a peculiarly determined expression that said: This'll do. Just because you're born in the saddle doesn't mean you have to die in the bloody thing.

Strangely enough, many of his distinctive features had, by a trick of heredity, been bequeathed to his descendant[3], accounting for her rather idiosyncratic attractiveness. They were never more apparent than now. Even Cutwell was impressed. When it came to determination, you could have cracked rocks on her jaw.

In exactly the same tone of voice that her ancestor had used when he addressed his weary, sweaty followers before the attack[4], she said:

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[3] Although not the droopy moustache and round furry hat with the spike on it.

[4] The speech has been passed on to later generations in an epic poem commissioned by his son, who wasn't born in a saddle and could eat with a knife and fork. It began:

'No. No, I'm not going to accept it. I'm not going to dwindle into some sort of ghost. You're going to help me, wizard.'

Cutwell's subconscious recognised that tone. It had harmonics in it that made even the woodworm in the floorboards stop what they were doing and stand to attention. It wasn't voicing an opinion, it was saying: things will be thus.

'Me, madam?' he quavered, 'I don't see what I can possibly—'

He was jerked off his chair and out into the street, his robes billowing around him. Keli marched towards the palace with her shoulders set determinedly, dragging the wizard behind her like a reluctant puppy. It was with such a walk that mothers used to bear down on the local school when their little boy came home with a black eye; it was unstoppable; it was like the March of Time.

'What is it you intend?' Cutwell stuttered, horribly aware that there was going to be nothing he could do to resist, whatever it was.

'See yonder the stolid foemen slumber
Fat with stolen gold, corrupt of mind.
Let the spears of your wrath be as the steppe fire on a
windy day in the dry season,
Let your honest blade thrust like the horns of
a five-year old yok with severe toothache. . . .'

And went on for three hours. Reality, which can't usually afford to pay poets, records that in fact the entire speech ran:

'Lads, most of them are still in bed, we should go through them like kzak fruit through a short grandmother, and I for one have had it right up to here with yurts, okay?'

'It's your lucky day, wizard.'

'Oh. Good,' he said weakly.

'You've just been appointed Royal Recogniser.'

'Oh. What does that entail, exactly?'

'You're going to remind everyone I'm alive. It's very simple. There's three square meals a day and your laundry done. Step lively, man.'

'Royal?'

'You're a wizard. I think there's something you ought to know,' said the princess.

THERE is? said Death.

(That was a cinematic trick adapted for print. Death wasn't talking to the princess. He was actually in his study, talking to Mort. But it was quite effective, wasn't it? It's probably called a fast dissolve, or a crosscut/zoom. Or something. An industry where a senior technician is called a Best Boy might call it anything.)

AND WHAT IS THAT? he added, winding a bit of black silk around the wicked hook in a little vice he'd clamped to his desk.

Mort hesitated. Mostly this was because of fear and embarrassment, but it was also because the sight of a hooded spectre peacefully tying dry flies was enough to make anyone pause.

Besides, Ysabell was sitting on the other side of the room, ostensibly doing some needlework but also watching him through a cloud of sullen disapproval. He could feel her red-rimmed eyes boring into the back of his neck.

Death inserted a few crow hackles and whistled a busy little tune through his teeth, not having anything else to whistle through. He looked up.

HMM?

They – didn't go as smoothly as I thought,' said Mort, standing nervously on the carpet in front of the desk.

You HAD TROUBLE? said Death, snipping off a few scraps of feather.

'Well, you see, the witch wouldn't come away, and the monk, well, he started out all over again.'

THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT THERE, LAD —

'— Mort —'

— YOU SHOULD HAVE WORKED OUT BY NOW THAT EVERYONE GETS WHAT THEY THINK IS COMING TO THEM. IT'S SO MUCH NEATER THAT WAY.

'I know, sir. But that means bad people who think they're going to some sort of paradise actually do get there. And good people who fear they're going to some kind of horrible place really suffer. It doesn't seem like justice.'

WHAT is IT I'VE SAID YOU MUST REMEMBER, WHEN YOU'RE OUT ON THE DUTY?

'Well, you —'

HMM?

Mort stuttered into silence.

THERE'S NO JUSTICE. THERE'S JUST YOU.

'Well, I —'

YOU MUST REMEMBER THAT.

'Yes, but —'

I EXPECT IT ALL WORKS OUT PROPERLY IN THE END. I HAVE NEVER MET THE CREATOR, BUT I'M TOLD HE'S QUITE KINDLY DISPOSED TO PEOPLE. Death snapped the thread and started to unwind the vice.

PUT SUCH THOUGHTS OUT OF YOUR MIND, he added. AT LEAST THE THIRD ONE SHOULDN'T HAVE GIVEN YOU ANY TROUBLE.

This was the moment. Mort had thought about it for a long tune. There was no sense in concealing it. He'd upset the whole future course of history. Such things tend to draw themselves to people's attention. Best to get it off his chest. Own up like a man. Take his medicine. Cards on table. Beating about bush, none of. Mercy, throw himself on.

The piercing blue eyes glittered at him.

He looked back like a nocturnal rabbit trying to outstare the headlights of a sixteen-wheeled artic whose driver is a twelve-hour caffeine freak outrunning the tachometers of hell.

He failed.

'No, sir,'he said.

GOOD. WELL DONE. Now THEN, WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS?

Anglers reckon that a good dry fly should cunningly mimic the real thing. There are the right flies for morning. There are different flies for the evening rise. And so on.

But the thing between Death's triumphant digits was a fly from the dawn of time. It was the fly in the primordial soup. It had bred on mammoth turds. It wasn't a fly that bangs on window panes, it was a fly that drills through walls. It was an insect that would crawl out from between the slats of the heaviest swat dripping venom and seeking revenge. Strange wings and dangling bits stuck out all over it. It seemed to have a lot of teeth.

'What's it called?' said Mort.

I SHALL CALL IT – DEATH'S GLORY. Death gave the thing a final admiring glance and stuck it into the hood of his robe. I FEEL INCLINED TO SEE A LITTLE BIT OF LIFE THIS EVENING, he Said. YOU CAN TAKE THE DUTY, NOWTHATYOU'VEGOTTHEHANGOFIT.AS IT WERE.

'Yes. Sir,' said Mort, mournfully. He saw his life stretching out in front of him like a nasty black tunnel with no light at the end of it.

Death drummed his finger on the desk, muttered to himself.

AH YES, he said. ALBERT TELLS ME SOMEONE'S BEEN MEDDLING IN THE LIBRARY.

'Pardon, sir?'

TAKING BOOKS our, LEAVING THEM LYING AROUND.

BOOKS ABOUT YOUNG WOMEN. HE SEEMS TO THINK IT IS AMUSING.

As has already been revealed, the Holy Listeners have such well developed hearing that they can be deafened by a good sunset. Just for a few seconds it seemed to Mort that the skin on the back of his neck was developing similar strange powers, because he could see Ysabell freeze in mid-stitch. He also heard the little intake of breath that he'd heard before, among the shelves. He remembered the lace handkerchief.

He said, 'Yes, sir. It won't happen again, sir.'

The skin on the back of his neck started to itch like fury.

SPLENDID. Now, YOU TWO CAN RUN ALONG. GET ALBERT TO DO YOU A PICNIC LUNCH OR SOMETHING. GET SOME FRESH AIR. I'VE NOTICED THE WAY YOU TWO ALWAYS AVOID EACH OTHER. He gave Mort a conspiratorial nudge – it was like being poked with a stick – and added, ALBERT'S TOLD ME WHAT THAT MEANS.

'Has he?' said Mort gloomily. He'd been wrong, there *was* a light at the end of the tunnel, and it was a flamethrower.

Death gave him another of his supernova winks.

Mort didn't return it. Instead he turned and plodded towards the door, at a general speed and gait that made Great A'Tuin look like a spring lamb.

He was halfway along the corridor before he heard the soft rush of footsteps behind him and a hand caught his arm.

'Mort?'

He turned and gazed at Ysabell through a fog of depression.

'Why did you let him think it was you in the library?'

'Don't know.'

'It was . . . very . . . kind of you,' she said cautiously.

'Was it? I can't think what came over me.' He felt in his pocket and produced the handkerchief. This belongs to you, I think.'

'Thank you.' She blew her nose noisily.

Mort was already well down the corridor, his shoulders hunched like vulture's wings. She ran after him.

'I say,' she said.

'What?'

'I wanted to say thank you.'

'It doesn't matter,' he muttered. 'It'd just be best if you don't take books away again. It upsets them, or something.' He gave what he considered to be a mirthless laugh. 'Ha!'

'Ha what?'

'Just ha!'

He'd reached the end of the corridor. There was the door into the kitchen, where Albert would be leering knowingly, and Mort decided he couldn't face that. He stopped.

'But I only took the books for a bit of company,' she said behind him.

He gave in.

'We could have a walk in the garden,' he said in despair, and then managed to harden his heart a little and added, 'Without obligation, that is.'

'You mean you're not going to marry me?' she said. Mort was horrified. 'Marry?'

'Isn't that what father brought you here for?' she said. 'He doesn't need an apprentice, after all.'

'You mean all those nudges and winks and little comments about some day my son all this will be yours?' said Mort. 'I tried to ignore them. I don't want to get married to anyone yet,' he added, suppressing a fleeting mental picture of the princess. 'And certainly not to you, no offence meant.'

'I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on the Disc,' she said sweetly.

Mort was hurt by this. It was one thing not to want to marry someone, but quite another to be told they didn't want to marry *you*.

'At least I don't look like I've been eating doughnuts in a wardrobe for years,' he said, as they stepped out on to Death's black lawn.

'At least I walk as if my legs only had one knee each,' she said.

'*My* eyes aren't two juugly poached eggs.'

Ysabell nodded. 'On the other hand, *my* ears don't look like something growing on a dead tree. What does juugly mean?'

'You know, eggs like Albert does them.'

'With the white all sticky and runny and full of slimy bits?'

'Yes.'

'A good word,' she conceded thoughtfully. 'But *my* hair, I put it to you, doesn't look like something you clean a privy with.'

'Certainly, but neither does mine look like a wet hedgehog.'

'Pray note that my chest does not appear to be a toast rack in a wet paper bag.'

Mort glanced sideways at the top of Ysabell's dress, which contained enough puppy fat for two litters of Rotweilers, and forbore to comment.

'*My* eyebrows don't look like a pair of mating caterpillars,' he hazarded.

True. But *my* legs, I suggest, could at least stop a pig in a passageway.'

'Sorry —?'

'They're not bandy,' she explained.

'Ah.'

They strolled through the lily beds, temporarily lost for words. Eventually Ysabell confronted Mort and stuck out her hand. He shook it in thankful silence.

'Enough?' she said.

'Just about.'

'Good. Obviously we shouldn't get married, if only for the sake of the children.'

Mort nodded.

They sat down on a stone seat between some neatly clipped box hedges. Death had made a pond in this corner of the garden, fed by an icy spring that appeared to be vomited into the pool by a stone lion. Fat white carp lurked in the depths, or nosed on the surface among the velvety black water lilies.

'We should have brought some breadcrumbs,' said Mort gallantly, opting for a totally non-controversial subject.

'He never comes out here, you know,' said Ysabell, watching the fish. 'He made it to keep me amused.'

'It didn't work?'

'It's not real,' she said. 'Nothing's real here. Not really real. He just likes to act like a human being. He's trying really hard at the moment, have you noticed. I think you're having an effect on him. Did you know he tried to learn the banjo once?'

'I see him as more the organ type.'

'He couldn't get the hang of it,' said Ysabell, ignoring him. 'He can't create, you see.'

'You said he created this pool.'

'It's a copy of one he saw somewhere. Everything's a copy.'

Mort shifted uneasily. Some small insect had crawled up his leg.

'It's rather sad,' he said, hoping that this was approximately the right tone to adopt.

'Yes.'

She scooped a handful of gravel from the path and began to flick it absent-mindedly into the pool.

'Are my eyebrows that bad?' she said.

'Um,' said Mort, 'afraid so.'

'Oh.' Flick, flick. The carp were watching her disdainfully.

'And my legs?' he said.

'Yes. Sorry.'

Mort shuffled anxiously through his limited repertoire of small talk, and gave up.

'Never mind,' he said gallantly. 'At least you can use tweezers.'

'He's very kind,' said Ysabell, ignoring him, 'in a sort of absent-minded way.'

'He's not exactly your real father, is he?'

'My parents were killed crossing the Great Nef years ago. There was a storm, I think. He found me and brought me here. I don't know why he did it.'

'Perhaps he felt sorry for you?'

'He never feels anything. I don't mean that nastily, you understand. It's just that he's got nothing to feel with, no whatd'youcallits, no glands. He probably *thought* sorry for me.'

She turned her pale round face towards Mort.

'I won't hear a word against him. He tries to do his best. It's just that he's always got so much to think about.'

'My father was a bit like that. Is, I mean.'

'I expect he's got glands, though.'

'I imagine he has,' said Mort, shifting uneasily. 'Its not something I've ever really thought about, glands.'

They stared side by side at the trout. The trout stared back.

'I've just upset the entire history of the future,' said Mort.

'Yes?'

'You see, when he tried to kill her I killed him, but the thing is, according to the history she should have died and the duke would be king, but the *worst* bit, the worst bit is that although he's absolutely rotten to the core he'd unite the cities and eventually they'll be a federation and the books say there'll be a hundred years of peace and plenty. I mean, you'd think there'd be a reign of terror or something, but apparently history needs this kind of person sometimes and the princess would just be another monarch. I mean, not bad, quite good really, but just not right and now it's not going to happen and history is flapping around loose and it's all my fault.'

He subsided, anxiously awaiting her reply.

'You were right, you know.'

'I was?'

'We ought to have brought some breadcrumbs,' she said. 'I suppose they find things to eat in the water. Beetles and so on.'

'Did you hear what I said?'

'What about?'

'Oh. Nothing. Nothing much, really. Sorry.'

Ysabell sighed and stood up.

'I expect you'll be wanting to get off,' she said. 'I'm glad we got this marriage business sorted out. It was quite nice talking to you.'

'We could have a sort of hate-hate relationship,' said Mort.

'I don't normally get to talk with the people father works with.' She appeared to be unable to draw herself away, as though she was waiting for Mort to say something else.

'Well, you wouldn't,' was all he could think of.

'I expect you've got to go off to work now.'

'More or less.' Mort hesitated, aware that in some indefinable way the conversation had drifted out of the shallows and was now floating over some deep bits he didn't quite understand.

There was a noise like —

It made Mort recall the old yard at home, with a pang of homesickness. During the harsh Ramtop winters the family kept hardy mountain *tharga* beasts in the yard, chucking in straw as necessary. After the spring thaw the yard was several feet deep and had quite a solid crust on it. You could walk across it if you were careful. If you weren't, and sank knee deep in the concentrated gyppo, then the sound your boot made as it came out, green and steaming, was as much the sound of the turning year as birdsong and beebuzz.

It was that noise. Mort instinctively examined his shoes.

Ysabell was crying, not in little ladylike sobs, but in great yawning gulps, like bubbles from an underwater volcano, fighting one another to be the first to the surface. They were sobs escaping under pressure, matured in humdrum misery.

Mort said,'Er?'

Her body was shaking like a waterbed in an earthquake zone. She fumbled urgently in her sleeves for the handkerchief, but it was no more use in the circumstances than a paper hat in a thunderstorm. She tried to say something, which became a stream of consonants punctuated by sobs.

Mort said, 'Um?'

'I said, how old do you think I am?'

'Fifteen?' he hazarded.

'I'm sixteen,' she wailed. 'And do you know how long I've been sixteen *for*?'

'I'm sorry, I don't under —'

'No, you wouldn't. No-one would.' She blew her nose again, and despite her shaking hands nevertheless carefully tucked the rather damp hanky back up her sleeve.

'*You're* allowed out,' she said. 'You haven't been here long enough to notice. Time stands still here, haven't you noticed? Oh, *something* passes, but it's not real time. He can't create real time.'

'Oh.'

When she spoke again it was in the thin, careful and above all *brave* voice of someone who has pulled themselves together despite overwhelming odds but might let go again at any moment.

'I've been sixteen for thirty-five years.'

'Oh?'

'It was bad enough the first year.'

Mort looked back at his last few weeks, and nodded in sympathy.

'Is that why you've been reading all those books?' he said.

Ysabell looked down, and twiddled a sandalled toe in the gravel in an embarrassed fashion.

'They're very romantic,' she said. 'There's some really lovely stories. There was this girl who drank poison when her young man had died, and there was one who jumped off a cliff because her father insisted she should marry this old man, and another one drowned herself rather than submit to—'

Mort listened in astonishment. To judge by Ysabell's careful choice of reading matter, it was a matter of note for any Disc female to survive adolescence long enough to wear out a pair of stockings.

'— and then she thought he was dead, and she killed herself and then he woke up and so he did kill himself, and then there was this girl —'

Common sense suggested that at least a few women reached their third decade without killing themselves for love, but common sense didn't seem to get even a walk-on part in these dramas.[5] Mort was already aware that love made you feel hot and cold and cruel and weak, but he hadn't realised that it could make you stupid.

[5] The Disc's greatest lovers were undoubtedly Mellius and Gretelina, whose pure, passionate and soul-searing affair would have scorched the pages of History if they had not, because of some unexplained quirk of fate, been born two hundred years apart on different continents. However, the gods took pity on them and turned him into an ironing board* and her into a small brass bollard

' – swam the river every night, but one night there was this storm, and when he didn't arrive she —'

Mort felt instinctively that some young couples met, say, at a village dance, and hit it off, and went out together for a year or two, had a few rows, made up, got married and didn't kill themselves at all.

He became aware that the litany of star-crossed love had wound down.

'Oh,' he said, weakly. 'Doesn't anyone just, you know, just get along any more?'

To love is to suffer,' said Ysabell. There's got to be lots of dark passion.'

'Has there?'

'Absolutely. And anguish.'

Ysabell appeared to recall something.

'Did you say something about something flapping around loose?' she said, in the tight voice of someone pulling themselves together.

Mort considered. 'No,' he said.

'I'm afraid I wasn't paying much attention.'

'It doesn't matter at all.'

They strolled back to the house in silence.

When Mort went back to the study he found that Death had gone, leaving four hourglasses on the desk. The big leather book was lying on a lectern, securely locked shut.

There was a note tucked under the glasses.

Mort had imagined that Death's handwriting would either be gothic or else tombstone angular, but Death had in fact studied a classic work on graphology before selecting a style and had adopted a hand that indicated a balanced, well-adjusted personality.

It said:

Gone fyshing. Theyre ys ane execution in Pseudopoiis, a naturral in Krull, a faytal fall in the Carrick Mtns, ane ague in Ell-Kinte. Thee rest of thee day's your own.

Mort thought that history was thrashing around like a steel hawser with the tension off, twanging backwards and forwards across reality in great destructive sweeps.

History isn't like that. History unravels gently, like an old sweater. It has been patched and darned many times, reknitted to suit different people, shoved in a box under the sink of censorship to be cut up for the dusters of propaganda, yet it always – eventually – manages to spring back into its old familiar shape. History has a habit of changing the people who think they are changing *it*. History always has a few tricks up its frayed sleeve. It's been around a long time.

This is what was happening:

The misplaced stroke of Mort's scythe had cut history into two separate realities. In the city of Sto Lat Princess Keli still ruled, with a certain amount of difficulty and with the

full time aid of the Royal Recogniser, who was put on the court payroll and charged with the duty of remembering that she existed. In the lands outside, though – beyond the plain, in the Ramtops, around the Circle Sea and all the way to the Rim – the traditional reality still held sway and she was quite definitely dead, the duke was king and the world was proceeding sedately according to plan, whatever that was.

The point is that both realities were true.

The sort of historical event horizon was currently about twenty miles away from the city, and wasn't yet very noticeable. That's because the – well, call it the difference in historical pressures – wasn't yet very great. But it was growing. Out in the damp cabbage fields there was a shimmer in the air and a faint sizzle, like frying grasshoppers.

People don't alter history any more than birds alter the sky, they just make brief patterns in it. Inch by inch, implacable as a glacier and far colder, the real reality was grinding back towards Sto Lat.

Mort was the first person to notice.

It had been a long afternoon. The mountaineer had held on to his icy handhold until the last moment and the executee had called Mort a lackey of the monarchist state. Only the old lady of 103, who had gone to her reward surrounded by her sorrowing relatives, had smiled at him and said he was looking a little pale.

The Disc sun was close to the horizon by the time Binky cantered wearily through the skies over Sto Lat, and Mort looked down and saw the borderland of reality. It curved away below him, a crescent of faint silver mist. He didn't know what it was, but he had a nasty foreboding that it had something to do with him.

He reined in the horse and allowed him to trot gently towards the ground, touching down a few yards behind the wall of iridescent air. It was moving at something less than walking pace, hissing gently as it drifted ghost-like across the stark damp cabbage fields and frozen drainage ditches.

It was a cold night, the type of night when frost and fog fight for domination and every sound is muffled. Binky's breath made fountains of cloud in the still air. He whinnied gently, almost apologetically, and pawed at the ground.

Mort slid out of the saddle and crept up to the interface. It crackled softly. Weird shapes coruscated across it, flowing and shifting and disappearing.

After some searching he found a stick and poked it cautiously into the wall. It made strange ripples that wobbled slowly out of sight.

Mort looked up as a shape drifted overhead. It was a black owl, patrollng the ditches for anything small and squeaky.

It hit the wall with a splash of sparkling mist, leaving an owl-shaped ripple that grew and spread until it joined the boiling kaleidoscope.

Then it vanished. Mort could see through the transparent interface, and certainly no owl reappeared on the other side. Just as he was puzzling over this there was another soundless splash a few feet away and the bird burst into view again, totally unconcerned, and skimmed away across the fields.

Mort pulled himself together, and stepped through the barrier which was no barrier at all. It tingled.

A moment later Binky burst through after him, eyes rolling in desperation and tendrils of interface catching on his hooves. He reared up, shaking his mane like a dog to remove clinging fibres of mist, and looked at Mort beseechingly.

Mort caught his bridle, patted him on the nose, and fumbled in his pocket for a rather grubby sugar lump. He was aware that he was in the presence of something important, but he wasn't yet quite sure what it was.

There *was* a road running between an avenue of damp and gloomy willow trees. Mort remounted and steered Binky across the field into the dripping darkness under the branches.

In the distance he could see the lights of Sto Helit, which really wasn't much more than a small town, and a faint glow on the edge of sight must be Sto Lat. He looked at it longingly.

The barrier worried him. He could see it creeping across the field behind the trees.

Mort was on the point of urging Binky back into the air when he saw the light immediately ahead of him, warm and beckoning. It was spilling from the windows of a large building set back from the road. It was probably a cheerful sort of light in any case, but in these surroundings and compared with Mort's mood it was positively ecstatic.

As he rode nearer he saw shadows moving against it, and made out a few snatches of song. It was an inn, and inside there were people having a good time, or what passed for a good time if you were a peasant who spent most of your time closely concerned with cabbages. Compared to brassicas, practically anything is fun.

There were human beings in there, doing uncomplicated human things like getting drunk and forgetting the words of songs.

Mort had never really felt homesick, possibly because his mind had been too occupied with other things. But he felt it now for the first time – a sort of longing, not for a place, but for a state of mind, for being just an ordinary human being with straightforward things to worry about, like money and sickness and other people. . . .

'I shall have a drink,' he thought, 'and perhaps I shall feel better.'

There was an open-fronted stable at one side of the main building, and he led Binky into the warm, horse-smelling darkness that already accommodated three other horses. As Mort unfastened the nosebag he wondered if Death's horse felt the same way about other horses which had rather less supernatural lifestyles. He certainly looked impressive compared to the others, which regarded him watchfully. Binky was a real horse – the blisters of the shovel handle on Mort's hands were a testimony to that – and compared to the others he looked more real than ever. More solid. More horsey. Slightly larger than life.

In fact, Mort was on the verge of making an important deduction, and it is unfortunate that he was distracted, as he walked across the yard to the inn's low door, by the sight of the inn sign. Its artist hadn't been particularly gifted, but there was no mistaking the line of Keli's jaw or her mass of fiery hair in the portrait of The Quene's Hed.

He sighed, and pushed open the door.

As one man, the assembled company stopped talking and stared at him with the honest rural stare that suggests that for two pins they'll hit you around the head with a shovel and bury your body under a compost heap at full moon.

It might be worth taking another look at Mort, because he's changed a lot in the last few chapters. For example, while he still has plenty of knees and elbows about his person, they seem to have migrated to their normal places and he no longer moves as though his joints were loosely fastened together with elastic bands. He used to look as if he knew

nothing at all; now he looks as though he knows too much. Something about his eyes suggests that he has seen things that ordinary people never see, or at least never see more than once.

Something about all the rest of him suggests to the watchers that causing an inconvenience for this boy might just be as wise as kicking a wasp nest. In short, Mort no longer looks like something the cat brought in and then brought up.

The landlord relaxed his grip on the stout blackthorn peacemaker he kept under the bar and composed his features into something resembling a cheerful welcoming grin, although not very much.

'Evening, your lordship,' he said. 'What's your pleasure this cold and frosty night?'

'What?' said Mort, blinking in the light.

'What he means is, what d'you want to drink?' said a small ferret-faced man sitting by the fire, who was giving Mort the kind of look a butcher gives a field full of lambs.

'Um. I don't know,' said Mort. 'Do you sell stardrip?'

'Never heard of it, lordship.'

Mort looked around at the faces watching him, illuminated by the firelight. They were the sort of people generally called the salt of the earth. In other words, they were hard, square and bad for your health, but Mort was too preoccupied to notice.

'What do people like to drink here, then?'

The landlord looked sideways at his customers, a clever trick given that they were directly in front of him.

'Why, lordship, we drink scumble, for preference.'

'Scumble?' said Mort, failing to notice the muffled sniggers.

'Aye, lordship. Made from apples. Well, mainly apples.'

This seemed healthy enough to Mort. 'Oh, right,' he said. 'A pint of scumble, then.' He reached into his pocket and withdrew the bag of gold that Death had given him. It was still quite full. In the sudden hush of the inn the faint clink of the coins sounded like the legendary Brass Gongs of Leshp, which can be heard far out to sea on stormy nights as the currents stir them in their drowned towers three hundred fathoms below.

'And please serve these gentlemen with whatever they want,' he added.

He was so overwhelmed by the chorus of thanks that he didn't take much notice of the fact that his new friends were served their drink in tiny, thimble-sized glasses, while his alone turned up in a large wooden mug.

A lot of stories are told about scumble, and how it is made out on the damp marshes according to ancient recipes handed down rather unsteadily from father to son. It's not true about the rats, or the snake heads, or the lead shot. The one about the dead sheep is a complete fabrication. We can lay to rest all the variations of the one about the trouser button. But the one about not letting it come into contact with metal is absolutely true, because when the landlord flagrantly shortchanged Mort and plonked the small heap of copper in a puddle of the stuff it immediately began to froth.

Mort sniffed his drink, and then took a sip. It tasted something like apples, something like autumn mornings, and quite a lot like the bottom of a logpile. Not wishing to appear disrespectful, however, he took a swig.

The crowd watched him, counting under its breath.

Mort felt something was being demanded of him.

'Nice,' he said, 'very refreshing.' He took another sip. 'Bit of an acquired taste,' he added, 'but well worth the effort, I'm sure.'

There were one or two mutters of discontent from the back of the crowd.

'He's been watering the scumble, that's what 'tis.'

'Nay, thou knowst what happens if you lets a drop of water touch scumble.'

The landlord tried to ignore this. 'You like it?' he said to Mort, in pretty much the same tone of voice people used when they said to St George, 'You killed a *what*?'

'It's quite tangy,' said Mort. 'And sort of nutty.'

'Excuse me,' said the landlord, and gently took the mug out of Mort's hand. He sniffed at it, then wiped his eyes.

'Uuunnyag,' he said. 'It's the right stuff all right.'

He looked at the boy with something verging on admiration. It wasn't that he'd drunk a third of a pint of scumble in itself, it was that he was still vertical and apparently alive. He handed the pot back again: it was as if Mort was being given a trophy after some incredible contest. When the boy took another mouthful several of the watchers winced. The landlord wondered what Mort's teeth were made of, and decided it must be the same stuff as his stomach.

'You're not a wizard by any chance?' he enquired, just in case.

'Sorry, no. Should I be?'

Didn't think so, thought the landlord, he doesn't walk like a wizard and anyway he isn't smoking anything. He looked at the scumble pot again.

There was something wrong about this. There was something wrong about the boy. He didn't look right. He looked —

— more solid than he should do.

That was ridiculous, of course. The bar was solid, the floor was solid, the customers were as solid as you could wish for. Yet Mort, standing there looking rather embarrassed and casually sipping a liquid you could clean spoons with, seemed to emit a particularly potent sort of solidness, an extra dimension of realness. His hair was more hairy, his clothes more clothy, his boots the epitome of bootness. It made your head ache just to look at him.

However, Mort then demonstrated that he was human after all. The mug dropped from his stricken fingers and clattered on the flagstones, where the dregs of scumble started to eat its way through them. He pointed at the far wall, his mouth opening and shutting wordlessly.

The regulars turned back to their conversations and games of shovel-up, reassured that things were as they should be; Mort was acting perfectly normally now. The landlord, relieved that the brew had been vindicated, reached across the bar top and patted him companionably on the shoulder.

'It's all right,' he said. 'It often takes people like this, you'll just have a headache for a few weeks, don't worry about it, a drop of scumble'll see you all right again.'

It is a fact that the best remedy for a scumble hangover is a hair of the dog, although it should more accurately be called a tooth of the shark or possibly a tread of the bulldozer.

But Mort merely went on pointing and said, in a trembling voice, 'Can't you see it? It's coming through the wall! It's coming right through the wall!'

'A lot of things come through the wall after your first drink of scumble. Green hairy things, usually.'

'It's the mist! Can't you hear it sizzling?'

'A sizzling mist, is it?' The landlord looked at the wall, which was quite empty and unmysterious except for a few cobwebs. The urgency in Mort's voice unsettled him. He would have preferred the normal scaly monsters. A man knew where he stood with them.

'It's coming right across the room! Can't you feel it?'

The customers looked at one another. Mort was making them uneasy. One or two of them admitted later that they did feel something, rather like an icy tingle, but it could have been indigestion.

Mort backed away, and then gripped the bar. He shivered for a moment.

'Look,' said the landlord, 'a joke's a joke, but —'

'You had a green shirt on before!'

The landlord looked down. There was an edge of terror in his voice.

'Before what?' he quavered. To his astonishment, and before his hand could complete its surreptitious journey towards the blackthorn stick, Mort lunged across the bar and grabbed him by the apron.

'You've got a green shirt, haven't you?' he said. 'I saw it, it had little yellow buttons!'

'Well, yes. I've got two shirts.' The landlord tried to draw himself up a little. 'I'm a man of means,' he added. 'I just didn't wear it today.' He didn't want to know how Mort knew about the buttons.

Mort let him go and spun round.

'They're all sitting in different places! Where's the man who was sitting by the fire? It's all changed!'

He ran out through the door and there was a muffled cry from outside. He dashed back, wild-eyed, and confronted the horrified crowd.

'Who changed the sign? Someone changed the sign!'

The landlord nervously ran his tongue across his lips.

'After the old king died, you mean?' he said.

Mort's look chilled him, the boy's eyes were two black pools of terror.

'It's the name I mean!'

'We've – it's always been the same name,' said the man, looking desperately at his customers for support. 'Isn't that so, lads? The Duke's Head.'

There was a murmured chorus of agreement.

Mort stared at everyone, visibly shaking. Then he turned and ran outside again.

The listeners heard hoof beats in the yard, which grew fainter and then disappeared entirely, just as though a horse had left the face of the earth.

There was no sound inside the inn. Men tried to avoid one another's gaze. No-one wanted to be the first to admit to seeing what he thought he had just seen.

So it was left to the landlord to walk unsteadily across the room and reach out and run his fingers across the familiar, reassuring wooden surface of the door. It was solid, unbroken, everything a door should be.

Everyone had seen Mort run through it three times. He just hadn't opened it.

Binky fought for height, rising nearly vertically with his hooves thrashing the air and his breath curling away behind him like a vapour trail. Mort hung on with knees and hands and mostly with willpower, his face buried in the horse's mane. He didn't look down until the air around him was freezing and thin as workhouse gravy.

Overhead the Hub Lights flickered silently across the winter sky. Below —

— an upturned saucer, miles across, silvery in the starlight. He could see lights through it. Clouds were drifting through it.

No. He watched carefully. Clouds were certainly drifting into it, and there were clouds *in* it, but the clouds inside were wispier and moving in a slightly different direction and, in fact, didn't seem to have much to do with the clouds outside. There was something else . .

. oh yes, the Hub Lights. They gave the night outside the ghostly hemisphere a faint green tint, but there was no sign of it under the dome.

It was like looking into a piece of another world, almost identical, that had been grafted on to the Disc. The weather was slightly different in there, and the Lights weren't on display tonight.

And the Disc was resenting it, and surrounding it, and pushing it back into non-existence. Mort couldn't see it growing smaller from up here, but in his mind's ear he could hear the locust sizzle of the thing as it ground across the land, changing things back to where they should be. Reality was healing itself.

Mort knew, without even having to think about it, who was at the centre of the dome. It was obvious even from here that it was centred firmly on Sto Lat.

He tried not to think what would happen when the dome had shrunk to the size of the room, and then the size of a person, and then the size of an egg. He failed.

Logic would have told Mort that here was his salvation. In a day or two the problem would solve itself; the books in the library would be right again; the world would have sprung back into shape like an elastic bandage. Logic would have told him that interfering with the process a second time around would only make things worse. Logic would have said all that, if only Logic hadn't taken the night off too.

Light travels quite slowly on the Disc, due to the braking effect of the huge magical field, and currently that part of the Rim carrying the island of Krull was directly under the little sun's orbit and it was, therefore, still early evening. It was also quite warm, since the Rim picks up more heat and enjoys a gentle maritime climate.

In fact Krull, with a large part of what for want of a better word must be called its coastline sticking out over the Edge, was a fortunate island. The only native Krullians who did not appreciate this were those who didn't look where they were going or who walked in their sleep and, because of natural selection, there weren't very many of them any more. All societies have their share of dropouts, but on Krull they never had a chance to drop back in again.

Terpsic Mims was not a dropout. He was an angler. There is a difference; angling is more expensive. But Terpsic was happy. He was watching a feather on a cork bob gently on the gentle, reed-lined waters of the Hakrull river and his mind was very nearly a blank. The only thing that could have disturbed his mood was actually catching a fish, because catching fish was the one thing about angling that he really dreaded. They were cold and slimy and panicky and got on his nerves, and Terpsic's nerves weren't very good.

So long as he caught nothing Terpsic Mims was one of the Disc's happiest anglers, because the Hakrull river was five miles from his home and therefore five miles from Mrs Gwladys Mims, with whom he had enjoyed six happy months of married life. That had been some twenty years previously.

Terpsic did not pay undue heed when another angler took up station further along the bank. Of course, some fishermen might have objected to this breach of etiquette, but in Terpsic's book anything that reduced his chance of actually catching any of the damned things was all right by him. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that the newcomer was fly-fishing, an interesting pastime which Terpsic had rejected because one spent altogether far too much time at home making the equipment.

He had never seen fly-fishing like this before. There were wet flies, and there were dry flies, but this fly augured into the water with a saw-toothed whine and dragged the fish out backwards.

Terpsic watched in horrified fascination as the indistinct figure behind the willow trees cast and cast again. The water boiled as the river's entire piscine population fought to get out of the way of the buzzing terror and, unfortunately, a large and maddened pike took Terpsic's hook out of sheer confusion.

One moment he was standing on the bank, and the next he was in a green, clanging gloom, bubbling his breath away and watching his life flash before his eyes and, even in the moment of drowning, dreading the thought of watching the bit between the day of his wedding and the present. It occurred to him that Gwladys would soon be a widow, which cheered him up a little bit. In fact Terpsic had always tried to look on the bright side, and it struck him, as he sank gratefully into the silt, that from this point on his whole life could only improve. . . .

And a hand grabbed his hair and dragged him to the surface, which was suddenly full of pain. Ghastly blue and black blotches swam in front of his eyes. His lungs were on fire. His throat was a pipe of agony.

Hands – cold hands, freezing hands, hands that felt like a glove full of dice – towed him through the water and threw him down on to the bank where, after some game attempts to get on with drowning, he was eventually bullied back into what passed for his life.

Terpsic didn't often get angry, because Gwladys didn't hold with it. But he felt cheated. He'd been born without being consulted, he'd been married because Gwladys and her father had seen to it, and the only major human achievement that was uniquely his had been rudely snatched away from him. A few seconds ago it had all been so simple. Now it was all complicated again.

Not that he wanted to die, of course. The gods were very firm on the subject of suicide. He just hadn't wanted to be rescued.

Through red eyes in a mask of slime and duckweed he peered at the blurred form above him, and shouted, 'Why did you have to save me?'

The answer worried him. He thought about it as he squelched all the way home. It sat at the back of his mind while Gwladys complained about the state of his clothes. It squirrelled around in his head as he sat and sneezed guiltily by the fire, because being ill was another thing Gwladys didn't hold with. As he lay shivering in bed it settled in his dreams like an iceberg. In the midst of his fever he muttered, 'What did he mean, "FOR LATER"?'

Torches flared in the city of Sto Lat. Whole squads of men were charged with the task of constantly renewing them. The streets glowed. The sizzling flames pushed back shadows that had been blamelessly minding their own business every night for centuries. They illuminated ancient corners where the eyes of bewildered rats glittered in the depths of their holes. They forced burglars to stay indoors. They glowed on the night mists, forming a nimbus of yellow light that blotted out the cold high flames streaming from the Hub. But mainly they shone on the face of Princess Keli.

It was everywhere. It plastered every flat surface. Binky cantered along the glowing streets between Princess Keli on doors, walls and gable ends. Mort gaped at posters of his beloved on every surface where workmen had been able to make paste stick.

Even stranger, no-one seemed to be paying them much attention. While Sto Lat's night life was not as colourful and full of incident as that of Ankh-Morpork, in the same way that a wastepaper basket cannot compete with a municipal tip, the streets were nevertheless a-bustle with people and shrill with the cries of hucksters, gamblers, sellers of sweetmeats, pea-and-thimble men, ladies of assignation, pickpockets and the occasional honest trader who had wandered in by mistake and couldn't now raise enough money to leave. As Mort rode through them snatches of conversation in half-a-dozen

languages floated into his ears; with numb acceptance he realised he could understand every one of them.

He eventually dismounted and led the horse along Wall Street, searching in vain for Cutwell's house. He found it only because a lump on the nearest poster was making muffled swearing noises.

He reached out gingerly and pulled aside a strip of paper.

Tanks very much,' said the gargoyle doorknocker. 'You wouldn't credit it, would you? One minute life as normal, nexft minute a mouthful of glue.'

'Where's Cutwell?'

'He's gone off to the palace.' The knocker leered at him and winked a cast-iron eye. 'Some men came and took all his fstuff away. Then some ovver men started pasting pictures of his girlfriend all over the place. Barftuds,' it added.

Mort coloured.

'His girlfriend?'

The doorknocker, being of the demonic persuasion, sniggered at his tone. It sounded like fingernails being dragged over a file.

'Yeff,' it said. They feemed in a bit of a hurry, if you ask me.'

Mort was already up on Binky's back.

'I fay!' shouted the knocker at his retreating back. 'I fay! Could you unftick me, boy?'

Mort tugged on Binky's reins so hard that the horse reared and danced crazily backwards across the cobbles, then reached out and grabbed the ring of the knocker. The gargoyle looked up into his face and suddenly felt like a very frightened doorknocker indeed. Mort's eyes glowed like crucibles, his expression was a furnace, his voice held enough heat to melt iron. It didn't know what he could do, but felt that it would prefer not to find out.

'What did you call me?' Mort hissed.

The doorknocker thought quickly. 'Fir?' it said.

'What did you ask me to do?'

'Unftick me?'

'I don't intend to.'

'Fine,' said the doorknocker, 'fine. That's okay by me. I'll just ftick around, then.'

It watched Mort canter off along the street and shuddered with relief, knocking itself gently in its nervousness.

'A naaaarrow sqeeeak,' said one of the hinges.

'Fut up!'

Mort passed night watchmen, whose job now appeared to consist of ringing bells and shouting the name of the Princess, but a little uncertainly, as if they had difficulty

remembering it. He ignored them, because he was listening to voices inside his head which went:

She's only met you once, you fool. Why should she bother about you?

Yes, but I did save her life.

That means it belongs to her. Not to you. Besides, he's a wizard.

So what? Wizards aren't supposed to – to go out with girls, they're celebrate. . . .

Celebrate?

They're not supposed to youknow. . . .

What, never any youknow at all? said the internal voice, and it sounded as if it was grinning.

It's supposed to be bad for the magic, thought Mort bitterly.

Funny place to keep magic.

Mort was shocked. Who are you? he demanded.

I'm you, Mort. Your inner self.

Well, I wish I'd get out of my head, it's quite crowded enough with me in here.

Fair enough, said the voice, I was only trying to help. But remember, if you ever need you, you're always around.

The voice faded away.

Well, thought Mort bitterly, that must have been me. I'm the only one that calls me Mort.

The shock of the realisation quite obscured the fact that, while Mort had been locked into the monologue, he had ridden right through the gates of the palace. Of course, people rode through the gates of the palace every day, but most of them needed the things to be opened first.

The guards on the other side were rigid with fear, because they thought they had seen a ghost. They would have been far more frightened if they had known that a ghost was almost exactly what they hadn't seen.

The guard outside the doors of the great hall had seen it happen too, but he had time to gather his wits, or such that remained, and raise his spear as Binky trotted across the courtyard.

'Halt,' he croaked. 'Halt. What goes where?'

Mort saw him for the first time.

'What?' he said, still lost in thought.

The guard ran his tongue over his dry lips, and backed away. Mort slid off Binky's back and walked forward.

'I meant, what goes there?' the guard tried again, with a mixture of doggedness and suicidal stupidity that marked him for early promotion.

Mort caught the spear gently and lifted it out of the way of the door. As he did so the torchlight illuminated his face.

'Mort,' he said softly.

It should have been enough for any normal soldier, but this guard was officer material.

'I mean, friend or foe?' he stuttered, trying to avoid Mort's gaze.

'Which would you prefer?' he grinned. It wasn't quite the grin of his master, but it was a pretty effective grin and didn't have a trace of humour in it.

The guard sagged with relief, and stood aside.

'Pass, friend,' he said.

Mort strode across the hall towards the staircase that led to the royal apartments. The hall had changed a lot since he last saw it. Portraits of Keli were everywhere; they'd even replaced the ancient and crumbling battle banners in the shadowy heights of the roof. Anyone walking through the palace would have found it impossible to go more than a few steps without seeing a portrait. Part of Mort's mind wondered why, just as another part worried about the flickering dome that was steadily closing on the city, but most of his mind was a hot and steamy glow of rage and bewilderment and jealousy. Ysabell had been right, he thought, this must be love.

'The walk-through-walls boy!'

He jerked his head up. Cutwell was standing at the top of the stairs.

The wizard had changed a lot too, Mort thought bitterly. Perhaps not that much, though. Although he was wearing a black and white robe embroidered with sequins, although his pointy hat was a yard high and decorated with more mystic symbols than a dental chart,

and although his red velvet shoes had silver buckles and toes that curled like snails, there were still a few stains on his collar and he appeared to be chewing.

He watched Mort climb the stairs towards him.

'Are you angry about something?' he said. 'I started work, but I got rather tied up with other things. Very difficult, walking through – why are you looking at me like that?'

'What are you doing here?'

'I might ask you the same question. Would you like a strawberry?'

Mort glanced at the small wooden punnet in the wizard's hands.

'In mid-winter?'

'Actually, they're sprouts with a dash of enchantment.'

They taste like strawberries?'

Cutwell sighed. 'No, like sprouts. The spell isn't totally efficient. I thought they might cheer the princess up, but she threw them at me. Shame to waste them. Be my guest.'

Mort gaped at him.

'She threw them at you?'

'Very accurately, I'm afraid. Very strong-minded young lady.'

Hi, said a voice in the back of Mort's mind, it's you again, pointing out to yourself that the chances of the princess even contemplating you know with this fellow are on the far side of remote.

Go away, thought Mort. His subconscious was worrying him. It appeared to have a direct line to parts of his body that he wanted to ignore at the moment.

'Why *are* you here?' he said aloud. 'Is it something to do with all these pictures?'

'Good idea, wasn't it?' beamed Cutwell. 'I'm rather proud of it myself.'

'Excuse me,' said Mort weakly. 'I've had a busy day. I think I'd like to sit down somewhere.'

'There's the Throne Room,' said Cutwell. 'There's no-one in there at this time of night. Everyone's asleep.'

Mort nodded, and then looked suspiciously at the young wizard.

'What are you doing up, then?' he said.

'Um,' said Cutwell, 'um, I just thought I'd see if there was anything in the pantry.'

He shrugged.[6]

[6] There had been half a jar of elderly mayonnaise, a piece of very old cheese, and a tomato with white mould growing on it. Since during the day the pantry of the palace of Sto Lat normally contained fifteen whole stags, one hundred brace of partridges, fifty hogsheads of butter, two hundred jugs of hares, seventy-five sides of beef, two miles of assorted sausages, various fowls, eighty dozen eggs, several Circle Sea sturgeon, a vat of caviar and an elephant's leg stuffed with olives, Cutwell had learned once again that one universal manifestation of raw, natural magic throughout the universe is this; that any domestic food store, raided furtively in the middle of the

Now is the time to report that Cutwell too notices that Mort, even a Mort weary with riding and lack of sleep, is somehow glowing from within and in some strange way unconnected with size is nevertheless larger than life. The difference is that Cutwell is, by training, a better guesser than other people and knows that in occult matters the obvious answer is usually the wrong one.

Mort can move absentmindedly through walls and drink neat widowmaker soberly not because he is turning into a ghost, but because he is becoming dangerously real.

In fact, as the boy stumbles while they walk along the silent corridors and steps through a marble pillar without noticing, it's obvious that the world is becoming a pretty insubstantial place from his point of view.

'You just walked through a marble pillar,' observed Cutwell. 'How did you do it?'

'Did I?' Mort looked around. The pillar looked sound enough. He poked an arm towards it, and slightly bruised his elbow.

'I could have sworn you did,' said Cutwell. 'Wizards notice these things, you know.' He reached into the pocket of his robe.

Then have you noticed the mist dome around the country?' said Mort.

Cutwell squeaked. The jar in his hand dropped and smashed on the tiles; there was the smell of slightly rancid salad dressing.

'*Already*?'

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night, always contains, no matter what its daytime inventory, half a jar of elderly mayonnaise, a piece of very old cheese, and a tomato with white mould growing on it.

'I don't know about already,' said Mort, 'but there's this sort of crackling wall sliding over the land and no-one else seems to worry about it and—'

'How fast was it moving?'

'— it changes things!'

'You saw it? How far away is it? How fast is it moving?'

'Of course I saw it. I rode through it twice. It was like —'

'But you're not a wizard, so why —'

'What are you doing here, anyway —'

Cutwell took a deep breath. 'Everyone shut up!' he screamed.

There was silence. Then the wizard grabbed Mort's arm. 'Come on,' he said, pulling him back along the corridor. 'I don't know who you are exactly and I hope I've got time to find out one day but something really horrible is going to happen soon and I think you're involved, somehow.'

'Something horrible? When?'

That depends on how far away the interface is and how fast it's moving,' said Cutwell, dragging Mort down a side passage. When they were outside a small oak door he let go of his arm and fumbled in his pocket again, removing a small hard piece of cheese and an unpleasantly squashy tomato.

'Hold these, will you? Thank you.' He delved again, produced a key and unlocked the door.

'It's going to kill the princess, isn't it?' said Mort.

'Yes,' said Cutwell, 'and then again, no.' He paused with his hand on the doorhandle. 'That was pretty perspicacious of you. How did you know?'

'I —' Mort hesitated.

'She told me a very strange story,' said Cutwell.

'I expect she did,' said Mort. 'If it was unbelievable, it was true.'

'You're him, are you? Death's assistant?'

'Yes. Off duty at the moment, though.'

'Pleased to hear it.'

Cutwell shut the door behind them and fumbled for a candlestick. There was a pop, a flash of blue light and a whimper.

'Sorry,' he said, sucking his fingers. 'Fire spell. Never really got the hang of it.'

'You were expecting the dome thing, weren't you?' said Mort urgently. 'What will happen when it closes in?'

The wizard sat down heavily on the remains of a bacon sandwich.

'I'm not exactly sure,' he said. 'It'll be interesting to watch. But not from inside, I'm afraid. What I *think* will happen is that the last week will never have existed.'

'She'll suddenly die?'

'You don't quite understand. She will have been dead for a week. All this —' he waved his hands vaguely in the air – 'will not have happened. The assassin will have done his job. You will have done yours. History will have healed itself. Everything will be all right. From History's point of view, that is. There really isn't any other.'

Mort stared out of the narrow window. He could see across the courtyard into the glowing streets outside, where a picture of the princess smiled at the sky.

'Tell me about the pictures,' he said. That looks like some sort of wizard thing.'

'I'm not sure if it's working. You see, people were beginning to get upset and they didn't know why, and that made it worse. Their minds were in one reality and their bodies were in another. Very unpleasant. They couldn't get used to the idea that she was still alive. I thought the pictures might be a good idea but, you know, people just don't see what their mind tells them isn't there.'

'I could have told you that,' said Mort bitterly.

'I had the town criers out during the daytime,' Cutwell continued. 'I thought that if people could come to believe in her, then this new reality could become the real one.'

'Mmmph?' said Mort. He turned away from the window. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, you see – I reckoned that if enough people believed in her, they could change reality. It works for gods. If people stop believing in a god, he dies. If a lot of them believe in him, he grows stronger.'

'I didn't know that. I thought gods were just gods.'

'They don't like it talked about,' said Cutwell, shuffling through the heap of books and parchments on his worktable.

'Well, that might work for gods, because they're special,' said Mort. 'People are – more solid. It wouldn't work for people.'

That's not true. Let's suppose you went out of here and prowled around the palace. One of the guards would probably see you and he'd think you were a thief and he'd fire his crossbow. I mean, in his reality you'd be a thief. It wouldn't actually be true but you'd be just as dead as if it was. Belief is powerful stuff. I'm a wizard. We know about these things. Look here.'

He pulled a book out of the debris in front of him and opened it at the piece of bacon he'd used as a bookmark. Mort looked over his shoulder, and frowned at the curly magical writing. It moved around on the page, twisting and writhing in an attempt not to be read by a non-wizard, and the general effect was unpleasant.

'What's this?' he said.

'It's the Book of the Magick of Alberto Malich the Mage,' said the wizard, 'a sort of book of magical theory. It's not a good idea to look too hard at the words, they resent it. Look, it says here —'

His lips moved soundlessly. Little beads of sweat sprang up on his forehead and decided to get together and go down and see what his nose was doing. His eyes watered.

Some people like to settle down with a good book. No-one in possession of a complete set of marbles would like to settle down with a book of magic, because even the

individual words have a private and vindictive life of their own and reading them, in short, is a kind of mental Indian wrestling. Many a young wizard has tried to read a grimoire that is too strong for him, and people who've heard the screams have found only his pointy shoes with the classic wisp of smoke coming out of them and a book which is, perhaps, just a little fatter. Things can happen to browsers in magical libraries that make having your face pulled off by tentacled monstrosities from the Dungeon Dimensions seem a mere light massage by comparison.

Fortunately Cutwell had an expurgated edition, with some of the more distressing pages clamped shut (although on quiet nights he could hear the imprisoned words scritching irritably inside their prison, like a spider trapped in a matchbox; anyone who has ever sat next to someone wearing a Walkman will be able to imagine exactly what they sounded like).

'This is the bit,' said Cutwell. 'It says here that even gods —'

'I've seen him before!'

'What?'

Mort pointed a shaking finger at the book.

'Him!'

Cutwell gave him an odd look and examined the left-hand page. There was a picture of an elderly wizard holding a book and a candlestick in an attitude of near-terminal dignity.

'That's not part of the magic,' he said testily, 'that's just the author.'

'What does it say under the picture?'

'Er, It says "Yff youe have enjoyed thiss Boke, youe maye be interestede yn othere Titles by —'

'No, right under the picture is what I meant!'

'That's easy. It's old Malich himself. Every wizard knows him. I mean, he founded the University.' Cutwell chuckled. There's a famous statue of him in the main hall, and during Rag Week once I climbed up it and put a —'

Mort stared at the picture.

'Tell me,' he said quietly, 'did the statue have a drip on the end of its nose?'

'I shouldn't think so,' said Cutwell. 'It was marble. But I don't know what you're getting so worked up about. Lots of people know what he looked like. He's famous.'

'He lived a long time ago, did he?'

'Two thousand years, I think. Look, I don't know why —'

'I bet he didn't die, though,' said Mort. 'I bet he just disappeared one day. Did he?'

Cutwell was silent for a moment.

'Funny you should say that,' he said slowly. There was a legend I heard. He got up to some weird things, they say. They say he blew himself into the Dungeon Dimensions while trying to perform the Rite of AshkEnte backwards. All they found was his hat. Tragic, really. The whole city in mourning for a day just for a hat. It wasn't even a particularly attractive hat; it had burn marks on it.'

'Alberto Malich,' said Mort, half to himself. 'Well. Fancy that.'

He drummed his fingers on the table, although the sound was surprisingly muted.

'Sorry,' said Cutwell. 'I can't get the hang of treacle sandwiches, either.'

'I reckon the interface is moving at a slow walking pace,' said Mort, licking his fingers absent-mindedly. 'Can't you stop it by magic?'

Cutwell shook his head. 'Not me. It'd squash me flat,' he said cheerfully.

'What'll happen to you when it arrives, then?'

'Oh, I'll go back to living in Wall Street. I mean, I never will have left. All this won't have happened. Pity, though. The cooking here is pretty good, and they do my laundry for free. How far away did you say it was, by the way?'

'About twenty miles, I guess.'.

Cutwell rolled his eyes heavenwards and moved his lips. Eventually he said: 'That means it'll arrive around midnight tomorrow, just in time for the coronation.'

'Whose?'

'Hers.'

'But she's queen already, isn't she?'

'In a way, but officially she's not queen until she's crowned.' Cutwell grinned, his face a pattern of shade in the candlelight, and added, 'If you want a way of thinking about it, then it's like the difference between stopping living and being dead.'

Twenty minutes earlier Mort had been feeling tired enough to take root. Now he could feel a fizzing in his blood. It was the kind of late-night, frantic energy that you knew you would pay for around midday tomorrow, but for now he felt he had to have some action or else his muscles would snap out of sheer vitality.

'I want to see her,' he said. 'If you can't do anything, there might be something I can do.'

There's guards outside her room,' said Cutwell. 'I mention this merely as an observation. I don't imagine for one minute that they'll make the slightest difference.'

It was midnight in Ankh-Morpork, but in the great twin city the only difference between night and day was, well, it was darker. The markets were thronged, the spectators were still thickly clustered around the whore pits, runners-up in the city's eternal and byzantine gang warfare drifted silently down through the chilly waters of the river with lead weights tied to their feet, dealers in various illegal and even illogical delights plied their sidelong trade, burglars burgled, knives flashed starlight in alleyways, astrologers started their day's work and in the Shades a nightwatch-man who had lost his way rang his bell and cried out: 'Twelve o'clock and all's arrrrrgghhhh, . . .'

However, the Ankh-Morpork Chamber of Commerce would not be happy at the suggestion that the only real difference between their city and a swamp is the number of legs on the alligators, and indeed in the more select areas of Ankh, which tend to be in the hilly districts where there is a chance of a bit of wind, the nights are gentle and scented with habiscine and Cecillia blossoms.

On this particular night they were scented with saltpetre, too, because it was the tenth anniversary of the accession of the Patrician[7] and he had invited a few friends round for a drink, five hundred of them in this case, and was letting off fireworks. Laughter and the occasional gurgle of passion filled the palace gardens, and the evening had just got to that interesting stage where everyone had drunk too much for their own good but not enough actually to fall over. It is the kind of state in which one does things that one will recall with crimson shame in later life, such as blowing through a paper squeaker and laughing so much that one is sick.

In fact some two hundred of the Patrician's guests were now staggering and kicking their way through the Serpent Dance, a quaint Morporkian folkway which consisted of getting rather drunk, holding the waist of the person in front, and then wobbling and giggling uproariously in a long crocodile that wound through as many rooms as possible, preferably ones with breakables in, while kicking one leg vaguely in time with the beat, or at least in time with some other beat. This dance had gone on for half an hour and had wound through every room in the palace, picking up two trolls, the cook, the Patrician's head torturer, three waiters, a burglar who happened to be passing and a small pet swamp dragon.

Somewhere around the middle of the dance was fat Lord Rodley of Quirm, heir to the fabulous Quirm estates, whose current preoccupation was with the thin fingers gripping his waist. Under its bath of alcohol his brain kept trying to attract his attention.

'I say,' he called over his shoulder, as they oscillated for the tenth hilarious time through the enormous kitchen, 'not so tight, please.'

I AM MOST TERRIBLY SORRY.

[7] Ankh-Morpork had dallied with many forms of government and had ended up with that form of democracy known as One Man, One Vote. The Patrician was the Man; he had the Vote.

'No offence, old chap. Do I know you?' said Lord Rodley, kicking vigorously on the back beat.

I THINK IT UNLIKELY. TELL ME, PLEASE, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS ACTIVITY?

'What?' shouted Lord Rodley, above the sound of someone kicking in the door of a glass cabinet amid shrieks of merriment.

WHAT is THIS THING THAT WE DO? said the voice, with glacial patience.

'Haven't you been to a party before? Mind the glass, by the way.'

I AM AFRAID I DO NOT GET OUT AS MUCH AS I WOULD LIKE TO. PLEASE EXPLAIN THIS. DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH SEX?

'Not unless we pull up sharp, old boy, if you know what I mean?' said his lordship, and nudged his unseen fellow guest with his elbow.

'Ouch,' he said. A crash up ahead marked the demise of the cold buffet.

NO.

'What?'

I DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN.

'Mind the cream there, it's slippery – look, it's just a dance, all right? You do it for fun.'

FUN.

'That's right. Dada, dada, da – kick!' There was an audible pause.

WHO IS THIS FUN?

'No, fun isn't anybody, fun is what you have.'

WE ARE HAVING FUN?

'I thought I was,' said his lordship uncertainly. The voice by his ear was vaguely worrying him; it appeared to be arriving directly into his brain.

WHAT is THIS FUN?

'This is!'

TO KICK VIGOROUSLY IS FUN?

'Well, part of the fun. Kick!'

TO HEAR LOUD MUSIC IN HOT ROOMS IS FUN?

'Possibly.'

HOW IS THIS FUN MANIFEST?

'Well, it – look, either you're having fun or you're not, you don't have to ask me, you just know, all right? How did you get in here, anyway?' he added. 'Are you a friend of the Patrician?'

LET US SAY, HE PUTS BUSINESS MY WAY. I FELT I OUGHT TO LEARN SOMETHING OF HUMAN PLEASURES.

'Sounds like you've got a long way to go.'

I KNOW. PLEASE EXCUSE MY LAMENTABLE IGNORANCE. I WISH ONLY TO LEARN. ALL THESE PEOPLE, PLEASE – THEY ARE HAVING FUN?

'Yes!'

THEN THIS is FUN.

'I'm glad we've got that sorted out. Mind the chair,' snapped Lord Rodley, who was now feeling very unfunny and unpleasantly sober.

A voice behind him said quietly: THIS IS FUN. TO DRINK EXCESSIVELY IS FUN. WE ARE HAVING FUN. HE IS HAVING FUN. THIS IS SOME FUN. WHAT FUN.

Behind Death the Patrician's small pet swamp dragon held on grimly to the bony hips and thought: guards or no guards, next time we pass an open window I'm going to run like buggery.

Keli sat bolt upright in bed.

'Don't move another step,' she said. 'Guards!'

'We couldn't stop him,' said the first guard, poking his head shame-facedly around the doorpost.

'He just pushed in . . .' said the other guard, from the other side of the doorway.

'And the wizard said it was all right, and we were told everyone must listen to him because.

'All right, all right. People could get murdered around here,' said Keli testily, and put the crossbow back on the bedside table without, unfortunately, operating the safety catch.

There was a click, the thwack of sinew against metal, a zip of air, and a groan. The groan came from Cutwell. Mort spun round to him.

'Are you all right?' he said. 'Did it hit you?'

'No,' said the wizard, weakly. 'No, it didn't. How do you feel?'

'A bit tired. Why?'

'Oh, nothing. Nothing. No draughts anywhere? No slight leaking feelings?'

'No. Why?'

'Oh, nothing, nothing.' Cutwell turned and looked closely at the wall behind Mort.

'Aren't the dead allowed any peace?' said Keli bitterly. 'I thought one thing you could be sure of when you were dead was a good night's sleep.' She looked as though she had been crying. With an insight that surprised him, Mort realised that she knew this and that it was making her even angrier than before.

That's not really fair,' he said. 'I've come to help. Isn't that right, Cutwell?'

'Hmm?' said Cutwell, who had found the crossbow bolt buried in the plaster and was looking at it with deep suspicion. 'Oh, yes. He has. It won't work, though. Excuse me, has anyone got any string?'

'Help?' snapped Keli. 'Help? If it wasn't for you —'

'You'd still be dead,' said Mort. She looked at him with her mouth open.

'I wouldn't know about it, though,' she said. That's the worst part.'

'I think you two had better go,' said Cutwell to the guards, who were trying to appear inconspicuous. 'But I'll have that spear, please. Thank you.'

'Look,' said Mort, 'I've got a horse outside. You'd be amazed. I can take you anywhere. You don't have to wait around here.'

'You don't know much about monarchy, do you,' said Keli.

'Um. No?'

' She means better to be a dead queen in your own castle than a live commoner somewhere else,' said Cutwell, who had stuck the spear into the wall by the bolt and was trying to sight along it. 'Wouldn't work, anyway. The dome isn't centred on the palace, it's centred on her.'

'On *who*?' said Keli. Her voice could have kept milk fresh for a month.

'On her Highness,' said Cutwell automatically, squinting along the shaft.

'Don't you forget it.'

'I won't forget it, but that's not the point,' said he wizard. He pulled the bolt out of the plaster and tested the point with his finger.

'But if you stay here you'll die!' said Mort.

Then I shall have to show the Disc how a queen can die,' said Keli, looking as proud as was possible in a pink knitted bed jacket.

Mort sat down on the end of the bed with his head in his hands.

'I *know* how a queen can die,' he muttered. They die just like other people. And some of us would rather not see it happen.'

'Excuse me, I just want to look at this crossbow,' said Cutwell conversationally, reaching across them. 'Don't mind me.'

'I shall go proudly to meet my destiny,' said Keli, but there was the barest flicker of uncertainty in her voice.

'No you won't. I mean, I know what I'm talking about. Take it from me. There's nothing proud about it. You just die.'

'Yes, but it's how you do it. I shall die nobly, like Queen Ezeriel.'

Mort's forehead wrinkled. History was a closed book to him.

'Who's she?'

'She lived in Klatch and she had a lot of lovers and she sat on a snake,' said Cutwell, who was winding up the crossbow.

'She meant to! She was crossed in love!'

'All I can remember was that she used to take baths in asses' milk. Funny thing, history,' said Cutwell reflectively. 'You become a queen, reign for thirty years, make laws, declare war on people and then the only thing you get remembered for is that you smelled like yoghurt and were bitten in the—'

'She's a distant ancestor of mine,' snapped Keli. 'I won't listen to this sort of thing.'

'Will you both be quiet and listen to me!' shouted Mort.

Silence descended like a shroud.

Then Cutwell sighted carefully and shot Mort in the back.

The night shed its early casualties and journeyed onwards. Even the wildest parties had ended, their guests lurching home to their beds, or someone's bed at any rate. Shorn of these fellow travellers, mere daytime people who had strayed out of their temporal turf, the true survivors of the night got down to the serious commerce of the dark.

This wasn't so very different from Ankh-Morpork's daytime business, except that the knives were more obvious and people didn't smile so much.

The Shades were silent, save only for the whistled signals of thieves and the velvety hush of dozens of people going about their private business in careful silence.

And, in Ham Alley, Cripple Wa's famous floating crap game was just getting under way. Several dozen cowled figures knelt or squatted around the little circle of packed earth where Wa's three eight-sided dice bounced and spun their misleading lesson in statistical probability.

'Three!'

'Tuphal's Eyes, by lo!'

'He's got you there, Hummok! This guy knows how to roll his bones!'

IT'S A KNACK.

Hummok M'guk, a small flat-faced man from one of the Hublandish tribes whose skill at dice was famed wherever two men gathered together to fleece a third, picked up the dice and glared at them. He silently cursed Wa, whose own skill at switching dice was equally notorious among the cognoscenti but had, apparently, failed him, wished a painful and untimely death on the shadowy player seated opposite and hurled the dice into the mud.

'Twenty-one the hard way!'

Wa scooped up the dice and handed them to the stranger. As he turned to Hummok one eye flickered ever so slightly. Hummok was impressed – he'd barely noticed the blur in Wa's deceptively gnarled fingers, and *he'd* been watching for it.

It was disconcerting the way the things rattled in the stranger's hand and then flew out of it in a slow arc that ended with twenty-four little spots pointing at the stars.

Some of the more streetwise in the crowd shuffled away from the stranger, because luck like that can be very unlucky in Cripple Wa's floating crap game.

Wa's hand closed over the dice with a noise like the click of a trigger.

'All the eights,' he breathed. 'Such luck is uncanny, mister.'

The rest of the crowd evaporated like dew, leaving only those heavy-set, unsympathetic-looking men who, if Wa had ever paid tax, would have gone down on his return as Essential Plant and Business Equipment.

'Maybe it's not luck,' he added. 'Maybe it's wizarding?'

I MOST STRONGLY RESENT THAT.

'We had a wizard once who tried to get rich,' said Wa. 'Can't seem to remember what happened to him. Boys?'

'We give him a good talking-to —'

'— and left him in Pork Passage —'

'— and in Honey Lane —'

'— and a couple other places I can't remember.'

The stranger stood up. The boys closed in around him.

THIS IS UNCALLED FOR. I SEEK ONLY TO LEARN. WHAT PLEASURE CAN HUMANS FIND IN A MERE REITERATION OF THE LAWS OF CHANCE?

'Chance doesn't come into it. Let's have a look at him, boys.'

The events that followed were recalled by no living soul except the one belonging to a feral cat, one of the city's thousands, that was crossing the alley en route to a tryst. It stopped and watched with interest.

The boys froze in mid-stab. Painful purple light flickered around them. The stranger pushed his hood back and picked up the dice, and then pushed them into Wa's unresisting hand. The man was opening and shutting his mouth, his eyes unsuccessfully trying not to see what was in front of them. Grinning.

THROW.

Wa managed to look down at his hand.

'What are the stakes?' he whispered.

IF YOU WIN, YOU WILL REFRAIN FROM THESE RIDICULOUS ATTEMPTS TO SUGGEST THAT CHANCE GOVERNS THE AFFAIRS OF MEN.

'Yes. Yes. And . . . if I lose?'

YOU WILL WISH YOU HAD WON.

Wa tried to swallow, but his throat had gone dry. 'I know I've had lots of people murdered —'

TWENTY-THREE, TO BE PRECISE.

'Is it too late to say I'm sorry?'

SUCH THINGS DO NOT CONCERN ME. NOW THROW THE DICE.

Wa shut his eyes and dropped the dice on to the ground, too nervous even to try the special flick-and-twist throw. He kept his eyes shut.

ALL THE EIGHTS. THERE, THAT WASN'T TOO DIFFICULT, WAS IT?

Wa fainted.

Death shrugged, and walked away, pausing only to tickle the ears of an alley cat that happened to be passing. He hummed to himself. He didn't quite know what had come over him, but he was enjoying it.

'You couldn't be sure it would work!'

Cutwell spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

'Well, no,' he conceded, 'but I thought, what have I got to lose?' He backed away.

'What have you got to lose?' shouted Mort.

He stamped forward and tugged the bolt out of one of the posts in the princess's bed.

'You're not going to tell me this went through me?' he snapped.

'I was particularly watching it,' said Cutwell.

'I saw it too,' said Keli. 'It was horrible. It came right out of where your heart is.'

'And I saw you walk through a stone pillar,' said Cutwell.

'And *I* saw you ride straight through a window.'

'Yes, but that *was* on business,' declared Mort, waving his hands in the air. That wasn't everyday, that's different. And —'

He paused. The way you're looking at me,' he said. They looked at me the same way in the inn this evening. What's wrong?'

'It was the way you waved your arm straight through the bedpost,' said Keli faintly.

Mort stared at his hand, and then rapped it on the wood.

'See?' he said. 'Solid. Solid arm, solid wood.'

'You said people looked at you in an inn?' said Cutwell. 'What did you do, then? Walk through the wall?'

'No! I mean, no, I just drank this drink, I think it was called scrumble —'

'Scumble?'

'Yes. Tastes like rotten apples. You'd have thought it was some sort of poison the way they kept staring.'

'How much did you drink, then?' said Cutwell.

'A pint, perhaps, I wasn't really paying much attention —'

'Did you know scumble is the strongest alcoholic drink between here and the Ramtops?' the wizard demanded.

'No. No-one said,' said Mort. 'What's it got to do with—'

'No,' said Cutwell, slowly, 'you didn't know. Hmm. That's a clue, isn't it?'

'Has it got anything to do with saving the princess?'

'Probably not. I'd like to have a look at my books, though.'

'In that case it's not important,' said Mort firmly.

He turned to Keli, who was looking at him with the faint beginnings of admiration.

'I think I can help,' he said. 'I think I can lay my hands on some powerful magic. Magic will hold back the dome, won't it, Cutwell?'

'My magic won't. It'd have to be pretty strong stuff, and I'm not sure about it even then. Reality is tougher than —'

'I shall go,' said Mort. 'Until tomorrow, farewell!'

'It is tomorrow,' Keli pointed out.

Mort deflated slightly.

'All right, tonight then,' he said, slightly put out, and added, 'I will begone!'

'Begone what?'

'It's hero talk,' said Cutwell, kindly. 'He can't help it.' Mort scowled at him, smiled bravely at Keli and walked out of the room.

'He might have opened the door,' said Keli, after he had gone.

'I think he was a bit embarrassed,' said Cutwell. 'We all go through that stage.'

'What, of walking through things?'

'In a manner of speaking. Walking into them, anyway.'

'I'm going to get some sleep,' Keli said. 'Even the dead need some rest. Cutwell, stop fiddling with that crossbow, please. I'm sure it's not wizardly to be alone in a lady's boudoir.'

'Hmm? But I'm not alone, am I? You're here.'

'That,' she said, 'is the point, isn't it?'

'Oh. Yes. Sorry. Um. I'll see you in the morning, then.'

'Goodnight, Cutwell. Shut the door behind you.'

The sun crept over the horizon, decided to make a run for it, and began to rise.

But it would be some time before its slow light rolled across the sleeping Disc, herding the night ahead of it, and nocturnal shadows still ruled the city.

They clustered now around The Mended Drum in Filigree Street, foremost of the city's taverns. It was famed not for its beer, which looked like maiden's water and tasted like battery acid, but for its clientele. It was said that if you sat long enough in the Drum, then sooner or later every major hero on the Disc would steal your horse.

The atmosphere inside was still loud with talk and heavy with smoke although the landlord was doing all those things landlords do when they think it's time to close, like turn some of the lights out, wind up the clock, put a cloth over the pumps and, just in

case, check the whereabouts of their club with the nails hammered in it. Not that the customers were taking the slightest bit of notice, of course. To most of the Drum's clientele even the nailed club would have been considered a mere hint.

However, they were sufficiently observant to be vaguely worried by the tall dark figure standing by the bar and drinking his way through its entire contents.

Lonely, dedicated drinkers always generate a mental field which ensures complete privacy, but this particular one was radiating a kind of fatalistic gloom that was slowly emptying the bar.

This didn't worry the barman, because the lonely figure was engaged in a very expensive experiment.

Every drinking place throughout the multiverse has them – those shelves of weirdly-shaped, sticky bottles that not only contain exotically-named liquid, which is often blue or green, but also odds and ends that bottles of real drink would never stoop to contain, such as whole fruits, bits of twig and, in extreme cases, small drowned lizards. No-one knows why barmen stock so many, since they all taste like treacle dissolved in turpentine. It has been speculated that they dream of a day when someone will walk in off the street unbidden and ask for a glass of Peach Corniche with A Hint Of Mint and overnight the place will become somewhere To Be Seen At.

The stranger was working his way along the row.

WHAT is THAT GREEN ONE?

The landlord peered at the label.

'It says it's Melon Brandy,' he said doubtfully. 'It says it's bottled by some monks to an ancient recipe,'he added.

I WILL TRY IT.

The man looked sideways at the empty glasses on the counter, some of them still containing bits of fruit salad, cherries on a stick and small paper umbrellas.

'Are you sure you haven't had enough?' he said. It worried him vaguely that he couldn't seem to make out the stranger's face.

The glass, with its drink crystallising out on the sides, disappeared into the hood and came out again empty.

No. WHAT is THE YELLOW ONE WITH THE WASPS IN IT?

'Spring Cordial, it says. Yes?'

YES. AND THEN THE BLUE ONE WITH THE GOLD FLECKS.

'Er. Old Overcoat?'

YES. AND THEN THE SECOND ROW.

'Which one did you have in mind?'

ALL OF THEM.

The stranger remained bolt upright, the glasses with their burdens of syrup and assorted vegetation disappearing into the hood on a production line basis.

This is it, the landlord thought, this is style, this is where I buy a red jacket and maybe put some monkey nuts and a few gherkins on the counter, get a few mirrors around the place,

replace the sawdust. He picked up a beer-soaked cloth and gave the woodwork a few enthusiastic wipes, speading the drips from the cordial glasses into a rainbow smear that took the varnish off. The last of the usual customers put on his hat and staggered out, muttering to himself.

I DON'T SEE THE POINT, the stranger said.

'Sorry?'

WHAT is SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN?

'How many drinks have you had?'

FORTY-SEVEN.

'Just about anything, then,' said the barman and, because he knew his job and knew what was expected of him when people drank alone in the small hours, he started to polish a glass with the slops cloth and said, 'Your lady thrown you out, has she?'

PARDON?

'Drowning your sorrows, are you?'

I HAVE NO SORROWS.

'No, of course not. Forget I mentioned it.' He gave the glass a few more wipes. 'Just thought it helps to have someone to talk to,' he said.

The stranger was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he said: You WANT TO TALK TO ME?

'Yes. Sure. I'm a good listener.'

NO-ONE EVER WANTED TO TALK TO ME BEFORE.

'That's a shame.'

THEY NEVER INVITE ME TO PARTIES, YOU KNOW.

'Tch.'

THEY ALL HATE ME. EVERYONE HATES ME. I DONT HAVE A SINGLE FRIEND.

'Everyone ought to have a friend,' said the barman sagely.

I THINK —

'Yes?'

I THINK . . . I THINK I COULD BE FRIENDS WITH THE GREEN BOTTLE.

The landlord slid the octagon-bottle along the counter. Death took it and tilted it over the glass. The liquid tinkled on the rim.

YOU DRUNK I'M THINK, DON'T YOU?

'I serve anyone who can stand upright best out of three,' said the landlord.

YOURRRE ABSOROOTLY RIGHT. BUT I —

The stranger paused, one declamatory finger in the air.

WAS WHAT I SAYING?

'You said I thought you were drunk.'

AH. YES, *BUT* I CAN BE SHOBER ANY TIME I LIKE. THIS ISH AN EXPERIMENT. AND NOW I WOULD LIKES TO EXPERIMENT WITH THE ORANGE BRANDY AGAIN.

The landlord sighed, and glanced at the clock. There was no doubt that he was making a lot of money, especially since the stranger didn't seem inclined to worry about overcharging or short change. But it was getting late; in fact it was getting so late that it was getting early. There was also something about the solitary customer that unsettled him. People in The Mended Drum often drank as though there was no tomorrow, but this was the first time he'd actually felt they might be right.

I MEAN, WHAT HAVE I GOT TO LOOK FORWARD TO? WHERE'S THE SENSE IN IT ALL? WHAT IS IT REALLY ALL ABOUT?

'Can't say, my friend. I expect you'll feel better after a good night's sleep.'

SLEEP? SLEEP? I NEVER SLEEP. I'M WOSSNAME, PROVERBIAL FOR IT.

'Everyone needs their sleep. Even me,' he hinted.

THEY ALL HATE ME, YOU KNOW.

'Yes, you said. But it's a quarter to three.'

The stranger turned unsteadily and looked around the silent room.

THERE'S NO-ONE IN THE PLACE BUT YOU AND I, he said.

The landlord lifted up the flap and came around the bar, helping the stranger down from his stool.

I HAVEN'T GOT A SINGLE FRIEND. EVEN CATS FIND ME AMUSING.

A hand shot out and grabbed a bottle of Amanita Liquor before the man managed to propel its owner to the door, wondering how someone so thin could be so heavy.

I DON'T HAVE TO BE DRUNK, I SAID. WHY DO PEOPLE LIKE TO BE DRUNK? IS IT FUN?

'Helps them forget about life, old chap. Now just you lean there while I get the door open —'

FORGET ABOUT LIFE. HA. HA.

'You come back any time you like, y'hear?'

YOU'D REALLY LIKE TO SEE ME AGAIN?

The landlord looked back at the small heap of coins on the bar. That was worth a little weirdness. At least this one was a quiet one, and seemed to be harmless.

'Oh, yes,' he said, propelling the stranger into the street and retrieving the bottle in one smooth movement. 'Drop in anytime.'

THAT'S THE NICEHEST THING —

The door slammed on the rest of the sentence.

Ysabell sat up in bed.

The knocking came again, soft and urgent. She pulled the covers up to her chin.

'Who is it?' she whispered.

'It's me, Mort,' came the hiss under the door. 'Let me in, please!'

'Wait!'

Ysabell scrambled frantically on the bedside table for the matches, knocking over a bottle of toilet water and dislodging a box of chocolates that was now mostly discarded wrappers. Once she'd got the candle alight she adjusted its position for maximum effect, tweaked the line of her nightdress into something more revealing, and said: 'It's not locked.'

Mort staggered into the room, smelling of horses and frost and scumble.

'I hope,' said Ysabell archly, 'that you have not forced your way in here in order to take advantage of your position in this household.'

Mort looked around him. Ysabell was heavily into frills. Even the dressing table seemed to be wearing a petticoat. The whole room wasn't so much furnished as lingeried.

'Look, I haven't got time to mess around,' he said. 'Bring that candle into the library. And for heaven's sake put on something sensible, you're overflowing.'

Ysabell looked down, and then her head snapped up.

'Well!'

Mort poked his head back round the door. 'It's a matter of life and death,' he added, and disappeared.

Ysabell watched the door creak shut after him, revealing the blue dressing gown with the tassels that Death had thought up for her as a present last Hogswatch and which she hadn't the heart to throw away, despite the fact that it was a size too small and had a rabbit on the pocket.

Finally she swung her legs out of bed, slipped into the shameful dressing gown, and padded out into the corridor. Mort was waiting for her.

'Won't father hear us?' she said.

'He's not back. Come on.'

'How can you tell?'

'The place feels different when he's here. It's – it's like the difference between a coat when it's being worn and when it's hanging on a hook. Haven't you noticed?'

'What are we doing that's so important?'

Mort pushed open the library door. A gust of warm, dry air drifted out, and the door hinges issued a protesting creak.

'We're going to save someone's life,' he said. 'A princess, actually.'

Ysabell was instantly fascinated.

'A real princess? I mean can she feel a pea through a dozen mattresses?'

'Can she —?' Mort felt a minor worry disappear. 'Oh. Yes. I thought Albert had got it wrong.'

'Are you in love with her?'

Mort came to a standstill between the shelves, aware of the busy little scritchings inside the book covers.

'It's hard to be sure,' he said. 'Do I look it?'

'You look a bit flustered. How does she feel about you?'

'Don't know.'

'Ah,' said Ysabell knowingly, in the tones of an expert. 'Unrequited love is the worst kind. It's probably not a good idea to go taking poison or killing yourself, though,' she added thoughtfully. 'What are we doing here? Do you want to find her book to see if she marries you?'

'I've read it, and she's dead,' said Mort. 'But only technically. I mean, not really dead.'

'Good, otherwise that would be necromancy. What are we looking for?'

'Albert's biography.'

'What for? I don't think he's got one.'

'Everyone's got one.'

'Well, he doesn't like people asking personal questions. I looked for it once and I couldn't find it. Albert by itself isn't much to go on. Why is he so interesting?' Ysabell lit a couple of candles from the one in her hand and filled the library with dancing shadows.

'I need a powerful wizard and I think he's one.'

'What, Albert?'

'Yes. Only we're looking for Alberto Malich. He's more than two thousand years old, I think.'

'What, Albert?'

'Yes. Albert.'

'He never wears a wizard's hat,' said Ysabell doubtfully.

'He lost it. Anyway, the hat isn't compulsory. Where do we start looking?'

'Well, if you're sure . . . the Stack, I suppose. That's where father puts all the biographies that are more than five hundred years old. It's this way.'

She led the way past the whispering shelves to a door set in a cul-de-sac. It opened with some effort and the groan of the hinges reverberated around the library; Mort fancied for a moment that all the books paused momentarily in their work just to listen.

Steps led down into the velvet gloom. There were cobwebs and dust, and air that smelled as though it had been locked in a pyramid for a thousand years.

'People don't come down here very often,' said Ysabell. 'I'll lead the way.'

Mort felt something was owed.

'I must say,' he said, 'you're a real brick.'

'You mean pink, square and dumpy? You really know how to talk to a girl, my boy.'

'Mort,' said Mort automatically.

The Stack was as dark and silent as a cave deep underground. The shelves were barely far enough apart for one person to walk between them, and towered up well beyond the dome of candlelight. They were particularly eerie because they were silent. There were no more lives to write; the books slept. But Mort felt that they slept like cats, with one eye open. They were aware.

'I came down here once,' said Ysabell, whispering. 'If you go far enough along the shelves the books run out and there's clay tablets and lumps of stone and animal skins and everyone's called Ug and Zog.'

The silence was almost tangible. Mort could feel the books watching them as they tramped through the hot, silent passages. Everyone who had ever lived was here somewhere, right back to the first people that the gods had baked out of mud or whatever. They didn't exactly resent him, they were just wondering about why he was here.

'Did you get past Ug and Zog?' he hissed. There's a lot of people would be very interested to know what's there.'

'I got frightened. It's a long way and I didn't have enough candles.'

'Pity.'

Ysabell stopped so sharply that Mort cannoned into the back of her.

This would be about the right area,' she said. 'What now?'

Mort peered at the faded names on the spines.

'They don't seem to be in any order!' he moaned.

They looked up. They wandered down a couple of side alleys. They pulled a few books off the lowest shelves at random, raising pillows of dust.

'This is silly,' said Mort at last. There's millions of lives here. The chances of finding his are worse than —'

Ysabell laid her hand against his mouth.

'Listen!'

Mort mumbled a bit through her fingers and then got the message. He strained his ears, striving to hear anything above the heavy hiss of absolute silence.

And then he found it. A faint, irritable scratching. High, high overhead, somewhere in the impenetrable darkness on the cliff of shelves, a life was still being written.

They looked at each other, their eyes widening. Then Ysabell said, 'We passed a ladder back there. On wheels.'

The little castors on the bottom squeaked as Mort rolled it back. The top end moved too, as if it was fixed to another set of wheels somewhere up in the darkness.

'Right,' he said. 'Give me the candle, and —'

'If the candle's going up, then so am I,' said Ysabell firmly. 'You stop down here and move the ladder when I say. And don't argue.'

'It might be dangerous up there,' said Mort gallantly.

'It might be dangerous down here,' Ysabell pointed out. 'So I'll be up the ladder with the candle, thank you.'

She set her foot on the bottom rung and was soon no more than a frilly shadow outlined in a halo of candlelight that soon began to shrink.

Mort steadied the ladder and tried not to think of all the lives pressing in on him. Occasionally a meteor of hot wax would thump into the floor beside him, raising a crater in the dust. Ysabell was now a faint glow far above, and he could feel every footstep as it vibrated down the ladder.

She stopped. It seemed to be for quite a long time.

Then her voice floated down, deadened by the weight of silence around them.

'Mort, I've found it.'

'Good. Bring it down.'

'Mort, you were right.'

'Okay, thanks. Now bring it down,'

'Yes, Mort, but which one?'

'Don't mess about, that candle won't last much longer.'

'Mort!'

'What?'

'Mort, there's a whole *shelf*!'

Now it really was dawn, that cusp of the day that belonged to no-one except the seagulls in Morpork docks, the tide that rolled in up the river, and a warm turnwise wind that added a smell of spring to the complex odour of the city.

Death sat on a bollard, looking out to sea. He had decided to stop being drunk. It made his head ache.

He'd tried fishing, dancing, gambling and drink, allegedly four of life's greatest pleasures, and wasn't sure that he saw the point. Food he was happy with – Death liked a good meal as much as anyone else. He couldn't think of any other pleasures of the flesh or, rather, he could, but they were, well, *fleshy*, and he couldn't see how it would be possible to go about them without some major bodily restructuring, which he wasn't going to contemplate. Besides, humans seemed to leave off doing them as they grew older, so presumably they couldn't be that attractive.

Death began to feel that he wouldn't understand people as long as he lived.

The sun made the cobbles steam and Death felt the faintest tingling of that little springtime urge that can send a thousand tons of sap pumping through fifty feet of timber in a forest.

The seagulls swooped and dived around him. A one-eyed cat, down to its eighth life and its last ear, emerged from its lair in a heap of abandoned fish boxes, stretched, yawned, and rubbed itself against his legs. The breeze, cutting through Ankh's famous smell, brought a hint of spices and fresh bread.

Death was bewildered. He couldn't fight it. He was actually feeling glad to be alive, and very reluctant to be Death.

I MUST BE SICKENING FOR SOMETHING, he thought.

Mort eased himself up the ladder alongside Ysabell. It was shaky, but seemed to be safe. At least the height didn't bother him; everything below was just blackness.

Some of Albert's earlier volumes were very nearly falling apart. He reached out for one at random, feeling the ladder tremble underneath them as he did so, brought it back and opened it somewhere in the middle.

'Move the candle this way,' he said.

'Can you read it?'

'Sort of —'

— "turnered hys hand, butt was sorelie vexed that alle menne at laste comme to nort, viz. Deathe, and vowed hymme to seke Imortalitie yn his pride. 'Thus,' he tolde the younge wizzerds, 'we may take unto ourselfes the mantel of Goddes.' Thee next day, yt being raining, Alberto" —

'It's written in Old,' he said. 'Before they invented spelling. Let's have a look at the latest one.'

It was Albert all right. Mort caught several references to fried bread.

'Let's have a look at what he's doing now,' said Ysabell.

'Do you think we should? It's a bit like spying.'

'So what? Scared?'

'All right.'

He flicked through until he came to the unfilled pages, and then turned back until he found the story of Albert's life, crawling across the page at surprising speed considering it was the middle of the night; most biographies didn't have much to say about sleep, unless the dreams were particularly vivid.

'Hold the candle properly, will you? I don't want to get grease on his life.'

'Why not? He likes grease.'

'Stop giggling, you'll have us both off. Now look at this bit. . . .

— 'He crept through the dusty darkness of the Stack —' Ysabell read – 'his eyes fixed on the tiny glow of candlelight high above. Prying, he thought, poking away at things that shouldn't concern them, the little devils' —

'Mort! He's —'

'Shut up! I'm reading!'

— 'soon put a stop to this. Albert crept silently to the foot of the ladder, spat on his hands, and got ready to push. The master'd never know; he was acting strange these days and it was all that lad's fault, and' —

Mort looked up into Ysabell's horrified eyes.

Then the girl took the book out of Mort's hand, held it at arm's length while her gaze remained fixed woodenly on his, and let it go.

Mort watched her lips move and then realised that he, too, was counting under his breath.

Three, four —

There was a dull thump, a muffled cry, and silence.

'Do you think you've killed him?' said Mort, after a while.

'What, *here*? Anyway, I didn't notice any better ideas coming from you.'

'No, but – he is an old man, after all.'

'No, he's not,' said Ysabell sharply, starting down the ladder.

'Two thousand years?'

'Not a day over sixty-seven.'

'The books said —'

'I told you, time doesn't apply here. Not *real* time. Don't you listen, boy?'

'Mort,' said Mort.

'And stop treading on my fingers, I'm going as fast as I can.'

'Sorry.'

'And don't act so wet. Have you any idea how boring it is living here?'

'Probably not,' said Mort, adding with genuine longing, 'I've heard about boredom but I've never had a chance to try it.'

'It's dreadful.'

'If it comes to that, excitement isn't all it's cracked up to be.'

'Anything's got to be better than this.'

There was a groan from below, and then a stream of swearwords.

Ysabell peered into the gloom.

'Obviously I didn't damage his cursing muscles,' she said. 'I don't think I ought to listen to words like that. It could be bad for my moral fibre.'

They found Albert slumped against the foot of the bookshelf, muttering and holding his arm.

'There's no need to make that kind of fuss,' said Ysabell briskly. 'You're not hurt; father simply doesn't allow that kind of thing to happen.'

'What did you have to go and do that for?' he moaned. 'I didn't mean any harm.'

'You were going to push us off,' said Mort, trying to help him up. 'I read it. I'm surprised you didn't use magic.'

Albert glared at him.

'Oh, so you've found out, have you?' he said quietly. Then much good may it do you. You've no right to go prying.'

He struggled to his feet, shook off Mort's hand, and stumbled back along the hushed shelves.

'No, wait,' said Mort, 'I need your help!'

'Well, of course,' said Albert over his shoulder. 'It stands to reason, doesn't it? You thought, I'll just go and pry into someone's private life and then I'll drop it on him and then I'll ask him to help me.'

'I only wanted to find out if you were really you,' said Mort, running after him.

'I am. Everyone is.'

'But if you don't help me something terrible will happen! There's this princess, and she —
'

Terrible things happen all the time, boy —'

'— Mort —'

'— and no-one expects me to do anything about it.'

'But you were the greatest!'

Albert stopped for a moment, but did not look around.

'*Was* the greatest, *was* the greatest. And don't you try to butter me up. I ain't butterable.'

'They've got statues to you and everything,' said Mort, trying not to yawn.

'More fool them, then.' Albert reached the foot of the steps into the library proper, stamped up them and stood outlined against the candlelight from the library.

'You mean you won't help?' said Mort. 'Not even if you can?'

'Give the boy a prize,' growled Albert. 'And it's no good thinking you can appeal to my better nature under this here crusty exterior,' he added, 'cos my interior's pretty damn crusty too.'

They heard him cross the library floor as though he had a grudge against it, and slam the door behind him.

'Well,' said Mort, uncertainly.

'What did you expect?' snapped Ysabell. 'He doesn't care for anyone much except father.'

'It's just that I thought someone like him would help if I explained it properly,' said Mort. He sagged. The rush of energy that had propelled him through the long night had evaporated, filling his mind with lead. 'You know he was a famous wizard?'

That doesn't mean anything, wizards aren't necessarily nice. Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards because a refusal often offends, I read somewhere.' Ysabell stepped closer to

Mort and peered at him with some concern. 'You look like something left on a plate,' she said.

' 'M okay,' said Mort, walking heavily up the steps and into the scratching shadows of the library.

'You're not. You could do with a good night's sleep, my lad.'

'M't,' murmured Mort.

He felt Ysabell slip his arm over her shoulder. The walls were moving gently, even the sound of his own voice was coming from a long way off, and he dimly felt how nice it would be to stretch out on a nice stone slab and sleep forever.

Death'd be back soon, he told himself, feeling his unprotesting body being helped along the corridors. There was nothing for it, he'd have to tell Death. He wasn't such a bad old stick. Death would help; all he needed to do was explain things. And then he could stop all this worrying and go to slee. . . .

'And what was your previous position?'

I BEG YOUR PARDON?

'What did you do for a living?' said the thin young man behind the desk.

The figure opposite him shifted uneasily.

I USHERED SOULS INTO THE NEXT WORLD. I WAS THE GRAVE OF ALL HOPE. I WAS THE ULTIMATE REALITY. I WAS THE ASSASSIN AGAINST WHOM NO LOCK WOULD HOLD.

'Yes, point taken, but do you have any particular skills?'

Death thought about it.

I SUPPOSE A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF EXPERTISE WITH AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS? he ventured after a while.

The young man shook his head firmly.

NO?

'This is a city, Mr —' he glanced down, and once again felt a faint unease that he couldn't quite put his finger on – 'Mr – Mr – Mr, and we're a bit short of fields.'

He laid down his pen and gave the kind of smile that suggested he'd learned it from a book.

Ankh-Morpork wasn't advanced enough to possess an employment exchange. People took jobs because their fathers made room for them, or because their natural talent found an opening, or by word-of-mouth. But there was a call for servants and menial workers, and with the commercial sections of the city beginning to boom the thin young man – a Mr Liona Keeble – had invented the profession of job broker and was, right at this moment, finding it difficult.

'My dear Mr —' he glanced down – 'Mr, we get many people coming into the city from outside because, alas, they believe life is richer here. Excuse me for saying so, but you seem to me to be a gentleman down on his luck. I would have thought you would have

preferred something rather more refined than —' he glanced down again, and frowned – ' "something nice working with cats or flowers".'

I'M SORRY. I FELT IT WAS TIME FOR A CHANGE.

'Can you play a musical instrument ?'

NO.

'Can you do carpentry?'

I DO NOT KNOW, I HAVE NEVER TRIED. Death tared at his feet. He was beginning to feel deeply embarrassed.

Keeble shuffled the paper on his desk, and sighed.

I CAN WALK THROUGH WALLS, Death volunteered, aware that the conversation had reached an impasse.

Keeble looked up brightly. 'I'd like to see that,' he said. 'That could be quite a qualification.'

RIGHT.

Death pushed his chair back and stalked confidently towards the nearest wall.

OUCH.

Keeble watched expectantly. 'Go on, then,' he said.

UM. THIS IS AN ORDINARY WALL, IS IT?

'I assume so. I'm not an expert.'

IT SEEMS TO BE PRESENTING ME WITH SOME DIFFICULTY.

'So it would appear.'

WHAT DO YOU CALL THE FEELING OF BEING VERY SMALL AND HOT?

Keeble twiddled his pencil.

'Pygmy?'

BEGINS WITH AN M.

'Embarrassing?'

'Yes,' said Death, I MEAN YES.

'It would seem that you have no useful skill or talent whatsoever,' he said. 'Have you thought of going into teaching?'

Death's face was a mask of terror. Well, it was always a mask of terror, but this time he meant it to be.

'You see,' said Keeble kindly, putting down his pen and steepling his hands together, 'it's very seldom I ever have to find a new career for an – what was it again?'

ANTHROPOMORPHIC PERSONIFICATION.

'Oh, yes. What *is* that, exactly?'

Death had had enough.

THIS, he said.

For a moment, just for a moment, Mr Keeble saw him clearly. His face went nearly as pale as Death's own. His hands jerked convulsively. His heart gave a stutter.

Death watched him with mild interest, then drew an hourglass from the depths of his robe and held it up to the light and examined it critically.

SETTLE DOWN, he said, YOU'VE GOT A GOOD FEW YEARS YET.

'Bbbbbbb —'

I COULD TELL YOU HOW MANY IF YOU LIKE.

Keeble, fighting to breathe, managed to shake his head.

DO YOU WANT ME TO GET YOU A GLASS OF WATER, THEN?

'nnN – nnN.'

The shop bell jangled. Keeble's eyes rolled. Death decided that he owed the man something. He shouldn't be allowed to lose custom, which was clearly something humans valued dearly.

He pushed aside the bead curtain and stalked into the outer shop, where a small fat woman, looking rather like an angry cottage loaf, was hammering on the counter with a haddock.

'It's about that cook's job up at the University,' she said. 'You told me it was a good position and it's a disgrace up there, the tricks them students play, and I demand – I want you to – I'm not.

Her voice trailed off.

' 'Ere,' she said, but you could tell her heart wasn't in it, 'you're not Keeble, are you?'

Death stared at her. He'd never before experienced an unsatisfied customer. He was at a loss. Finally he gave up.

BEGONE, YOU BLACK AND MIDNIGHT HAG, he said.

The cook's small eyes narrowed.

' 'Oo are you calling a midnight bag?' she said accusingly, and hit the counter with the fish again. 'Look at this,' she said. 'Last night it was my bedwarmer, in the morning it's a fish. I ask you.'

MAY ALL THE DEMONS OF HELL REND YOUR LIVING SPIRIT IF YOU DON'T GET OUT OF THE SHOP THIS MINUTE, Death tried.

'I don't know about that, but what about my bedwarmer? It's no place for a respectable woman up there, they tried to —'

IF YOU WOULD CARE TO GO AWAY, said Death desperately, I WILL GIVE YOU SOME MONEY.

'How much?' said the cook, with a speed that would have outdistanced a striking rattlesnake and given lightning a nasty shock.

Death pulled out his coin bag and tipped a heap of verdigrised and darkened coins on the counter. She regarded them with deep suspicion.

NOW LEAVE UPON THE INSTANT, said Death, and added, BEFORE THE SEARING WINDS OF INFINITY SCORCH THY WORTHLESS CARCASS.

'My husband will be told about this,' said the cook darkly, as she left the shop. It seemed to Death that no threat of his could possibly be as dire.

He stalked back through the curtains. Keeble, still slumped in his chair, gave a kind of strangled gurgle.

'It was true!' he said. 'I thought you were a nightmare!'

I COULD TAKE OFFENCE AT THAT, said Death.

'You really are Death?' said Keeble.

YES.

'Why didn't you say?'

PEOPLE USUALLY PREFER ME NOT TO.

Keeble scrabbled among his papers, giggling hysterically.

'You want to do something else?' he said. Tooth fairy? Water sprite? Sandman?'

DO NOT BE FOOLISH. I SIMPLY – FEEL I WANT A CHANGE.

Keeble's frantic rustling at last turned up the paper he'd been searching for. He gave a maniacal laugh and thrust it into Death's hands.

Death read it.

THIS is A JOB? PEOPLE ARE PAID TO DO THIS?

'Yes, yes, go and see him, you're just the right type. Only don't tell him I sent you.'

Binky moved at a hard gallop across the night, the Disc unrolling far below his hooves. Now Mort found that the sword could reach out further than he had thought, it could reach the stars themselves, and he swung it across the deeps of space and into the heart of a yellow dwarf which went nova most satisfactorily. He stood in the saddle and whirled the blade around his head, laughing as the blue flame fanned across the sky leaving a trail of darkness and embers.

And didn't stop. Mort struggled as the sword cut through the horizon, grinding down the mountains, drying up the seas, turning green forests into punk and ashes. He heard voices behind him, and the brief screams of friends and relatives as he turned desperately. Dust storms whirled from the dead earth as he fought to release his own grip, but the sword burned icy cold in his hand, dragging him on in a dance that would not end until there was nothing left alive.

And that time came, and Mort stood alone except for Death, who said, 'A fine job, boy.'

And Mort said, MORT.

'Mort! Mort! Wake up!'

Mort surfaced slowly, like a corpse in a pond. He fought against it, clinging to his pillow and the horrors of sleep, but someone was tugging urgently at his ear.

'Mmmph?' he said.

'Mort!'

'*Wsst*?'

'Mort, it's father!'

He opened his eyes and stared up blankly into Ysabell's face. Then the events of the previous night hit him like a sock full of damp sand.

Mort swung his legs out of bed, still wreathed in the remains of his dream.

'Yeah, okay,' he said. 'I" go and see him directly.'

'He's not here! Albert's going crazy!' Ysabell stood by the bed, tugging a handkerchief between her hands. 'Mort, do you think something bad has happened to him?'

He gave her a blank look. 'Don't be bloody stupid,' he said, 'he's Death.' He scratched his skin. He felt hot and dry and itchy.

'But he's never been away this long! Not even when there was that big plague in Pseudopolis! I mean, he has to be here in the mornings to do the books and work out the nodes and —'

Mort grabbed her arms. 'All right, all right,' he said, as soothingly as he could manage. 'I'm sure everything's okay. Just settle down, I'll go and check . . . why have you got your eyes shut?'

'Mort, please put some clothes on,' said Ysabell in a tight little voice.

Mort looked down.

'Sorry,' he said meekly, 'I didn't realise . . . Who put me to bed?'

'I did,' she said. 'But I looked the other way.'

Mort dragged on his breeches, shrugged into his shirt and hurried out towards Death's study with Ysabell on his heels. Albert was in there, jumping from foot to foot like a duck on a griddle. When Mort came in the look on the old man's face could almost have been gratitude.

Mort saw with amazement that there were tears in his eyes.

'His chair hasn't been sat in,' Albert whined.

'Sorry, but is that important?' said Mort. 'My grandad didn't used to come home for days if he'd had a good sale at the market.'

'But he's always here,' said Albert. 'Every morning, as long as I've known him, sitting here at his desk a-working on the nodes. It's his job. He wouldn't miss it.'

'I expect the nodes can look after themselves for a day or two,' said Mort.

The drop in temperature told him he was wrong. He looked at their faces.

They can't?' he said.

Both heads shook.

'If the nodes aren't worked out properly all the Balance is destroyed,' said Ysabell. 'Anything could happen.'

'Didn't he explain?' said Albert.

'Not really. I've really only done the practical side. He said he'd tell me about the theoretical stuff later,' said Mort. Ysabell burst into tears.

Albert took Mort's arm and, with considerable dramatic waggling of his eyebrows, indicated that they should have a little talk in the corner. Mort trailed after him reluctantly.

The old man rummaged in his pockets and at last produced a battered paper bag.

'Peppermint?' he enquired.

Mort shook his head.

'He never tell you about the nodes?' said Albert.

Mort shook' his head again. Albert gave his peppermint a suck; it sounded like the plughole in the bath of God.

'How old are you, lad?'

'Mort. I'm sixteen.'

'There's some things a lad ought to be tole before he's sixteen,' said Albert, looking over his shoulder at Ysabell, who was sobbing in Death's chair.

'Oh, I know about *that*. My father told me all about that when we used to take the thargas to be mated. When a man and a woman —'

'About the universe is what I meant,' said Albert hurriedly. 'I mean, have you ever thought about it?'

'I know the Disc is carried through space on the backs of four elephants that stand on the shell of Great A'Tuin,' said Mort.

'That's just part of it. I meant the whole universe of time and space and life and death and day and night and everything.'

'Can't say I've ever given it much thought,' said Mort.

'Ah. You ought. The point is, the nodes are part of it. They stop death from getting out of control, see. Not him, not Death. Just death itself. Like, uh —' Albert struggled for words – 'like, death should come exactly at the end of life, see, and not before or after, and the nodes have to be worked out so that the key figures . . . you're not taking this in, are you?'

'Sorry.'

'They've got to be worked out,' said Albert flatly, 'and then the correct lives have got to be got. The hourglasses, you call them. The actual Duty is the easy job.'

'Can you do it?'

'No. Can you?'

'No!'

Albert sucked reflectively at his peppermint. That's the whole world in the gyppo, then,' he said.

'Look, I can't see why you're so worried. I expect he's just got held up somewhere,' said Mort, but it sounded feeble even to him. It wasn't as though people buttonholed Death to tell him another story, or clapped him on the back and said things like 'You've got time for a quick half in there, my old mate, no need to rush off home' or invited him to make up a skittles team and come out for a Klatchian take-away afterwards, or . . . It struck Mort with sudden, terrible poignancy that Death must be the loneliest creature in the universe. In the great party of Creation, he was always in the kitchen.

'I'm sure I don't know what's come over the master lately,' mumbled Albert. 'Out of the chair, my girl. Let's have a look at these nodes.'

They opened the ledger.

They looked at it for a long time.

Then Mort said, 'What do all those symbols mean?'

'Sodomy non sapiens,' said Albert under his breath.

'What does that mean?'

'Means I'm buggered if I know.'

That was wizard talk, wasn't it?' said Mort.

'You shut up about wizard talk. I don't know anything about wizard talk. You apply your brain to this here.'

Mort looked down again at the tracery of lines. It was as if a spider had spun a web on the page, stopping at every junction to make notes. Mort stared until his eyes hurt, waiting for some spark of inspiration. None volunteered.

'Any luck?'

'It's all Klatchian to me,' said Mort. 'I don't even know whether it should be read upside down or sideways.'

'Spiralling from the centre outwards,' sniffed Ysabell from her seat in the corner.

Their heads collided as they both peered at the centre of the page. They stared at her. She shrugged.

'Father taught me how to read the node chart,' she said, 'when I used to do my sewing in here. He used to read bits out.'

'You can help?' said Mort.

'No,' said Ysabell. She blew her nose.

'What do you mean, no?' growled Albert. This is too important for any flighty —'

'I mean,' said Ysabell, in razor tones, 'that I can do them and you can help.'

The Ankh-Morpork Guild of Merchants has taken to hiring large gangs of men with ears like fists and fists like large bags of walnuts whose job it is to re-educate those misguided people who publicly fail to recognise the many attractive points of their fine city. For example the philosopher Catroaster was found floating face downward in the river within

hours of uttering the famous line, 'When a man is tired of Ankh-Morpork, he is tired of ankle-deep slurry.'

Therefore it is prudent to dwell on one – of the very many, of course – on one of the things that makes Ankh-Morpork renowned among the great cities of the multiverse.

This is its food.

The trade routes of half the Disc pass through the city or down its rather sluggish river. More than half the tribes and races of the Disc have representatives dwelling within its sprawling acres. In Ankh-Morpork the cuisines of the world collide: on the menu are one thousand types of vegetable, fifteen hundred cheeses, two thousand spices, three hundred types of meat, two hundred fowl, five hundred different kinds of fish, one hundred variations on the theme of pasta, seventy eggs of one kind or another, fifty insects, thirty molluscs, twenty assorted snakes and other reptiles, and something pale brown and warty known as the Klatchian migratory bog truffle.

Its eating establishments range from the opulent, where the portions are tiny but the plates are silver, to the secretive, where some of the Disc's more exotic inhabitants are rumoured to eat anything they can get down their throat best out of three.

Harga's House of Ribs down by the docks is probably not numbered among the city's leading eateries, catering as it does for the type of beefy clientele that prefers quantity and breaks up the tables if it doesn't get it. They don't go in for the fancy or exotic, but stick to conventional food like flightless bird embryos, minced organs in intestine skins, slices of hog flesh and burnt ground grass seeds dipped in animal fats; or, as it is known in their patois, egg, soss and bacon and a fried slice.

It was the kind of eating house that didn't need a menu. You just looked at Harga's vest.

Still, he had to admit, this new cook seemed to be the business. Harga, an expansive advert for his own high carbohydrate merchandise, beamed at a room full of satisfied customers. And a fast worker, too! In fact, disconcertingly fast.

He rapped on the hatch.

'Double egg, chips, beans, and a trollburger, hold the onions,' he rasped.

RIGHT.

The hatch slid up a few seconds later and two plates were pushed through. Harga shook his head in gratified amazement.

It had been like that all evening. The eggs were bright and shiny, the beans glistened like rubies, and the chips were the crisp golden brown of sunburned bodies on expensive beaches. Harga's last cook had turned out chips like little paper bags full of pus.

Harga looked around the steamy cafe. No-one was watching him. He was going to get to the bottom of this. He rapped on the hatch again.

'Alligator sandwich,' he said. 'And make it sna —'

The hatch shot up. After a few seconds to pluck up enough courage, Harga peered under the top slice of the long sarny in front of him. He wasn't saying that it was alligator, and he wasn't saying it wasn't. He knuckled the hatch again.

'Okay,' he said, I'm not complaining, I just want to know how you did it so fast.'

TIME IS NOT IMPORTANT.

'You say?'

RIGHT.

Harga decided not to argue.

'Well, you're doing a damn fine job in there, boy,' he said.

WHAT is IT CALLED WHEN YOU FEEL WARM AND CONTENT AND WISH THINGS WOULD STAY THAT WAY?

'I guess you'd call it happiness,' said Harga.

Inside the tiny, cramped kitchen, strata'd with the grease of decades, Death spun and whirled, chopping, slicing and flying. His skillet flashed through the fetid steam.

He'd opened the door to the cold night air, and a dozen neighbourhood cats had strolled in, attracted by the bowls of milk and meat – some of Harga's best, if he'd known – that had been strategically placed around the floor. Occassionally Death would pause in his work and scratch one of them behind the ears.

'Happiness,' he said, and puzzled at the sound of his own voice.

Cutwell, the wizard and Royal Recogniser by appointment, pulled himself up the last of the tower steps and leaned against the wall, waiting for his heart to stop thumping.

Actually it wasn't particularly high, this tower, just high for Sto Lat. In general design and outline it looked the standard sort of tower for imprisoning princesses in; it was mainly used to store old furniture.

However, it offered unsurpassed views of the city and the Sto plain, which is to say, you could see an awful lot of cabbages.

Cutwell made it as far as the crumbling crenel-lations atop the wall and looked out at the morning haze. It was, maybe, a little hazier than usual. If he tried hard he could imagine a flicker in the sky. If he really strained his imagination he could hear a buzzing out over the cabbage fields, a sound like someone frying locusts. He shivered.

At a time like this his hands automatically patted his pockets, and found nothing but half a bag of jelly babies, melted into a sticky mass, and an apple core. Neither offered much consolation.

What Cutwell wanted was what any normal wizard wanted at a time like this, which was a smoke. He'd have killed for a cigar, and would have gone as far as a flesh wound for a squashed dog-end. He pulled himself together. Resolution was good for the moral fibre; the only trouble was the fibre didn't appreciate the sacrifices he was making for it. They said that a truly great wizard should be permanently under tension. You could have used Cutwell for a bowstring.

He turned his back on the brassica-ed landscape and made his way back down the winding steps to the main part of the palace.

Still, he told himself, the campaign appeared to be working. The population didn't seem to be resisting the fact that there was going to be a coronation, although they weren't exactly clear about who was going to be crowned. There was going to be bunting in the streets and Cutwell had arranged for the town square's main fountain to run, if not with wine, then at least with an acceptable beer made from broccoli. There was going to be folk dancing, at sword point if necessary. There would be races for children. There would be an ox roast. The royal coach had been regilded and Cutwell was optimistic that people could be persuaded to notice it as it went by.

The High Priest at the Temple of Blind Io was going to be a problem. Cutwell had marked him down as a dear old soul whose expertise with the knife was so unreliable that half of the sacrifices got tired of waiting and wandered away. The last time he'd tried to sacrifice a goat it had time to give birth to twins before he could focus, and then the courage of motherhood had resulted in it chasing the entire priesthood out of the temple.

The chances of him succeeding in putting the crown on the right person even in normal circumstances were only average, Cutwell had calculated; he'd have to stand alongside the old boy and try tactfully to guide his shaking hands.

Still, even that wasn't the big problem. The big problem was much bigger than that. The big problem had been sprung on him by the Chancellor after breakfast.

'Fireworks?' Cutwell had said.

'That's the sort of thing you wizard fellows are supposed to be good at, isn't it?' said the Chancellor, as crusty as a week-old loaf. 'Flashes and bangs and whatnot. I remember a wizard when I was a lad —'

'I'm afraid I don't know anything about fireworks,' said Cutwell, in tones designed to convey that he cherished this ignorance.

'Lots of rockets,' the Chancellor reminisced happily. 'Ankhian candles. Thunderflashes. And thingies that you can hold in your hand. It's not a proper coronation without fireworks.'

'Yes, but, you see —'

'Good man,' said the Chancellor briskly, 'knew we could rely on you. Plenty of rockets, you understand, and to finish with there must be a set-piece, mind you, something really

breathtaking like a portrait of – of —' his eyes glazed over in a way that was becoming depressingly familiar to Cut-well.

'The Princess Keli,' he said wearily.

'Ah. Yes. Her,' said the Chancellor. 'A portrait of – who you said – in fireworks. Of course, it's probably all pretty simple stuff to you wizards, but the people like it. Nothing like a good blowout and a blowup and a bit of balcony waving to keep the loyalty muscles in tip-top shape, that's what I always say. See to it. Rockets. With runes on.'

An hour ago Cutwell had thumbed through the index of *The Monster Fun Grimoire* and had cautiously assembled a number of common household ingredients and put a match to them.

Funny thing about eyebrows, he mused. You never really noticed them until they'd gone.

Red around the eyes, and smelling slightly of smoke, Cutwell ambled towards the royal apartments past bevies of maids engaged in whatever it was maids did, which always seemed to take at least three of them. Whenever they saw Cutwell they would usually go silent, hurry past with their heads down and then break into muffled giggles along the corridor. This annoyed Cutwell. Not – he told himself quickly – because of any personal considerations, but because wizards ought to be shown more respect. Besides, some of the maids had a way of looking at him which caused him to think distinctly unwizardly thoughts.

Truly, he thought, the way of enlightenment is like unto half a mile of broken glass.

He knocked on the door of Keli's suite. A maid opened it.

'Is your mistress in?' he said, as haughtily as he could manage.

The maid put her hand to her mouth. Her shoulders shook. Her eyes sparkled. A sound like escaping steam crept between her fingers.

I can't help it, Cutwell thought, I just seem to have this amazing effect on women.

'Is it a man?' came Keli's voice from within. The maid's eyes glazed over and she tilted her head, as if not sure of what she had heard.

'It's me, Cutwell,' said Cutwell.

'Oh, that's all right, then. You can come in.'

Cutwell pushed past the girl and tried to ignore the muffled laughter as the maid fled the room. Of course, everyone knew a wizard didn't need a chaperon. It was just the tone of the princess's 'Oh, that's all right then' that made him writhe inside.

Keli was sitting at her dressing table, brushing her hair. Very few men in the world ever find out what a princess wears under her dresses, and Cutwell joined them with extreme reluctance but with remarkable self-control. Only the frantic bobbing of his adam's apple betrayed him. There was no doubt about it, he'd be no good for magic for *days*.

She turned and he caught a whiff of talcum powder. For *weeks*, dammit, for *weeks*.

'You look a bit hot, Cutwell. Is something the matter?'

'Naarg.'

'I'm sorry?'

He shook himself. Concentrate on the hairbrush, man, the hairbrush. 'Just a bit of magical experimenting, ma'am. Only superficial burns.'

'Is *it* still moving?'

'I am afraid so.'

Keli turned back to the mirror. Her face was set.

'Have we got time?'

This was the bit he'd been dreading. He'd done everything he could. The Royal Astrologer had been sobered up long enough to insist that tomorrow was the only possible day the ceremony could take place, so Cutwell had arranged for it to begin one second after midnight. He'd ruthlessly cut the score of the royal trumpet fanfare. He'd timed the High Priest's invocation to the gods and then subedited heavily; there was going to be a row when the gods found out. The ceremony of the anointing with sacred oils had been cut to a quick dab behind the ears. Skateboards were an unknown invention on the Disc; if they hadn't been, Keli's trip up the aisle would have been unconstitutionally fast. And it still wasn't enough. He nerved himself.

'I think possibly not,' he said. 'It could be a very close thing.'

He saw her glare at him in the mirror.

'How close?'

'Um. Very.'

'Are you trying to say it might reach us at the same time as the ceremony?'

'Um. More sort of, um, before it,' said Cutwell wretchedly. There was no sound but the drumming of Keli's fingers on the edge of the table. Cutwell wondered if she was going to break down, or smash the mirror. Instead she said:

'How do you know?'

He wondered if he could get away with saying something like, I'm a wizard, we know these things, but decided against it. The last time he'd said that she'd threatened him with the axe.

'I asked one of the guards about that inn Mort talked about,' he said. Then I worked out the approximate distance it had to travel. Mort said it was moving at a slow walking pace, and I reckon his stride is about —'

'As simple as that? You didn't use magic?'

'Only common sense. It's a lot more reliable in the long run.'

She reached out and patted his hand.

'Poor old Cutwell,' she said.

'I am only twenty, ma'am.'

She stood up and walked over to her dressing room. One of the things you learn when you're a princess is always to be older than anyone of inferior rank.

'Yes, I suppose there must be such things as young wizards,' she said over her shoulder. 'It's just that people always think of them as old. I wonder why this is?'

'Rigours of the calling, ma'am,' said Cutwell, rolling his eyes. He could hear the rustle of silk.

'What made you decide to become a wizard?' Her voice was muffled, as if she had something over her head.

'It's indoor work with no heavy lifting,' said Cutwell. 'And I suppose I wanted to learn how the world worked.'

'Have you succeeded, then?'

'No.' Cutwell wasn't much good at small talk, otherwise he'd never have let his mind wander sufficiently to allow him to say: 'What made you decide to become a princess?'

After a thoughtful silence she said, 'It was decided for me, you know.'

'Sorry, I —'

'Being royal is a sort of family tradition. I expect it's the same with magic; no doubt your father was a wizard?'

Cutwell gritted his teeth. 'Um. No,' he said, 'not really. Absolutely not, in fact.'

He knew what she would say next, and here it came, reliable as the sunset, in a voice tinged with amusement and fascination.

'Oh? Is it really true that wizards aren't allowed to —'

'Well, if that's all I really should be going,' said Cutwell loudly. 'If anyone wants me, just follow the explosions. I – *gnnnh*!'

Keli had stepped out of the dressing room.

Now, women's clothes were not a subject that preoccupied Cutwell much – in fact, usually when he thought about women his mental pictures seldom included any clothes at all – but the vision in front of him really did take his breath away. Whoever had designed the dress didn't know when to stop. They'd put lace over the silk, and trimmed it with black vermine, and strung pearls anywhere that looked bare, and puffed and starched the sleeves and then added silver filigree and then started again with the silk.

In fact it really was amazing what could be done with several ounces of heavy metal, some irritated molluscs, a few dead rodents and a lot of thread wound out of insects' bottoms. The dress wasn't so much worn as occupied; if the outlying flounces weren't supported on wheels, then Keli was stronger than he'd given her credit for.

'What do you think?' she said, turning slowly. 'This was worn by my mother, and my grandmother, and her mother.'

'What, all together?' said Cutwell, quite prepared to believe it. How can she get into it? he wondered. There must be a door round the back. . . .

'It's a family heirloom. It's got real diamonds on the bodice.'

'Which bit's the bodice?'

This bit.'

Cutwell shuddered. 'It's very impressive,' he said, when he could trust himself to speak. 'You don't think it's perhaps a bit mature, though?'

'It's queenly.'

'Yes, but perhaps it won't allow you to move very fast?'

'I have no intention of running. There must be dignity.' Once again the set of her jaw traced the line of her descent all the way to her conquering ancestor, who preferred to move very fast at all times and knew as much about dignity as could be carried on the point of a sharp spear.

Cutwell spread his hands.

'All right,' he said. 'Fine. We all do what we can. I just hope Mort has come up with some ideas.'

'It's hard to have confidence in a ghost,' said Keli. 'He walks through walls!'

'I've been thinking about that,' said Cutwell. 'It's a puzzle, isn't it? He walks through things only if he doesn't know he's doing it. I think it's an industrial disease.'

'What?'

'I was nearly sure last night. He's becoming real.'

'But we're all real! At least, you are, and I suppose I am.'

'But he's becoming more real. Extremely real. Nearly as real as Death, and you don't get much realler. Not much realler at all.'

'Are you sure?' said Albert, suspiciously.

'Of course,' said Ysabell. 'Work it out yourself if you like.'

Albert looked back at the big book, his face a portrait of uncertainty.

'Well, they could be about right,' he conceded with bad grace, and copied out the two names on a scrap of paper. There's one way to find out, anyway.'

He pulled open the top drawer of Death's desk and extracted a big iron keyring. There was only one key on it.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW? said Mort.

'We've got to fetch the lifetimers,' said Albert. 'You have to come with me.'

'Mort!' hissed Ysabell.

'What?'

'What you just said —' She lapsed into silence, and then added, 'Oh, nothing. It just sounded . . . odd.'

'I only asked what happens now,' said Mort.

'Yes, but – oh, never mind:'

Albert brushed past them and sidled out into the hallway like a two-legged spider until he reached the door that was always kept locked. The key fitted perfectly. The door swung open. There wasn't so much as a squeak from its hinges, just a swish of deeper silence.

And the roar of sand.

Mort and Ysabell stood in the doorway, transfixed, as Albert stamped off between the aisles of glass. The sound didn't just enter the body via the ears, it came up through the legs and down through the skull and filled up the brain until all that it could think of was the rushing, hissing grey noise, the sound of millions of lives being lived. And rushing towards their inevitable destination.

They stared up and out at the endless ranks of lifetimers, every one different, every one named. The light from torches ranged along the walls picked highlights off them, so that a star gleamed on every glass. The far walls of the room were lost in the galaxy of light.

Mort felt Ysabell's fingers tighten on his arm.

When she spoke, her voice was strained. 'Mort, some of them are so *small*.'

I KNOW.

Her grip relaxed, very gently, like someone putting the top ace on a house of cards and taking their hand away gingerly so as not to bring the whole edifice down.

'Say that again?' she said quietly.

'I said I know. There's nothing I can do about it. Haven't you been in here before?'

'No.' She had withdrawn slightly, and was staring at his eyes.

'It's no worse than the library,' said Mort, and almost believed it. But in the library you only read about it; in here you could see it happening.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' he added.

'I was just trying to remember what colour your eyes were,' she said, 'because —'

'If you two have quite had enough of each other!' bellowed Albert above the roar of the sand. 'This way!'

'Brown,' said Mort to Ysabell. 'They're brown. Why?'

'Hurry up!'

'You'd better go and help him,' said Ysabell. 'He seems to be getting quite upset.'

Mort left her, his mind a sudden swamp of uneasiness, and stalked across the tiled floor to where Albert stood impatiently tapping a foot.

'What do I have to do?' he said.

'Just follow me.'

The room opened out into a series of passages, each one lined with the hourglasses. Here and there the shelves were divided by stone pillars inscribed with angular markings. Albert glanced at them occasionally; mainly he strode through the maze of sand as though he knew every turn by heart.

'Is there one glass for everyone, Albert?'

'Yes.'

'This place doesn't look big enough.'

'Do you know anything about m-dimensional topography?'

'Um. No.'

Then I shouldn't aspire to hold any opinions, if I was you,' said Albert.

He paused in front of a shelf of glasses, glanced at the paper again, ran his hand along the row and suddenly snatched up a glass. The top bulb was almost empty.

'Hold this,' he said. 'If this is right, then the other should be somewhere near. Ah. Here.'

Mort turned the two glasses around in his hands. One had all the markings of an important life, while the other one was squat and quite unremarkable.

Mort read the names. The first seemed to refer to a nobleman in the Agatean Empire regions. The second was a collection of pictograms that he recognised as originating in Turnwise Klatch.

'Over to you,' Albert sneered. The sooner you get started, the sooner you'll be finished. I'll bring Binky round to the front door.'

'Do my eyes look all right to you?' said Mort, anxiously.

'Nothing wrong with them that I can see,' said Albert. 'Bit red round the edges, bit bluer than usual, nothing special.'

Mort followed him back past the long shelves of glass, looking thoughtful. Ysabell watched him take the sword from the rack by the door and test its edge by swishing it through the air, just as Death did, and grinning mirthlessly at the satisfactory sound of the thunderclap.

She recognised the walk. He was *stalking*.

'Mort?' she whispered.

YES?

'Something's happening to you.'

I KNOW, said Mort. 'But I think I can control it.'

They heard the sound of hooves outside, and Albert pushed the door open and came in rubbing his hands.

'Right, lad, no time to —'

Mort swung the sword at arm's length. It scythed through the air with a noise like ripping silk and buried itself in the doorpost by Albert's ear.

ON YOUR KNEES, ALBERTO MALICH.

Albert's mouth dropped open. His eyes rolled sideways to the shimmering blade a few inches from his head, and then narrowed to tight little lines.

'You surely wouldn't dare, boy,' he said.

MORT. The syllable snapped out as fast as a whiplash and twice as vicious.

There was a pact,' said Albert, but there was the barest gnat-song of doubt in his voice. There was an agreement.'

'Not with me.'

There was an agreement! Where would we be if we could not honour an agreement?'

'I don't know where I would be,' said Mort softly.

BUT I KNOW WHERE YOU WOULD GO. That's not fair!' Now it was a whine. THERE'S NO JUSTICE. THERE'S JUST ME.

'Stop it,' said Ysabell. 'Mort, you're being silly. You can't kill anyone here. Anyway, you don't really want to kill Albert.'

'Not here. But I could send him back to the world.'

Albert went pale.

'You wouldn't!'

'No? I can take you back and leave you there. I shouldn't think you've got much time left, have you?' HAVE YOU?

'Don't talk like that,' said Albert, quite failing to meet his gaze. 'You sound like the master when you talk like that.'

'I could be a lot worse than the master,' said Mort evenly. 'Ysabell, go and get Albert's book, will you?'

'Mort, I really think you're —'

SHALL I ASK YOU AGAIN?

She fled from the room, white-faced.

Albert squinted at Mort along the length of the sword, and smiled a lop-sided, humourless smile.

'You won't be able to control it forever,' he said.

'I don't want to. I just want to control it for long enough.'

'You're receptive now, see? The longer the master is away, the more you'll become just like him. Only it'll be worse, because you'll remember all about being human and —'

'What about you, then?' snapped Mort. 'What can you remember about being human? If you went back, how much life have you got left?'

'Ninety-one days, three hours and five minutes,' said Albert promptly. 'I knew he was on my trail, see? But I'm safe here and he's not such a bad master. Sometimes I don't know what he'd do without me.'

'Yes, no-one dies in Death's own kingdom. And you're pleased with that?' said Mort.

'I'm more than two thousand years old, I am. I've lived longer than anyone in the world.'

Mort shook his head.

'You haven't, you know,' he said. 'You've just stretched things out more. No-one really lives here. The time in this place is just a sham. It's not real. Nothing changes. I'd rather die and see what happens next than spend eternity here.'

Albert pinched his nose reflectively. 'Yes, well, you might,' he conceded, 'but I was a wizard, you know. I was pretty good at it. They put up a statue to me, you know. But you don't live a long life as a wizard without making a few enemies, see, ones who'll . . . wait on the Other Side.'

He sniffed. They ain't all got two legs, either. Some of them ain't got legs at all. Or faces. Death don't frighten me. It's what comes after.'

'Help me, then.'

'What good will that do me?'

'One day you might need some friends on the Other Side,' said Mort. He thought for a few seconds and added, 'If I were you, it wouldn't do any harm to give my soul a bit of a last-minute polish. Some of those waiting for you might not like the taste of that.'

Albert shuddered and shut his eyes.

'You don't know about that what you talk about,' he added, with more feeling than grammar, 'else you wouldn't say that. What do you want from me?'

Mort told him.

Albert cackled.

'Just that? Just change Reality? You can't. There isn't any magic strong enough any more. The Great Spells could of done it. Nothing else. And that's it, so you might as well do as you please and the best of luck to you.'

Ysabell came back, a little out of breath, clutching the latest volume of Albert's life. Albert sniffed again. The tiny drip on the end of his nose fascinated Mort. It was always on the point of dropping off but never had the courage. Just like him, he thought.

'You can't do anything to me with the book,' said the old wizard warily.

'I don't intend to. But it strikes me that you don't get to be a powerful wizard by telling the truth all the time. Ysabell, read out what's being written.'

' "Albert looked at him uncertainly",' Ysabell read.

'You can't believe everything writ down there —'

'— "he burst out, knowing in the flinty pit of his heart that Mort certainly could",' Ysabell read.

'Stop it!'

' "he shouted, trying to put at the back of his mind the knowledge that even if Reality could not be stopped it might be possible to slow it down a little".'

HOW?

' "intoned Mort in the leaden tones of Death",' began Ysabell dutifully.

'Yes, yes, all right, you needn't bother with my bit,' snapped Mort irritably.

'Pardon me for living, I'm sure.'

NO-ONE GETS PARDONED FOR LIVING.

'And don't talk like that to me, thank you. It doesn't frighten me,' she said. She glanced down at the book, where the moving line of writing was calling her a liar.

Tell me how, wizard,' said Mort.

'My magic's all I've got left!' wailed Albert.

'You don't need it, you old miser.'

'You don't frighten me, boy —'

LOOK INTO MY FACE AND TELL ME THAT.

Mort snapped his fingers imperiously. Ysabell bent her head over the book again.

' "Albert looked into the blue glow of those eyes and the last of his defiance drained away",' she read, ' "for he saw not just Death but Death with all the human seasonings of vengeance and cruelty and distaste, and with a terrible certainty he knew that this was the last chance and Mort would send him back into Time and hunt him down and take him and deliver him bodily into the dark Dungeon Dimensions where creatures of horror would dot dot dot dot dot",' she finished. 'It's just dots for half a page.'

That's because the book daren't even mention them,' whispered Albert. He tried to shut his eyes but the pictures in the darkness behind his eyelids were so vivid that he opened them again. Even Mort was better than that.

'All right,' he said. There is one spell. It slows down time over a little area. I'll write it down, but you'll have to find a wizard to say it.'

'I can do that.'

Albert ran a tongue like an old loofah over his dry lips.

There is a price, though,' he added. 'You must complete the Duty first.'

'Ysabell?' said Mort. She looked at the page in front of her.

'He means it,' she said. 'If you don't then everything will go wrong and he'll drop back into Time anyway.'

All three of them turned to look at the great clock that dominated the hallway. Its pendulum blade sawed slowly through the air, cutting time into little pieces.

Mort groaned.

'There isn't enough time!' he groaned. 'I can't do both of them in time!'

'The master would have found time,' observed Albert.

Mort wrenched the blade from the doorway and shook it furiously but ineffectually towards Albert, who flinched.

'Write down the spell, then,' he shouted. 'And do it fast!'

He turned on his heel and stalked back into Death's study. There was a large disc of the world in one corner, complete down to solid silver elephants standing on the back of a Great A'Tuin cast in bronze and more than a metre long. The great rivers were represented by veins of jade, the deserts by powdered diamond and the most notable cities were picked out in precious stones; Ankh-Morpork, for instance, was a carbuncle.

He plonked the two glasses down at the approximate locations of their owners and flopped down in Death's chair, glaring at them, willing them to be closer together. The chair squeaked gently as he swivelled from side to side, glowering at the little disc.

After a while Ysabell came in, treading softly.

'Albert's written it down,' she said quietly, 'I've checked the book. It isn't a trick. He's gone and locked himself in his room now and —'

'Look at these two! I mean, will you look at them!'

'I think you should calm down a bit, Mort.'

'How can I calm down with, look, this one over here almost in the Great Nef, and *this* one right in Bes Pelargic and then I've got to get back to Sto Lat. That's a ten thousand mile round trip however you look at it. It can't be done.'

'I'm sure you'll find a way. And I'll help.'

He looked at her for the first time and saw she was wearing her outdoor coat, the unsuitable one with the big fur collar.

'You? What could you do?'

'Binky can easily carry two,' said Ysabell meekly. She waved a paper package vaguely. 'I've packed us something to eat. I could – hold open doors and things.'

Mort laughed mirthlessly. THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY.

'I wish you'd stop talking like that.'

'I can't take passengers. You'll slow me down.'

Ysabell sighed. 'Look, how about this? Let's pretend we've had the row and I've won. See? It saves a lot of effort. I actually think you might find Binky rather reluctant to go if I'm not there. I've fed him an awful lot of sugar lumps over the years. Now – are we going?'

Albert sat on his narrow bed, glowering at the wall. He heard the sound of hoofbeats, abruptly cut off as Binky got airborne, and muttered under his breath.

Twenty minutes passed. Expressions flitted across the old wizard's face like cloud shadows across a hillside. Occasionally he'd whisper something to himself, like 'I told 'em' or 'Never would of stood for it' or The master ought to be tole'.

Eventually he seemed to reach an agreement with himself, knelt down gingerly and pulled a battered trunk from under his bed. He opened it with difficulty and unfolded a dusty grey robe that scattered mothballs and tarnished sequins across the floor. He pulled it on, brushed off the worst of the dust, and crawled under the bed again. There was a lot of muffled cursing and the occasional clink of china and finally Albert emerged holding a staff taller than he was.

It was thicker than any normal staff, mainly because of the carvings that covered it from top to bottom. They were actually quite indistinct, but gave the impression that if you could see them better you would regret it.

Albert brushed himself down again and examined himself critically in the washstand mirror.

Then he said, 'Hat. No hat. Got to have a hat for the wizarding. Damn.'

He stamped out of the room and returned after a busy fifteen minutes which included a circular hole cut out of the carpet in Mort's bedroom, the silver paper taken out from behind the mirror in Ysabell's room, a needle and thread from the box under the sink in the kitchen and a few loose sequins scraped up from the bottom of the robe chest. The end result was not as good as he would have liked and tended to slip rakishly over one eye, but it was black and had stars and moons on it and proclaimed its owner to be, without any doubt, a wizard, although possibly a desperate one.

He felt properly dressed for the first time in two thousand years. It was a disconcerting feeling and caused him a second's reflection before he kicked aside the rag rug beside the bed and used the staff to draw a circle on the floor.

When the tip of the staff passed it left a line of glowing octarine, the eighth colour of the spectrum, the colour of magic, the pigment of the imagination.

He marked eight points on its circumference and joined them up to form an octogram. A low throbbing began to fill the room.

Alberto Malich stepped into the centre and held the staff above his head. He felt it wake to his grip, felt the tingle of the sleeping power unfold itself slowly and deliberately, like a waking tiger. It triggered old memories of power and magic that buzzed through the cobwebbed attics of his mind. He felt alive for the first time in centuries.

He licked his lips. The throbbing had died away, leaving a strange, waiting kind of silence.

Malich raised his head and shouted one single syllable.

Blue-green fire flashed from both ends of the staff. Streams of octarine flame spouted from the eight pouits of the octogram and enveloped the wizard. All this wasn't actually necessary to accomplish the spell, but wizards consider appearances are very important. . . .

So are disappearances. He vanished.

Stratohemispheric winds whipped at Mort's cloak.

'Where are we going first?' yelled Ysabell in his ear.

'Bes Pelargic!' shouted Mort, the gale whirling his words away.

'Where's that?'

'Agatean Empire! Counterweight Continent!'

He pointed downward.

He wasn't forcing Binky at the moment, knowing the miles that lay ahead, and the big white horse was currently running at an easy gallop out over the ocean. Ysabell looked down at roaring green waves topped with white foam, and clung tighter to Mort.

Mort peered ahead at the cloudbank that marked the distant continent and resisted the urge to hurry Binky along with the flat of his sword. He'd never struck the horse and wasn't at all confident about what would happen if he did. All he could do was wait.

A hand appeared under his arm, holding a sandwich.

'There's ham or cheese and chutney,' she said. 'You might as well eat, there's nothing else to do.'

Mort looked down at the soggy triangle and tried to remember when he last had a meal. Some time beyond the reach of a clock, anyway – he'd need a calendar to calculate it. He took the sandwich.

'Thanks,' he said, as graciously as he could manage.

The tiny sun rolled down towards the horizon, towing its lazy daylight behind it. The clouds ahead grew, and became outlined in pink and orange. After a while he could make out the darker blur of land below them, with here and there the lights of a city.

Half an hour later he was sure he could see individual buildings. Agatean architecture inclined towards squat pyramids.

Binky lost height until his hooves were barely a few feet above the sea. Mort examined the hourglass again, and gently tugged on the reins to direct the horse towards a seaport a little Rimwards of their present course.

There were a few ships at anchor, mostly single-sailed coastal traders. The Empire didn't encourage its subjects to go far away, in case they saw things that might disturb them. For the same reason it had built a wall around the entire country, patrolled by the Heavenly Guard whose main function was to tread heavily on the fingers of any inhabitants who felt they might like to step outside for five minutes for a breath of fresh air.

This didn't happen often, because most of the subjects of the Sun Emperor were quite happy to live inside the Wall. It's a fact of life that everyone is on one side or other of a wall, so the only thing to do is forget about it or evolve stronger fingers.

'Who runs this place?' said Ysabell, as they passed over the harbour.

'There's some kind of boy emperor,' said Mort. 'But the top man is really the Grand Vizier, I think.'

'Never trust a Grand Vizier,' said Ysabell wisely.

In fact the Sun Emperor didn't. The Vizier, whose name was Nine Turning Mirrors, had some very clear views about who should run the country, e.g., that it should be him, and now the boy was getting big enough to ask questions like 'Don't you think the wall would

look better with a few gates in it?' and 'Yes, but what is it like on the other side?' he had decided that in the Emperor's own best interests he should be painfully poisoned and buried in quicklime.

Binky landed on the raked gravel outside the low, many-roomed palace, severely rearranging the harmony of the universe.[8] Mort slid off his back and helped Ysabell down.

'Just don't get in the way, will you?' he said urgently. 'And don't ask questions either.'

He ran up some lacquered steps and hurried through the silent rooms, pausing occasionally to take his bearings from the hourglass. At last he sidled down a corridor and peered through an ornate lattice into a long low room where the Court was at its evening meal.

The young Sun Emperor was sitting crosslegged at the head of the mat with his cloak of vermine and feathers spread out behind him. He looked as though he was outgrowing it. The rest of the Court was sitting around the mat in strict and complicated order of precedence, but there was no mistaking the Vizier, who was tucking into his bowl of *squishi* and boiled seaweed in a highly suspicious fashion. No-one seemed to be about to die.

Mort padded along the passage, turned the corner and nearly walked into several large members of the Heavenly Guard, who were clustered around a spyhole in the paper wall and passing a cigarette from hand to hand in that palm-cupped way of soldiers on duty.

He tiptoed back to the lattice and overheard the conversation thus:

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[8] The stone garden of Universal Peace and Simplicity, laid out to the orders of the old Emperor One Sun Mirror*, used economy of position and shadow to symbolise the basic unity of soul and matter and the harmony of all things. It was said the secrets at the very heart of reality lay hidden in the precise ordering of its stones.

'I am the most unfortunate of mortals, O Immanent Presence, to find such as this in my otherwise satisfactory *squishi*,' said the Vizier, extending his chopsticks.

The Court craned to see. So did Mort. Mort couldn't help agreeing with the statement, though – the thing was a sort of blue-green lump with rubbery tubes dangling from it.

The preparer of food will be disciplined, Noble Personage of Scholarship,' said the Emperor. 'Who got the spare ribs?'

'No, O Perceptive Father of Your People, I was rather referring to the fact that this is, I believe, the bladder and spleen of the deepwater puff eel, allegedly the most tasty of morsels to the extent that it may be eaten only by those beloved of the gods themselves or so it is written, among such company of course I do not include my miserable self.'

With a deft flick he transported it to the bowl of the Emperor, where it wobbled to a standstill. The boy looked at it for some time, and then skewered it on a chopstick.

'Ah,' he said, 'but is it not also written by none other than the great philosopher Ly Tin Wheedle that a scholar may be ranked above princes? I seem to remember you giving me the passage to read once, O Faithful and Assiduous Seeker of Knowledge.'

The thing followed another brief arc through the air and flopped apologetically into the Vizier's bowl. He scooped it up in a quick movement and poised it for a second service. His eyes narrowed.

'Such may be generally the case, O Jade River of Wisdom, but specifically I cannot be ranked above the Emperor whom I love as my own son and have done ever since his late father's unfortunate death, and thus I lay this small offering at your feet.'

The eyes of the court followed the wretched organ on its third flight across the mat, but the Emperor snatched up his fan and brought off a magnificent volley that ended back in the Vizier's bowl with such force that it sent up a spray of seaweed.

'*Somebody* eat it, for heaven's sake,' shouted Mort, totally unheard. 'I'm in a hurry!'

Thou art indeed the most thoughtful of servants, 0 Devoted and Indeed Only Companion of My Late Father and Grandfather When They Passed Over, and therefore I decree that your reward shall be this most rare and exquisite of morsels.'

The Vizier prodded the thing uncertainly, and looked into the Emperor's smile. It was bright and terrible. He fumbled for an excuse.

'Alas, it would seem that I have already eaten far too much —' he began, but the Emperor waved him into silence.

'Doubtless it requires a suitable seasoning,' he said, and clapped his hands. The wall behind him ripped from top to bottom and four Heavenly Guards stepped through, three of them brandishing *cando* swords and the fourth trying hurriedly to swallow a lighted dog-end.

The Vizier's bowl dropped from his hands.

'My most faithful of servants believes he has no space left for this final mouthful,' said the Emperor. 'Doubtless you can investigate his stomach to see if this is true. Why has that man got smoke coming out of his ears?'

'Anxious for action, O Sky Eminence,' said the sergeant quickly. 'No stopping him, I'm afraid.'

Then let him take his knife and – oh, the Vizier seems to be hungry after all. Well done.'

There was absolute silence while the Vizier's cheeks bulged rhythmically. Then he gulped.

'Delicious,' he said. 'Superb. Truly the food of the gods, and now, if you will excuse me —' He unfolded his legs and made as if to stand up. Little beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead.

'You wish to depart?' said the Emperor, raising his eyebrows.

'Pressing matters of state, O Perspicacious Personage of —'

'Be seated. Rising so soon after meals can be bad for the digestion,' said the Emperor, and the guards nodded agreement. 'Besides, there are no urgent matters of state unless you refer to those in the small red bottle marked "Antidote" in the black lacquered cabinet on the bamboo rug in your quarters, O Lamp of Midnight Oil.'

There was a ringing in the Vizier's ears. His face began to go blue.

'You see?' said the Emperor. 'Untimely activity on a heavy stomach is conducive to ill humours. May this message go swiftly to all corners of my country, that all men may know of your unfortunate condition and derive instruction thereby.'

'I . . . must . . . congratulate your . . . Personage on such . . . consideration,' said the Vizier, and fell forward into a dish of boiled soft-shelled crabs.

'I had an *excellent* teacher,' said the Emperor.

ABOUT TIME, TOO, said Mort, and swung the sword.

A moment later the soul of the Vizier got up from the mat and looked Mort up and down.

'Who are you, barbarian?' he snapped.

DEATH.

'Not my Death,'said the Vizier firmly. 'Where's the Black Celestial Dragon of Fire?'

HE COULDN'T COME, said Mort. There were shadows forming in the air behind the Vizier's soul. Several of them wore emperor's robes, but there were plenty of others jostling them, and they all looked most anxious to welcome the newcomer to the lands of the dead.

'I think there's some people here to see you,' said Mort, and hurried away. As he reached the passageway the Vizier's soul started to scream. . . .

Ysabell was standing patiently by Binky, who was making a late lunch of a five-hundred-year-old bonsai tree.

'One down,' said Mort, climbing into the saddle. 'Come on. I've got a bad feeling about the next one, and we haven't much time.'

Albert materialised in the centre of Unseen University, in the same place, in fact, from which he had departed the world some two thousand years before.

He grunted with satisfaction and brushed a few specks of dust off his robe.

He became aware that he was being watched; on looking up, he discovered that he had flashed into existence under the stern marble gaze of himself.

He adjusted his spectacles and peered disapprovingly at the bronze plaque screwed to his pedestal. It said:

'Alberto Malich, Founder of This University. AM 1,222-1,289. "We Will Not See His Like Again".'

So much for prediction, he thought. And if they thought so much of him they could at least have hired a decent sculptor. It was disgraceful. The nose was all wrong. Call that a leg? People had been carving their names on it, too. He wouldn't be seen dead in a hat like that, either. Of course, if he could help it, he wouldn't be seen dead at all.

Albert aimed an octarine thunderbolt at the ghastly thing and grinned evilly as it exploded into dust.

'Right,' he said to the Disc at large, 'I'm back.' The tingle from the magic coursed all the way up his arm and started a warm glow in his mind. How he'd missed it, all these years.

Wizards came hurrying through the big double doors at the sound of the explosion and cleared the wrong conclusion from a standing start.

There was the pedestal, empty. There was a cloud of marble dust over everything. And striding out of it, muttering to himself, was Albert.

The wizards at the back of the crowd started to have it away as quickly and quietly as possible. There wasn't one of them that hadn't, at some time in his jolly youth, put a common bedroom utensil on old Albert's head or carved his name somewhere on the statue's chilly anatomy, or spilled beer on the pedestal. Worse than that, too, during Rag Week when the drink flowed quickly and the privy seemed too far to stagger. These had all seemed hilarious ideas at the time. They suddenly didn't, now.

Only two figures remained to face the statue's wrath, one because he had got his robe caught in the door and the other because he was, in fact, an ape and could therefore take a relaxed attitude to human affairs.

Albert grabbed the wizard, who was trying desperately to walk into the wall. The man squealed.

'All right, all right, I admit it! I was drunk at the time, believe me, didn't mean it, gosh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry —'

'What are you bleating about, man?' said Albert, genuinely puzzled.

'— so sorry, if I tried to tell you how sorry I am we'd —'

'Stop this bloody nonsense!' Albert glanced down at the little ape, who gave him a warm friendly smile. 'What's your name, man?'

'Yes, sir, I'll stop, sir, right away, no more nonsense, sir . . . Rincewind, sir. Assistant librarian, if it's all right by you.'

Albert looked him up and down. The man had a desperate scuffed look, like something left out for the laundry. He decided that if this was what wizarding had come to, someone ought to do something about it.

'What sort of librarian would have you for assistant?' he demanded irritably.

'Oook.'

Something like awarm soft leather glove tried to hold his hand.

'A monkey! In my university!'

'Orang-outang, sir. He used to be a wizard but got caught in some magic, sir, now he won't let us turn him back, and he's the only one who knows where all the books are,' said Rincewind urgently. 'I look after his bananas,' he added, feeling some additional explanation was called for.

Albert glared at him. 'Shut up.'

'Shutting up right away, sir.'

'And tell me where Death is.'

'Death, sir?' said Rincewind, backing against the wall.

Tall, skeletal, blue eyes, stalks, TALKS LIKE THIS . . . Death. Seen him lately?'

Rincewind swallowed. 'Not lately, sir.'

'Well, I want him. This nonsense has got to stop. I'm going to stop it *now*, see? I want the eight most senior wizards assembled *here*, right, in half an hour with all the necessary equipment to perform the Rite of AshkEnte, is that understood? Not that the sight of you lot gives me any confidence. Bunch of pantywaisters the lot of you, and stop trying to hold my hand!'

'Oook.'

'And now I'm going to the pub,' snapped Albert. 'Do they sell any halfway decent cat's piss anywhere these days?'

There's the Drum, sir,' said Rincewind.

'The Broken Drum? In Filigree Street? Still there?'

'Well, they change the name sometimes and rebuild it completely but the site has been, er, on the site for years. I expect you're pretty dry, eh, sir?' Rincewind said, with an air of ghastly camaraderie.

'What would you know about it?' said Albert sharply.

'Absolutely nothing, sir,' said Rincewind promptly.

'I'm going to the Drum, then. Half an hour, mind. And if they're not waiting for me when I come back, then well, they'd just better be!'

He stormed out of the hall in a cloud of marble dust.

Rincewind watched him go. The librarian held his hand.

'You know the worst of it?' said Rincewind.

'Oook?'

'I don't even *remember* walking under a mirror.'

At about the time Albert was in The Mended Drum arguing with the landlord over a yellowing bar tab that had been handed down carefully from father to son through one regicide, three civil wars, sixty-one major fires, four hundred and ninety robberies and more than fifteen thousand barroom brawls to record the fact that Alberto Malich still owed the management three copper pieces plus interest currently standing at the contents of most of the Disc's larger strongrooms, which proved once again that an Ankhian

merchant with an unpaid bill has the kind of memory that would make an elephant blink . . . at about this time, Binky was leaving a vapour trail in skies above the great mysterious continent of Klatch.

Far below drums sounded in the scented, shadowy jungles and columns of curling mist rose from hidden rivers where nameless beasts lurked under the surface and waited for supper to walk past.

'There's no more cheese, you'll have to have the ham,' said Ysabell. 'What's that light over there?'

The Light Dams,' said Mort. 'We're getting closer.' He pulled the hourglass out of his pocket and checked the level of the sand.

'But not close enough, dammit!'

The Light Dams lay like pools of light hubwards of their course, which is exactly what they were; some of the tribes constructed mirror walls in the desert mountains to collect the Disc sunlight, which is slow and slightly heavy. It was used as currency.

Binky glided over the campfires of the nomads and the silent marshes of the Tsort river. Ahead of them dark, familiar shapes began to reveal themselves in the moonlight.

The Pyramids of Tsort by moonlight!' breathed Ysabell, 'How romantic!'

MORTARED WITH THE BLOOD OF THOUSANDS OF SLAVES, observed Mort.

'Please don't.'

'I'm sorry, but the practical fact of the matter is that these —'

'All right, all right, you've made your point,' said Ysabell irritably.

'It's a lot of effort to go to to bury a dead king,' said Mort, as they circled above one of the smaller pyramids. They fill them full of preservative, you know, so they'll survive into the next world.'

'Does it work?'

'Not noticeably.' Mort leaned over Binky's neck. 'Torches down there,' he said. 'Hang On.'

A procession was winding away from the avenue of pyramids, led by a giant statue of Offler the Crocodile God borne by a hundred sweating slaves. Binky cantered above it, entirely unnoticed, and performed a perfect four-point landing on the hard-packed sand outside the pyramid's entrance.

'They've pickled another king,' said Mort. He examined the glass again in the moonlight. It was quite plain, not the sort normally associated with royalty.

That can't be him,' said Ysabell. They don't pickle them when they're still alive, do they?'

'I hope not, because I read where, before they do the preserving, they, um, cut them open and remove —'

'I don't want to hear it —'

'— all the soft bits,' Mort concluded lamely. 'It's just as well the pickling doesn't work, really, just imagine having to walk around with no —'

'So it isn't the king you've come to take,' said Ysabell loudly. 'Who is it, then?'

Mort turned towards the dark entrance. It wouldn't be sealed until dawn, to give time for the dead king's soul to leave. It looked deep and foreboding, hinting at purposes considerably more dire than, say, keeping a razor blade nice and sharp.

'Let's find out,' he said.

'Look out! He's coming back!'

The University's eight most senior wizards shuffled into line, tried to smooth out their beards and in general made an unsuccessful effort to look presentable. It wasn't easy. They had been snatched from their workrooms, or a postprandial brandy in front of a roaring fire, or quiet contemplation under a handkerchief in a comfy chair somewhere, and all of them were feeling extremely apprehensive and rather bewildered. They kept glancing at the empty pedestal.

Only one creature could have duplicated the expressions on their faces, and that would be a pigeon who has heard not only that Lord Nelson has got down off his column but has also been seen buying a 12-bore repeater and a box of cartridges.

'He's coming up the corridor!' shouted Rincewind, and dived behind a pillar.

The assembled mages watched the big double doors as if they were about to explode, which shows how prescient they were, because they exploded. Matchstick-sized bits of oak rained down among them and a small thin figure stood outlined against the light. It held a smoking staff in one hand. The other held a small yellow toad.

'Rincewind!' bawled Albert.

'Sir!'

'Take this thing away and dispose of it.'

The toad crawled into Rincewind's hand and gave him an apologetic look.

That's the last time that bloody landlord gives any lip to a wizard,' said Albert with smug satisfaction. 'It seems I turn my back for a few hundred years and suddenly people in this town are encouraged to think they can talk back to wizards, eh?'

One of the senior wizards mumbled something.

'What was that? Speak up, that man!'

'As the bursar of this university I must say that we've always encouraged a good neighbour policy with respect to the community,' mumbled the wizard, trying to avoid Albert's gimlet stare. He had an upturned chamber pot on his conscience, with three cases of obscene graffiti to be taken into consideration.

Albert let his mouth drop open. 'Why?' he said.

'Well, er, a sense of civic duty, we feel it's vitally important that we show an examp— arrgh!'

The wizard tried desperately to beat out the flames in his beard. Albert lowered his staff and looked slowly along the row of mages. They swayed away from his stare like grass in a gale.

'Anyone else want to show a sense of civic duty?' he said. 'Good neighbours, anybody?' He drew himself up to his full height. 'You spineless maggots! I didn't found this University so you could lend people the bloody lawnmower! What's the use of having the

power if you don't wield it? Man doesn't show you respect, you don't leave enough of his damn inn to roast chestnuts on, understand?'

Something like a soft sigh went up from the assembled wizards. They stared sadly at the toad in Rincewind's hand. Most of them, in the days of their youth, had mastered the art of getting rascally drunk at the Drum. Of course, all that was behind them now, but the Guild of Merchants' annual knife-and-fork supper would have been held in the Drum's upstairs room the following evening, and all the Eighth Level wizards had been sent complimentary tickets; there would have been roast swan and two kinds of trifle and lots of fraternal toasts to 'Our esteemed, nay, distinguished guests' until it was time for the college porters to turn up with the wheelbarrows.

Albert strutted along the row, poking the occasional paunch with his staff. His mind danced and sang. Go back? Never! This was power, this was living; he'd challenge old boniface and spit in his empty eye.

'By the Smoking Mirror of Grism, there's going to be a few changes around here!'

Those wizards who had studied history nodded uncomfortably. It would be back to the stone floors and getting up when it was still dark and no alcohol under any circumstances and memorising the true names of everything until the brain squeaked.

'*What's that man doing!*'

A wizard who had absent-mindedly reached for his tobacco pouch let the half-formed cigarette fall from his trembling fingers. It bounced when it hit the floor and all the wizards watched it roll with longing eyes until Albert stepped forward smartly and squashed it.

Albert spun round. Rincewind, who had been following him as a sort of unofficial adjutant, nearly walked into him.

'You! Rincething! D'yer smoke?'

'No, sir! Filthy habit!' Rincewind avoided the gaze of his superiors. He was suddenly aware that he had made some lifelong enemies, and it was no consolation to know that he probably wouldn't have them for very long.

'Right! Hold my staff. Now, you bunch of miserable back-sliders, this is going to stop, d'yer hear? First thing tomorrow, up at dawn, three times round the quadrangle and back here for physical jerks! Balanced meals! Study! Healthy exercise! And that bloody monkey goes to a circus, first thing!'

'Oook?'

Several of the older wizards shut their eyes.

'But first,' said Albert, lowering his voice, 'you'll oblige me by setting up the Rite of AshkEnte.'

'I have some unfinished business,' he added.

Mort strode through the cat-black corridors of the pyramid, with Ysabell hurrying along behind him. The faint glow from his sword illuminated unpleasant things; Offler the Crocodile God was a cosmetics advert compared to some of the things the people of Tsort worshipped. In alcoves along the way were statues of creatures apparently built of all the bits God had left over.

'What are they here for?' whispered Ysabell.

'The Tsortean priests say they come alive when the pyramid is sealed and prowl the corridors to protect the body of the king from tomb robbers,' said Mort.

'What a horrible superstition.'

'Who said anything about superstition?' said Mort absently.

'They really come alive?'

'All I'll say is that when the Tsorteans put a curse on a place, they don't mess about.'

Mort turned a corner and Ysabell lost sight of him for a heart-stopping moment. She scurried through the darkness and cannoned into him. He was examining a dog-headed bird.

'Urgh,' she said. 'Doesn't it send shivers up your spine?'

'No,' said Mort flatly.

'Why not?'

BECAUSE I AM MORT. He turned, and she saw his eyes glow like blue pinpoints.

'Stop it!'

I – CAN'T.

She tried to laugh. It didn't work. 'You're not Death,' she said. 'You're only doing his job.' DEATH is WHOEVER DOES DEATH'S JOB. The shocked pause that followed this was broken by a groan from further along the dark passage. Mort turned on his heel and hurried towards it.

He's right, thought Ysabell. Even the way he moves. . . .

But the fear of the darkness that the light was dragging towards her overcame any other doubts and she crept after him, around another corner and into what appeared, in the fitful glow from the sword, to be a cross between a treasury and a very cluttered attic.

'What's this place?' she whispered. 'I've never seen so much stuff!'

THE KING TAKES IT WITH HIM INTO THE NEXT WORLD, said Mort.

'He certainly doesn't believe in travelling light. Look, there's a whole boat. And a gold bathtub!'

DOUBTLESS HE WILL WISH TO KEEP CLEAN WHEN HE GETS THERE.

'And all those statues!'

THOSE STATUES, I'M SORRY TO SAY, WERE PEOPLE. SERVANTS FOR THE KING, YOU UNDERSTAND.

Ysabell's face set grimly.

THE PRIESTS GIVE THEM POISON.

There was another groan, from the other side of the cluttered room. Mort followed it to its source, stepping awkwardly over rolls of carpet, bunches of dates, crates of crockery and piles of gems. The long obviously hadn't been able to decide what he was going to leave behind on his journey, so had decided to play safe and take everything.

ONLY IT DOESNT ALWAYS WORK QUICKLY, Mort added sombrely.

Ysabell clambered gamely after him, and peered over a canoe at a young girl sprawled across a pile of rugs. She was wearing gauze trousers, a waistcoat cut from not enough material, and enough bangles to moor a decent-sized ship. There was a green stain around her mouth.

'Does it hurt?' said Ysabell quietly.

No. THEY THINK IT TAKES THEM TO PARADISE.

'Does it?'

MAYBE. WHO KNOWS? Mort took the hourglass out of an inner pocket and inspected it by the gleam of the sword. He seemed to be counting to himself, and then with a sudden movement tossed the glass over his shoulder and brought the sword down with his other hand.

The girl's shade sat up and stretched, with a clink of ghostly jewellery. She caught sight of Mort, and bowed her head.

'My lord!'

NO-ONE'S LORD, said Mort. NOW RUN ALONG TO WHEREVER YOU BELIEVE YOU'RE GOING.

'I shall be a concubine at the heavenly court of King Zetesphut, who will dwell among the stars forever,' she said firmly.

'You don't have to be,' said Ysabell sharply. The girl turned to her, wide-eyed.

'Oh, but I must. I've been training for it,' she said, as she faded from view. 'I've only managed to be a handmaiden up till now.'

She vanished. Ysabell stared with dark disapproval at the space she had occupied.

'Well!' she said, and, 'Did you see what she had on?'

LET'S GET OUT OF HERE.

'But it can't be true about King Whosis dwelling among the stars,' she grumbled as they found their way out of the crowded room. 'There's nothing but empty space up there.'

IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN, said Mort. HE'LL DWELL AMONG THE STARS IN HIS OWN MIND.

'With slaves?'

IF THAT'S WHAT THEY THINK THEY ARE.

That's not very fair.'

THERE'S NO JUSTICE, said Mort. JUST us.

They hurried back along the avenues of waiting ghouls and were nearly running when they burst out into the desert night air. Ysabell leaned against the rough stonework and panted for breath.

Mort wasn't out of breath.

He wasn't breathing.

I WILL TAKE YOU WHEREVER YOU WANT, he said, AND THEN I MUST LEAVE YOU.

'But I thought you wanted to rescue the princess!'

Mort shook his head.

I HAVE NO CHOICE. THERE ARE NO CHOICES.

She ran forward and grabbed his arm as he turned towards the waiting Binky. He removed her hand gently.

I HAVE FINISHED MY APPRENTICESHIP.

'It's all in your own mind!' yelled Ysabell. 'You're whatever you think you are!'

She stopped and looked down. The sand around Mort's feet was beginning to whip up in little spurts and twirling dust devils.

There was a crackle in the air, and a greasy feel. Mort looked uneasy.

SOMEONE is PERFORMING THE RITE OF ASH —

It hit like a hammer, a force from out of the sky that blew the sand into a crater. There was a low buzzing and the smell of hot tin.

Mort looked around himself in the gale of rushing sand, turning as if in a dream, alone in the calm centre of the gale. Lightning flashed in the whirling cloud. Deep inside his own mind he struggled to break free, but something had him in its grip and he could no more resist than a compass needle can ignore the compulsion to point towards the Hub.

At last he found what he was searching for. It was a doorway edged in octarine light, leading to a short tunnel. There were figures at the other end, beckoning to him.

I COME, he said, and then turned as he heard the sudden noise behind him. Eleven stone of young womanhood hit him squarely in the chest, lifting him off the ground.

Mort landed with Ysabell kneeling on him, holding on grimly to his arms.

LET ME GO, he intoned. I HAVE BEEN SUMMONED.

'Not you, idiot!'

She stared into the blue, pupil-less pools of his eyes. It was like looking down a rushing tunnel.

Mort arched his back and screamed a curse so ancient and virulent that in the strong magical field it actually took on a form, flapped its leathery wings and slunk away. A private thunderstorm crashed around the sand dunes.

His eyes drew her again. She looked away before she dropped like a stone down a well made of blue light.

I COMMAND YOU. Mort's voice could have cut holes in rock.

'Father tried that tone on me for years,' she said calmly. 'Generally when he wanted me to clean my bedroom. It didn't work then, either.'

Mort screamed another curse, which flopped out of the air and tried to bury itself in the sand.

THE PAIN —

'It's all in your head,' she said, bracing herself against the force that wanted to drag them towards that flickering doorway. 'You're not Death. You're just Mort. You're whatever I think you are.'

In the centre of the blurred blueness of his eyes were two tiny brown dots, rising at the speed of sight.

The storm around them rose and wailed. Mort screamed.

The Rite of AshkEnte, quite simply, summons and binds Death. Students of the occult will be aware that it can be performed with a simple incantation, three small bits of wood and 4cc of mouse blood, but no wizard worth his pointy hat would dream of doing anything so unimpressive; they knew in their hearts that if a spell didn't involve big yellow candles, lots of rare incense, circles drawn on the floor with eight different colours of chalk and a few cauldrons around the place then it simply wasn't worth contemplating.

The eight wizards at their stations on the points of the great ceremonial octogram swayed and chanted, their arms held out sideways so they were just touching the fingertips of the mages on either side.

But something was going wrong. True, a mist had formed in the very centre of the living octogram, but it was writhing and turning in on itself, refusing to focus.

'More power!' shouted Albert. 'Give it more power!'

A figure appeared momentarily in the smoke, black-robed and holding a glittering sword. Albert swore as he caught a glimpse of the pale face under the cowl; it wasn't pale enough.

'No!' Albert yelled, ducking into the octogram and flailing at the flickering shape with his hands. 'Not you, not you. . . .'

And, in faraway Tsort, Ysabell forgot she was a lady, bunched her fist, narrowed her eyes and caught Mort squarely on the jaw. The world around her exploded. . . .

In the kitchen of Harga's House of Ribs the frying pan crashed to the floor, sending the cats scurrying out of the door. . . .

In the great hall of the Unseen University everything happened at once.[9]

The tremendous force the wizards had been exerting on the shadow realm suddenly had one focus. Like a reluctant cork from a bottle, like a dollop of fiery ketchup from the upturned sauce bottle of Infinity, Death landed in the octogram and swore.

Albert realised just too late that he was inside the charmed ring and made a dive for the edge. But skeletal fingers caught him by the hem of his robe.

The wizards, such of them who were still on their feet and conscious, were rather surprised to see that Death was wearing an apron and holding a small kitten.

'Why did you have' TO SPOIL IT ALL?

'Spoil it all? Have you seen what the lad has done?' snapped Albert, still trying to reach the edge of the ring.

Death raised his skull and sniffed the air.

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[9] This is not precisely true. It is generally agreed by philosophers that the shortest time in which everything can happen is one thousand billion years.

The sound cut through all the other noises in the hall and forced them into silence.

It was the kind of noise that is heard on the twilight edges of dreams, the sort that you wake from in a cold sweat of mortal horror. It was the snuffling under the door of dread. It was like the snuffling of a hedgehog, but if so then it was the kind of hedgehog that crashes out of the verges and flattens lorries. It was the kind of noise you wouldn't want to hear twice; you wouldn't want to hear it *once*.

Death straightened up slowly.

IS THIS HOW HE REPAYS MY KINDNESS? TO STEAL MY DAUGHTER, INSULT MY SERVANTS, AND RISK THE FABRIC OF REALITY ON A PERSONAL WHIM? OH, FOOLISH, FOOLISH, I HAVE BEEN FOOLISH TOO LONG!

'Master, if you would just be so good as to let go of my robe —' began Albert, and the wizard noticed a pleading edge to his voice that hadn't been there before.

Death ignored him. He snapped his fingers like a castanet and the apron around his waist exploded into brief flames. The kitten, however, he put down very carefully and gently pushed away with his foot.

DID I NOT GIVE HIM THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY?

'Exactly, master, and now if you could see your way clear —'

SKILLS? A CAREER STRUCTURE? PROSPECTS? A JOB OR LIFE?

'Indeed, and if you would but let go —'

The change in Albert's voice was complete. The trumpets of command had become the piccolos of supplication. He sounded terrified, in fact, but he Managed to catch Rincewind's eye and hiss:

'My staff! Throw me my staff! While he is in the circle he is not invincible! Let me have my staff and I can break free!'

Rincewind said: 'Pardon?'

OH, MINE IS THE FAULT FOR GIVING IN TO THESE WEAKNESSES OF WHAT FOR WANT OF A BETTER WORD I SHALL CALL THE FLESH!

'My staff, you idiot, my staff!' gibbered Albert. 'Sorry?'

WELL DONE, MY SERVANT, FOR CALLING ME TO MY SENSES. said Death. LET us LOSE NO TIME.

'My sta-!'

There was an implosion and an inrush of air.

The candle flames stretched out like lines of fire for a moment, and then went out.

Some time passed.

Then the bursar's voice from somewhere near the floor said, 'That was very unkind, Rincewind, losing his staff like that. Remind me to discipline you severely one of these days. Anyone got a light?'

'I don't know what happened to it! I just leaned it against the pillar here and now it's —'

'Oook.'

'Oh,' said Rincewind.

'Extra banana ration, that ape,' said the bursar levelly. A match flared and someone managed to get a candle alight. Wizards started to pick themselves off the floor.

'Well, that was a lesson to all of us,' the bursar continued, brushing dust and candlewax off his robe. He looked up, expecting to see the statue of Alberto Malich back on its pedestal.

'Clearly even statues have feelings,' he said. 'I myself recall, when I was but a first-year student, writing my name on his well, never mind. The point is, I propose here and now we replace the statue.'

Dead silence greeted this suggestion.

'With, say, an exact likeness cast in gold. Suitably embellished with jewels, as befits our great founder,' he went on brightly.

'And to make sure no students deface it in any way I suggest we then erect it in the deepest cellar,' he continued.

'And then lock the door,' he added. Several wizards began to cheer up.

'And throw away the key?' said Rincewind.

'And weld the door,' the bursar said. He had just remembered about The Mended Drum. He thought for a while and remembered about the physical fitness regime as well.

'And then brick up the doorway,' he said. There was a round of applause.

'And throw away the bricklayer!' chortled Rincewind, who felt he was getting the hang of this.

The bursar scowled at him. 'No need to get carried away,' he said.

In the silence a larger than usual sand dune humped up awkwardly and then fell away to reveal Binky, blowing the sand out of his nostrils and shaking his mane.

Mort opened his eyes.

There should be a word for that brief period just after waking when the mind is full of warm pink nothing. You lie there entirely empty of thought, except for a growing suspicion that heading towards you, like a sockful of damp sand in a nocturnal alleyway, are all the recollections you'd really rather do without, and which amount to the fact that the only mitigating factor in your horrible future is the certainty that it will be quite short.

Mort sat up and put his hands on top of his head to stop it unscrewing.

The sand beside him heaved and Ysabell pushed herself into a sitting position. Her hair was full of sand and her face was grimy with pyramid dust. Some of her hair had frizzled at the tips. She stared listlessly at him.

'Did you hit me?' he said, gently testing his jaw.

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

He looked at the sky, as though it could remind him about things. He had to be somewhere, soon, he recalled. Then he remembered something else.

Thank you,' he said.

'Any time, I assure you.' Ysabell made it to her feet and tried to brush the dirt and cobwebs off her dress.

'Are we going to rescue this princess of yours?' she said diffidently.

Mort's own personal, internal reality caught up with him. He shot to his feet with a strangled cry, watched blue fireworks explode in front of his eyes, and collapsed again. Ysabell caught him under the shoulders and hauled him back on his feet.

'Let's go down to the river,' she said. 'I think we could all do with a drink.'

'What happened to me?'

She shrugged as best she could while supporting his weight.

'Someone used the Rite of AshkEnte. Father hates it, he says they always summon him at inconvenient moments. The part of you that was Death went and you stayed behind. I think. At least you've got your own voice back.'

'What time is it?'

'What time did you say the priests close up the pyramid?'

Mort squinted through streaming eyes back towards the tomb of the king. Sure enough, torchlit fingers were working on the door. Soon, according to the legend, the guardians would come to life and begin their endless patrol.

He *knew* they would. He remembered the knowledge. He remembered his mind feeling as cold as ice and limitless as the night sky. He remembered being summoned into reluctant existence at the moment the first creature lived, in the certain knowledge that he would outlive life until the last being in the universe passed to its reward, when it would then be his job, figuratively speaking, to put the chairs on the tables and turn aU the lights off.

He remembered the loneliness.

'Don't leave me,' he said urgently.

'I'm here,' she said. 'For as long as you need me.'

'It's midnight,' he said dully, sinking down by the Tsort and lowering his aching head to the water. Beside him there was a noise like a bath emptying as Binky also took a drink.

'Does that mean we're too late?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do.'

There isn't.'

'At least you kept your promise to Albert.'

'Yes,' said Mort, bitterly. 'At least I did that.'

Nearly all the way from one side of the Disc to the other. . . .

There should be a word for the microscopic spark of hope that you dare not entertain in case the mere act of acknowledging it will cause it to vanish, like trying to look at a photon. You can only sidle up to it, looking past it, *walking* past it, waiting for it to get big enough to face the world.

He raised his dripping head and looked towards the sunset horizon, trying to remember the big model of the Disc in Death's study without actually letting the universe know what he was entertaining.

At times like this it can seem that eventuality is so finely balanced that merely thinking too loud can spoil everything.

He orientated himself by the thin streamers of Hublight dancing against the stars, and made an inspired guess that Sto Lat was . . . over there. . . .

'Midnight,' he said aloud.

'Gone midnight now,' said Ysabell.

Mort stood up, trying not to let the delight radiate out from him like a beacon, and grabbed Binky's harness.

'Come on,' he said. 'We haven't got much time.'

'What are you talking about?'

Mort reached down to swing her up behind him. It was a nice idea, but merely meant that he nearly pulled himself out of the saddle. She pushed him back gently and climbed up by herself. Binky skittered sideways, sensing Mort's feverish excitement, and snorted and pawed at the sand.

'I said, what are you talking about?'

Mort turned the horse to face the distant glow of the sunset.

'The speed of night,' he said.

Gutwell poked his head over the palace battlements and groaned. The interface was only a street away, clearly visible in the octarine, and he didn't have to imagine the sizzling. He could hear it – a nasty, saw-toothed buzz as random particles of possibility hit the interface and gave up their energy as noise. As it ground its way up the street the pearly wall swallowed the bunting, the torches and the waiting crowds, leaving only dark streets. Somewhere out there, Cutwell thought, I'm fast asleep in my bed and none of this has happened. Lucky me.

He ducked down, skidded down the ladder to the cobbles and legged it back to the main hall with the skirts of his robe flapping around his ankles. He slipped in through the small postern in the great door and ordered the guards to lock it, then grabbed his skirts again and pounded along a side passage so that the guests wouldn't notice him.

The hall was lit with thousands of candles and crowded with Sto Plain dignitaries, nearly all of them slightly unsure why they were there. And, of course, there was the elephant.

It was the elephant that had convinced Cutwell that he had gone off the rails of sanity, but it seemed like a good idea a few hours ago, when his exasperation at the High Priest's poor eyesight had run into the recollection that a lumber mill on the edge of town possessed said beast for the purposes of heavy haulage. It was elderly, arthritic and had an uncertain temper, but it had one important advantage as a sacrificial victim. The High Priest should be able to see it.

Half a dozen guards were gingerly trying to restrain the creature, in whose slow brain the realisation had dawned that it should be in its familiar stable, with plenty of hay and water and time to dream of the hot days on the great khaki plains of Klatch. It was getting restless.

It will shortly become apparent that another reason for its growing friskiness is the fact that, in the pre-ceremony confusion, its trunk found the ceremonial chalice containing a gallon of strong wine and drained the lot. Strange hot ideas are beginning to bubble in front of its crusted eyes, of uprooted baobabs, mating fights with other bulls, glorious stampedes through native villages and other half-remembered pleasures. Soon it will start to see pink people.

Fortunately this was unknown to Cutwell, who caught the eye of the High Priest's assistant – a forward-looking young man who had the foresight to provide himself with a long rubber apron and waders – and signalled that the ceremony should begin.

He darted back into the priest's robing room and struggled into the special ceremonial robe the palace seamstress had made up for him, digging deep into her workbasket for scraps of lace, equins and gold thread to produce a garment of uch dazzling tastelessness that even the ArchChancellor of Unseen University wouldn't have been ashamed to wear it. Cutwell allowed himself five seconds to admire himself in the mirror before ramming the pointy hat on his head and running back to the door, stopping just in time to emerge at a sedate pace as befitted a person of substance.

He reached the High Priest as Keli started her advance up the central aisle, flanked by maidservants who fussed around her like tugs around a liner.

Despite the drawbacks of the hereditary dress, Cutwell thought she looked beautiful. There was something about her that made him —

He gritted his teeth and tried to concentrate on the security arrangements. He had put guards at various vantage points in the hall in case the Duke of Sto Helit tried any last-minute rearrangement of the royal succession, and reminded himself to keep a special eye on the duke himself, who was sitting in the front row of seats with a strange quiet smile on his face. The duke caught Cutwell's eye, and the wizard hastily looked away.

The High Priest held up his hands for silence. Cutwell sidled towards him as the old man turned towards the Hub and in a cracked voice began the invocation to the gods.

Cutwell let his eyes slip back towards the duke.

'Hear me, mm, O gods —'

Was Sto Helit looking up into the bat-haunted darkness of the rafters?

'— hear me, O Blind Io of the Hundred Eyes; hear me, O Great Offler of the Bird-Haunted Mouth: hear me, O Merciful Fate; hear me, O Cold, mm. Destiny; hear me, O Seven-handed Sek; hear me, O Hoki of the Woods; hear me, O —'

With dull horror Cutwell realised that the daft old fool, against all instruction, was going to mention the whole lot. There were more than nine hundred known gods on the Disc, and research theologians were discovering more every year. It could take hours. The congregation was already beginning to shuffle its feet.

Keli was standing in front of the altar with a look of fury on her face. Cutwell nudged the High Priest in the ribs, which had no noticeable effect, and then waggled his eyebrows ferociously at the young acolyte.

'Stop him!' he hissed. 'We haven't got time!'

The gods would be displeased —'

'Not as displeased as me, and I'm *here*.'

The acolyte looked at Cutwell's expression for a moment and decided that he'd better explain to the gods later. He tapped the High Priest on the shoulder and whispered something in his ear.

'— O Steikhegel, god of, mm, isolated cow byres; hear me, O – hello? What?'

Murmur, murmur.

This is, mm, very irregular. Very well, we shall go straight to the, mm, Recitation of the Lineage.'

Murmur, murmur.

The High Priest scowled at Cutwell, or at least where he believed Cutwell to be.

'Oh, all right. Mm, prepare the incense and fragrances for the Shriving of the Fourfold-Path.'

Murmur, murmur.

The High Priest's face darkened.

'I suppose, mm, a short prayer, mm, is totally out of the question?' he said acidly.

'If some people don't get a move on,' said Keli demurely, 'there is going to be trouble.'

Murmur.

'I don't know, I'm sure,' said the High Priest. 'People might as well not bother with a religious, mm, ceremony at all. Fetch the bloody elephant, then.'

The acolyte gave Cutwell a frantic look and waved at the guards. As they urged their gently-swaying charge forward with shouts and pointed sticks the young priest sidled towards Cutwell and pushed something into his hand.

He looked down. It was a waterproof hat.

'Is this necessary?'

'He's very devout,' said the acolyte. 'We may need a snorkel.'

The elephant reached the altar and was forced, without too much difficulty, to kneel. It hiccupped.

'Well, where is it, then?' snapped the High Priest. 'Let's get this, mm, *farce* over with!'

Murmur went the acolyte. The High Priest listened, nodded gravely, picked up his white-handled sacrificial knife and raised it double-handed over his head. The whole hall watched, holding its breath. Then he lowered it again.

'*Where* in front of me?'

Murmur.

'I certainly don't need your help, my lad! I've been sacrificing man and boy – and, mm, women and animals – for seventy years, and when I can't use the, mm, knife you can put me to bed with a shovel!'

And he brought the blade down in a wild sweep which, by sheer luck, gave the elephant a mild flesh wound on the trunk.

The creature awoke from its pleasant reflective stupor and squealed. The acolyte turned in horror to look at two tiny bloodshot eyes squinting down the length of an enraged trunk, and cleared the altar in one standing jump.

The elephant was enraged. Vague confusing recollections flooded its aching head, of fires and shouts and men with nets and cages and spears and too many years hauling heavy tree trunks. It brought its trunk down across the altar stone and somewhat to its own surprise smashed it in two, levered the two parts into the air with its tusks, tried unsuccessfully to uproot a stone pillar and then, feeling the sudden need for a breath of fresh air, started to charge arthritically down the length of the hall.

It hit the door at a dead run, its blood loud with the call of the herd and fizzing with alcohol, and took it off at the hinges. Still wearing the frame on its shoulders it careened across the courtyard, smashed the outer gates, burped, thundered through the sleeping city and was still slowly accelerating when it sniffed the distant dark continent of Klatch on the night breeze and, tail raised, followed the ancient call of home.

Back in the hall there was dust and shouts and confusion. Cutwell pushed his hat out of his eyes and got to his hands and knees.

'Thank you,' said Keli, who had been lying underneath him. 'And why did you jump on top of me?'

'My first instinct was to protect you, your Majesty.'

'Yes, instinct it may have been, but —' She started to say that maybe the elephant would have weighed less, but the sight of his big, serious and rather flushed face stopped her.

'We will talk about this later,' she said, sitting up and brushing the dust off her. 'In the meantime, I think we will dispense with the sacrifice. I'm not your Majesty yet, just your Highness, and now if someone will fetch the crown —'

There was the snick of a safety catch behind them.

The wizard will put his hands where I can see them,' said the duke.

Cutwell stood up slowly, and turned around. The duke was backed by half a dozen large serious men, the type of men whose only function in life is to loom behind people like the duke. They had a dozen large serious crossbows, whose main purpose was to appear to be on the point of going off.

The princess sprang to her feet and launched herself at her uncle, but Cutwell grabbed her.

'No,' he said, quietly. This isn't the kind of man who ties you up in a cellar with just enough time for the mice to eat your ropes before the flood-waters rise. This is the kind of man who just kills you here and now.'

The duke bowed.

'I think it can be truly said that the gods have spoken,' he said. 'Clearly the princess was tragically crushed by the rogue elephant. The people will be upset. I will personally decree a week of mourning.'

'You can't do that, all the guests have seen – !' the princess began, nearly in tears.

Cutwell shook his head. He could see the guards moving through the crowds of bewildered guests.

They haven't,' he said. 'You'll be amazed at what they haven't seen. Especially when they learn that being tragically crushed to death by rogue elephants can be catching. You can even die of it in bed.'

The duke laughed pleasantly.

'You really are quite intelligent for a wizard,' he said. 'Now, I am merely proposing banishment —'

'You won't get away with this,' said Cutwell. He thought for a bit, and added, 'Well, you will probably get away with it, but you'll feel bad about it on your deathbed and you'll wish —'

He stopped talking. His jaw dropped.

The duke half turned to follow his gaze.

'Well, wizard? What have you seen?'

'You won't get away with it,' said Cutwell hysterically. 'You won't even be here. This is going to have never happened, do you realise?'

'Watch his hands,' said the duke. 'If he even moves his fingers, shoot them.'

He looked around again, puzzled. The wizard had sounded genuine. Of course, it was said wizards could see things that weren't there. . . .

'It doesn't even matter if you kill me,' Cutwell babbled, 'because tomorrow I'll wake up in my own bed and this won't have happened anyway. It's come through the wall!'

Night rolled onwards across the Disc. It was always there, of course, lurking in shadows and holes and cellars, but as the slow light of day drifted after the sun the pools and lakes of night spread out, met and merged. Light on the Discworld moves slowly because of the vast magical field.

Light on the Discworld isn't like light elsewhere. It's grown up a bit, it's been around, it doesn't feel the need to rush everywhere. It knows that however fast it goes darkness always gets there first, so it takes it easy.

Midnight glided across the landscape like a velvet bat. And faster than midnight, a tiny spark against the dark world of the Disc, Binky pounded after it. Flames roared back from his hooves. Muscles moved under his glistening skin like snakes in oil.

They moved in silence. Ysabell took one arm from around Mort's waist and watched sparks glitter around her fingers in all eight colours of the rainbow. Little crackling serpents of light flowed down her arm and flashed off the tips of her hair.

Mort took the horse down lower, leaving a boiling wake of cloud that extended for miles behind them.

'Now I know I'm going mad,' he muttered.

'Why?'

'I just saw an elephant down there. Whoa, boy. Look, you can see Sto Lat up ahead.'

Ysabell peered over his shoulder at the distant gleam of light.

'How long have we got?' she said nervously.

'I don't know. A few minutes, perhaps.'

'Mort, I hadn't asked you before —'

'Well?'

'What are you going to *do* when we get there?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I was sort of hoping something would suggest itself at the time.'

'Has it?'

'No. But it isn't time yet. Albert's spell may help. And I—'

The dome of reality squatted over the palace like a collapsing jellyfish. Mort's voice trailed into horrified silence. Then Ysabell said, 'Well, I think it's *nearly* time. What are we going to do?'

'Hold tight!'

Binky glided through the smashed gates of the outer courtyard, slid across the cobbles in a trail of sparks and leapt through the ravaged doorway of the hall. The pearly wall of the interface loomed up and passed like a shock of cold spray.

Mort had a confused vision of Keli and Cutwell and a group of large men diving for their lives. He recognised the features of the duke and drew his sword, vaulting from the saddle as soon as the steaming horse skidded to a halt.

'Don't you lay a finger on her!' he screamed. 'I'll have your head off!'

'This is certainly most impressive,' said the duke, drawing his own sword. 'And also very foolish. I —'

He stopped. His eyes glazed over. He toppled forward. Cutwell put down the big silver candlestick he'd wielded and gave Mort an apologetic smile.

Mort turned towards the guards, the blue flame of Death's sword humming through the air.

'Anyone else want some?' he snarled. They backed away, and then turned and ran. As they passed through the interface they vanished. There were no guests outside there, either. In the real reality the hall was dark and empty.

The four of them were left in a hemisphere that was rapidly growing smaller.

Mort sidled over to Cutwell.

'Any ideas?' he said. 'I've got a magic spell here somewhere —'

'Forget it. If I try any magic in here now it'll blow our heads off. This little reality is too small to contain it.'

Mort sagged against the remains of the altar. He felt empty, drained. For a moment he watched the sizzling wall of the interface drifting nearer. He'd survive it, he hoped, and so would Ysabell. Cutwell wouldn't, but a Cutwell would. Only Keli —

'Am I going to be crowned or not?' she said icily. 'I've got to die a queen! It'd be terrible to be dead *and* common!'

Mort gave her an unfocused look, trying to remember what on earth she was talking about. Ysabell fished around in the wreckage behind the altar, and came up with a rather battered gold circlet set with small diamonds.

'Is this it?' she said.

That's the crown,' said Keli, nearly in tears. 'But there's no priest or anything.'

Mort sighed deeply.

'Cutwell, if this is our own reality we can rearrange it the way we want, can't we?'

'What had you in mind?'

'You're now a priest. Name your own god.'

Cutwell curtsied, and took the crown from Ysabell.

'You're all making fun of me!' snapped Keli.

'Sorry,' said Mort, wearily. 'It's been rather a long day.'

'I hope I can do this right,' said Cutwell solemnly. 'I've never crowned anyone before.'

'I've never been crowned before!'

'Good,' said Cutwell soothingly. 'We can learn together.' He started to mutter some impressive words in a strange tongue. It was in fact a simple spell for ridding the clothing of fleas, but he thought, what the hell. And then he thought, gosh, in this reality I'm the most powerful wizard there ever was, that'd be something to tell my grandch . . . He gritted his teeth. There'd be some rules changed in this reality, that was for sure.

Ysabell sat down beside Mort and slipped her hand in his.

'Well?' she said quietly. This is the time. Has anything suggested itself?'

'No.'

The interface was more than halfway down the hall, slowing slightly as it relentlessly ground down the pressure of the intruding reality.

Something wet and warm blew in Mort's ear. He reached up and touched Binky's muzzle.

'Dear old horse,' he said. 'And I'm right out of sugar lumps. You'll have to find your way home by yourself —'

His hand stopped in mid-pat.

'We can *all* go home,' he said.

'I don't think father would like that very much,' said Ysabell, but Mort ignored her.

'Cutwell!'

'Yes?'

'We're leaving. Are you coming? You'll still exist when the interface closes.'

'Part of me will,' said the wizard.

'That's what I meant,' said Mort, swinging himself up on to Binky's back.

'But speaking as the part that won't, I'd like to join you,' said Cutwell quickly.

'I intend to stay here to die in my own kingdom,' said Keli.

'What you intend doesn't signify,' said Mort. 'I've come all the way across the Disc to rescue you, d'you see, and you're going to be rescued.'

'But I'm the queen!' said Keli. Uncertainty welled up in her eyes, and she spun round to Cutwell, who lowered his candle-stick guiltily. 'I heard you say the words! I am queen, aren't I?'

'Oh, yes,' said Cutwell instantly; and then, because a wizard's word is supposed to be harder than cast iron, added virtuously, 'And totally free from infestation, too.'

'Cutwell!' snapped Mort. The wizard nodded, caught Keli around the waist and bodily hoisted her on to Binky's back. Hoisting his skirts around his waist he clambered up behind Mort and reached down and swung Ysabell up behind him. The horse jigged across the floor, complaining about the overloading, but Mort turned him towards the broken doorway and urged him forward.

The interface followed them as they clattered down the hall and into the courtyard, rising slowly. Its pearly fog was only yards away, tightening by inches.

'Excuse me,' said Cutwell to Ysabell, raising his hat. 'Igneous Cutwell, Wizard Ist Grade (UU), former Royal Recogniser and soon to be beheaded probably. Would you happen to know where we are going?'

To my father's country,' shouted Ysabell, above the wind of their passage.

'Have I ever met him?'

'I don't think so. You'd have remembered.'

The top of the palace wall scraped Binky's hooves as, muscles straining, he sought for more height. Cutwell leaned backward again, holding on to his hat.

'Who is this gentleman of which we speak?' he yelled.

'Death,' said Ysabell.

'Not —'

'Yes.'

'Oh.' Cutwell peered down at the distant rooftops, and gave her a lopsided smile. 'Would it save time if I just jumped off now?'

'He's quite nice if you get to know him,' said Ysabell defensively.

'Is he? Do you think we'll get the chance?'

'Hold on!' said Mort. 'We should be going across just about —'

A hole full of blackness rushed out of the sky and caught them.

The interface bobbed uncertainly, empty as a pauper's pocket, and carried on shrinking.

The front door opened. Ysabell poked her head out.

'There's no-one at home,' she said. 'You'd better come in.'

The other three filed into the hallway. Cutwell conscientiously wiped his feet.

'It's a bit small,' said Keli, critically.

'It's a lot bigger inside,' said Mort, and turned to Ysabell. 'Have you looked everywhere?'

'I can't even find Albert,' she said. 'I can't remember him ever not being here.'

She coughed, remembering her duties as hostess.

'Would anyone like a drink?' she said. Keli ignored her.

'I was expecting a castle at least,' she said. 'Big and black, with great dark towers. Not an umbrella stand.'

'It has got a scythe in it,' Cutwell pointed out.

'Let's all go into the study and sit down and I'm sure we'll all feel better,' said Ysabell hurriedly, and pushed open the black baize door.

Cutwell and Keli stepped through, bickering. Ysabell took Mort's arm.

'What are we going to do now?' she said. 'Father will be very angry if he finds them here.'

'I'll think of something,' said Mort. 'I'll rewrite the autobiographies or something.' He smiled weakly. 'Don't worry. I'll think of something.'

The door slammed behind him. Mort turned to look into Albert's grinning face.

The big leather armchair behind the desk revolved slowly. Death looked at Mort over steepled fingers. When he was quite certain he had their full, horrified attention, he said:

YOU HAD BETTER START NOW.

He stood up, appearing to grow larger as the room darkened.

DON'T BOTHER TO APOLOGISE, he added. Keli buried her head in Cutwell's ample chest.

I AM *BACK*. AND I AM *ANGRY*.

'Master, I —' Mort began.

SHUT UP, said Death. He beckoned Keli with a calcareous forefinger. She turned to look at him, her body not daring to disobey.

Death reached out and touched her chin. Mort's hand went to his sword.

IS THIS THE FACE THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND SHIPS, AND BURNED THE TOPLESS TOWERS OF PSEUDO—

POLIS? wondered Death. Keli stared hypnotised at the red pinpoints miles deep in those dark sockets.

'Er, excuse me,' said Cutwell, holding his hat respectfully, Mexican fashion.

WELL? said Death, distracted.

'It isn't, sir. You must be thinking about another face.'

WHAT is YOUR NAME?

'Cutwell, sir. I'm a wizard, sir.'

I'M A WIZARD, SIR, Death sneered. BE SILENT, WIZARD.

'Sir.' Cutwell stepped back.

Death turned to Ysabell.

DAUGHTER, EXPLAIN YOURSELF. WHY DID YOU AID THIS FOOL?

Ysabell curtsied nervously.

'I – love him, father. I think.'

'You do?' said Mort, astonished. 'You never said!'

There didn't seem to be time,' said Ysabell. 'Father, he didn't mean —'

BE SILENT.

Ysabell dropped her gaze. 'Yes, father.'

Death stalked around the desk until he was standing directly in front of Mort. He stared at him for a long time.

Then in one blurred movement his hand struck Mort across the face, knocking him off his feet.

I INVITE YOU INTO MY HOME, he said, I TRAIN YOU, I FEED YOU, I CLOTHE YOU, I GIVE YOU OPPORTUNITIES YOU COULD NOT DREAM OF, AND THUS YOU REPAY ME. YOU SEDUCE MY DAUGHTER FROM ME, YOU NEGLECT THE DUTY, YOU MAKE RIPPLES IN REALITY THAT WILL TAKE A CENTURY TO HEAL. YOUR ILL-TIMED ACTIONS HAVE DOOMED YOUR COMRADES TO OBLIVION. THE GODS WILL DEMAND NOTHING LESS.

ALL IN ALL, BOY, NOT A GOOD START TO YOUR FIRST JOB.

Mort struggled into a sitting position, holding his cheek. It burned coldly, like comet ice.

'Mort,' he said.

IT SPEAKS! WHAT DOES IT SAY?

'You could let them go,' said Mort. They just got involved. It wasn't their fault. You could rearrange this so —'

WHY SHOULD I DO THAT? THEY BELONG TO ME NOW.

'I'll fight you for them,' said Mort.

VERY NOBLE. MORTALS FIGHT ME ALL THE TIME. YOU ARE DISMISSED.

Mort got to his feet. He remembered what being Death had been like. He caught hold of the feeling, let it surface. . . .

NO, he said.

AH. YOU CHALLENGE ME AS BETWEEN EQUALS, THEN?

Mort swallowed. But at least the way was clear now. When you step off a cliff, your life takes a very definite direction.

'If necessary,' he said. 'And if I win —'

IF YOU WIN, YOU WILL BE IN A POSITION TO DO WHATEVER YOU PLEASE, said Death. FOLLOW ME.

He stalked past Mort and out into the hall.

The other four looked at Mort.

'Are you sure you know what you're doing?' said Cutwell.

'No.'

'You can't beat the master,' said Albert. He sighed. Take it from me.'

'What will happen if you lose?' said Keli.

'I won't lose,' said Mort. That's the trouble.'

'Father wants him to win,' said Ysabell bitterly.

'You mean he'll let Mort win?' said Cutwell.

'Oh, no, he won't *let* him win. He just wants him to win.'

Mort nodded. As they followed Death's dark shape he reflected on an endless future, serving whatever mysterious purpose the Creator had in mind, living outside Time. He couldn't blame Death for wanting to quit the job. Death had said the bones were not

compulsory, but perhaps that wouldn't matter. Would eternity feel like a long time, or were all lives – from a personal viewpoint – entirely the same length?

Hi, said a voice in his head. Remember me? I'm you. I got you into this.

'Thanks,' he said bitterly. The others glanced at him.

You could come through this, the voice said. You've got a big advantage. You've been him, and he's never been you.

Death swept through the hall and into the Long Room, the candles obediently flicking into flame as he entered.

ALBERT.

'Master?'

FETCH THE GLASSES.

'Master.'

Cutwell grabbed the old man's arm.

'You're a wizard,' he hissed. 'You don't have to do what he says!'

'How old are you, lad?' said Albert, kindly.

'Twenty.'

'When you're my age you'll see your choices differently.' He turned to Mort. 'Sorry.'

Mort drew his sword, its blade almost invisible in the light from the candles. Death turned and stood facing him, a thin silhouette against a towering rack of hourglasses.

He held out his arms. The scythe appeared in them with a tiny thunderclap.

Albert came back down one of the glass-lined alleys with two hourglasses, and set them down wordlessly on a ledge on one of the pillars.

One was several times the size of the ordinary glasses – black, thin and decorated with a complicated skull-and-bones motif.

That wasn't the most unpleasant thing about it.

Mort groaned inwardly. He couldn't see any sand in there.

The smaller glass beside it was quite plain and unadorned. Mort reached for it.

'May I?' he said.

BE MY GUEST.

The name Mort was engraved on the top bulb. He held it up to the light, noting without any real surprise that there was hardly any sand left. When he held it to his ear he thought he could hear, even above the ever-present roar of the millions of lifetimers around him, the sound of his own life pouring away.

He put it down very carefully.

Death turned to Cutwell.

MR WIZARD, SIR, YOU WILL BE GOOD ENOUGH TO GIVE US A COUNT OF THREE.

Cutwell nodded glumly.

'Are you sure this couldn't all be sorted out by getting around a table —' he began.

NO.

'No.'

Mort and Death circled one another warily, their reflections flickering across the banks of hourglasses.

'One,'said Cutwell.

Death spun his scythe menacingly.

'Two.'

The blades met in mid-air with a noise like a cat sliding down a pane of glass.

'They both cheated!' said Keli. Ysabell nodded. 'Of course,' she said.

Mort jumped back, bringing the sword round in a too-slow arc that Death easily deflected, turning the parry into a wicked low sweep that Mort avoided only by a clumsy standing jump.

Although the scythe isn't pre-eminent among weapons of war, anyone who has been on the wrong end of, say, a peasants' revolt will know that in skilled hands it is fearsome.

Once its owner gets it weaving and spinning no-one – including the wielder – is quite certain where the blade is now and where it will be next.

Death advanced, grinning. Mort ducked a cut at head height and dived sideways, hearing a tinkle behind him as the tip of the scythe caught a glass on the nearest shelf. . . .

. . . in a dark alley in Morpork a night soil entrepreneur clutched at his chest and pitched forward over his cart. . . .

Mort rolled and came up swinging the sword double-handed over his head, feeling a twang of dark exhilaration as Death darted backwards across the checkered tiles. The wild swing cut through a shelf; one after another its burden of glasses started to slide towards the floor. Mort was dimly aware of Ysabell scurrying past him to catch them one by one. . . .

. . . across the Disc four people miraculously escaped death by falling. . . .

. . . and then he ran forward, pressing home his advantage. Death's hands moved in a blur as he blocked every chop and thrust, and then changed grip on the scythe and brought the blade swinging up in an arc that Mort sidestepped awkwardly, nicking the frame of an hourglass with the hilt of his sword and sending it flying across the room. . . .

. . . in the Ramtop mountains a tharga-herder, searching by lamplight in the high meadows for a lost cow, missed his footing and plunged over a thousand foot drop. . . .

. . . Gutwell dived forward and caught the tumbling glass in one desperately outstretched hand, hit the floor and slid along on his stomach. . . .

. . . a gnarled sycamore mysteriously loomed under the screaming herder and broke his fall, removing his major problems – death, the judgement of the gods, the uncertainty of

Paradise and so on – and replacing them with the comparatively simple one of climbing back up about one hundred feet of sheer, icy cliff in pitch darkness.

There was a pause as the combatants backed away from each other and circled again, looking for an opening.

'Surely there's something we can do?' said Keli.

'Mort will lose either way,' said Ysabell, shaking her head. Cutwell shook the silver candlestick out of his baggy sleeve and tossed it thoughtfully from hand to hand.

Death hefted the scythe threateningly, incidentally smashing an hourglass by his shoulder. . . .

. . . in Bes Pelargic the Emperor's chief torturer slumped backwards into his own acid pit. . . .

. . . and took another swing which Mort dodged by sheer luck. But only just. He could feel the hot ache in his muscles and the numbing greyness of fatigue poisons in his brain, two disadvantages that Death did not have to consider.

Death noticed.

YIELD, he said. I MAY BE MERCIFUL.

To illustrate the point he made a roundarm slash that Mort caught, clumsily, on the edge of his sword. The scythe blade bounced up, splintered a glass into a thousand shards. . . .

. . . the Duke of Sto Helit clutched at his heart, felt the icy stab of pain, screamed soundlessly and tumbled from his horse. . . .

Mort backed away until he felt the roughness of a stone pillar on his neck. Death's glass with its dauntingly empty bulbs was a few inches from his head.

Death himself wasn't paying much attention. He was looking down thoughtfully at the jagged remains of the Duke's life.

Mort yelled and swung his sword up, to the faint cheers of the crowd that had been waiting for him to do this for some time. Even Albert clapped his wrinkled hands.

But instead of. the tinkle of glass that Mort had expected there was – nothing.

He turned and tried again. The blade passed right through the glass without breaking it.

The change in the texture of the air made him bring the sword around and back in time to deflect a vicious downward sweep. Death sprang away in time to dodge Mort's counter thrust, which was slow and weak.

THUS IT ENDS, BOY.

'Mort,' said Mort. He looked up.

'Mort,' he repeated, and brought the sword up in a stroke that cut the scythe's handle in two. Anger bubbled up inside him. If he was going to die, then at least he'd die with the right name.

'Mort, you bastard!' he screamed, and propelled himself straight towards the grinning skull with the sword whirring in a complicated dance of blue light. Death staggered backwards, laughing, crouching under the rain of furious strokes that sliced the scythe handle into more pieces.

Mort circled him, chopping and thrusting and dully aware, even through the red mists of fury, that Death was following his every move, holding the orphaned scytheblade like a sword. There was no opening, and the motor of his anger wouldn't last. You'll never beat him, he told himself. The best we can do is hold him off for a while. And losing is probably better than winning. Who needs eternity, anyway?

Through the curtain of his fatigue he saw Death unfold the length of his bones and bring his blade aund in a slow, leisurely arc as though it was moving through treacle.

'Father!' screamed Ysabell.

Death turned his head.

Perhaps Mort's mind welcomed the prospect of the life to come but his body, which maybe felt it had most to lose in the deal, objected. It brought his sword arm up in one unstoppable stroke that flicked Death's blade from his hand, and then pinned him against the nearest pillar.

In the sudden hush Mort realised he could no longer hear an intrusive little noise that had been just at his threshold of hearing for the last ten minutes. His eyes darted sideways.

The last of his sand was running out.

STRIKE.

Mort raised the sword, and looked into the twin blue fires.

He lowered the sword.

'No.'

Death's foot lashed out at groin height with a speed that even made Cutwell wince.

Mort silently curled into a ball and rolled across the floor. Through his tears he saw Death advancing, scytheblade in one hand and Mort's own hourglass in the other. He saw Keli and Ysabell swept disdainfully aside as they made a grab for the robe. He saw Cutwell elbowed in the ribs, his candlestick clattering across the tiles.

Death stood over him. The tip of the blade hovered in front of Mort's eyes for a moment, and then swept upwards.

'You're right. There's no justice. There's just you.'

Death hesitated, and then slowly lowered the blade. He turned and looked down into Ysabell's face. She was shaking with anger.

YOUR MEANING?

She glowered up at Death's face and then her hand swung back and swung around and swung forward and connected with a sound like a dice box.

It was nothing like as loud as the silence that followed it.

Keli shut her eyes. Cutwell turned away and put his arms over his head.

Death raised a hand to his skull, very slowly.

Ysabell's chest rose and fell in a manner that should have made Cutwell give up magic for life.

Finally, in a voice even more hollow than usual, Death said: WHY?

'You said that to tinker with the fate of one individual could destroy the whole world,' said Ysabell.

YES?

'You meddled with his. And mine.' She pointed a trembling finger at the splinters of glass on the floor. 'And those, too.'

WELL?

'What will the gods demand for *that*?'

FROM ME?

'Yes!'

Death looked surprised. THE GODS CAN DEMAND NOTHING OF *ME*. EVEN GODS ANSWER TO ME, EVENTUALLY.

'Doesn't seem very fair, does it? Don't the gods bother about justice and mercy?' snapped Ysabell. Without anyone quite noticing she had picked up the sword.

Death grinned. I APPLAUD YOUR EFFORTS, he said, BUT THEY AVAIL YOU NAUGHT. STAND ASIDE.

'No.'

YOU MUST BE AWARE THAT EVEN LOVE IS NO DEFENCE AGAINSTME. I AM SORRY.

Ysabell raised the sword. '*You 're* sorry?'

STAND ASIDE, I SAY.

'No. You're just being vindictive. It's not fair!'

Death bowed his skull for a moment, then looked up with his eyes blazing.

YOU WILL DO AS YOU ABE TOLD.

'I will not.'

YOU'RE MAKING THIS VERY DIFFICULT.

'Good.'

Death's fingers drummed impatiently on the scytheblade, like a mouse tapdancing on a tin. He seemed to be thinking. He looked at Ysabell standing over Mort, and then turned and looked at the others crouching against a shelf.

No, he said eventually. No. I CANNOT BE BIDDEN.

I CANNOT BE FORCED. I WILL DO ONLY THAT WHICH I KNOW TO BE RIGHT.

He waved a hand, and the sword whirred out of Ysabell's grasp. He made another complicated gesture and the girl herself was picked up and pressed gently but firmly against the nearest pillar.

Mort saw the dark reaper advance on him again, blade swinging back for the final stroke. He stood over the boy.

YOU DON'T KNOW HOW SORRY THIS MAKES ME, he aid.

Mort pulled himself on to his elbows.

'I might,' he said.

Death gave him a surprised look for several seconds, and then started to laugh. The sound bounced eerily around the room, ringing off the shelves as Death, still laughing like an earthquake in a graveyard, held Mort's own glass in front of its owner's eyes.

Mort tried to focus. He saw the last grain of sand skid down the glossy surface, teeter on the edge and then drop, tumbling in slow motion, towards the bottom. Candlelight flickered off its tiny silica facets as it spun gently downward. It landed soundlessly, throwing up a tiny crater.

The light in Death's eyes flared until it filled Mort's vision and the sound of his laughter rattled the universe.

And then Death turned the hourglass over.

Once again the great hall of Sto Lat was brilliant with candlelight and loud with music.

As the guests flocked down the steps and descended on the cold buffet the Master of Ceremonies was in non-stop voice, introducing those who, by reason of importance or simple absent-mindedness, had turned up late. As for example:

The Royal Recogniser, Master of the Queen's Bedchamber, His Ipississumussness Igneous Cutwell, Wizard Ist Grade (UU).'

Cutwell advanced on the royal couple, grinning, a large cigar in one hand.

'May I kiss the bride?' he said.

'If it's allowed for wizards,' said Ysabell, offering a cheek.

'We thought the fireworks were marvellous,' said Mort. 'And I expect they'll soon be able to rebuild the outer wall. No doubt you'll be able to find your way to the food.'

'He's looking a lot better these days,' said Ysabell behind her fixed grin, as Cutwell disappeared into the throng.

'Certainly there's a lot to be said for being the only person who doesn't bother to obey the queen,' said Mort, exchanging nods with a passing nobleman.

'They say he's the real power behind the throne,' said Ysabell. 'An eminence something.'

'Eminence grease,' said Mort absently. 'Notice how he doesn't do any magic these days?'

'Shutuphereshecomes.'

'Her Supreme Majesty, Queen Kelirehenna I, Lord of Sto Lat, Protector of the Eight Protectorates and Empress of the Long Thin Debated Piece Hubwards of Sto Kerrig.'

Ysabell bobbed. Mort bowed. Keli beamed at both of them. They couldn't help noticing that she had come under some influence that inclined her towards clothes that at least roughly followed her shape, and away from hairstyles that looked like the offspring of a pineapple and a candyfloss.

She pecked Ysabell on the cheek and then stepped back and looked Mort up and down.

'How's Sto Helit?' she said.

'Fine, fine,' said Mort. 'We'll have to do something about the cellars, though. Your late uncle had some unusual – hobbies, and. . . .'

'She means you,' whispered Ysabell. That's your official name.'

'I preferred Mort,' said Mort.

'Such an interesting coat of arms, too,' said the queen. 'Crossed scythes on an hourglass rampant against a sable field. It gave the Royal College quite a headache.'

'It's not that I mind being a duke,' said Mort. 'Its being married to a duchess that comes as a shock.'

'You'll get used to it.'

'I hope not.'

'Good. And now, Ysabell,' said Keli, setting her jaw, 'if you are to move in royal circles there are some people you simply must meet.

Ysabell gave Mort a despairing look as she was swept away into the crowd, and was soon lost to view.

Mort ran a finger around the inside of his collar, looked both ways, and then darted into a fern-shaded corner near the end of the buffet where he could have a quiet moment to himself.

Behind him the Master of Ceremonies cleared his throat. His eyes took on a distant, glazed look.

The Stealer of Souls,' he said in the faraway voice of one whose ears aren't hearing what his mouth is saying, 'Defeater of Empires, Swallower of Oceans, Thief of Years, The Ultimate Reality, Harvester of Mankind, the —'

ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT. I CAN SEE MYSELF IN.

Mort paused with a cold turkey leg halfway to his mouth. He didn't turn around. He didn't need to. There was no mistaking that voice, felt rather than heard, or the way in which the air chilled and darkened. The chatter and music of the wedding reception slowed and faded.

'We didn't think you'd come,' he said to a potted fern.

TO MY OWN DAUGHTER'S WEDDING? ANYWAY, IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'VE EVER HAD AN INVITATION TO ANYTHING. IT HAD GOLD EDGES AND RSVP AND EVERYTHING.

'Yes, but when you weren't at the service —'

I THOUGHT PERHAPS IT WOULD NOT BE ENTIRELY APPROPRIATE.

'Well, yes, I suppose so —'

TO BE FRANK, I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO MARRY THE PRINCESS.

Mort blushed. 'We talked about it,' he said. 'Then we thought, just because you happen to rescue a princess, you shouldn't rush into things.'

VERY WISE. Too MANY YOUNG WOMEN LEAP INTO THE ARMS OF THE FIRST YOUNG MAN TO WAKE THEM AFTER A HUNDRED YEARS' SLEEP, FOR EXAMPLE.

'And, well, we thought that all in all, well, once I really got to know Ysabell, well.

YES, YES, I AM SURE. AN EXCELLENT DECISION.

HOWEVER, I HAVE DECIDED NOT TO INTEREST MYSELF IN HUMAN AFFAIRS ANY FURTHER.

Really?'

EXCEPT OFFICIALLY, OF COURSE. IT WAS CLOUDING MY JUDGEMENT.

A skeletal hand appeared on the edge of Mort's vision and skilfully speared a stuffed egg. Mort spun around.

'What happened?' he said. 'I've got to know! One minute we were in the Long Room and the next we were in a field outside the city, and we were really us! I mean, reality had been altered to fit us in! Who did it?'

I HAD A WORD WITH THE GODS. Death looked uncomfortable.

'Oh. You did, did you?' said Mort. Death avoided his gaze.

YES.

'I shouldn't think they were very pleased.'

THE GODS ARE JUST. THEY ARE ALSO SENTIMENTALISTS. I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO MASTER IT, MYSELF.

BUT YOU AREN'T FREE YET. YOU MUST SEE TO IT THAT HISTORY TAKES PLACE.

'I know,' said Mort. 'Uniting the kingdoms and everything.'

YOU MIGHT END UP WISHING YOU'D STAYED WITH ME.

'I certainly learned a lot,' Mort admitted. He put his hand up to his face and absent-mindedly stroked the four thin white scars across his cheek. 'But I don't think I was cut out for that sort of work. Look, I'm really sorry —'

I HAVE A PRESENT FOR YOU.

Death put down his plate of hors d'oeuvres and fumbled in the mysterious recesses of his robe. When his skeletal hand emerged it was holding a little globe between thumb and forefinger.

It was about three inches across. It could have been the largest pearl in the world, except that the surface was a moving swirl of complicated silver shapes, forever on the point of resolving themselves into something recognisable but always managing to avoid it.

When Death dropped it into Mort's outstretched palm it felt surprisingly heavy and slightly warm.

FOR YOU AND YOUR LADY. A WEDDING PRESENT. A DOWRY.

'It's beautiful! We thought the silver toast rack was from you.'

THAT WAS ALBERT. I'M AFRAID HE DOESN'T HAVE MUCH IMAGINATION.

Mort turned the globe over and over in his hands. The shapes boiling inside it seemed to respond to his touch, sending little streamers of light arching across the surface towards his fingers.

'Is it a pearl?' he said.

YES. WHEN SOMETHING IRRITATES AN OYSTER AND CAN'T BE REMOVED, THE POOR THING COATS IT WITH MUCUS AND TURNS IT INTO A PEARL. THIS IS A PEARL OF A DIFFERENT COLOUR. A PEARL OF REALITY. ALL THAT SHINY STUFF IS CONGEALED ACTUALITY. YOU OUGHT TO RECOGNISE IT – YOU CREATED IT, AFTER ALL.

Mort tossed it gently from hand to hand.

'We will put it with the castle jewels,' he said. 'We haven't got that many.'

ONE DAY IT WILL BE THE SEED OF A NEW UNIVERSE.

Mort fumbled the catch, but reached down with lightning reflexes and caught it before it hit the flagstones.

'What?'

THE PRESSURE OF *THIS* REALITY KEEPS IT COMPRESSED. THERE MAY COME A TIME WHEN THE UNIVERSE ENDS AND REALITY DIES, AND THEN THIS ONE WILL EXPLODE AND . . . WHO KNOWS? KEEP IT SAFE. IT'S A FUTURE AS WELL AS A PRESENT.

Death put his skull on one side. IT'S A SMALL THING, he added. You *COULD* HAVE HAD ETERNITY.

'I know,' said Mort. 'I've been very lucky.'

He put it very carefully on the buffet table, between the quails' eggs and the sausage rolls.

THERE WAS ANOTHER THING, said Death. He reached under his robe again and pulled out an oblong shape inexpertly wrapped and tied with string.

IT'S FOR YOU, he said, PERSONALLY. YOU NEVER SHOWED ANY INTEREST IN IT BEFORE. DID YOU THINK IT DIDN'T EXIST?

Mort unwrapped the packet and realised he was holding a small leather-bound book. On the spine was blocked, in shiny gold leaf, the one word: *Mort*.

He leafed backwards through the unfilled pages until he found the little trail of ink, winding patiently down the page, and read: *Mort shut the book with a little snap that sounded, in the silence, like the crack of creation, and smiled uneasily.*

There's a lot of pages still to fill,' he said. 'How much sand have I got left? Only Ysabell said that since you turned the glass over that means I shall die when I'm —'

YOU HAVE SUFFICIENT, said Death coldly. MATHEMATICS ISNT ALL IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE.

'How do you feel about being invited to christenings?'

I THINK NOT. I WASN'T CUT OUT TO BE A FATHER, AND CERTAINLY NOT A GRANDAD. I HAVEN'T GOT THE RIGHT KIND OF KNEES.

He put down his wine giass and nodded at Mort.

MY REGARDS TO YOUB GOOD LADY, he said. AND NOW I REALLY MUST BE OFF.

'Are you sure? You're welcome to stay.'

IT'S NICE OF YOU TO SAY SO, BUT DUTY CALLS. He extended a bony hand. YOU KNOW HOW IT IS.

Mort gripped the hand and shook it, ignoring the chill.

'Look,' he said. 'If ever you want a few days off, you know, if you'd like a holiday —'

MANY THANKS FOR THE OFFER, said Death graciously. I SHALL THINK ABOUT IT MOST SERIOUSLY. AND NOW —

'Goodbye,' Mart said, and was surprised to find a lJump in his throat. 'It's such an unpleasant word, isn't it?'

QUITE SO. Death grinned because, as has so often been remarked, he didn't have much option. But possibly he meant it, this time.

I PREFER AU REVOIR, he said.

The End
10

10

Sourcery

Sourcery

DEDICATION

Many years ago I saw, in Bath, a very large American lady towing a huge tartan suitcase very fast on little rattly wheels which caught in the pavement cracks and generally gave it a life of its own. At that moment the Luggage was born. Many thanks to that lady and everyone else in places like Power Cable, Neb., who don't get nearly enough encouragement.

This book does not contain a map. Please feel free to draw your own.

There was a man and he had eight sons. Apart from that, he was nothing more than a comma on the page of History. It's sad, but that's all you can say about some people.

But the eighth son grew up and married and had eight sons, and because there is only one suitable profession for the eighth son of an eighth son, he became a wizard. And he became wise and powerful, or at any rate powerful, and wore a pointed hat and there it would have ended ...

Should have ended ...

But against the Lore of Magic and certainly against all reason-except the reasons of the heart, which are warm and messy and, well, unreasonable - he fled the halls of magic and fell in love and got married, not necessarily in that order.

And he had seven sons, each one from the cradle at least as powerful as any wizard in the world.

And then he had an eighth son ...

A wizard squared. A source of magic.

A sourcerer.

Summer thunder rolled around the sandy cliffs. Far below, the sea sucked on the shingle as noisily as an old man with one tooth who had been given a gobstopper. A few seagulls hung lazily in the updraughts, waiting for something to happen.

And the father of wizards sat among the thrift and rattling sea grasses at the edge of the cliff, cradling the child in his arms, staring out to sea.

There was a roil of black cloud out there, heading inland, and the light it pushed before it had that deep syrup quality it gets before a really serious thunderstorm.

He turned at a sudden silence behind him, and looked up through tear-reddened eyes at a tall hooded figure in a black robe.

IPSLORE THE RED? it said. The voice was as hollow as a cave, as dense as a neutron star.

Ipslore grinned the terrible grin of the suddenly mad, and held up the child for Death's inspection.

'My son,' he said. 'I shall call him Coin.'

A NAME AS GOOD AS ANY OTHER, said Death politely. His empty sockets stared down at a small round face wrapped in sleep. Despite rumour, Death isn't cruel-merely terribly, terribly good at his job.

'You took his mother,' said Ipslore. It was a flat statement, without apparent rancour. In the valley behind the cliffs Ipslore's homestead was a smoking ruin, the rising wind already spreading the fragile ashes across the hissing dunes.

IT WAS A HEART ATTACK AT THE END, said Death. THERE ARE WORSE WAYS TO DIE. TAKE IT FROM ME.

Ipslore looked out to sea. 'All my magic could not save her,' he said.

THERE ARE PLACES WHERE EVEN MAGIC MAY NOT GO.

'And now you have come for the child?'

NO. THE CHILD HAS HIS OWN DESTINY I HAVE COME FOR YOU.

'Ah.' The wizard stood up, carefully laid the sleeping baby down on the thin grass, and picked up a long staff that had been lying there. It was made of a black metal, with a meshwork of silver and gold carvings that gave it a rich and sinister tastelessness; the metal was octiron, intrinsically magical.

'I made this, you know,' he said. 'They all said you couldn't make a staff out of metal, they said they should only be of wood, but they were wrong. I put a lot of myself into it. I shall give it to him.'

He ran his hands lovingly along the staff, which gave off a faint tone.

He repeated, almost to himself, 'I put a lot of myself into it.'

IT IS A GOOD STAFF, said Death.

Ipslore held it in the air and looked down at his eighth son, who gave a gurgle.

'She wanted a daughter,' he said.

Death shrugged. Ipslore gave him a look compounded of bewilderment and rage.

'What is he?'

THE EIGHTH SON OF AN EIGHTH SON OF AN EIGHTH SON, said Death, unhelpfully. The wind whipped at his robe, driving the black clouds overhead.

'What does that make him?'

A SOURCERER, AS YOU ARE WELL AWARE.

Thunder rolled, on cue.

'What is his destiny?' shouted Ipslore, above the rising gale.

Death shrugged again. He was good at it.

SOURCERERS MAKE THEIR OWN DESTINY. THEY TOUCH THE EARTH LIGHTLY.

Ipslore leaned on the staff, drumming on it with his fingers, apparently lost in the maze of his own thoughts. His left eyebrow twitched.

'No,' he said, softly, 'no. I will make his destiny for him.'

I ADVISE AGAINST IT.

'Be quiet! And listen when I tell you that they drove me out, with their books and their rituals and their Lore! They called themselves wizards, and they had less magic in their whole fat bodies than I have in my little finger! Banished! Me! For showing that I was human! And what would humans be without love?'

RARE, said Death. NEVERTHELESS

'Listen! They drove us here, to the ends of the world, and that killed her! They tried to take my staff away!' Ipslore was screaming above the noise of the wind.

'Well, I still have some power left,' he snarled. 'And I say that my son shall go to Unseen University and wear the Archchancellor's hat and the wizards of the world shall bow to him! And he shall show them what lies in their deepest hearts. Their craven, greedy hearts. He'll show the world its true destiny, and there will be no magic greater than his.'

NO. And the strange thing about the quiet way Death spoke the word was this: it was louder than the roaring of the storm. It jerked Ipslore back to momentary sanity.

Ipslore rocked back and forth uncertainly. 'What?' he said.

I SAID NO. NOTHING IS FINAL. NOTHING IS ABSOLUTE. EXCEPT ME, OF COURSE. SUCH TINKERING WITH DESTINY COULD MEAN THE DOWNFALL OF THE WORLD. THERE MUST BE A CHANCE, HOWEVER SMALL. THE LAWYERS OF FATE DEMAND A LOOPHOLE IN EVERY PROPHECY.

Ipslore stared at Death's implacable face.

'I must give them a chance?'

YES.

Tap, tap, tap went Ipslore's fingers on the metal of the staff.

'Then they shall have their chance,' he said, 'when hell freezes over.'

NO. I AM NOT ALLOWED TO ENLIGHTEN YOU, EVEN BY DEFAULT, ABOUT CURRENT TEMPERATURES IN THE NEXT WORLD.

'Then,' Ipslore hesitated, 'then they shall have their chance when my son throws his staff away.'

NO WIZARD WOULD EVER THROW HIS STAFF AWAY, said Death. THE BOND IS TOO GREAT.

'Yet it is possible, you must agree.'

Death appeared to consider this. Must was not a word he was accustomed to hearing, but he seemed to concede the point.

AGREED, he said.

'Is that a small enough chance for you?'

SUFFICIENTLY MOLECULAR.

Ipslore relaxed a little. In a voice that was nearly normal, he said: 'I don't regret it, you know. I would do it all again. Children are our hope for the future.'

THERE IS NO HOPE FOR THE FUTURE, said Death.

'What does it contain, then?'

ME.

'Besides you I mean!'

Death gave him a puzzled look. I'M SORRY?

The storm reached its howling peak overhead. A seagull went past backwards.

'I meant,' said Ipslore, bitterly, 'what is there in this world that makes living worth while?'

Death thought about it.

CATS, he said eventually, CATS ARE NICE.

'Curse you!'

MANY HAVE, said Death, evenly.

'How much longer do I have?'

Death pulled a large hourglass from the secret recesses of his robe. The two bulbs were enclosed in bars of black and gold, and the sand was nearly all in the bottom one.

OH, ABOUT NINE SECONDS.

Ipslore pulled himself up to his full and still impressive height, and extended the

gleaming metal staff towards the child. A hand like a little pink crab reached out from the blanket and grasped it.

'Then let me be the first and last wizard in the history of the world to pass on his staff to his eighth son,' he said slowly and sonorously. 'And I charge him to use it to-‘

I SHOULD HURRY UP, IF I WERE YOU . . .

'-the full,' said Ipslore, 'becoming the mightiest-‘

The lightning screamed from the heart of the cloud, hit Ipslore on the point of his hat, crackled down his arm, flashed along the staff and struck the child.

The wizard vanished in a wisp of smoke. The staff glowed green, then white, then merely red-hot. The child smiled in his sleep.

When the thunder had died away Death reached down slowly and picked up the boy, who opened his eyes.

They glowed golden, from the inside. For the first time in what, for want of any better word, must be called his life, Death found himself looking at a stare that he found hard to return. The eyes seemed to be focused on a point several inches inside his skull.

I did not mean for that to happen, said the voice of Ipslore, from out of the empty air. Is he harmed?

No. Death tore his gaze away from that fresh, knowing smile. HE CONTAINED THE POWER. HE IS A SOURCERER: NO DOUBT HE WILL SURVIVE MUCH WORSE. AND NOW -YOU WILL COME WITH ME.

No.

YES. YOU ARE DEAD, YOU SEE. Death looked around for Ipslore's wavering shade, and failed to find it. WHERE ARE YOU?

In the staff.

Death leaned on his scythe and sighed.

FOOLISH. HOW EASILY COULD I CUT YOU LOOSE.

Not without destroying the staff, said the voice of Ipslore, and it seemed to Death that there was a new, thick, exultant quality to it. And now the child has accepted the staff you cannot destroy it without destroying him. And that you cannot do without upsetting destiny. My last magic. Rather neat, l feel.

Death prodded the staff. It crackled, and sparks crawled obscenely along its length.

Strangely enough, he wasn't particularly angry. Anger is an emotion, and for emotion you need glands, and Death didn't have much truck with glands and needed a good run at it to get angry. But he was mildly annoyed. He sighed again. People were always trying this sort of thing. On the other hand, it was quite interesting to watch, and at least this was a bit more original than the usual symbolic chess game, which Death always dreaded because he could never remember how the knight was supposed to move.

YOU'RE ONLY PUTTING OFF THE INEVITABLE, he said.

That's what being alive is all about.

BUT WHAT PRECISELY DO YOU EXPECT TO GAIN?

I shall be by my son's side. l shall teach him, even though he won't know it. I shall guide

his understanding. And, when he is ready, l shall guide his steps.

TELL ME, said Death, HOW DID YOU GUIDE THE STEPS OF YOUR OTHER SONS?

I drove them out. They dared to argue with me, they would not listen to what I could teach them. But this one will.

IS THIS WISE?

The staff was silent. Beside it, the boy chuckled at the sound of a voice only he could hear.

There was no analogy for the way in which Great A'Tuin the world turtle moved against the galactic night. When you are ten thousand miles long, your shell pocked with meteor craters and frosted with comet ice, there is absolutely nothing you can realistically be like except yourself.

So Great A'Tuin swam slowly through the interstellar deeps like the largest turtle there has ever been, carrying on its carapace the four huge elephants that bore on their backs the vast, glittering waterfall-fringed circle of the Discworld, which exists either because of some impossible blip on the curve of probability or because the gods enjoy a joke as much as anyone.

More than most people, in fact.

Near the shores of the Circle Sea, in the ancient, sprawling city of Ankh-Morpork, on a velvet cushion on a ledge high up in the Unseen University, was a hat.

It was a good hat. It was a magnificent hat.

It was pointy, of course, with a wide floppy brim, but after disposing of these basic details the designer had really got down to business. There was gold lace on there, and pearls, and bands of purest vermine, and sparkling Ankhstones[1], and some incredibly tasteless sequins, and - a dead giveaway, of course - a circle of octarines.

Since they weren't in a strong magical field at the moment they weren't glowing, and looked like rather inferior diamonds.

Spring had come to Ankh-Morpork. It wasn't immediately apparent, but there were signs that were obvious to the cognoscenti. For example, the scum on the river Ankh, that great wide slow waterway that served the double city as reservoir, sewer and frequent morgue, had turned a particularly iridescent green. The city's drunken rooftops sprouted mattresses and bolsters as the winter bedding was put out to air in the weak sunshine, and in the depths of musty cellars the beams twisted and groaned when their dry sap responded to the ancient call of root and forest. Birds nested among the gutters and eaves of Unseen University, although it was noticeable that however great the pressure on the nesting sites they never, ever, made nests in the invitingly open mouths of the gargoyles that lined the rooftops, much to the gargoyles' disappointment.

A kind of spring had even come to the ancient University itself. Tonight would be the Eve of Small Gods, and a new Archchancellor would be elected.

Well, not exactly elected, because wizards didn't have any truck with all this undignified voting business, and it was well known that Archchancellors were selected by the will of the gods, and this year it was a pretty good bet that the gods would see their way clear to selecting old Virrid Wayzygoose, who was a decent old boy and had been patiently

[1] Like rhinestones, but different river. When it comes to glittering objects, wizards have all the taste and self-control of a deranged magpie

waiting his turn for years.

The Archchancellor of Unseen University was the official leader of all the wizards on the Disc. Once upon a time it had meant that he would be the most powerful in the handling of magic, but times were a lot quieter now and, to be honest, senior wizards tended to look upon actual magic as a bit beneath them. They tended to prefer administration, which was safer and nearly as much fun, and also big dinners.

And so the long afternoon wore on. The hat squatted on its faded cushion in Wayzygoose's chambers, while he sat in his tub in front of the fire and soaped his beard. Other wizards dozed in their studies, or took a gentle stroll around the gardens in order to work up an appetite for the evening's feast; about a dozen steps was usually considered quite sufficient.

In the Great Hall, under the carved or painted stares of two hundred earlier Archchancellors, the butler's staff set out the long tables and benches. In the vaulted maze of the kitchens -well, the imagination should need no assistance. It should include lots of grease and heat and shouting, vats of caviar, whole roast oxen, strings of sausages like paperchains strung from wall to wall, the head chef himself at work in one of the cold rooms putting the finishing touches to a model of the University carved for some inexplicable reason out of butter. He kept doing this every time there was a feast - butter swans, butter buildings, whole rancid greasy yellow menageries - and he enjoyed it so much no-one had the heart to tell him to stop.

In his own labyrinth of cellars the butler prowled among his casks, decanting and tasting.

The air of expectation had even spread to the ravens who inhabited the Tower of Art, eight hundred feet high and reputedly the oldest building in the world. Its crumbling stones supported thriving miniature forests high above the city's rooftops. Entire species of beetles and small mammals had evolved up there and, since people rarely climbed it these days owing to the tower's distressing tendency to sway in the breeze, the ravens had

it all to themselves. Now they were flying around it in a state of some agitation, like gnats before a thunderstorm. If anyone below is going to take any notice of them it might be a good idea.

Something horrible was about to happen.

You can tell, can't you?

You're not the only one.

'What's got into them?' shouted Rincewind above the din.

The Librarian ducked as a leather-bound grimoire shot out from its shelf and jerked to a mid-air halt on the end of its chain. Then he dived, rolled and landed on a copy of Maleficio's Discouverie of Demonologie that was industriously bashing at its lectern.

'Oook!' he said.

Rincewind put his shoulder against a trembling bookshelf and forced its rustling volumes back into place with his knees. The noise was terrible.

Books of magic have a sort of life of their own. Some have altogether too much; for example, the first edition of the Necrotelicomicon has to be kept between iron plates, the True Arte of Levitatione has spent the last one hundred and fifty years up in the rafters, and Ge Fordge's Compenydyum of Sex Majick is kept in a vat of ice in a room all by itself and there's a strict rule that it can only be read by wizards who are over eighty and, if possible, dead.

But even the everyday grimoires and incunabula on the main shelves were as restless and

nervy as the inmates of a chickenhouse with something rank scrabbling under the door. From their shut covers came a muffled scratching, like claws.

'What did you say?' screamed Rincewind.

'Oook!'[2]

'Right!'

Rincewind, as honorary assistant librarian, hadn't progressed much beyond basic indexing and bananafetching, and he had to admire the way the Librarian ambled among the quivering shelves, here running a black-leather hand over a trembling binding, here comforting a frightened thesaurus with a few soothing simian murmurings.

After a while the Library began to settle down, and Rincewind felt his shoulder muscles relax.

It was a fragile peace, though. Here and there a page rustled. From distant shelves came the ominous creak of a spine. After its initial panic the Library was now as alert and jittery as a long-tailed cat in a rocking-chair factory.

The Librarian ambled back down the aisles. He had a face that only a lorry tyre could love and it was permanently locked in a faint smile, but Rincewind could tell by the way the ape crept into his cubbyhole under the desk and hid his head under a blanket that he was deeply worried.

Examine Rincewind, as he peers around the sullen shelves. There are eight levels of wizardry on the Disc; after sixteen years Rincewind has failed to achieve even level one.

[2] Like rhinestones, but different river. When it comes to glittering objects, wizards have all the taste and self-control of a deranged magpie

In fact it is the considered opinion of some of his tutors that he is incapable even of achieving level zero, which most normal people are born at; to put it another way, it has been suggested that when Rincewind dies the average occult ability of the human race will actually go up by a fraction.

He is tall and thin and has the scrubby kind of beard that looks like the kind of beard worn by people who weren't cut out by nature to be beard wearers. He is dressed in a dark red robe that has seen better days, possibly better decades. But you can tell he's a wizard, because he's got a pointy hat with a floppy brim. It's got the word 'Wizzard' embroidered on it in big silver letters, by someone whose needlework is even worse than their spelling. There's a star on top. It has lost most of its sequins.

Clamping his hat on his head, Rincewind pushed his way through the Library's ancient doors and stepped out into the golden light of the afternoon. It was calm and quiet, broken only by the hysterical croaking of the ravens as they circled the Tower of Art.

Rincewind watched them for a while. The University's ravens were a tough bunch of birds. It took a lot to unsettle them.

On the other hand-

-the sky was pale blue tinted with gold, with a few high wisps of fluffy cloud glowing pinkly in the lengthening light. The ancient chestnut trees in the quadrangle were in full bloom. From an open window came the sound of a student wizard practising the violin, rather badly. It was not what you would call ominous.

Rincewind leaned against the warm stonework. And screamed.

The building was shuddering. He could feel it come up through his hand and along his arms, a faint rhythmic sensation at just the right frequency to suggest uncontrollable terror. The stones themselves were frightened.

He looked down in horror at a faint clinking noise. An ornamental drain cover fell backwards and one of the University's rats poked its whiskers out. It gave Rincewind a desperate look as it scrambled up and fled past him, followed by dozens of its tribe. Some of them were wearing clothes but that wasn't unusual for the University, where the high level of background magic does strange things to genes.

As he stared around him Rincewind could see other streams of grey bodies leaving the University by every drainpipe and flowing towards the outside wall. The ivy by his ear rustled and a group of rats made a series of death-defying leaps on to his shoulders and slid down his robe. They otherwise ignored him totally but, again, this wasn't particularly unusual. Most creatures ignored Rincewind.

He turned and fled into the University, skirts flapping around his knees, until he reached the bursar's study. He hammered on the door, which creaked open.

'Ah. It's, um, Rincewind, isn't it?' said the bursar, without much enthusiasm. 'What's the matter?'

'We're sinking!'

The bursar stared at him for a few moments. His name was Spelter. He was tall and wiry and looked as though he had been a horse in previous lives and had only just avoided it in this one. He always gave people the impression that he was looking at them with his teeth.

'Sinking?'

'Yes. All the rats are leaving!'

The bursar gave him another stare.

'Come inside, Rincewind,' he said, kindly. Rincewind followed him into the low, dark room and across to the window. It looked out over the gardens to the river, oozing peacefully towards the sea.

'You haven't been, um, overdoing it?' said the bursar.

'Overdoing what?' said Rincewind, guiltily.

'This is a building, you see,' said the bursar. Like most wizards when faced with a puzzle, he started to roll himself a cigarette. 'It's not a ship. There are ways of telling, you know. Absence of porpoises frolicking around the bows, a shortage of bilges, that sort of thing. The chances of foundering are remote. Otherwise, um, we'd have to man the sheds and row for shore. Um?'

'But the rats-'

'Grain ship in harbour, I expect. Some, um, springtime ritual.'

'I'm sure I felt the building shaking, too,' said Rincewind, a shade uncertainly. Here in this quiet room, with the fire crackling in the grate, it didn't seem quite so real.

'A passing tremor. Great A'Tuin hiccuping, um, possibly. A grip on youself, um, is what you should get. You haven't been drinking, have you?'

'No!'

'Um. Would you like to?'

Spelter padded over to a dark oak cabinet and pulled out a couple of glasses, which he filled from the water jug.

'I tend to be best at sherry this time of day,' he said, and spread his hands over the glasses. 'Say, um, the word - sweet or dry?'

'Um, no,' said Rincewind. 'Perhaps you're right. I think I'll go and have a bit of rest.'

'Good idea.'

Rincewind wandered down the chilly stone passages. Occasionally he'd touch the wall and appear to be listening, and then he'd shake his head.

As he crossed the quadrangle again he saw a herd of mice swarm over a balcony and scamper towards the river. The ground they were running over seemed to be moving, too. When Rincewind looked closer he could see that it was because it was covered with ants.

These weren't ordinary ants. Centuries of magical leakage into the walls of the University had done strange things to them. Some of them were pulling very small carts, some of them were riding beetles, but all of them were leaving the University as quickly as possible. The grass on the lawn rippled as they passed.

He looked up as an elderly striped mattress was extruded from an upper window and flopped down on to the flagstones below. After a pause, apparently to catch its breath, it rose a little from the ground. Then it started to float purposefully across the lawn and bore down on Rincewind, who managed to jump out of its way just in time. He heard a high-pitched chittering and caught a glimpse of thousands of determined little legs under the bulging fabric before it hurtled onward. Even the bedbugs were on the move, and in case they didn't find such comfortable quarters elsewhere they were leaving nothing to chance. One of them waved at him and squeaked a greeting.

Rincewind backed away until something touched the back of his legs and froze his spine. It turned out to be a stone seat. He watched it for some time. It didn't seem in any hurry to

run away. He sat down gratefully.

There's probably a natural explanation, he thought. Or a perfectly normal unnatural one, anyway.

A gritty noise made him look across the lawn.

There was no natural explanation of this. With incredible slowness, easing themselves down parapets and drainpipes in total silence except for the occasional scrape of stone on stone, the gargoyles were leaving the roof.

It's a shame that Rincewind had never seen poor quality stop-motion photography, because then he would have known exactly how to describe what he was seeing. The creatures didn't exactly move, but they managed to progress in a series of high speed tableaux, and lurched past him in a spindly procession of beaks, manes, wings, claws and pigeon droppings.

What's happening?' he squeaked.

A thing with a goblin's face, harpy's body and hen's legs turned its head in a series of little jerks and spoke in a voice like the peristalsis of mountains (although the deep resonant effect was rather spoiled because, of course, it couldn't close its mouth).

It said: 'A Ourcerer is umming! Eee orr ife!'

Rincewind said 'Pardon?' But the thing had gone past and was lurching awkwardly across the ancient lawn.[3]

[3] The furrow left by the fleeing gargoyles caused the University's head gardener to bite through his rake and led to the famous quotation: 'How do you get a lawn like this? You mows it and you rolls it for five hundred years and then a bunch of bastards walks across it.'

So Rincewind sat and stared blankly at nothing much for fully ten seconds before giving a little scream and running as fast as he could.

He didn't stop until he'd reached his own room in the Library building. It wasn't much of a room, being mainly used to store old furniture, but it was home.

Against one shadowy wall was a wardrobe. It wasn't one of your modern wardrobes, fit only for nervous adulterers to jump into when the husband returned home early, but an ancient oak affair, dark as night, in whose dusty depths coat-hangers lurked and bred; herds of flaking shoes roamed its floor. It was quite possible that it was a secret doorway to fabulous worlds, but no-one had ever tried to find out because of the distressing smell of mothballs.

And on top of the wardrobe, wrapped in scraps of yellowing paper and old dust sheets, was a large brassbound chest. It went by the name of the Luggage. Why it consented to be owned by Rincewind was something only the Luggage knew, and it wasn't telling, but probably no other item in the entire chronicle of travel accessories had quite such a history of mystery and grievous bodily harm. It had been described as half suitcase, half homicidal maniac. It had many unusual qualities which may or may not become apparent soon, but currently there was only one that set it apart from any other brassbound chest. It was snoring, with a sound like someone very slowly sawing a log.

The Luggage might be magical. It might be terrible. But in its enigmatic soul it was kin to every other piece of luggage throughout the multiverse, and preferred to spend its winters hibernating on top of a wardrobe.

Rincewind hit it with a broom until the sawing stopped, filled his pockets with odds and ends from the banana crate he used as a dressing table, and made for the door. He couldn't help noticing that his mattress had gone but that didn't matter because he was pretty clear that he was never going to sleep on a mattress again, ever.

The Luggage landed on the floor with a solid thump. After a few seconds, and with extreme care, it rose up on hundreds of little pink legs. It tilted backwards and forwards a bit, stretching every leg, and then it opened its lid and yawned.

'Are you coming or not?'

The lid shut with a snap. The Luggage manoeuvred its feet into a complicated shuffle until it was facing the doorway, and headed after its master.

The Library was still in a state of tension, with the occasional clinking[4] of a chain or muffled crackle of a page. Rincewind reached under the desk and grabbed the Librarian who was still hunched under his blanket.

'Come on, I said!'

'Oook.'

'I'll buy you a drink,' said Rincewind desperately.

The Librarian unfolded like a four-legged spider. 'Oook?'

Rincewind half-dragged the ape from his nest and out through the door. He didn't head for the main gates but for an otherwise undistinguished area of wall where a few loose stones had, for two thousand years, offered students an unobtrusive way in after lights-out. Then he stopped so suddenly that the Librarian cannoned into him and the Luggage ran into both of them.

[4] In most old libraries the books are chained to the shelves to prevent them being damaged by people. In the Library of Unseen University, of course, it's more or less the other way about.

'Oook!'

'Oh, gods,' he said. 'Look at that!'

'Oook?'

There was a shiny black tide flowing out of a grating near the kitchens. Early evening starlight glinted off millions of little black backs.

But it wasn't the sight of the cockroaches that was so upsetting. It was the fact that they were marching in step, a hundred abreast. Of course, like all the informal inhabitants of the University the roaches were a little unusual, but there was something particularly unpleasant about the sound of billions of very small feet hitting the stones in perfect time.

Rincewind stepped gingerly over the marching column. The Librarian jumped it.

The Luggage, of course, followed them with a noise like someone tapdancing over a bag of crisps.

And so, forcing the Luggage to go all the way around to the gates anyway, because otherwise it'd only batter a hole in the wall, Rincewind quit the University with all the other insects and small frightened rodents and decided that if a few quiet beers wouldn't allow him to see things in a different light, then a few more probably would. It was certainly worth a try.

That was why he wasn't present in the Great Hall for dinner. It would turn out to be the most important missed meal of his life.

Further along the University wall there was a faint clink as a grapnel caught the spikes

that lined its top. A moment later a slim, black-clad figure dropped lightly into the University grounds and ran soundlessly towards the Great Hall, where it was soon lost in the shadows.

No-one would have noticed it anyway. On the other side of the campus the Sourcerer was walking towards the gates of the University. Where his feet touched the cobbles blue sparks crackled and evaporated the early evening dew.

It was very hot. The big fireplace at the turnwise end of the Great Hall was practically incandescent. Wizards feel the cold easily, so the sheer blast of heat from the roaring logs was melting candles twenty feet away and bubbling the varnish on the long tables. The air over the feast was blue with tobacco smoke, which writhed into curious shapes as it was bent by random drifts of magic. On the centre table the complete carcass of a whole roast pig looked extremely annoyed at the fact that someone had killed it without waiting for it to finish its apple, and the model University made of butter was sinking gently into a pool of grease.

There was a lot of beer about. Here and there red-faced wizards were happily singing ancient drinking songs which involved a lot of knee-slapping and cries of 'Ho!' The only possible excuse for this sort of thing is that wizards are celibate, and have to find their amusement where they can.

Another reason for the general conviviality was the fact that no-one was trying to kill anyone else. This is an unusual state of affairs in magical circles.

The higher levels of wizardry are a perilous place. Every wizard is trying to dislodge the wizards above him while stamping on the fingers of those below; to say that wizards are healthily competitive by nature is like saying that piranhas are naturally a little peckish.

However, ever since the great Mage Wars left whole areas of the Disc uninhabitable[5], wizards have been forbidden to settle their differences by magical means, because it caused a lot of trouble for the population at large and in any case it was often difficult to tell which of the resultant patches of smoking fat had been the winner. So they traditionally resort to knives, subtle poisons, scorpions in shoes and hilarious booby traps involving razor-sharp pendulums.

On Small Gods' Eve, however, it was considered extremely bad form to kill a brother wizard, and wizards felt able to let their hair down without fear of being strangled with it.

The Archchancellor's chair was empty. Wayzygoose was dining alone in his study, as befits a man chosen by the gods after their serious discussion with sensible senior wizards earlier in the day. Despite his eighty years, he was feeling a little bit nervous and hardly touched his second chicken.

In a few minutes he would have to make a speech. Wayzygoose had, in his younger days, sought power in strange places; he'd wrestled with demons in blazing octagrams, stared into dimensions that men were not meant to wot of, and even outfaced the Unseen University grants committee, but nothing in the eight circles of nothingness was quite so bad as a couple of hundred expectant faces staring up at him through the cigar smoke.

The heralds would soon be coming by to collect him. He sighed and pushed his pudding away untasted, crossed the room, stood in front of the big mirror, and fumbled in the pocket of the robe for his notes.

After a while he managed to get them in some sort of order and cleared his throat.

'My brothers in art,' he began, 'I cannot tell you how much I -er, how much ... fine

[5] At least, by anyone who wanted to wake up the same shape, or even the same species, as they went to bed.

traditions of this ancient university ... er ... as I look around me and see the pictures of Archchancellors gone before ...' He paused, sorted through his notes again, and plunged on rather more certainly. 'Standing here tonight I am reminded of the story about the three-legged pedlar and the, er, merchant's daughters. It seems that this merchant ...'

There was a knock at the door.

'Enter,' Wayzygoose barked, and peered at the notes carefully.

'This merchant,' he muttered, 'this merchant, yes, this merchant had three daughters. I think it was. Yes. It was three. It would appear...'

He looked into the mirror, and turned round.

He started to say, 'Who are y-'

And found that there are things worse than making speeches, after all.

The small dark figure creeping along the deserted corridors heard the noise, and didn't take too much notice. Unpleasant noises were not uncommon in areas where magic was commonly practised. The figure was looking for something. It wasn't sure what it was, only that it would know it when it found, it.

After some minutes its search led it to Wayzygoose's room. The air was full of greasy coils. Little particles of soot drifted gently on the air currents, and there were several foot-shaped burn marks on the floor.

The figure shrugged. There was no accounting for the sort of things you found in wizard's rooms. It caught sight of its multifaceted reflection in the shattered mirror, adjusted the

set of its hood, and got on with the search.

Moving like one listening to inner directions, it padded noiselessly across the room until it reached the table whereon stood a tall, round and battered leather box. It crept closer and gently raised the lid.

The voice from inside sounded as though it was talking through several layers of carpet when it said, At last. What kept you?

'I mean, how did they all get started? I mean, back in the old times, there were real wizards, there was none of this levels business. They just went out and - did it. POW!,

One or two of the other customers in the darkened bar of the Mended Drum tavern looked around hastily at the noise. They were new in town. Regular customers never took any notice of surprising noises like groans or unpleasantly gristly sounds. It was a lot healthier. In some parts of the city curiosity didn't just kill the cat, it threw it in the river with lead weights tied to its feet.

Rincewind's hands weaved unsteadily over the array of empty glasses on the table in front of him. He'd almost been able to forget about the cockroaches. After another drink he might manage to forget about the mattress, too.

'Whee! A fireball! Fizz! Vanishing like smoke! Whee!- Sorry.'

The Librarian carefully pulled what remained of his beer out of the reach of Rincewind's flailing arms.

'Proper magic.' Rincewind stifled a belch.

'Oook.'

Rincewind stared into the frothy remnants of his last beer, and then, with extreme care in case the top of his head fell off, leaned down and poured some into a saucer for the Luggage. It was lurking under the table, which was a relief. It usually embarrassed him in bars by sidling up to drinkers and terrorising them into feeding it crisps.

He wondered fuzzily where his train of thought had been derailed.

'Where was I?'

'Oook,' the Librarian hinted.

'Yeah.' Rincewind brightened. 'They didn't have all this levels and grades business, you know. They had sourcerers in those days. They went out in the world and found new spells and had adventures-‘

He dipped a finger in a puddle of beer and doodled a design on the stained, scratched timber of the table.

One of Rincewind's tutors had said of him that 'to call his understanding of magical theory abysmal is to leave no suitable word to describe his grasp of its practice.' This had always puzzled him. He objected to the fact that you had to be good at magic to be a wizard. He knew he was a wizard, deep in his head. Being good at magic didn't have anything to do with it. That was just an extra, it didn't actually define somebody.

'When I was a little boy,' he said wistfully, 'I saw this picture of a sourcerer in a book. He was standing on a mountain top waving his arms and the waves were coming right up, you know, like they do down in Ankh Bay in a gale, and there were flashes of lightning all round him-’

'Oook?'

'I don't know why they didn't, perhaps he had rubber boots on,' Rincewind snapped, and went on dreamily,

'And he had this staff and a hat on, just like mine, and his eyes were sort of glowing and there was all this sort of like glitter coming out of his fingertips, and I thought one day I'll do that, and-‘

'Oook?'

'Just a half, then.'

'Oook.'

'How do you pay for this stuff? Every time anyone gives you any money you eat it.'

'Oook.'

Amazing.'

Rincewind completed his sketch in the beer. There was a stick figure on a cliff. It didn't look much like him - drawing in stale beer is not a precise art - but it was meant to.

'That's what I wanted to be,' he said. 'Pow! Not all this messing around. All this books and stuff, that isn't what it should all be about. What we need is real wizardry.'

That last remark would have earned the prize for the day's most erroneous statement if Rincewind hadn't then said:

'It's a pity there aren't any of them around any more.'

Spelter rapped on the table with his spoon.

He was an impressive figure, in his ceremonial robe with the purple-and-vermine[6] hood of the Venerable Council of Seers and the yellow sash of a fifth level wizard; he'd been fifth level for three years, waiting for one of the sixty-four sixth level wizards to create a vacancy by dropping dead. He was in an amiable mood, however. Not only had he just finished a good dinner, he also had in his quarters a small phial of a guaranteed untastable poison which, used correctly, should guarantee him promotion within a few months. Life looked good.

The big clock at the end of the hall trembled on the verge of nine o'clock.

The tattoo with the spoon hadn't had much effect. Spelter picked up a pewter tankard and brought it down hard.

'Brothers!' he shouted, and nodded as the hubbub died away. 'Thank you. Be upstanding, please, for the ceremony of the, um, keys.'

There was a ripple of laughter and a general buzz of expectancy as the wizards pushed back their benches and got unsteadily to their feet.

The double doors to the hall were locked and triple barred. An incoming Archchancellor had to request entry three times before they would be unlocked, signifying that he was appointed with the consent of wizardry in general. Or some such thing. The origins were

[6] The vermine is a small black and white relative of the lemming, found in the cold Hublandish regions. Its skin is rare and highly valued, especially by the vermine itself; the selfish little bastard will do anything rather than let go of it.

lost in the depths of time, which was as good a reason as any for retaining the custom.

The conversation died away. The assembled wizardry stared at the doors.

There was a soft knocking.

'Go away!' shouted the wizards, some of them collapsing at the sheer subtlety of the humour.

Spelter picked up the great iron ring that contained the keys to the University. They weren't all metal. They weren't all visible. Some of them looked very strange indeed.

'Who is that who knocketh without?' he intoned.

'I do.'

What was strange about the voice was this: it seemed to every wizard that the speaker was standing right behind him. Most of them found themselves looking over their shoulders.

In that moment of shocked silence there was the sharp little snick of the lock. They watched in fascinated horror as the iron bolts travelled back of their own accord; the great oak balks of timber, turned by Time into something tougher than rock, slid out of their sockets; the hinges flared from red through yellow to white and then exploded. Slowly, with a terrible inevitability, the doors fell into the hall.

There was an indistinct figure standing in the smoke from the burning hinges.

'Bloody hell, Virrid,' said one of the wizards nearby, 'that was a good one.'

As the figure strode into the light they could all see that it was not, after all, Virrid

Wayzygoose.

He was at least a head shorter than any other wizard, and wore a simple white robe. He was also several decades younger; he looked about ten years old, and in one hand he held a staff considerably taller than he was.

'Here, he's no wizard-’

'Where's his hood, then?'

'Where's his hat?'

The stranger walked up the line of astonished wizards until he was standing in front of the top table. Spelter looked down at a thin young face framed by a mass of blond hair, and most of all he looked into two golden eyes that glowed from within. But he felt they weren't looking at him. They seemed to be looking at a point six inches beyond the back of his head. Spelter got the impression that he was in the way, and considerably surplus to immediate requirements.

He rallied his dignity and pulled himself up to his full height.

'What is the meaning of, um, this?' he said. It was pretty weak, he had to admit, but the steadiness of that incandescent glare appeared to be stripping all the words out of his memory.

'I have come,' said the stranger.

'Come? Come for what?'

'To take my place. Where is the seat for me?'

'Are you a student?' demanded Spelter, white with anger. 'What is your name, young man?'

The boy ignored him and looked around at the assembled wizards.

'Who is the most powerful wizard here?' he said. 'I wish to meet him.'

Spelter nodded his head. Two of the college porters, who had been sidling towards the newcomer for the last few minutes, appeared at either elbow.

'Take him out and throw him in the street,' said Spelter. The porters, big solid serious men, nodded. They gripped the boy's pipestem arms with hands like banana bunches.

'Your father will hear of this,' said Spelter severely.

'He already has,' said the boy. He glanced up at the two men and shrugged.

'What's going on here?'

Spelter turned to see Skarmer Billias, head of the Order of the Silver Star. Whereas Spelter tended towards the wiry, Billias was expansive, looking rather like a small captive balloon that had for some reason been draped in blue velvet and vermine; between them, the wizards averaged out as two normal-sized men.

Unfortunately, Billias was the type of person who prided himself on being good with children. He bent down as far as his dinner would allow and thrust a whiskery red face towards the boy.

'What's the matter, lad?' he said.

'This child had forced his way into here because, he says, he wants to meet a powerful

wizard,' said Spelter, disapprovingly. Spelter disliked children intensely, which was perhaps why they found him so fascinating. At the moment he was successfully preventing himself from wondering about the door.

'Nothing wrong with that,' said Billias. 'Any lad worth his salt wants to be a wizard. I wanted to be a wizard when I was a lad. Isn't that right lad?'

'Are you puissant?' said the boy.

'Hmm?'

'I said, are you puissant? How powerful are you?'

'Powerful?' said Billias. He stood up, fingered his eighth-level sash, and winked at Spelter. 'Oh, pretty powerful. Quite powerful as wizards go.'

'Good. I challenge you. Show me your strongest magic. And when I have beaten you, why, then I shall be Archchancellor.'

'Why, you impudent-’ began Spelter, but his protest was lost in the roar of laughter from the rest of the wizards. Billias slapped his knees, or as near to them as he could reach.

'A duel, eh?' he said. 'Pretty good, eh?'

'Duelling is forbidden, as well you know,' said Spelter. 'Anyway, it's totally ridiculous! I don't know who did the doors for him, but I will not stand here and see you waste all our time-‘

'Now, now,' said Billias. 'What's your name, lad?'

'Coin.'

'Coin sir,' snapped Spelter.

'Well, now, Coin,' said Billias. 'You want to see the best I can do, eh?'

'Yes.'

'Yes sir,' snapped Spelter. Coin gave him an unblinking stare, a stare as old as time, the kind of stare that basks on rocks on volcanic islands and never gets tired. Spelter felt his mouth go dry.

Billias held out his hands for silence. Then, with a theatrical flourish, he rolled up the sleeve of his left arm and extended his hand.

The assembled wizards watched with interest. Eighth-levels were above magic, as a rule, spending most of their time in contemplation -normally of the next menu - and, of course, avoiding the attentions of ambitious wizards of the seventh-level. This should be worth seeing.

Billias grinned at the boy, who returned it with a stare that focused on a point a few inches beyond the back of the old wizard's head.

Somewhat disconcerted, Billias flexed his fingers. Suddenly this wasn't quite the game he had intended, and he felt an overpowering urge to impress. It was swiftly overtaken by a surge of annoyance at his own stupidity in being unnerved.

'I shall show you,' he said, and took a deep breath, 'Maligree's Wonderful Garden.'

There was a susurration from the diners. Only four wizards in the entire history of the University had ever succeeded in achieving the complete Garden. Most wizards could create the trees and flowers, and a few had managed the birds. It wasn't the most

powerful spell, it couldn't move mountains, but achieving the fine detail built into Maligree's complex syllables took a finely tuned skill.

'You will observe,' Billias added, 'nothing up my sleeve.'

His lips began to move. His hands flickered through the air. A pool of golden sparks sizzled in the palm of his hand, curved up, formed a faint sphere, began to fill in the detail ...

Legend had it that Maligree, one of the last of the true sourcerers, created the Garden as a small, timeless, private self-locking universe where he could have a quiet smoke and a bit of a think while avoiding the cares of the world. Which was itself a puzzle, because no wizard could possibly understand how any being as powerful as a sourcerer could have a care in the world. Whatever the reason, Maligree retreated further and further into a world of his own and then, one day, closed the entrance after him.

The garden was a glittering ball in Billias's hands. The nearest wizards craned admiringly over his shoulders, and looked down into a two-foot sphere that showed a delicate, flower-strewn landscape; there was a lake in the middle distance, complete in every ripple, and purple mountains behind an interesting-looking forest. Tiny birds the size of bees flew from tree to tree, and a couple of deer no larger than mice glanced up from their grazing and stared out at Coin.

Who said critically: 'It's quite good. Give it to me.'

He took the intangible globe out of the wizard's hands and held it up.

'Why isn't it bigger?' he said.

Billias mopped his brow with a lace-edged handkerchief.

'Well,' he said weakly, so stunned by Coin's tone that he was quite unable to be affronted, 'since the old days, the efficacity of the spell has rather-’

Coin stood with his head on one side for a moment, as though listening to something. Then he whispered a few syllables and stroked the surface of the sphere.

It expanded. One moment it was a toy in the boy's hands, and the next ...

... the wizards were standing on cool grass, in a shady meadow rolling down to the lake. There was a gentle breeze blowing from the mountains; it was scented with thyme and hay. The sky was deep blue shading to purple at the zenith.

The deer watched the newcomers suspiciously from their grazing ground under the trees.

Spelter looked down in shock. A peacock was pecking at his bootlaces.

'-' he began, and stopped. Coin was still holding a sphere, a sphere of air. Inside it, distorted as though seen through a fisheye lens or the bottom of a bottle, was the Great Hall of Unseen University.

The boy looked around at the trees, squinted thoughtfully at the distant, snow-capped mountains, and nodded at the astonished men.

'It's not bad,' he said. 'I should like to come here again.' He moved his hands in a complicated motion that seemed, in some unexplained way, to turn them inside out.

Now the wizards were back in the hall, and the boy was holding the shrinking Garden in his palm. In the heavy, shocked silence he put it back into Billias's hands, and said: 'That was quite interesting. Now I will do some magic.'

He raised his hands, stared at Billias, and vanished him.

Pandemonium broke out, as it tends to on these occasions. In the centre of it stood Coin, totally composed, in a spreading cloud of greasy smoke.

Ignoring the tumult, Spelter bent down slowly and, with extreme care, picked a peacock feather off the floor. He rubbed it thoughtfully back and forth across his lips as he looked from the doorway to the boy to the vacant Archchancellor's chair, and his thin mouth narrowed, and he began to smile.

An hour later, as thunder began to roll in the clear skies above the city, and Rincewind was beginning to sing gently and forget all about cockroaches, and a lone mattress was wandering the streets, Spelter shut the door of the Archchancellor's study and turned to face his fellow mages.

There were six of them, and they were very worried.

They were so worried, Spelter noted, that they were listening to him, a mere fifth level wizard.

'He's gone to bed,' he said, 'with a hot milk drink.'

'Milk?' said one of the wizards, with tired horror in his voice.

'He's too young for alcohol', explained the bursar.

'Oh, yes. Silly of me.'

The hollow-eyed wizard opposite said: 'Did you see what he did to the door?'

'I know what he did to Billias!'

'What did he do?'

'I don't want to know!'

'Brothers, brothers,' said Spelter soothingly. He looked down at their worried faces and thought: too many dinners. Too many afternoons waiting for the servants to bring in the tea. Too much time spent in stuffy rooms reading old books written by dead men. Too much gold brocade and ridiculous ceremony. Too much fat. The whole University is ripe for one good push ...

Or one good pull ...

'I wonder if we really have, um, a problem here,' he said.

Gravie Derment of the Sages of the Unknown Shadow hit the table with his fist.

'Good grief, man!' he snapped. 'Some child wanders in out of the night, beats two of the University's finest, sits down in the Archchancellor's chair and you wonder if we have a problem? The boy's a natural! From what we've seen tonight, there isn't a wizard on the Disc who could stand against him!'

'Why should we stand against him?' said Spelter, in a reasonable tone of voice.

'Because he's more powerful than we are!'

'Yes?' Spelter's voice would have made a sheet of glass look like a ploughed field, it made honey look like gravel.

'It stands to reason-’

Gravie hesitated. Spelter gave him an encouraging smile.

'Ahem.'

The ahemmer was Marmaric Carding, head of the Hoodwinkers. He steepled his beringed fingers and peered sharply at Spelter over the top of them. The bursar disliked him intensely. He had considerable doubt about the man's intelligence. He suspected it might be quite high, and that behind those vein-crazed jowls was a mind full of brightly polished little wheels, spinning like mad.

'He does not seem overly inclined to use that power,' said Carding.

'What about Billias and Virrid?'

'Childish pique,' said Carding.

The other wizards stared from him to the bursar. They were aware of something going on, and couldn't quite put their finger on it.

The reason that wizards didn't rule the Disc was quite simple. Hand any two wizards a piece of rope and they would instinctively pull in opposite directions. Something about their genetics or their training left them with an attitude towards mutual co-operation that made an old bull elephant with terminal toothache look like a worker ant.

Spelter spread his hands. 'Brothers,' he said again, 'do you not see what has happened? Here is a gifted youth, perhaps raised in isolation out in the untutored, um, countryside, who, feeling the ancient call of the magic in his bones, has journeyed far across tortuous terrain, through who knows what perils, and at last has reached his journey's end, alone and afraid, seeking only the steadying influence of us, his tutors, to shape and guide his talents? Who are we to turn him away, into the, um, wintry blast, shunning his-’

The oration was interrupted by Gravie blowing his nose.

'It's not winter,' said one of the other wizards flatly, 'and it's quite a warm night.'

'Out into the treacherously changeable spring weather,' snarled Spelter, 'and cursed indeed would be the man who failed, um, at this time-'

'It's nearly summer.'

Carding rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully.

'The boy has a staff,' he said. 'Who gave it to him? Did you ask?'

'No,' said Spelter, still glowering at the almanackical interjector.

Carding started to look at his fingernails in what Spelter considered to be a meaningful way.

Well, whatever the problem, I feel sure it can wait until morning,' he said in what Spelter felt was an ostentatiously bored voice.

'Ye gods, he blew Billias away!' said Gravie. 'And they say there's nothing in Virrid's room but soot!'

'They were perhaps rather foolish,' said Carding smoothly. 'I am sure, my good brother, that you would not be defeated in affairs of the Art by a mere stripling?'

Gravie hesitated. 'Well, er,' he said, 'no. Of course not.' He looked at Carding's innocent smile and coughed loudly. 'Certainly not, of course. Billias was very foolish. However, some prudent caution is surely-'

'Then let us all be cautious in the morning,' said Carding cheerfully. 'Brothers, let us adjourn this meeting. The boy sleeps, and in that at least he is showing us the way. This will look better in the light.'

'I have seen things that didn't,' said Gravie darkly, who didn't trust Youth. He held that no good ever came of it.

The senior wizards filed out and back to the Great Hall, where the dinner had got to the ninth course and was just getting into its stride. It takes more than a bit of magic and someone being blown to smoke in front of him to put a wizard off his food.

For some unexplained reason Spelter and Carding were the last to leave. They sat at either end of the long table, watching each other like cats. Cats can sit at either end of a lane and watch each other for hours, performing the kind of mental manoeuvring that would make a grand master appear impulsive by comparison, but cats have got nothing on wizards. Neither was prepared to make a move until he had run the entire forthcoming conversation through his mind to see if it left him a move ahead.

Spelter weakened first.

'All wizards are brothers,' he said. 'We should trust one another. I have information.'

'I know,' said Carding. 'You know who the boy is.'

Spelter's lips moved soundlessly as he tried to foresee the next bit of the exchange. 'You can't be certain of that,' he said, after a while.

'My dear Spelter, you blush when you inadvertently tell the truth.'

'I didn't blush!'

'Precisely,' said Carding, 'my point.'

'All right,' Spelter conceded. 'But you think you know something else.'

The fat wizard shrugged. 'A mere suspicion of a hunch,' he said. 'But why should I ally,' he rolled the unfamiliar word around his tongue, 'with you, a mere fifth level? I could more certainly obtain the information by rendering down your living brain. I mean no offence, you understand, I ask only for knowledge.'

The events of the next few seconds happened far too fast to be understood by non-wizards, but went approximately like this:

Spelter had been drawing the signs of Megrim's Accelerator in the air under cover of the table. Now he muttered a syllable under his breath and fired the spell along the tabletop, where it left a smoking path in the varnish and met, about halfway, the silver snakes of Brother Hushmaster's Potent Asp-Spray as they spewed from Carding's fingertips.

The two spells cannoned into one another, turned into a ball of green fire and exploded, filling the room with fine yellow crystals.

The wizards exchanged the kind of long, slow glare you could roast chestnuts on.

Bluntly, Carding was surprised. He shouldn't have been. Eighth-level wizards are seldom faced with challenging tests of magical skill. In theory there are only seven other wizards of equal power and every lesser wizard is, by definition - well, lesser. This makes them complacent. But Spelter, on the other hand, was at the fifth level.

It may be quite tough at the top, and it is probably even tougher at the bottom, but halfway up it's so tough you could use it for horseshoes. By then all the no-hopers, the lazy, the silly and the downright unlucky have been weeded out, the field's cleared, and

every wizard stands alone and surrounded by mortal enemies on every side. There's the pushy fours below, waiting to trip him up. There's the arrogant sixes above, anxious to stamp out all ambition. And, of course, all around are his fellow fives, ready for any opportunity to reduce the competition a little. And there's no standing still. Wizards of the fifth level are mean and tough and have reflexes of steel and their eyes are thin and narrow from staring down the length of that metaphorical last furlong at the end of which rests the prize of prizes, the Archchancellor's hat.

The novelty of co-operation began to appeal to Carding. There was worthwhile power here, which could be bribed into usefulness for as long as it was necessary. Of course, afterwards it might have to be - discouraged ...

Spelter thought: patronage. He'd heard the term used, though never within the University, and he knew it meant getting those above you to give you a leg up. Of course, no wizard would normally dream of giving a colleague a leg up unless it was in order to catch them on the hop. The mere thought of actually encouraging a competitor ... But on the other hand, this old fool might be of assistance for a while, and afterwards, well ...

They looked at one another with mutual, grudging admiration and unlimited mistrust, but at least it was a mistrust each one felt he could rely on. Until afterwards.

'His name is Coin,' said Spelter. 'He says his father's name is Ipslore.'

'I wonder how many brothers has he got?' said Spelter.

'I'm sorry?'

'There hasn't been magic like that in this university in centuries,' said Carding, 'maybe for thousands of years. I've only ever read about it.'

'We banished an Ipslore thirty years ago,' said Spelter. 'According to the records, he'd got

married. I can see that if he had sons, um, they'd be wizards, but I don't understand how-’

'That wasn't wizardry. That was sourcery,' said Carding, leaning back in his chair.

Spelter stared at him across the bubbling varnish.

'Sourcery?'

'The eighth son of a wizard would be a sourcerer.'

'I didn't know that!'

'It is not widely advertised.'

'Yes, but - sourcerers were a long time ago, I mean, the magic was a lot stronger then, um, men were different ... it didn't have anything to do with, well, breeding.' Spelter was thinking, eight sons, that means he did it eight times. At least. Gosh.

'Sourcerers could do everything,' he went on. 'They were nearly as powerful as the gods. Um. There was no end of trouble. The gods simply wouldn't allow that sort of thing any more, depend upon it.'

'Well, there was trouble because the sourcerers fought among themselves,' said Carding, 'But one sourcerer wouldn't be any trouble. One sourcerer correctly advised, that is. By older and wiser minds.'

'But he wants the Archchancellor's hat!'

'Why can't he have it?'

Spelter's mouth dropped open. This was too much, even for him.

Carding smiled at him amiably.

'But the hat-‘

'It's just a symbol,' said Carding. 'It's nothing special. If he wants it, he can have it. It's a small enough thing. Just a symbol, nothing more. A figurehat.'

'Figurehat?'

'Worn by a figurehead.'

'But the gods choose the Archchancellor!'

Carding raised an eyebrow. 'Do they?' he said, and coughed.

'Well, yes, I suppose they do. In a manner of speaking.'

'In a manner of speaking?'

Carding got up and gathered his skirts around him. 'I think,' he said, 'that you have a great deal to learn. By the way, where is that hat?'

'I don't know,' said Spelter, who was still quite shaken.

'Somewhere in, um, Virrid's apartments, I suppose.'

'We'd better fetch it,' said Carding.

He paused in the doorway and stroked his beard reflectively. 'I remember Ipslore,' he said. 'We were students together. Wild fellow. Odd habits. Superb wizard, of course,

before he went to the bad. Had a funny way of twitching his eyebrow, I remember, when he was excited.' Carding looked blankly across forty years of memory, and shivered.

'The hat,' he reminded himself. 'Let's find it. It would be a shame if anything happened to it.'

In fact the hat had no intention of letting anything happen to it, and was currently hurrying towards the Mended Drum under the arm of a rather puzzled, black-clad thief.

The thief, as will become apparent, was a special type of thief. This thief was an artist of theft. Other thieves merely stole everything that was not nailed down, but this thief stole the nails as well. This thief had scandalised Ankh by taking a particular interest in stealing, with astonishing success, things that were in fact not only nailed down but also guarded by keen-eyed guards in inaccessible strongrooms. There are artists that will paint an entire chapel ceiling; this was the kind of thief that could steal it.

This particular thief was credited with stealing the jewelled disembowelling knife from the Temple of Offler the Crocodile God during the middle of Evensong, and the silver shoes from the Patrician's finest racehorse while it was in the process of winning a race. When Gritoller Mimpsey, vice-president of the Thieves' Guild, was jostled in the marketplace and then found on returning home that a freshly-stolen handful of diamonds had vanished from their place of concealment, he knew who to blame.[7] This was the type of thief that could steal the initiative, the moment and the words right out of your mouth.

However, it was the first time it had stolen something that not only asked it to, in a low but authoritative voice, but gave precise and somehow unarguable instructions about how it was to be disposed of.

[7] This was because Gritoller had swallowed the jewels for safe keeping.

It was that cusp of the night that marks the turning point of Ankh-Morpork's busy day, when those who make their living under the sun are resting after their labours and those who turn an honest dollar by the cold light of the moon are just getting up the energy to go to work. The day had, in fact, reached that gentle point when it was too late for housebreaking and too early for burglary.

Rincewind sat alone in the crowded, smoky room, and didn't take much notice when a shadow passed over the table and a sinister figure sat down opposite him. There was nothing very remarkable about sinister figures in this place. The Drum jealousy guarded its reputation as the most stylishly disreputable tavern in Ankh-Morpork and the big troll that now guarded the door carefully vetted customers for suitability in the way of black cloaks, glowing eyes, magic swords and so forth. Rincewind never found out what he did to the failures. Perhaps he ate them.

When the figure spoke, its husky voice came from the depths of a black velvet hood, lined with fur.

'Psst,' it said.

'Not very,' said Rincewind, who was in a state of mind where he couldn't resist it, 'but I'm working on it.'

'I'm looking for a wizard,' said the voice. It sounded hoarse with the effort of disguising itself but, again, this was nothing unusual in the Drum.

'Any wizard in particular?' Rincewind said guardedly. People could get into trouble this way.

'One with a keen sense of tradition who would not mind taking risks for high reward,' said another voice. It appeared to be coming from a round black leather box under the

stranger's arm.

‘Ah,' said Rincewind, 'that narrows it down a bit, then. Does this involve a perilous journey into unknown and probably dangerous lands?'

'It does, as a matter of fact.'

'Encounters with exotic creatures?' Rincewind smiled.

'Could be.'

'Almost certain death?'

'Almost certainly.'

Rincewind nodded, and picked up his hat.

'Well, I wish you every success in your search,' he said, 'Id help you myself, only I'm not going to.'

'What?'

'Sorry. I don't know why, but the prospect of certain death in unknown lands at the claws of exotic monsters isn't for me. I've tried it, and I couldn't get the hang of it. Each to their own, that's what I say, and I was cut out for boredom.' He rammed his hat on his head and stood up a little unsteadily.

He'd reached the foot of the steps leading up into the street when a voice behind him said: 'A real wizard would have accepted.'

He could have kept going. He could have walked up the stairs, out into the street, got a

pizza at the Klatchian takeaway in Sniggs Alley, and gone to bed. History would have been totally changed, and in fact would also have been considerably shorter, but he would have got a good night's sleep although, of course, it would have been on the floor.

The future held its breath, waiting for Rincewind to walk away.

He didn't do this for three reasons. One was alcohol. One was the tiny flame of pride that flickers in the heart of even the most careful coward. But the third was the voice.

It was beautiful. It sounded like wild silk looks.

The subject of wizards and sex is a complicated one, but as has already been indicated it does, in essence, boil down to this: when it comes to wine, women and song, wizards are allowed to et drunk and croon as much as they like.

The reason given to young wizards was that the practice of magic is hard and demanding and incompatible with sticky and furtive activities. It was a lot more sensible, they were told, to stop worrying about that sort of thing and really get to grips with Woddeley's Occult Primer instead. Funnily enough this didn't seem to satisfy, and young wizards suspected that the real reason was that the rules were made by old wizards. With poor memories. They were quite wrong, although the real reason had long been forgotten: if wizards were allowed to go around breeding all the time, there was a risk of sourcery.

Of course, Rincewind had been around a bit and had seen a thing or two, and had thrown off his early training to such an extent that he was quite capable of spending hours at a time in a woman's company without having to go off for a cold shower and a lie-down. But that voice would have made even a statue get down off its pedestal for a few brisk laps of the playing field and fifty press-ups. It was a voice that could make 'Good morning' sound like an invitation to bed.

The stranger threw back her hood and shook out her long hair. It was almost pure white.

Since her skin was tanned golden the general effect was calculated to hit the male libido like a lead pipe.

Rincewind hesitated, and lost a splendid opportunity to keep quiet. From the top of the stairs came a thick trollish voice:

"Ere, I thed you can't go freu dere-'

She sprang forward and shoved a round leather box into Rincewind's arms.

'Quick, you must come with me,' she said. 'You're in great danger!'

'Why?'

'Because I will kill you if you don't.'

'Yes, but hang on a moment, in that case-' Rincewind protested feebly.

Three members of the Patrician's personal guard appeared at the top of the stairs. Their leader beamed down at the room. The smile suggested that he intended to be the only one to enjoy the joke.

'Don't nobody move,' he suggested.

Rincewind heard a clatter behind him as more guards appeared at the back door.

The Drum's other customers paused with their hands on assorted hilts. These weren't the normal city watch, cautious and genially corrupt. These were walking slabs of muscle and they were absolutely unbribable, if only because the Patrician could outbid anyone else. Anyway, they didn't seem to be looking for anyone except the woman. The rest of the clientele relaxed and prepared to enjoy the show. Eventually it might be worth joining

it, once it was certain which was the winning side.

Rincewind felt the pressure tighten on his wrist.

'Are you mad?' he hissed. 'This is messing with the Man!'

There was a swish and the sergeant's shoulder suddenly sprouted a knife hilt. Then the girl spun around and with surgical precision planted a small foot in the groin of the first guard through the door. Twenty pairs of eyes watered in sympathy.

Rincewind grabbed his hat and tried to dive under the nearest table, but that grip was steel. The next guard to approach got another knife in the thigh. Then she drew a sword like a very long needle and raised it threateningly.

'Anyone else?' she said.

One of the guards raised a crossbow. The Librarian, sitting hunched over his drink, reached out a lazy arm like two broom handles strung with elastic and slapped him backwards. The bolt rebounded from the star on Rincewind's hat and hit the wall by a respected procurer who was sitting two tables away. His bodyguards threw another knife which just missed a thief across the room, who picked up a bench and hit two guards, who struck out at the nearest drinkers. After that one thing sort of led to another and pretty soon everyone was fighting to get something - either away, out or even.

Rincewind found himself pulled relentlessly behind the bar. The landlord was sitting on his moneybags under the counter with two machetes crossed on his knees, enjoying a quiet drink. Occasionally the sound of breaking furniture would make him wince.

The last thing Rincewind saw before he was dragged away was the Librarian. Despite looking like a hairy rubber sack full of water, the orang-utan had the weight and reach of any man in the room and was currently sitting on a guard's shoulders and trying, with

reasonable success, to unscrew his head.

Of more concern to Rincewind was the fact that he was being dragged upstairs.

'My dear lady,' he said desperately. 'What do you have in mind?'

'Is there a way on to the roof?'

'Yes. What's in this box?'

'Shhh!'

She halted at a bend in the dingy corridor, reached into a belt pouch and scattered a handful of small metal objects on the floor behind them. Each one was made of four nails welded together so that, however the things fell, one was always pointing upwards.

She looked critically at the nearest doorway.

'You haven't got about four feet of cheesewire on you, have you?' she said wistfully. Shed drawn another throwing knife and was throwing it up and catching it again.

'I don't think so,' said Rincewind weakly.

'Pity. I've run out. Okay, come on.'

'Why? I haven't done anything!'

She went to the nearest window, pushed open the shutters and paused with one leg over the sill.

'Fine,' she said, over her shoulder. 'Stay here and explain it to the guards.'

'Why are they chasing you?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh, come on! There must be a reason!'

'Oh, there's plenty of reasons. I just don't know which one. Are you coming?'

Rincewind hesitated. The Patrician's personal guard was not known for its responsive approach to community policing, preferring to cut bits off instead. Among the things they took a dim view of was, well, basically, people being in the same universe. Running away from them was likely to be a capital offence.

'I think maybe I'll come along with you,' he said gallantly. 'A girl can come to harm all alone in this city.'

Freezing fog filled the streets of Ankh-Morpork. The flares of street traders made little yellow haloes in the smothering billows.

The girl peered around a corner.

'We've lost them,' she said. 'Stop shaking. You're safe now.'

'What, you mean I'm all alone with a female homicidal maniac?' said Rincewind. 'Fine.'

She relaxed and laughed at him.

'I was watching you,' she said. 'An hour ago you were afraid that your future was going to

be dull and uninteresting.'

'I want it to be dull and uninteresting,' said Rincewind bitterly. 'I'm afraid it's going to be short.'

'Turn your back,' she commanded, stepping into an alley.

'Not on your life,' he said.

'I'm going to take my clothes off.'

Rincewind spun around, his face red. There was a rustling behind him, and a waft of scent. After a while she said, 'You can look round now.'

He didn't.

'You needn't worry. I've put some more on.'

He opened his eyes. The girl was wearing a demure white lace dress with fetchingly puffed sleeves. He opened his mouth. He realised with absolute clarity that up to now the trouble he had been in was simple, modest and nothing he couldn't talk his way out of given a decent chance or, failing that, a running start. His brain started to send urgent messages to his sprinting muscles, but before they could get through she'd grabbed his arm again.

'You really shouldn't be so nervous,' she said sweetly. 'Now, let's have a look at this thing.'

She pulled the lid off the round box in Rincewind's unprotesting hands, and lifted out the Archchancellor's hat.

The octarines around its crown blazed in all eight colours of the spectrum, creating the kind of effects in the foggy alley that it would take a very clever special effects director and a whole battery of star filters to achieve by any non-magical means. As she raised it high in the air it created its own nebula of colours that very few people ever see in legal circumstances.

Rincewind sank gently to his knees.

She looked down at him, puzzled.

'Legs given out?'

'It's - it's the hat. The Archchancellor's hat,' said Rincewind, hoarsely. His eyes narrowed. 'You've stolen it!' he shouted, struggling back to his feet and grabbing for the sparkling brim.

'It's just a hat.'

'Give it to me this minute! Women musn't touch it! It belongs to wizards!'

'Why are you getting so worked up?' she said.

Rincewind opened his mouth. Rincewind closed his mouth.

He wanted to say: It's the Archchancellor's hat, don't you understand? It's worn by the head of all wizards, well, on the head of the head of all wizards, no, metaphorically it's worn by all wizards, potentially, anyway, and it's what every wizard aspires to, it's the symbol of organised magic, it's the pointy tip of the profession, it's a symbol, it's what it means to all wizards ...

And so on. Rincewind had been told about the hat on his first day at University, and it

had sunk into his impressionable mind like a lead weight into a jelly. He wasn't sure of much in the world, but he was certain that the Archchancellor's hat was important. Maybe even wizards need a little magic in their lives.

Rincewind, said the hat.

He stared at the girl. 'It spoke to me!'

'Like a voice in your head?'

'Yes!'

'It did that to me, too.'

'But it knew my name!'

Of course we do, stupid fellow. We are supposed to be a magic hat after all.

The hat's voice wasn't only clothy. It also had a strange choral effect, as if an awful lot of voices were talking at the same time, in almost perfect unison.

Rincewind pulled himself together.

'O great and wonderful hat,' he said pompously, 'strike down this impudent girl who has had the audacity, nay, the-’

Oh, do shut up. She stole us because we ordered her to. It was a near thing, too.

'But she's a-’ Rincewind hesitated. 'She's of the female persuasion...' he muttered.

So was your mother.

'Yes, well, but she ran away before I was born,' Rincewind mumbled.

Of all the disreputable taverns in all the city you could have walked into, you walked into his, complained the hat.

'He was the only wizard I could find,' said the girl, 'He looked the part. He had 'blizzard' written on his hat and everything.'

Don't believe everything you read. Too late now, anyway. We haven't got much time.

'Hold on, hold on,' said Rincewind urgently, 'What's going on? You wanted her to steal you? Why haven't we got much time?' He pointed an accusing finger at the hat. 'Anyway, you can't go around letting yourself be stolen, you're supposed to be on - on the Archchancellor's head! The ceremony was tonight, I should have been there-'

Something terrible is happening at the University. It is vital that we are not taken back, do you understand? You must take us to Klatch, where there is someone fit to wear me.

'Why?' There was something very strange about the voice, Rincewind decided. It sounded impossible to disobey, as though it was solid destiny. If it told him to walk over a cliff, he thought, he'd be halfway down before it could occur to him to disobey.

The death of all wizardry is at hand.

Rincewind looked around guiltily.

'Why?' he said.

The world is going to end.

'What, again?'

I mean it, said the hat sulkily. The triumph of the Ice Giants, the Apocralypse, the Teatime of the Gods, the whole thing.

'Can we stop it?'

The future is uncertain on that point.

Rincewind's expression of determined terror faded slowly.

'Is this a riddle?' he said.

Perhaps it would be simpler if you just did what you're told and didn't try to understand things, said the hat. Young woman, you will put us back in our box. A great many people will shortly be looking for us.

'Hey, hold on,' said Rincewind. 'I've seen you around here for years and you never talked before.'

I didn't have anything that needed to be said.

Rincewind nodded. That seemed reasonable.

'Look, just shove it in its box, and let's get going,' said the girl.

A bit more respect if you please, young lady,' said Rincewind haughtily. 'That is the symbol of ancient wizardry you happen to be addressing.'

'You carry it, then,' she said.

'Hey, look,' said Rincewind, scrambling along after her as she swept down the alleys, crossed a narrow street and entered another alley between a couple of houses that leaned together so drunkenly that their upper storeys actually touched. She stopped.

'Well?' she snapped.

'You're the mystery thief, aren't you?' he said, 'Everyone's been talking about you, how you've taken things even from locked rooms and everything. You're different than I imagined...'

'Oh?' she said coldly. 'How?'

'Well, you're ... shorter.'

'Oh, come on.'

The street cressets, not particularly common in this part of the city in any case, gave out altogether here. There was nothing but watchful darkness ahead.

'I said come on,' she repeated. 'What are you afraid of?'

Rincewind took a deep breath. 'Murderers, muggers, thieves, assassins, pickpockets, cutpurses, reevers, snigsmen, rapists and robbers,' he said. 'That's the Shades you're going into!'[8]

'Yes, but people won't come looking for us in here,' she said.

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[8] The Ankh-Morpork Merchants' Guild publication Wellcome to Ankh-Morporke, Citie of One Thousand Surprises describes the area of Old Morpork known as The Shades as 'a folklorique network of old alleys and picturesque streets, wherre exitment and romans lurkes arounde everry corner and much may be heard the traditinal street cries of old time also the laughing visages of the denuizens as they goe about their business private.' In other words, you have been warned.

'Oh, they'll come in all right, they just won't come out,' said Rincewind. 'Nor will we. I mean, a beautiful young woman like you ... it doesn't bear thinking about ... I mean, some of the people in there ...'

'But I'll have you to protect me,' she said.

Rincewind thought he heard the sound of marching feet several streets away.

'You know,' he sighed, 'I knew you'd say that.'

Down these mean streets a man must walk, he thought. And along some of them he will break into a run.

It is so black in the Shades on this foggy spring night that it would be too dark to read about Rincewind's progress through the eerie streets, so the descriptive passage will lift up above the level of the ornate rooftops, the forest of twisty chimneys, and admire the few twinkling stars that manage to pierce the swirling billows. It will try to ignore the sounds drifting up from below the patter of feet, the rushes, the gristly noises, the groans, the muffled screams. It could be that some wild animal is pacing through the Shades after two weeks on a starvation diet.

Somewhere near the centre of the Shades - the district has never been adequately mapped - is a small courtyard. Here at least there are torches on the walls, but the light they throw is the light of the Shades themselves: mean, reddened, dark at the core.

Rincewind staggered into the yard and hung on to the wall for support. The girl stepped into the ruddy light behind him, humming to herself.

'Are you all right?' she said.

'Nurrgh,' said Rincewind.

'Sorry?'

'Those men,' he bubbled, 'I mean, the way you kicked his ... when you grabbed them by the ... when you stabbed that one right in ... who are you?'

'My name is Conina.'

Rincewind looked at her blankly for some time.

'Sorry,' he said, 'doesn't ring a bell.'

'I haven't been here long,' she said.

'Yes, I didn't think you were from around these parts,' he said. 'I would have heard.'

'I've taken lodgings here. Shall we go in?'

Rincewind glanced up at the dingy pole just visible in the smoky light of the spitting torches. It indicated that the hostelry behind the small dark door was the Troll's Head.

It might be thought that the Mended Drum, scene of unseemly scuffles only an hour ago, was a seedy disreputable tavern. In fact it was a reputable disreputable tavern. Its customers had a certain rough-hewn respectability - they might murder each other in an easygoing way, as between equals, but they didn't do it vindictively. A child could go in for a glass of lemonade and be certain of getting nothing worse than a clip round the ear when his mother heard his expanded vocabulary. On quiet nights, and when he was certain the Librarian wasn't going to come in, the landlord was even known to put bowls

of peanuts on the bar.

The Troll's Head was a cesspit of a different odour. Its customers, if they reformed, tidied themselves up and generally improved their image out of all recognition might, just might, aspire to be considered the utter dregs of humanity. And in the Shades, a dreg is a dreg.

By the way, the thing on the pole isn't a sign. When they decided to call the place the Troll's Head, they didn't mess about.

Feeling sick, and clutching the grumbling hatbox to his chest, Rincewind stepped inside.

Silence. It wrapped itself around them, nearly as thickly as the smoke of a dozen substances guaranteed to turn any normal brain to cheese. Suspicious eyes peered through the smog.

A couple of dice clattered to a halt on a tabletop. They sounded very loud, and probably weren't showing Rincewind's lucky number.

He was aware of the stares of several score of customers as he followed the demure and surprisingly small figure of Conina into the room. He looked sideways into the leering faces of men who would kill him sooner than think, and in fact would find it a great deal easier.

Where a respectable tavern would have had a bar there was just a row of squat black bottles and a couple of big barrels on trestles against the wall.

The silence tightened like a tourniquet. Any minute now, Rincewind thought.

A big fat man wearing nothing but a fur vest and a leather loincloth pushed back his stool and lurched to his feet and winked evilly at his colleagues. When his mouth opened, it

was like a hole with a hem.

'Looking for a man, little lady?' he said.

She looked up at him.

'Please keep away'

A snake of laughter writhed around the room. Conina's mouth snapped shut like a letterbox.

‘Ah,’ the big man gurgled, 'that's right, I likes a girl with spirit-‘

Conina's hand moved. It was a pale blur, stopping here and here: after a few seconds of disbelief the man gave a little grunt and folded up, very slowly.

Rincewind shrank back as every other man in the room leaned forward. His instinct was to run, and he knew it was an instinct that would get him instantly killed. It was the Shades out there. Whatever was going to happen to him next was going to happen to him here. It was not a reassuring thought.

A hand closed around his mouth. Two more grabbed the hatbox from his arms.

Conina spun past him, lifting her skirt to place a neat foot on a target beside Rincewind's waist. Someone whimpered in his ear and collapsed. As the girl pirouetted gracefully around she picked up two bottles, knocked out their bottoms on the shelf and landed with their jagged ends held out in front of her. Morpork daggers, they were called in the patois of the streets.

In the face of them, the Troll's Head's clientele lost interest.

'Someone got the hat,' Rincewind muttered through dry lips, 'They slipped out of the back way.'

She glared at him and made for the door. The Head's crowd of customers parted automatically, like sharks recognising another shark, and Rincewind darted anxiously after her before they came to any conclusion about him.

They ran out into another alley and pounded down it. Rincewind tried to keep up with the girl; people following her tended to tread on sharp things, and he wasn't sure she'd remember he was on her side, whatever side that was.

A thin, half-hearted drizzle was falling. And at the end of the alley was a faint blue glow.

'Wait!'

The terror in Rincewind's voice was enough to slow her down.

'What's wrong?'

'Why's he stopped?'

'I'll ask him,' said Conina, firmly.

'Why's he covered in snow?'

She stopped and turned around, arms thrust into her sides, one foot tapping impatiently on the damp cobbles.

'Rincewind, I've known you for an hour and I'm astonished you've lived even that long!'

'Yes, but I have, haven't I? I've got a sort of talent for it. Ask anyone. I'm an addict.'

'Addicted to what?'

'Life. I got hooked on it at an early age and I don't want to give it up and take it from me, this doesn't look right!'

Conina looked back at the figure surrounded by the glowing blue aura. It seemed to be looking at something in its hands.

Snow was settling on its shoulder like really bad dandruff. Terminal dandruff. Rincewind had an instinct for these things, and he had a deep suspicion that the man had gone where shampoo would be no help at all.

They sidled along a glistening wall.

'There's something very strange about him,' she conceded.

'You mean the way he's got his own private blizzard?'

'Doesn't seem to upset him. He's smiling.'

'A frozen grin, I'd call it.'

The man's icicle-hung hands had been taking the lid off the box, and the glow from the hat's octarines shone up into a pair of greedy eyes that were already heavily rimed with frost.

'Know him?' said Conina.

Rincewind shrugged. 'I've seen him around,' he said. 'He's called Larry the Fox or Fezzy the Stoat or something. Some sort of rodent, anyway. He just steals things. He's

harmless.'

'He looks incredibly cold.' Conina shivered.

'I expect he's gone to a warmer place. Don't you think we should shut the box?'

It's perfectly safe now, said the hat's voice from inside the glow. And so perish all enemies of wizardry.

Rincewind wasn't about to trust what a hat said.

'We need something to shut the lid,' he muttered. 'A knife or something. You wouldn't have one, would you?'

'Look the other way,' Conina warned.

There was a rustle and another gust of perfume.

'You can look back now.'

Rincewind was handed a twelve-inch throwing knife. He took it gingerly. Little particles of metal glinted on its edge.

'Thanks.' He turned back. 'Not leaving you short, am I?'

'I have others.'

'I'll bet.'

Rincewind reached out gingerly with the knife. As it neared the leather box its blade went white and started to steam. He whimpered a little as the cold struck his hand - a burning,

stabbing cold, a cold that crept up his arm and made a determined assault on his mind. He forced his numb fingers into action and, with great effort, nudged the edge of the lid with the tip of the blade.

The glow faded. The snow became sleet, then melted into drizzle.

Conina nudged him aside and pulled the box out of the frozen arms.

'I wish there was something we could do for him. It seems wrong just to leave him here.'

'He won't mind,' said Rincewind, with conviction.

'Yes, but we could at least lean him against the wall. Or something.'

Rincewind nodded, and grabbed the frozen thief by his icicle arm. The man slipped out of his grasp and hit the cobbles.

Where he shattered.

Conina looked at the pieces.

'Urg,' she said.

There was a disturbance further up the alley, coming from the back door of the Troll's Head. Rincewind felt the knife snatched from his hand and then go past his ear in a flat trajectory that ended in the doorpost twenty yards away. A head that had been sticking out withdrew hurriedly.

'We'd better go,' said Conina, hurrying along the alley. 'Is there somewhere we can hide? Your place?'

'I generally sleep at the University,' said Rincewind, hopping along behind her.

You must not return to the University, growled the hat from the depths of its box. Rincewind nodded distractedly. The idea certainly didn't seem attractive.

'Anyway, they don't allow women inside after dark,' he said.

'And before dark?'

'Not then, either.'

Conina sighed. 'That's silly. What have you wizards got against women, then?'

Rincewind's brow wrinkled. 'We're not supposed to put anything against women,' he said. 'That's the whole point.'

Sinister grey mists rolled through the docks of Morpork, dripping from the rigging, coiling around the drunken rooftops, lurking in alleys. The docks at night were thought by some to be even more dangerous than the Shades. Two muggers, a sneak thief and someone who had merely tapped Conina on the shoulder to ask her the time had already found this out.

'Do you mind if I ask you a question?' said Rincewind, stepping over the luckless pedestrian who lay coiled around his private pain.

Well?'

'I mean, I wouldn't like to cause offence.'

Well?'

'It's just that I can't help noticing-’

'Hmmm?'

'You have this certain way with strangers.' Rincewind ducked, but nothing happened.

What are you doing down there?' said Conina, testily.

‚Sorry.,

'I know what you're thinking. I can't help it, I take after my father.'

Who was he, then? Cohen the Barbarian?' Rincewind grinned to show it was a joke. At least, his lips moved in a desperate crescent.

'No need to laugh about it, wizard.'

'What?'

'It's not my fault.'

Rincewind's lips moved soundlessly. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Have I got this right? Your father really is Cohen the Barbarian?'

'Yes.' The girl scowled at Rincewind. 'Everyone has to have a father,' she added. 'Even you, I imagine.'

She peered around a corner.

'All clear. Come on,' she said, and then when they were striding along the damp cobbles she continued: 'I expect your father was a wizard, probably.'

'I shouldn't think so,' said Rincewind. 'Wizardry isn't allowed to run in families.' He paused. He knew Cohen, he'd even been a guest at one of his weddings when he married a girl of Conina's age; you could say this about Cohen, he crammed every hour full of minutes. 'A lot of people would like to take after Cohen, I mean, he was the best fighter, the greatest thief, he-'

'A lot of men would,' Conina snapped. She leaned against a wall and glared at him.

'Listen,' she said, 'There's this long word, see, an old witch told me about it ...can't remember it ...you wizards know about long words.'

Rincewind thought about long words. 'Marmalade?' he volunteered.

She shook her head irritably. 'It means you take after your parents.'

Rincewind frowned. He wasn't too good on the subject of parents.

'Kleptomania? Recidivist?' he hazarded.

'Begins with an H.'

'Hedonism?' said Rincewind desperately.

'Herrydeterry,' said Conina. 'This witch explained it to me. My mother was a temple dancer for some mad god or other, and father rescued her, and - they stayed together for a while. They say I get my looks and figure from her.'

'And very good they are, too,' said Rincewind, with hopeless gallantry.

She blushed. 'Yes, well, but from him I got sinews you could moor a boat with, reflexes like a snake on a hot tin, a terrible urge to steal things and this dreadful sensation every time I meet someone that I should be throwing a knife through his eye at ninety feet. I can, too,' she added with a trace of pride.

'Gosh.'

'It tends to put men off.'

Well, it would,' said Rincewind weakly.

'I mean, when they find out, it's very hard to hang on to a boyfriend.'

'Except by the throat, I imagine,' said Rincewind.

'Not what you really need to build up a proper relationship.'

'No. I can see,' said Rincewind. 'Still, pretty good if you want to be a famous barbarian thief.'

But not,' said Conina, 'if you want to be a hairdresser.'

'Ah.'

They stared into the mist.

'Really a hairdresser?' said Rincewind.

Conina sighed.

'Not much call for a barbarian hairdresser, I expect,' said Rincewind. 'I mean, no-one wants a shampoo-and-beheading.'

'It's just that every time I see a manicure set I get this terrible urge to lay about me with a double-handed cuticle knife. I mean sword,' said Conina.

Rincewind sighed. 'I know how it is,' he said. 'I wanted to be a wizard.'

'But you are a wizard.'

'Ah. Well, of course, but-’

'Quiet!'

Rincewind found himself rammed against the wall, where a trickle of condensed mist inexplicably began to drip down his neck. A broad throwing knife had mysteriously appeared in Conina's hand, and she was crouched like a jungle animal or, even worse, a jungle human.

'What-’ Rincewind began.

'Shut up!' she hissed. 'Something's coming!'

She stood up in one fluid movement, spun on one leg and let the knife go.

There was a single, hollow, wooden thud.

Conina stood and stared. For once, the heroic blood that pounded through her veins, drowning out all chances of a lifetime in a pink pinny, was totally at a loss.

'I've just killed a wooden box,' she said.

Rincewind looked round the corner.

The Luggage stood in the dripping street, the knife still quivering in its lid, and stared at her. Then it changed its position slightly, its little legs moving in a complicated tango pattern, and stared at Rincewind. The Luggage didn't have any features at all, apart from a lock and a couple of hinges, but it could stare better than a rockful of iguanas. It could outstare a glass-eyed statue. When it came to a look of betrayed pathos, the Luggage could leave the average kicked spaniel moping back in its kennel. It had several arrowheads and broken swords sticking in it.

'What is it?' hissed Conina.

'It's just the Luggage,' said Rincewind wearily.

'Does it belong to you?'

'Not really. Sort of.'

'Is it dangerous?'

The Luggage shuffled round to stare at her again.

'There's two schools of thought about that,' said Rincewind. 'There's some people who say it's dangerous, and others who say it's very dangerous. What do you think?'

The Luggage raised its lid a fraction.

The Luggage was made from the wood of the sapient peartree, a plant so magical that it had nearly died out on the Disc and survived only in one or two places; it was a sort of rosebay willowherb, only instead of bomb sites it sprouted in areas that had seen vast

expenditures of magic. Wizards' staves were traditionally made of it; so was the Luggage.

Among the Luggage's magical qualities was a fairly simple and direct one: it would follow its adopted owner anywhere. Not anywhere in any particular set of dimensions, or country, or universe, or lifetime. Anywhere. It was about as easy to shake off as a head cold and considerably more unpleasant.

The Luggage was also extremely protective of its owner. It would be hard to describe its attitude to the rest of creation, but one could start with the phrase 'bloody-minded malevolence' and work up from there.

Conina stared at that lid. It looked very much like a mouth.

'I think I'd vote for "terminally dangerous",' she said.

'It likes crisps,' volunteered Rincewind, and then added, 'Well, that's a bit strong. It eats crisps.'

'What about people?'

'Oh, and people. About fifteen so far; I think.'

'Were they good or bad?'

'Just dead, I think. It also does your laundry for you, you put your clothes in and they come out washed and ironed.'

'And covered in blood?'

'You know, that's the funny thing,' said Rincewind.

'The funny thing?' repeated Conina, her eyes not leaving the Luggage.

'Yes, because, you see, the inside isn't always the same, it's sort of multidimensional, and-
'

'How does it feel about women?'

'Oh, it's not choosy. It ate a book of spells last year. Sulked for three days and then spat it out.'

'It's horrible,' said Conina, and backed away.

'Oh, yes,' said Rincewind, 'absolutely.'

'I mean the way it stares!'

'It's very good at it, isn't it?'

We must leave for Klatch, said a voice from the hatbox. One of these boats will be adequate. Commandeer it.

Rincewind looked at the dim, mist-wreathed shapes that loomed in the mist under a forest of rigging. Here and there a riding light made a little fuzzy ball of light in the gloom.

'Hard to disobey, isn't it?' said Conina.

'I'm trying,' said Rincewind. Sweat prickled on his forehead.

Go aboard now, said the hat. Rincewind's feet began to shuffle of their own accord.

'Why are you doing this to me?' he moaned.

Because I have no alternative. Believe me, if I could have found an eighth level mage I would have done so. I must not be worn!

'Why not? You are the Archchancellor's hat.'

And through me speak all the Archchancellors who ever lived. I am the University. I am the Lore. I am the symbol of magic under the control of men - and I will not be worn by a sourcerer! There must be no more sourcerers! The world is too worn out for sourcery!

Conina coughed.

'Did you understand any of that?' she said, cautiously.

'I understood some of it, but I didn't believe it,' said Rincewind. His feet remained firmly rooted to the cobbles.

They called me a figurehat! The voice was heavy with sarcasm. Fat wizards who betray everything the University ever stood for, and they called me a figurehat! Rincewind, I command you. And you, madam. Serve me well and I will grant you your deepest desire.

'How can you grant my deepest desire if the world's going to end?'

The hat appeared to think about it. Well, have you got a deepest desire that need only take a couple of minutes?

'Look, how can you do magic? You're just a-' Rincewind's voice trailed off.

I AM magic. Proper magic. Besides, you don't get worn by some of the world's greatest wizards for two thousand years without learning a few things. Now. We must flee.

But with dignity of course.

Rincewind looked pathetically at Conina, who shrugged again.

'Don't ask me,' she said. 'This looks like an adventure. I'm doomed to have them, I'm afraid. That's genetics[9] for you.'

'But I'm no good at them! Believe me, I've been through dozens!' Rincewind wailed.

Ah. Experience, said the hat.

'No, really, I'm a terrible coward, I always run away.' Rincewind's chest heaved. 'Danger has stared me in the back of the head, oh, hundreds of times!'

I don't want you to go into danger.

'Good!'

I want you to stay OUT of danger.

Rincewind sagged. 'Why me?' he moaned.

For the good of the University. For the honour of wizardry. For the sake of the world. For your heart's desire. And I'll freeze you alive if you don't.

Rincewind breathed a sigh almost of relief. He wasn't good on bribes, or cajolery, or

[9] The study of genetics on the Disc had failed at an early stage, when wizards tried the experimental crossing of such well known subjects as fruit flies and sweet peas. Unfortunately they didn't quite grasp the fundamentals, and the resultant offspring - a sort of green bean thing that buzzed -led a short sad life before being eaten by a passing spider.

appeals to his better nature. But threats, now, threats were familiar. He knew where he was with threats.

The sun dawned on Small Gods' Day like a badly poached egg. The mists had closed in over Ankh-Morpork in streamers of silver and gold - damp, warm, silent. There was the distant grumbling of springtime thunder, out on the plains. It seemed warmer than it ought to be.

Wizards normally slept late. On this morning, however, many of them had got up early and were wandering the corridors aimlessly. They could feel the change in the air.

The University was filling up with magic.

Of course, it was usually full of magic anyway, but it was an old, comfortable magic, as exciting and dangerous as a bedroom slipper. But seeping through the ancient fabric was a new magic, saw-edged and vibrant, bright and cold as comet fire. It sleeted through the stones and crackled off sharp edges like static electricity on the nylon carpet of Creation. It buzzed and sizzled. It curled wizardly beards, poured in wisps of octarine smoke from fingers that had done nothing more mystical for three decades than a little light illusion. How can the effect be described with delicacy and taste? For most of the wizards, it was like being an elderly man who, suddenly faced with a beautiful young woman, finds to his horror and delight and astonishment that the flesh is suddenly as willing as the spirit.

And in the halls and corridors of the University the word was being whispered: Sourcery!

A few wizards surreptitiously tried spells that they hadn't been able to master for years, and watched in amazement as they unrolled perfectly. Sheepishly at first, and then with confidence, and then with shouts and whoops, they threw fireballs to one another or produced live doves out of their hats or made multi-coloured sequins fall out of the air.

Sourcery! One or two wizards, stately men who had hitherto done nothing more blameworthy that eat a live oyster, turned themselves invisible and chased the maids and bedders through the corridors.

Sourcery! Some of the bolder spirits had tried out ancient flying spells and were bobbing a little uncertainly among the rafters. Sourcery!

Only the Librarian didn't share in the manic breakfast. He watched the antics for some time, pursing his prehensile lips, and then knuckled stiffly off towards his Library. If anyone had bothered to notice, they'd have heard him bolting the door.

It was deathly quiet in the Library. The books were no longer frantic. They'd passed through their fear and out into the calm waters of abject terror, and they crouched on their shelves like so many mesmerised rabbits.

A long hairy arm reached up and grabbed Casplock's Compleet Lexicon of Majik with Precepts for the Wise before it could back away, soothed its terror with a longfingered hand, and opened it under 'S'. The Librarian smoothed the trembling page gently and ran a horny nail down the entries until he came to:

Sourcerer, n. (mythical). A proto-wizard, a doorway through which new majik may enterr the world, a wizard not limited by the physical capabilities of hys own bodie, not by Destinie, nor by Deathe. It is written that there once werre sourcerers in the youth of the world but not may there by nowe and blessed be, for sourcery is not for menne and the return of sourcery would mean the Ende of the Worlde ... If the Creator hadd meant menne to bee as goddes, he ould have given them wings. SEE ALSO: thee Apocralypse, the legende of thee Ice Giants, and thee Teatime of the Goddes.

The Librarian read the cross-references, turned back to the first entry, and stared at it through deep dark eyes for a long time. Then he put the book back carefully, crept under his desk, and pulled the blanket over his head.

But in the minstrel gallery over the Great Hall Carding and Spelter watched the scene with entirely different emotions.

Standing side by side they looked almost exactly like the number 10.

'What is happening?' said Spelter. He'd had a sleepless night, and wasn't thinking very straight.

'Magic is flowing into the University,' said Carding. 'That's what sourcerer means. A channel for magic. Real magic, my boy. Not the tired old stuff we've made do with these past centuries. This is the dawning of a ... a-'

'New, um, dawn?'

'Exactly. A time of miracles, a ... a-'

'Anus mirabilis?'

Carding frowned. 'Yes,' he said, eventually, 'something like that, I expect. You have quite a way with words, you know.'

'Thank you, brother.'

The senior wizard appeared to ignore the familiarity. Instead he turned and leaned on the carved rail, watching the magical displays below them. His hands automatically went to

his pockets for his tobacco pouch, and then paused. He grinned, and snapped his fingers. A lighted cigar appeared in his mouth.

'Haven't been able to do that in years,' he mused. 'Big changes, my boy. They haven't realised it yet, but it's the end of Orders and Levels. That was just a - rationing system. We don't need them any more. Where is the boy?'

'Still asleep-' Spelter began.

'I am here,' said Coin.

He stood in the archway leading to the senior wizard's quarters, holding the octiron staff that was half again as tall as he was. Little veins of yellow fire coruscated across its matt black surface, which was so dark that it looked like a slit in the world.

Spelter felt the golden eyes bore through him, as if his innermost thoughts were being scrolled across the back of his skull.

'Ah,' he said, in a voice that he believed was jolly and avuncular but in fact sounded like a strangled death rattle. After a start like that his contribution could only get worse, and it did. 'I see you're, um, up,' he said.

'My dear boy,' said Carding.

Coin gave him a long, freezing stare.

'I saw you last night,' he said. 'Are you puissant?'

'Only mildly,' said Carding, hurriedly recalling the boy's tendency to treat wizardry as a terminal game of corkers. 'But not so puissant as you, I'm sure.'

'I am to be made Archchancellor, as is my destiny?'

'Oh, absolutely,' said Carding. 'No doubt about it. May I have a look at your staff? Such an interesting design-’

He reached out a pudgy hand.

It was a shocking breach of etiquette in any case; no wizard should even think of touching another's staff without his express permission. But there are people who can't quite believe that children are fully human, and think that the operation of normal good manners doesn't apply to them.

Carding's fingers curled around the black staff.

There was a noise that Spelter felt rather than heard, and Carding bounced across the gallery and struck the opposite wall with a sound like a sack of lard hitting a pavement.

'Don't do that,' said Coin. He turned and looked through Spelter, who had gone pale, and added: 'Help him up. He is probably not badly hurt.'

The bursar scuttled hurriedly across the floor and bent over Carding, who was breathing heavily and had gone an odd colour. He patted the wizard's hand until Carding opened one eye.

'Did you see what happened?' he whispered.

'I'm not sure. Um. What did happen?’ hissed Spelter.

'It bit me.'

'The next time you touch the staff,' said Coin, matteroffactly, 'you will die. Do you

understand?'

Carding raised his head gently, in case bits of it fell off.

'Absolutely,' he said.

'And now I would like to see the University,' the boy continued. 'I have heard a great deal about it...'

Spelter helped Carding to his unsteady feet and supported him as they trotted obediently after the boy.

'Don't touch his staff,' muttered Carding.

'I'll remember, um, not to,' said Spelter firmly. 'What did it feel like?'

'Have you ever been bitten by a viper?'

'No.'

'In that case you'll understand exactly what it felt like.'

'Hmmm?'

'It wasn't like a snake bite at all.'

They hurried after the determined figure as Coin marched down the stairs and through the ravished doorway of the Great Hall.

Spelter dodged in front, anxious to make a good impression.

'This is the Great Hall,' he said. Coin turned his golden gaze towards him, and the wizard felt his mouth dry up. 'It's called that because it's a hall, dyou see. And big.'

He swallowed. 'It's a big hall,' he said, fighting to stop the last of his coherence being burned away by the searchlight of that stare. 'A great big hall, which is why it's called-’

'Who are those people?' said Coin. He pointed with his staff. The assembled wizards, who had turned to watch him enter, backed out of the way as though the staff was a flamethrower.

Spelter followed the sourcerer's stare. Coin was pointing to the portraits and statues of former Archchancellors, which decorated the walls. Full-bearded and pointhatted, clutching ornamental scrolls or holding mysterious symbolic bits of astrological equipment, they stared down with ferocious self-importance or, possibly, chronic constipation.

'From these walls,' said Carding, 'two hundred supreme mages look down upon you.'

'I don't care for them,' said Coin, and the staff streamed octarine fire. The Archchancellors vanished.

'And the windows are too small-’

'The ceiling is too high-’

'Everything is too old-’

The wizards threw themselves flat as the staff flared and spat. Spelter pulled his hat over his ayes and rolled under a table when the very fabric of the University flowed around him. Wood creaked, stone groaned.

Something tapped him on the head. He screamed.

'Stop that!' shouted Carding above the din. 'And pull your hat up! Show a little dignity!'

'Why are you under the table, then?' said Spelter sourly.

'We must seize our opportunity!'

What, like the staff?'

'Follow me!'

Spelter emerged into a bright, a horrible bright new world.

Gone were the rough stone walls. Gone were the dark, owlhaunted rafters. Gone was the tiled floor, with its eye-boggling pattern of black and white tiles.

Gone, too, were the high small windows, with their gentle patina of antique grease. Raw sunlight streamed into the hall for the first time.

The wizards stared at one another, mouths open, and what they saw was not what they had always thought they'd seen. The unforgiving rays transmuted rich gold embroidery into dusty gilt, exposed opulent fabric as rather stained and threadbare velvet, turned fine flowing beards into nicotinestained tangles, betrayed splendid diamonds as rather inferior Ankhstones. The fresh light probed and prodded, stripping away the comfortable shadows.

And, Spelter had to admit, what was left didn't inspire confidence. He was suddenly acutely aware that under his robes - his tattered, badly-faded robes, he realised with an added spasm of guilt; the robes with the perforated area where the mice had got at them - he was still wearing his bedroom slippers.

The hall was now almost all glass. What wasn't glass was marble. It was all so splendid that Spelter felt quite unworthy.

He turned to Carding, and saw that his fellow wizard was staring at Coin with his eyes gleaming.

Most of the other wizards had the same expression. If wizards weren't attracted to power they wouldn't be wizards, and this was real power. The staff had them charmed like so many cobras.

Carding reached out to touch the boy on the shoulder, and then thought better of it.

'Magnificent,' he said, instead.

He turned to the assembled wizardry and raised his arms. 'My brothers,' he intoned, 'we have in our midst a wizard of great power!'

Spelter tugged at his robe.

'He nearly killed you,' he hissed. Carding ignored him.

'And I propose-’ Carding swallowed - 'I propose him for Archchancellor!'

There was a moment's silence, and then a burst of cheering and shouts of dissent. Several quarrels broke out at the back of the crowd. The wizards nearer the front weren't quite so ready to argue. They could see the smile on Coin's face. It was bright and cold, like the smile on the face of the moon.

There was a commotion, and an elderly wizard fought his way to the front of the throng.

Spelter recognised Ovin Hakardly, a seventh-level wizard and a lecturer in Lore. He was red with anger, except where he was white with rage. When he spoke, his words seared through the air like so many knives, clipped as topiary, crisp as biscuits.

'Are you mad?' he said. 'No-one but a wizard of the eighth level may become Archchancellor! And he must be elected by the other most senior wizards in solemn convocation! (Duly guided by the gods, of course.) It is the Lore! (The very idea!)'

Hakardly had studied the Lore of magic for years and, because magic always tends to be a two-way process, it had made its mark on him; he gave the impression of being as fragile as a cheese straw, and in some unaccountable way the dryness of his endeavours had left him with the ability to pronounce punctuation. He stood vibrating with indignation and, he became aware, he was rapidly standing alone. In fact he was the centre of an expanding circle of empty floor fringed with wizards who were suddenly ready to swear that they'd never clapped eyes on him in their life.

Coin had raised his staff.

Hakardly raised an admonitory finger.

'You do not frighten me, young man,' he snapped. 'Talented you may be, but magical talent alone is not enough. There are many other qualities required of a great wizard. Administrative ability, for example, and wisdom, and the-’

Coin lowered his staff.

'The Lore applies to all wizards, does it not?' he said.

'Absolutely! It was drawn up-’

'But I am not a wizard, Lord Hakardly.'

The wizard hesitated. ‘Ah,’ he said, and hesitated again. 'Good point,' he said.

'But I am well aware of the need for wisdom, foresight and good advice, and I would be honoured if you could see your way clear to providing those much-valued commodities. For example - why is it that wizards do not rule the world?'

'What?'

'It is a simple question. There are in this room-’ Coin's lips moved for a fraction of a second - 'four hundred and seventy-two wizards, skilled in the most subtle of arts. Yet all you rule are these few acres of rather inferior architecture. Why is this?'

The most senior wizards exchanged knowing glances.

'Such it may appear,' said Hakardly eventually, 'but, my child, we have domains beyond the ken of the temporal power.' His eyes gleamed. 'Magic can surely take the mind to inner landscape of arcane-’

'Yes, yes,' said Coin. 'Yet there are extremely solid walls outside your University. Why is this?'

Carding ran his tongue over his lips. It was extraordinary. The child was speaking his thoughts.

'You squabble for power,' said Coin, sweetly, 'and yet, beyond these walls, to the man who carts nightsoil or the average merchant, is there really so much difference between a highlevel mage and a mere conjuror?'

Hakardly stared at him in complete and untrammelled astonishment.

'Child, it's obvious to the meanest citizen,' he said. 'The robes and trimmings themselves

'Ah,' said Coin, 'the robes and trimmings. Of course.'

A short, heavy and thoughtful silence filled the hall.

'It seems to me,' said Coin eventually, 'that wizards rule only wizards. Who rules in the reality outside?'

'As far as the city is concerned, that would be the Patrician, Lord Vetinari,' said Carding with some caution.

'And is he a fair and just ruler?'

Carding thought about it. The Patrician's spy network was said to be superb. 'I would say,' he said carefully, 'that he is unfair and unjust, but scrupulously evenhanded. He is unfair and unjust to everyone, without fear or favour.'

'And you are content with this?' said Coin.

Carding tried not to catch Hakardly's eye.

'It's not a case of being content with it,' he said. 'I suppose we've not given it much thought. A wizard's true vocation, you see-'

'Is it really true that the wise suffer themselves to be ruled in this way?'

Carding growled. 'Of course not! Don't be silly! We merely tolerate it. That's what wisdom is all about, you'll find that out when you grow up, it's a case of biding one's time-'

'Where is this Patrician? I would like to see him.'

'That can be arranged, of course,' said Carding. 'The Patrician is always graciously pleased to grant wizards an interview, and-'

'Now I will grant him an interview,' said Coin. 'He must learn that wizards have bided their time long enough. Stand back, please.'

He pointed the staff.

The temporal ruler of the sprawling city of Ankh-Morpork was sitting in his chair at the foot of the steps leading up to the throne, looking for any signs of intelligence in intelligence reports. The throne had been empty for more than two thousand years, since the death of the last of the line of the kings of Ankh. Legend said that one day the city would have a king again, and went on with various comments about magic swords, strawberry birthmarks and all the other things that legends gabble on about in these circumstances.

In fact the only real qualification now was the ability to stay alive for more than about five minutes after revealing the existence of any magic swords or birthmarks, because the great merchant families of Ankh had been ruling the city for the last twenty centuries and were about to relinquish power as the average limpet is to let go of its rock.

The current Patrician, head of the extremely rich and powerful Vetinari family, was thin, tall and apparently as cold-blooded as a dead penguin. Just by looking at him you could tell he was the sort of man you'd expect to keep a white cat, and caress it idly while sentencing people to death in a piranha tank; and you'd hazard for good measure that he probably collected rare thin porcelain, turning it over and over in his blue-white fingers while distant screams echoed from the depths of the dungeons. You wouldn't put it past

him to use the word 'exquisite' and have thin lips. He looked the kind of person who, when they blink, you mark it off on the calendar.

Practically none of this was in fact the case, although he did have a small and exceedingly elderly wire-haired terrier called Wuffles that smelled badly and wheezed at people. It was said to be the only thing in the entire world he truly cared about. He did of course sometimes have people horribly tortured to death, but this was considered to be perfectly acceptable behaviour for a civic ruler and generally approved of by the overwhelming majority of citizens.[10] The people of Ankh are of a practical persuasion, and felt that the Patrician's edict forbidding all street theatre and mime artists made up for a lot of things. He didn't administer a reign of terror, just the occasional light shower.

The Patrician sighed, and laid the latest report on top of the large heap beside the chair.

When he had been a little boy he had seen a showman who could keep a dozen plates spinning in the air. If the man had been capable of working the same trick with a hundred of them, Lord Vetinari considered, he would just about begin to be ready for training in the art of ruling Ankh-Morpork, a city once described as resembling an overturned termite heap without the charm.

He glanced out of the window at the distant pillar of the Tower of Art, the centre of Unseen University, and wondered vaguely whether any of those tiresome old fools could come up with a better way of collating all this paperwork. They wouldn't, of course - you couldn't expect a wizard to understand anything as basic as elementary civic espionage.

He sighed again, and picked up the transcript of what the president of the Thieves' Guild had said to his deputy at midnight in the soundproof room hidden behind the office in the Guild headquarters, and ...

[10] The overwhelming majority of citizens being defined in this case as everyone not currently hanging upside down over a scorpion pit

Was in the Great Ha ...

Was not in the Great Hall of Unseen University, where he had spent some interminable dinners, but there were a lot of wizards around him and they were ...

... different.

Like Death, which some of the city's less fortunate citizens considered he intimately resembled, the Patrician never got angry until he had time to think about it. But sometimes he thought very quickly.

He stared around at the assembled wizards, but there was something about them that choked the words of outrage in his throat. They looked like sheep who had suddenly found a trapped wolf at exactly the same time as they heard about the idea of unity being strength.

There was something about their eyes.

'What is the meaning of this outr-' he hesitated, and concluded, 'this? A merry Small Gods' Day prank, is it?'

His eyes swivelled to meet those of a small boy holding a long metal staff. The child was smiling the oldest smile the Patrician had ever seen.

Carding coughed.

'My lord,' he began.

'Out with it, man,' snapped Lord Vetinari.

Carding had been diffident, but the Patrician's tone was just that tiny bit too peremptory. The wizard's knuckles went white.

'I am a wizard of the eighth level,' he said quietly, 'and you will not use that tone to me.'

'Well said,' said Coin.

`Take him to the dungeons,' said Carding.

'We haven't got any dungeons,' said Spelter. 'This is a university.'

'Then take him to the wine cellars,' snapped Carding. 'And while you're down there, build some dungeons.'

'Have you the faintest inkling of what you are doing?' said the-Patrician. 'I demand to know the meaning of this-’

'You demand nothing at all,' said Carding. 'And the meaning is that from now on the wizards will rule, as it was ordained. Now take-’

'You? Rule Ankh-Morpork? Wizards who can barely govern themselves?'

'Yes!' Carding was aware that this wasn't the last word in repartee, and was even more alive to the fact that the dog Wuffles, who had been teleported along with his master, had waddled painfully across the floor and was peering short-sightedly at the wizard's boots.

'Then all truly wise men would prefer the safety of a nice deep dungeon,' said the Patrician. 'And now you will cease this foolery and replace me in my palace, and it is just possible that we will say no more about this. Or at least that you won't have the chance to.'

Wuffles gave up investigating Carding's boots and trotted towards Coin, shedding a few hairs on the way.

'This pantomime has gone on long enough,' said the Patrician. 'Now I am getting-‘

Wuffles growled. It was a deep, primeval noise, which struck a chord in the racial memory of all those present and filled them with an urgent desire to climb a tree. It suggested long grey shapes hunting in the dawn of time. It was astonishing that such a small animal could contain so much menace, and all of it was aimed at the staff in Coin's hand.

The Patrician strode forward to snatch the animal, and Carding raised his hand and sent a blaze of orange and blue fire searing across the room.

The Patrician vanished. On the spot where he had been standing a small yellow lizard blinked and glared with malevolent reptilian stupidity.

Carding looked in astonishment at his fingers, as if for the first time.

‘All right,' he whispered hoarsely.

The wizards stared down at the panting lizard, and then out at the city sparkling in the early morning light. Out there was the council of aldermen, the city watch, the Guild of Thieves, the Guild of Merchants, the priesthoods ...and none of them knew what was about to hit them.

It has begun, said the hat, from its box on the deck.

'What has?' said Rincewind.

The rule of sourcery.

Rincewind looked blank. 'Is that good?'

Do you ever understand anything anyone says to you?

Rincewind felt on firmer ground here. 'No,' he said. 'Not always. Not lately. Not often.'

'Are you sure you are a wizard?' said Conina.

'It's the only thing I've ever been sure of,' he said, with conviction.

'How strange.'

Rincewind sat on the Luggage in the sun on the foredeck of the Ocean Waltzer as it lurched peacefully across the green waters of the Circle Sea. Around them men did what he was sure were important nautical things, and he hoped they were doing them correctly, because next to heights he hated depths most of all.

'You look worried,' said Conina, who was cutting his hair. Rincewind tried to make his head as small as possible as the blades flashed by.

'That's because I am.'

What exactly is the Apocralypse?'

Rincewind hesitated. 'Well', he said, 'it's the end of the world. Sort of.'

`Sort of? Sort of the end of the world? You mean we won't be certain? We'll look around and say "Pardon me, did you hear something?"?'

'It's just that no two seers have ever agreed about it. There have been all kinds of vague predictions. Quite mad, some of them. So it was called the Apocralypse.' He looked embarrassed. 'It's a sort of apocryphal Apocalypse. A kind of pun, you see.'

'Not very good.'

'No. I suppose not.'[11]

Conina's scissors snipped busily.

'I must say the captain seemed quite happy to have us aboard,' she observed.

`That's because they think it's lucky to have a wizard on the boat,' said Rincewind. 'It isn't, of course.'

'Lots of people believe it,' she said.

'Oh, it's lucky for other people, just not for me. I can't swim.'

'What, not a stroke?'

Rincewind hesitated, and twiddled the star on his hat cautiously.

About how deep is the sea here, would you say? Approximately?' he said.

'About a dozen fathoms, I believe.'

'Then I could probably swim about a dozen fathoms, whatever they are.'

[11] Wizards' tastes in the matter of puns are about the same as their taste in glittery objects

'Stop trembling like that, I nearly had your ear off,' Conina snapped. She glared at a passing seaman and waved her scissors. 'What's the matter, you never saw a man have a haircut before?'

Someone up in the rigging made a remark which caused a ripple of ribald laughter in the topgallants, unless they were forecastles.

'I shall pretend I didn't hear that,' said Conina, and gave the comb a savage yank, dislodging numerous inoffensive small creatures.

'Well, you should keep still!'

'It's a little difficult to keep still knowing who it is that's waving a couple of steel blades around my head!'

And so the morning passed, with scudding wavelets, the creaking of the rigging, and a rather complex layer cut. Rincewind had to admit, looking at himself in a shard of mirror, that there was a definite improvement.

The captain had said that they were bound for the city of Al Khali, on the hubward coast of Klatch.

`Like Ankh, only with sand instead of mud,' said Rincewind, leaning over the rail. 'But quite a good slave market.'

'Slavery is immoral,' said Conina firmly.

`Is it? Gosh,' said Rincewind.

'Would you like me to trim your beard?' said Conina, hopefully.

She stopped, scissors drawn, and stared out to sea.

'Is there a kind of sailor that uses a canoe with sort of extra bits on the side and a sort of red eye painted on the front and a small sail?' she said.

'I've heard of Klatchian slave pirates,' said Rincewind, 'but this is a big boat. I shouldn't think one of them would dare attack it.'

'One of them wouldn't,' said Conina, still staring at the fuzzy area where the sea became the sky, 'but these five might.'

Rincewind peered at the distant haze, and then looked up at the man on watch, who shook his head.

'Come on,' he chuckled, with all the humour of a blocked drain. 'You can't really see anything out there. Can you?'

'Ten men in each canoe,' said Conina grimly.

'Look, a joke's a joke-’

'With long curvy swords.'

'Well, I can't see a-’

- their long and rather dirty hair blowing in the wind -

'With split ends, I expect?' said Rincewind sourly.

'Are you trying to be funny?'

'Me?'

'And here's me without a weapon,' said Conina, sweeping back across the deck. 'I bet there isn't a decent sword anywhere on this boat.'

'Never mind. Perhaps they've just come for a quick shampoo.'

While Conina rummaged frantically in her pack Rincewind sidled over to the Archchancellor's hatbox and cautiously raised the lid.

'There's nothing out there, is there?' he asked.

How should I know? Put me on.

'What? On my head?'

Good grief.

'But I'm not an Archchancellor!' said Rincewind. 'I mean, I've heard of cool-headed, but-'

I need to use your eyes. Now put me on. On your head.

'Um.'

Trust me.

Rincewind couldn't disobey. He gingerly removed his battered grey hat, looked longingly at its dishevelled star, and lifted the Archchancellor's hat out of its box. It felt rather heavier than he'd expected. The octarines around the crown were glowing faintly.

He lowered it carefully on to his new hairstyle, clutching the brim tightly in case he felt the first icy chill.

In fact he simply felt incredibly light. And there was a feeling of great knowledge and power - not actually present, but just, mentally speaking, on the tip of his metaphorical tongue.

Odd scraps of memory flickered across his mind, and they weren't any memories he remembered remembering before. He probed gently, as one touches a hollow tooth with the tongue, and there they were -

Two hundred dead Archchancellors, dwindling into the leaden, freezing past, one behind the other, watched him with blank grey eyes.

That's why it's so cold, he told himself, the warmth seeps into the dead world. Oh, no ...

When the hat spoke, he saw two hundred pairs of pale lips move.

Who are you?

Rincewind, thought Rincewind. And in the inner recesses of his head he tried to think privately to himself ... help.

He felt his knees begin to buckle under the weight of centuries.

What's it like, being dead? he thought.

Death is but a sleep, said the dead mages.

But what does it feel like? Rincewind thought.

You will have an unrivalled chance to find out when those war canoes get here, Rincewind.

With a yelp of terror he thrust upwards and forced the hat off his head. Real life and sound flooded back in, but since someone was frantically banging a gong very close to his ear this was not much of an improvement. The canoes were visible to everyone now, cutting through the water with an eerie silence. Those black-clad figures manning the paddles should have been whooping and screaming; it wouldn't have made it any better, but it would have seemed more appropriate. The silence bespoke an unpleasant air of purpose.

'Gods, that was awful,' he said. 'Mind you, so is this.'

Crew members scurried across the deck, cutlasses in hand. Conina tapped Rincewind on the shoulder.

'They'll try to take us alive,' she said.

'Oh,' said Rincewind weakly. 'Good.'

Then he remembered something else about Klatchian slavers, and his throat went dry.

'You'll - you'll be the one they'll really be after,' he said. 'I've heard about what they do-'

'Should I know?' said Conina. To Rincewind's horror she didn't appear to have found a weapon.

'They'll throw you in a seraglio!'

She shrugged. 'Could be worse.'

'But it's got all these spikes and when they shut the door-’ hazarded Rincewind. The canoes were close enough now to see the determined expressions of the rowers.

'That's not a seraglio. That's an Iron Maiden. Don't you know what a seraglio is?'

'Um ...'

She told him. He went crimson.

'Anyway, they'll have to capture me first,' said Conina primly. 'It's you who should be worrying.'

'Why me?'

'You're the only other one who's wearing a dress.'

Rincewind bridled. 'It's a robe-’

'Robe, dress. You better hope they know the difference.'

A hand like a bunch of bananas with rings on grabbed Rincewind's shoulder and spun him around. The captain, a Hublander built on generous bear-like lines, beamed at him through a mass of facial hair.

'Hah!' he said. 'They know not that we aboard a wizard have! To create in their bellies the burning green fire! Hah?'

The dark forests of his eyebrows wrinkled as it became apparent that Rincewind wasn't immediately ready to hurl vengeful magic at the invaders.

'Hah?' he insisted, making a mere single syllable do the work of a whole string of blood-

congealing threats.

'Yes, well, I'm just - I'm just girding my loins,' said Rincewind. 'hat's what I'm doing. Girding them. Green fire, you want?'

'Also to make hot lead run in their bones,' said the captain. 'Also their skins to blister and living scorpions without mercy to eat their brains from inside, and-’

The leading canoe came alongside and a couple of grapnels thudded into the rail. As the first of the savers appeared the captain hurried away, drawing his sword. He stopped for a moment and turned to Rincewind.

'You gird quickly,' he said. 'Or no loins. Hah?'

Rincewind turned to Conina, who was leaning on the rail examining her fingernails.

'You'd better get on with it,' she said. 'That's fifty green fires and hot leads to go, with a side order for blisters and scorpions. Hold the mercy.'

'This sort of thing is always happening to me,' he moaned.

He peered over the rail to what he thought of as the main floor of the boat. The invaders were winning by sheer weight of numbers, using nets and ropes to tangle the struggling crew. They worked in absolute silence, clubbing and dodging, avoiding the use of swords wherever possible.

'Musn't damage the merchandise,' said Conina. Rincewind watched in horror as the captain went down under a press of dark shapes, screaming, 'Green fire! Green fire!'

Rincewind backed away. He wasn't any good at magic, but he'd had a hundred per cent success at staying alive up to now and didn't want to spoil the record. All he needed to do

was to learn how to swim in the time it took to dive into the sea. It was worth a try.

'What are you waiting for? Let's go while they're occupied,' he said to Conina.

'I need a sword,' she said.

'You'll be spoilt for choice in a minute.'

'One will be enough.'

Rincewind kicked the Luggage.

'Come on,' he snarled. 'You've got a lot of floating to do.'

The Luggage extended its little legs with exaggerated nonchalance, turned slowly, and settled down beside the girl.

'Traitor,' said Rincewind to its hinges.

The battle already seemed to be over. Five of the raiders stalked up the ladder to the afterdeck, leaving most of their colleagues to round up the defeated crew below. The leader pulled down his mask and leered briefly and swarthily at Conina; and then he turned and leered for a slightly longer period at Rincewind.

'This is a robe,' said Rincewind quickly. 'And you'd better watch out, because I'm a wizard.' He took a deep breath. 'Lay a finger on me, and you'll make me wish you hadn't. I warn you.'

A wizard? Wizards don't make good strong slaves,' mused the leader.

'Absolutely right,' said Rincewind. 'So if you'll just see your way clear to letting me go-’

The leader turned back to Conina, and signalled to one of his companions. He jerked a tattooed thumb towards Rincewind.

'Do not kill him too quickly. In fact-’ he paused, and treated Rincewind to a smile full of teeth. 'Maybe ... yes. And why not? Can you sing, wizard?'

'I might be able to,' said Rincewind, cautiously. Why?'

'You could be just the man the Seriph needs for a job in the harem.' A couple of slavers sniggered.

'It could be a unique opportunity,' the leader went on, encouraged by this audience appreciation. There was more broad-minded approval from behind him.

Rincewind backed away. 'I don't think so,' he said, 'thanks all the same. I'm not cut out for that kind of thing.'

'Oh, but you could be,' said the leader, his eyes bright. 'You could be.'

'Oh, for goodness sake,' muttered Conina. She glanced at the men on either side of her, and then her hands moved. The one stabbed with the scissors was possibly better off than the one she raked with the comb, given the kind of mess a steel comb can make of a face. Then she reached down, snatched up a sword dropped by one of the stricken men, and lunged at the other two.

The leader turned at the screams, and saw the Luggage behind him with its lid open. And then Rincewind cannoned into the back of him, pitching him forward into whatever oblivion lay in the multidimensional depths of the chest.

There was the start of a bellow, abruptly cut off.

Then there was a click like the shooting of the bolt on the gates of Hell.

Rincewind backed away, trembling. :A unique opportunity,' he muttered under his breath, having just got the reference.

At least he had a unique opportunity to watch Conina fight. Not many men ever got to see it twice.

Her opponents started off grinning at the temerity of a slight young girl in attacking them, and then rapidly passed through various stages of puzzlement, doubt, concern and abject gibbering terror as they apparently became the centre of a flashing, tightening circle of steel.

She disposed of the last of the leader's bodyguard with a couple of thrusts that made Rincewind's eyes water and, with a sigh, vaulted the rail on the main deck. To Rincewind's annoyance the Luggage barrelled after her, cushioning its fall by dropping heavily on to a slaver, and adding to the sudden panic of the invaders because, while it was bad enough to be attacked with deadly and ferocious accuracy by a rather pretty girl in a white dress with flowers on it, it was even worse for the male ego to be tripped up and bitten by a travel accessory; it was pretty bad for all the rest of the male, too.

Rincewind peered over the railing.

'Showoff,' he muttered.

A throwing knife clipped the wood near his chin and ricocheted past his ear. He raised his hand to the sudden stinging pain, and stared at in in horror before gently passing out. It wasn't blood in general he couldn't stand the sight of, it was just his blood in particular that was so upsetting.

The market in Sator Square, the wide expanse of cobbles outside the black gates of the University, was in full cry.

It was said that everything in Ankh-Morpork was for sale except for the beer and the women, both of which one merely hired. And most of the merchandise was available in Sator market, which over the years had grown, stall by stall, until the newcomers were up against the ancient stones of the University itself; in fact they made a handy display area for bolts of cloth and racks of charms.

No-one noticed the gates swing back. But a silence rolled out of the University, spreading out across the noisy, crowded square like the first fresh wavelets of the tide trickling over a brackish swamp. In fact it wasn't true silence at all, but a great roar of anti-noise. Silence isn't the opposite of sound, it is merely its absence. But this was the sound that lies on the far side of silence, anti-noise, its shadowy decibels throttling the market cries like a fall of velvet.

The crowds stared around wildly, mouthing like goldfish and with about as much effect. All heads turned towards the gates.

Something else was flowing out besides that cacophony of hush. The stalls nearest the empty gateway began to grind across the cobbles, shedding merchandise. Their owners dived out of the way as the stalls hit the row behind them and scraped relentlessly onwards, piling up until a wide avenue of clean, empty stones stretched the whole width of the square.

Ardrothy Longstaff, Purveyor of Pies Full of Personality, peered over the top of the wreckage of his stall in time to see the wizards emerge.

He knew wizards, or up until now he'd always thought he did. They were vague old boys,

harmless enough in their way, dressed like ancient sofas, always ready customers for any of his merchandise that happened to be marked down on account of age and rather more personality than a prudent housewife would be prepared to put up with.

But these wizards were something new to Ardrothy. They walked out into Sator Square as if they owned it. Little blue sparks flashed around their feet. They seemed a little taller, somehow.

Or perhaps it was just the way they carried themselves.

Yes, that was it ...

Ardrothy had a touch of magic in his genetic makeup, and as he watched the wizards sweep across the square it told him that the very best thing he could do for his health would be to pack his knives, and mincers in his little pack and have it away out of the city at any time in the next ten minutes.

The last wizard in the group lagged behind his colleagues and looked around the square with disdain.

'There used to be fountains out here,' he said. 'You people - be off.'

The traders stared at one another. Wizards normally spoke imperiously, that was to be expected. But there was an edge to the voice that no-one had heard before. It had knuckles in it.

Ardrothy's eyes swivelled sideways. Arising out of the ruins of his jellied starfish and clam stall like an avenging angel, dislodging various molluscs from his beard and spitting vinegar, was Miskin Koble, who was said to be able to open oysters with one hand. Years of pulling limpets off rocks and wrestling the giant cockles in Ankh Bay had given him the kind of physical development normally associated with tectonic plates. He didn't so

much stand up as unfold.

Then he thudded his way towards the wizard and pointed a trembling finger at the ruins of his stall, from which half a dozen enterprising lobsters were making a determined bid for freedom. Muscles moved around the edges of his mouth like angry eels.

'Did you do that?' he demanded.

'Stand aside, oaf,' said the wizard, three words which in the opinion of Ardrothy gave him the ongoing life expectancy of a glass cymbal.

'I hates wizards,' said Koble. 'I really hates wizards. So I am going to hit you, all right?'

He brought his fist back and let fly.

The wizard raised an eyebrow, yellow fire sprang up around the shellfish salesman, there was a noise like tearing silk, and Koble had vanished. All that was left was his boots, standing forlornly on the cobbles with little wisps of smoke coming out of them.

No-one knows why smoking boots always remain, no matter how big the explosion. It seems to be just one of those things.

It seemed to the watchful eyes of Ardrothy that the wizard himself was nearly as socked as the crowd, but he rallied magnificently and gave his staff a flourish.

'You people had better jolly well learn from this,' he said. 'No-one raises their hand to a wizard, do you understand? There are going to be a lot of changes around here. Yes, what do you want?'

This last comment was to Ardrothy, who was trying to sneak past unnoticed. He scrabbled quickly in his pie tray.

'I was just wondering if your honourship would care to purchase one of these finest pies,' he said hurriedly. 'Full of nourish-’

'Watch closely, pie-selling person,' said the wizard. He stretched out his hand, made a strange gesture with his fingers, and produced a pie out of the air.

It was fat, golden-brown and beautifully glazed. just by looking at it Ardrothy knew it was packed edge to edge with prime lean pork, with none oft hose spacious areas of good fresh air under the lid that represented his own profit margin. It was the kind of pie piglets hope to be when they grew up.

His heart sank. His ruin was floating in front of him with short-crust pastry on it.

'Want a taste?' said the wizard. 'There's plenty more where that came from.'

'Wherever it came from,' said Ardrothy.

He looked past the shiny pastry to the face of the wizard, and in the manic gleam of those eyes he saw the world turning upside down.

He turned away, a broken man, and set out for the nearest city gate.

As if it wasn't bad enough that wizards were killing people, he thought bitterly, they were taking away their livelihood as well.

A bucket of water splashed into Rincewind's face, jerking him out of a dreadful dream in which a hundred masked women were attempting to trim his hair with broadswords and cutting it very fine indeed. Some people, having a nightmare like that, would dismiss it as

castration anxiety, but Rincewind's subconscious knew being-cut-to-tiny-bits-mortal dread when it saw it. It saw it most of the time.

He sat up.

'Are you all right?' said Conina, anxiously.

Rincewind swivelled his eyes around the cluttered deck.

'Not necessarily,' he said cautiously. There didn't seem to be any black-clad slavers around, at least vertically. There were a good many crew members, all of them maintaining a respectful distance from Conina. Only the captain stood reasonably close, an inane grin on his face.

'They left,' said Conina. 'Took what they could and left.'

'They bastards,' said the captain, 'but they paddle pretty fast!' Conina winced as he gave her a ringing slap on the back. 'She fight real good for a lady,' he added. 'Yes!'

Rincewind got unsteadily to his feet. The boat was scudding along cheerfully towards a distant smear on the horizon that had to be hubward Klatch. He was totally unharmed. He began to cheer up a bit.

The captain gave them both a hearty nod and hurried off to shout orders connected with sails and ropes and things. Conina sat down on the Luggage, which didn't seem to object.

'He said he's so grateful he'll take us all the way to Al Khali,' she said.

'I thought that's what we arranged anyway,' said Rincewind. 'I saw you give him money, and everything.'

'Yes, but he was planning to overpower us and sell me as a slave when he got there.'

'What, not sell me?' said Rincewind, and then snorted, 'Of course, it's the wizard's robes, he wouldn't dare-'

'Um. Actually, he said he'd have to give you away,' said Conina, picking intently at an imaginary splinter on the Luggage's lid.

'Give me away?'

'Yes. Um. Sort of like, one free wizard with every concubine sold? Um.'

'I don't see what vegetables have got to do with it.'

Conina gave him a long, hard stare, and when he didn't break into a smile she sighed and said, 'Why are you wizards always nervous around women?'

Rincewind bridled at this slur. 'I like that!' he said, 'I'll have you know that - look, anyway, the point is, I get along very well with women in general, it's just women with swords that upset me.' He considered this for a while, and added, 'Everyone with swords upset me, if it comes to that.'

Conina picked industriously at the splinter. The Luggage gave a contented creak.

'I know something else that'll upset you,' she muttered.

'Hmmm?'

'The hat's gone.'

'What?'

'I couldn't help it, they just grabbed whatever they could-’

'The slavers have made off with the hat?'

'Don't you take that tone with me! I wasn't having a quiet sleep at the time-’

Rincewind waved his hands frantically. 'Nonono, don't get excited, I wasn't taking any tone - I want to think about this...'

'The captain says they'll probably go back to Al Khali,' he heard Conina say. 'There's a place where the criminal element hang out, and we can soon-’

'I don't see why we have to do anything,' said Rincewind. 'The hat wanted to keep out the way of the University, and I shouldn't think those slavers ever drop in there for a quick sherry.'

'You'll let them run off with it?' said Conina, in genuine astonishment.

'Well, someone's got to do it. The way I see it, why me?'

'But you said it's the symbol of wizardry! What wizards all aspire to! You can't just let it go like that!'

'You watch me.' Rincewind sat back. He felt oddly surprised. He was making a decision. It was his. It belonged to him. Noone was forcing him to make it. Sometimes it seemed that his entire life consisted of getting into trouble because of what other people wanted, but this time he'd made a decision and that was that. He'd get off the boat at Al Khali and find some way of going home. Someone else could save the world, and he wished them luck. He'd made a decision.

His brow furrowed. Why didn't he feel happy about it?

Because it's the wrong bloody decision, you idiot.

Right, he thought, I've had enough voices in my head. Out.

But I belong here.

You mean you're me?

Your conscience.

Oh.

You can't let the hat be destroyed. It's the symbol ...

... all right, I know ...

... the symbol of magic under the Lore. Magic under the control of mankind. You don't want to go back to those dark Ians ...

... What? ...

Ians ...

Do I mean aeons?

Right. Aeons. Go back aeons to the time when raw magic ruled. The whole framework of reality trembled daily. It was pretty terrible, I can tell me.

How do I know?

Racial memory.

Gosh. Have I got one of those?

Well. A part of one.

Yes, all right, but why me?

In your soul you know you are a true wizard. The word 'Wizard' is engraved on your heart.

'Yes, but the trouble is I keep meeting people who might try to find out,' said Rincewind miserably.

'What did you say?' said Conina.

Rincewind stared at the smudge on the horizon and sighed.

'Just talking to myself,' he said.

Carding surveyed the hat critically. He walked around the table and stared at it from a new angle. At last he said: 'It's pretty good. Where did you get the octarines?'

'They're just very good Ankhstones,' said Spelter. 'They fooled you, did they?'

It was a magnificent hat. In fact, Spelter had to admit, it looked a lot better than the real thing. The old Archchancellor's hat had looked rather battered, its gold thread tarnished and unravelling. The replica was a considerable improvement. It had style.

'I especially like the lace,' said Carding.

'It took ages.'

'Why didn't you try magic?' Carding waggled his fingers, and grasped the tall cool glass that appeared in mid-air. Under its paper umbrella and fruit salad it contained some sticky and expensive alcohol.

'Didn't work,' said Spelter. 'Just couldn't seem, um, to get it right. I had to sew every sequin on by hand.' He picked up the hatbox.

Carding coughed into his drink. 'Don't put it away just yet,' he said, and took it out of the bursar's hands. 'I've always wanted to try this-'

He turned to the big mirror on the bursar's wall and reverently lowered the hat on his rather grubby locks.

It was the ending of the first day of the sourcery, and the wizards had managed to change everything except themselves.

They had all tried, on the quiet and when they thought no-one else was looking. Even Spelter had a go, in the privacy of his study. He had managed to become twenty years younger with a torso you could crack rocks on, but as soon as he stopped concentrating he sagged, very unpleasantly, back into his old familiar shape and age. There was something elastic about the way you were. The harder you threw it, the faster it came back. The worse it was when it hit, too. Spiked iron balls, broadswords and large heavy sticks with nails in were generally considered pretty fearsome weapons, but they were nothing at all compared to twenty years suddenly applied with considerable force to the back of the head.

This was because sourcery didn't seem to work on things that were instrinsically magical. Nevertheless, the wizards had made a few important improvements. Carding's robe, for example, had become a silk and lace confection of overpoweringly expensive tastelessness, and gave him the appearance of a big red jelly draped with antimacassars.

'It suits me, don't you think?' said Carding. He adjusted the hat brim, giving it an inappropriately rakish air.

Spelter said nothing. He was looking out of the window.

There had been a few improvements all right. It had been a busy day.

The old stone walls had vanished. There were some rather nice railings now. Beyond them, the city fairly sparkled, a poem in white marble and red tiles. The river Ankh was no longer the silt-laden sewer he'd grown up knowing, but a glittering glassclear ribbon in which - a nice touch - fat carp mouthed and swam in water pure as snowmelt.[12]

From the air Ankh-Morpork must have been blinding. It gleamed. The detritus of millennia had been swept away.

It made Spelter strangely uneasy. He felt out of place, as though he was wearing new clothes that itched. Of course, he was wearing new clothes and they did itch, but that wasn't the problem. The new world was all very nice, it was exactly how it should be, and yet, and yet - had he wanted to change, he thought, or had he only wanted things rearranged more suitably?

'I said, don't you think it was made for me?' said Carding.

[12] Of course, Ankh-Morpork's citizens had always claimed that the river water was incredibly pure in any case. Any water that had passed through so many kidneys, they reasoned, had to be very pure indeed.

Spelter turned back, his face blank.

'Um?'

'The hat, man.'

'Oh. Um. Very - suitable.'

With a sigh Carding removed the baroque headpiece and carefully replaced it in its box. 'We'd better take it to him,' he said. 'He's starting to ask about it.'

'I'm still bothered about where the real hat is,' said Spelter.

'It's in here,' said Carding firmly, tapping the lid.

'I mean the, um, real one.'

'This is the real one.'

'I meant-’

'This is the Archchancellor's Hat,' said Carding carefully. 'You should know, you made it.'

'Yes, but-’began the bursar wretchedly.

'After all, you wouldn't make a forgery, would you?'

'Not as, um, such-’

'It's just a hat. It's whatever people think it is. People see the Archchancellor wearing it,

they think it's the original hat. In a certain sense, it is. Things are defined by what they do. And people, of course. Fundamental basis of wizardry, is that.' Carding paused dramatically, and plonked the hatbox into Spelter's arms. 'Cogitum ergot hatto, you might say.'

Spelter had made a special study of old languages, and did his best.

' "I think, therefore I am a hat?"' he hazarded.

`What?' said Carding, as they set off down the stairs to the new incarnation of the Great Hall.

' "I considered I'm a mad hat?"' Spelter suggested.

'Just shut up, all right?'

The haze still hung over the city, its curtains of silver and gold turned to blood by the light of the setting sun which streamed in through the windows of the hall.

Coin was sitting on a stool with his staff across his knees. It occurred to Spelter that he had never seen the boy without it, which was odd. Most wizards kept their staves under the bed, or hooked up over the fireplace.

He didn't like this staff. It was black, but not because that was its colour, more because it seemed to be a moveable hole into some other, more unpleasant set of dimensions. It didn't have eyes but, nevertheless, it seemed to stare at Spelter as if it knew his innermost thoughts, which at the moment was more than he did.

His skin prickled as the two wizards crossed the floor and felt the blast of a raw magic flowing outwards from the seated figure.

Several dozen of the most senior wizards were clustered around the stool, staring in awe at the floor.

Spelter craned to see, and saw-

The world.

It floated in a puddle of black night somehow set into the floor itself, and Spelter knew with a terrible certainty that it was the world, not some image or simple projection. There were cloud patterns and everything. There were the frosty wastes of the Hublands, the Counterweight Continent, the Circle Sea, the Rimfall, all tiny and pastel-coloured but nevertheless real ...

Someone was speaking to him.

'Um?' he said, and the sudden drop in metaphorical temperature jerked him back into reality. He realised with horror that Coin had just directed a remark at him.

'I'm sorry?' he corrected himself. 'It was just that the world ... so beautiful ...'

'Our Spelter is an aesthete,' said Coin, and there was a brief chuckle from one or two wizards who knew what the word meant, 'but as to the world, it could be improved. I had said, Spelter, that everywhere we look we can see cruelty and inhumanity and greed, which tell us that the world is indeed governed badly, does it not?'

Spelter was aware of two dozen pairs of eyes turning to him.

'Um,' he said. 'Well, you can't change human nature.'

There was dead silence.

Spelter hesitated. 'Can you?' he said.

'That remains to be seen,' said Carding. 'But if we change the world, then human nature also will change. Is that not so, brothers?'

'We have the city,' said one of the wizards. 'I myself have created a castle-’

'We rule the city, but who rules the world?' said Carding. 'There must be a thousand petty kings and emperors and chieftains down there.'

'Not one of whom can read without moving his lips,' said a wizard.

'The Patrician could read,' said Spelter.

'Not if you cut off his index finger,' said Carding. 'What happened to the lizard, anyway? Never mind. The point is, the world should surely be run by men of wisdom and philosophy. It must be guided. We've spent centuries fighting amongst ourselves, but together... who knows what we could do?'

'Today the city, tomorrow the world,' said someone at the back of the crowd.

Carding nodded.

'Tomorrow the world, and-’ he calculated quickly-’on Friday the universe!'

That leaves the weekend free, thought Spelter. He recalled the box in his arms, and held it out towards Coin. But Carding floated in front of him, seized the box in one fluid movement and offered it to the boy with a flourish.

'The Archchancellor's hat,' he said. 'Rightfully yours, we think.'

Coin took it. For the first time Spelter saw uncertainty cross his face.

'Isn't there some sort of formal ceremony?' he said.

Carding coughed.

'I-er, no,' he said. 'No, I don't think so.' He glanced up at the other senior mages, who shook their heads. 'No. We've never had one. Apart from the feast, of course. Er. You see, it's not like a coronation, the Archchancellor, you see, he leads the fraternity of wizards, he's,' Carding's voice ran down slowly in the light of that golden gaze, 'he's you see ... he's the ... first ...among ... equals ...'

He stepped back hurriedly as the staff moved eerily until it pointed towards him. Once again Coin seemed to be listening to an inner voice.

'No,' he said eventually, and when he spoke next his voice had that wide, echoing quality that, if you are not a wizard, you can only achieve with a lot of very expensive audio equipment. 'There will be a ceremony. There must be a ceremony, people must understand that wizards are ruling, but it will not be here. I will select a place. And all the wizards who have passed through these gates will attend, is that understood?'

'Some of them live far off,' said Carding, carefully. 'It will take them some time to travel, so when were you thinking of-‘

'They are wizards!' shouted Coin. 'They can be here in the twinkling of an eye! I have given them the power! Besides,' his voice dropped back to something like normal pitch, 'the University is finished. It was never the true home of magic, only its prison. I will build us a new place.'

He lifted the new hat out of its box, and smiled at it. Spelter and Carding held their breath.

'But-’

They looked around. Hakardly the Lore master had spoken, and now stood with his mouth opening and shutting.

Coin turned to him, one eyebrow raised.

'You surely don't mean to close the University?' said the old wizard, his voice trembling.

'It is no longer necessary,' said Coin. 'It's a place of dust and old books. It is behind us. Is that not so ... brothers?'

There was a chorus of uncertain mumbling. The wizards found it hard to imagine life without the old stones of UU. Although, come to think of it, there was a lot of dust, of course, and the books were pretty old ...

'After all ... brothers ... who among you has been into your dark library these past few days? The magic is inside you now, not imprisoned between covers. Is that not a joyous thing? Is there not one among you who has done more magic, real magic, in the past twenty-four hours than he has done in the whole of his life before? Is there one among you who does not, in his heart of hearts, truly agree with me?'

Spelter shuddered. In his heart of hearts an inner Spelter had woken, and was struggling to make himself heard. It was a Spelter who suddenly longed for those quiet days, only hours ago, when magic was gentle and shuffled around the place in old slippers and always had time for a sherry and wasn't like a hot sword in the brain and, above all, didn't kill people.

Terror seized him as he felt his vocal chords twang to attention and prepare, despite all his efforts, to disagree.

The staff was trying to find him. He could feel it searching for him. It would vanish him, just like poor old Billias. He clamped his jaws together, but it wouldn't work. He felt his chest heave. His jaw creaked.

Carding, shifting uneasily, stood on his foot. Spelter yelped.

'Sorry', said Carding.

'Is something the matter, Spelter?' said Coin.

Spelter hopped on one leg, suddenly released, his body flooding with relief as his toes flooded with agony, more grateful than anyone in the entire history of the world that seventeen stones of wizardry had chosen his instep to come down heavily on.

His scream seemed to have broken the spell. Coin sighed, and stood up.

'It has been a good day,' he said.

It was two o'clock in the morning. River mists coiled like snakes through the streets of Ankh-Morpork, but they coiled alone. Wizards did not hold with other people staying up after midnight, and so no-one did. They slept the troubled sleep of the enchanted, instead.

In the Plaza of Broken Moons, once the boutique of mysterious pleasures from whose flare-lit and curtain-hung stalls the late-night reveller could obtain anything from a plate of jellied eels to the venereal disease of his choice, the mists coiled and dripped into chilly emptiness.

The stalls had gone, replaced by gleaming marble and a statue depicting the spirit of

something or other, surrounded by illuminated fountains. Their dull splashing was the only sound that broke the cholesterol of silence that had the heart of the city in its grip.

Silence reigned too in the dark bulk of Unseen University. Except-

Spelter crept along the shadowy corridors like a two-legged spider, darting - or at least limping quickly -from pillar to archway, until he reached the forbidding doors of the Library. He peered nervously at the darkness around him and, after some hesitation, tapped very, very lightly.

Silence poured from the heavy woodwork. But, unlike the silence that had the rest of the city under its thrall, this was a watchful, alert silence; it was the silence of a sleeping cat that had just opened one eye.

When he could bear it no longer Spelter dropped to his hands and knees and tried to peer under the doors.

Finally he, put his mouth as close as he could to the draughty, dusty gap under the bottommost hinge and whispered: 'I say! Um. Can you hear me?'

He felt sure that something moved, far back in the darkness.

He tried again, his mood swinging between terror and hope with every erratic thump of his heart.

'I say? It's me, um, Spelter. You know? Could you speak to me, please?'

Perhaps large leathery feet were creeping gently across the floor in there, or maybe it was only the creaking of Spelter's nerves. He tried to swallow away the dryness in his throat, and had another go.

'Look, all right, but, look, they're talking about shutting the Library!'

The silence grew louder. The sleeping cat had cocked an ear.

'What is happening is all wrong!' the bursar confided, and clapped his hand over his mouth at the enormity of what he had said.

'Oook?'

It was the faintest of noises, like the eructation of cockroaches.

Suddenly emboldened, Spelter pressed his lips closer to the crack.

'Have you got the, um, Patrician in there?'

'Oook.'

'What about the little doggie?'

'Oook.'

'Oh. Good.'

Spelter lay full length in the comfort of the night, and drummed his fingers on the chilly floor.

'You wouldn't care to, um, let me in too?' he ventured.

'Oook!'

Spelter made a face in the gloom.

'Well, would you, um, let me come in for a few minutes? We need to discuss something urgently, man to man.'

'Eeek.'

'I meant ape.'

'Oook.'

'Look, won't you come out, then?'

'Oook.'

Spelter sighed. 'This show of loyalty is all very well, but you'll starve in there.'

'Oook oook.'

'What other way in?'

'Oook.'

'Oh, have it your way,' Spelter sighed. But, somehow, he felt better for the conversation. Everyone else in the University seemed to be living in a dream, whereas the Librarian wanted nothing more in the whole world than soft fruit, a regular supply of index cards and the opportunity, every month or so, to hop over the wall of the Patrician's private menagerie.[13] It was strangely reassuring.

'So you're all right for bananas and so forth?' he inquired, after another pause.

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[13]] No-one ever had the courage to ask him what he did there

'Oook.'

'Don't let anyone in, will you? Um. I think that's frightfully important.'

'Oook.'

'Good.' Spelter stood up and dusted off his knees. Then he put his mouth to the keyhole and added, 'Don't trust anyone.'

'Oook.'

It was not completely dark in the Library, because the serried rows of magical books gave off a faint octarine glow, caused by thaumaturgical leakage into a strong occult field. It was just bright enough to illuminate the pile of shelves wedged against the door.

The former Patrician had been carefully decanted into a jar on the Librarian's desk. The Librarian himself sat under it, wrapped in his blanket and holding Wuffles on his lap.

Occasionally he would eat a banana.

Spelter, meanwhile, limped back along the echoing passages of the University, heading for the security of his bedroom. It was because his ears were nervously straining the tiniest of sounds out of the air that he heard, right on the cusp of audibility, the sobbing.

It wasn't a normal noise up here. In the carpeted corridors of the senior wizards' quarters there were a number of sounds you might hear late at night, such as snoring, the gentle clinking of glasses, tuneless singing and, once in a while, the zip and sizzle of a spell gone wrong. But the sound of someone quietly crying was such a novelty that Spelter found himself edging down the passage that led to the Archchancellor's suite.

The door was ajar. Telling himself that he really shouldn't, tensing himself for a hurried dash, Spelter peered inside.

Rincewind stared.

'What is it?' he whispered.

'I think it's a temple of some sort,' said Conina.

Rincewind stood and gazed upwards, the crowds of AI Khali bouncing off and around him in a kind of human Brownian motion. A temple, he thought. Well, it was big, and it was impressive, and the architect had used every trick in the book to make it look even bigger and even more impressive than it was, and to impress upon everyone looking at it that they, on the other hand, were very small and ordinary and didn't have as many domes. It was the kind of place that looked exactly as you were always going to remember it.

But Rincewind felt he knew holy architecture when he saw it, and the frescoes on the big and, of course, impressive walls above him didn't look at all religious. For one thing, the participants were enjoying themselves. Almost certainly, they were enjoying themselves. Yes, they must be. It would be pretty astonishing if they weren't.

'They're not dancing, are they?' he said, in a desperate attempt not to believe the evidence of his own eyes. 'Or maybe it's some sort of acrobatics?'

Conina squinted upwards in the hard, white sunlight.

'I shouldn't think so,' she said, thoughtfully.

Rincewind remembered himself. 'I don't think a young woman like you should be looking at this sort of thing,' he said sternly.

Conina gave him a smile. 'I think wizards are expressly forbidden to,' she said sweetly. 'It's supposed to turn you blind.'

Rincewind turned his face upwards again, prepared to risk maybe one eye. This sort of thing is only to be expected, he told himself. They don't know any better. Foreign countries are, well, foreign countries. They do things differently there.

Although some things, he decided, were done in very much the same way, only with rather more inventiveness and, by the look of it, far more often.

'The temple frescoes of Al Khali are famous far and wide,' said Conina, as they walked through crowds of children who kept trying to sell Rincewind things and introduce him to nice relatives.

'Well, I can see they would be,' Rincewind agreed. 'Look, push off, will you? No, I don't want to buy whatever it is. No, I don't want to meet her. Or him, either. Or it, you nasty little boy. Get off, will you?'

The last scream was to the group of children riding sedately on the Luggage, which was plodding along patiently behind Rincewind and making no attempt to shake them off. Perhaps it was sickening for something, he thought, and brightened up a bit.

'How many people are there on this continent, do you think?' he said.

'I don't know,' said Conina, without turning round. 'Millions, I expect?'

'If I were wise, I wouldn't be here,' said Rincewind, with feeling.

They had been in Al Khali, gateway to the whole mysterious continent of Klatch, for several hours. He was beginning to suffer.

A decent city should have a bit of fog about it, he considered, and people should live indoors, not spend all their time out on the streets. There shouldn't be all this sand and heat. As for the wind ...

Ankh-Morpork had its famous smell, so full of personality that it could reduce a strong man to tears. But Al Khali had its wind, blowing from the vastness of the deserts and continents nearer the rim. It was a gentle breeze, but it didn't stop and eventually it had the same effect on visitors that a cheesegrater achieves on a tomato. After a while it seemed to have worn away your skin and was rasping directly across the nerves.

To Conina's sensitive nostrils it carried aromatic messages from the heart of the continent, compounded of the chill of deserts, the stink of lions, the compost of jungles and the flatulence of wildebeest.

Rincewind, of course, couldn't smell any of this. Adaptation is a wonderful thing, and most Morporkians would be hard put to smell a burning feather mattress at five feet.

'Where to next?' he said. 'Somewhere out of the wind?'

'My father spent some time in Khali when he was hunting for the Lost City of Ee,' said Conina. 'And I seem to remember he spoke very highly of the soak. It's a kind of bazaar.'

'I suppose we just go and look for the second-hand hat stalls,' said Rincewind. 'Because the whole idea is totally-’

'What I was hoping was that maybe we could be attacked. That seems the most sensible idea. My father said that very few strangers who entered the soak ever came out again. Some very murderous types hang out there, he said.'

Rincewind gave this due consideration.

'Just run that by me again, will you?' he said. 'After you said we should be attacked I seemed to hear a ranging in my ears.'

'Well, we want to meet the criminal element, don't we?'

'Not exactly want,' said Rincewind. 'That wasn't the phrase I would have chosen.'

'How would you put it, then?'

'Er. I think the phrase "not want" sums it up pretty well.'

'But you agreed that we should get the hat!'

'But not die in the process,' said Rincewind, wretchedly. 'That won't do anyone any good. Not me, anyway.'

'My father always said that death is but a sleep,' said Conina.

'Yes, the hat told me that,' said Rincewind, as they turned down a narrow, crowded street between white adobe walls. 'But the way I see it, it's a lot harder to get up in the morning.'

'Look,' said Conina, 'there's not much risk. You're with me.'

'Yes, and you're looking forward to it, aren't you,' said Rincewind accusingly, as Conina piloted them along a shady alley, with their retinue of pubescent entrepreneurs at their heels. 'It's the old herrydeterry at work.'

'Just shut up and try to look like a victim, will you?'

'I can do that all right,' said Rincewind, beating off a particularly stubborn member of the junior Chamber of Commerce, 'I've had a lot of practice. For the last time, I don't want to buy anyone, you wretched child!'

He looked gloomily at the walls around them. At least there weren't any of those disturbing pictures here, but the hot breeze still blew the dust around him and he was sick and tired of looking at sand. What he wanted was a couple of cool beers, a cold bath and a change of clothing; it probably wouldn't make him feel better, but it would at least make feeling awful more enjoyable. Not that there was any beer here, probably. It was a funny thing, but in chilly cities like Ankh-Morpork the big drink was beer, which cooled you down, but in places like this, where the whole sky was an oven with the door left open, people drank tiny little sticky drinks which set fire to the back of your throat. And the architecture was all wrong. And they had statues in their temples that, well, just weren't suitable. This wasn't the right kind of place for wizards. Of course, they had some local grown alternative, enchanters or some such, but not what you'd call decent magic ...

Conina strolled ahead of him, humming to herself.

You rather like her, don't you? I can tell, said a voice in his head.

Oh blast, thought Rincewind, you're not my conscience again, are you?

Your libido. It's a bit stuffy in here, isn't it? You haven't had it done up since the last time I was around.

Look, go away, will you? I'm a wizard! Wizards are ruled by their heads, not by their hearts!

And I'm getting votes from your glands, and they’re telling me that as far as your body is concerned your brain is in a minority of one.

Yes? But it's got the casting vote, then.

Hah! That's what you think. Your heart has got nothing to do with this, by the way, it's merely a muscular organ which powers the circulation of the blood. But look at it like this - you quite like her, don't you?

Well ... Rincewind hesitated. Yes, he thought, er ...

She's pretty good company, eh? Nice voice?

Well, of course ...

You'd like to see more of her?

Well ... Rincewind realised with some surprise that, yes, he would. It wasn't that he was entirely unused to the company of women, but it always seemed to cause trouble and, of course, it was a well known fact that it was bad for the magical abilities, although he had to admit that his particular magical abilities, being approximately those of a rubber hammer, were shaky enough to start with.

Then you've got nothing to lose, have you? his libido put in, in an oily tone of thought.

It was at this point Rincewind realised that something important was missing. It took him a little while to realise what it was.

No-one had tried to sell him anything for several minutes. In Al Khali, that probably meant you were dead.

He, Corona and the Luggage were alone in a long, shady alley. He could hear the bustle of the city some way away, but immediately around them there was nothing except a

rather expectant silence.

'They've run off,' said Conina.

'Are we going to be attacked?'

'Could be. There's been three men following us on the rooftops.'

Rincewind squinted upwards at almost the same time as three men, dressed in flowing black robes, dropped lightly into the alleyway in front of them. When he looked around two more appeared from around a corner. All five were holding long curved swords and, although the lower halves of their faces were masked, it was almost certain that they were grinning evilly.

Rincewind rapped sharply on the Luggage's lid.

'Kill,' he suggested. The Luggage stood stock still for a moment, and then plodded over and stood next to Conina. It looked slightly smug and, Rincewind realised with jealous horror, rather embarrassed.

'Why, you-' he growled, and gave it a kick - 'you handbag.'

He sidled closer to the girl, who was standing there with a thoughtful smile on her face.

'What now?' he said. 'Are you going to offer them all a quick perm?'

The men edged a little closer. They were, he noticed, only interested in Conina.

'I'm not armed,' she said.

'What happened to your legendary comb?'

'Left it on the boat.'

'You've got nothing?'

Conina shifted slightly to keep as many of the men as possible in her field of vision.

'I've got a couple of hairgrips,' she said out of the corner of her mouth.

'Any good?'

'Don't know. Never tried.'

'You got us into this!'

'Relax. I think they'll just take us prisoner.'

'Oh, that's fine for you to say. You're not marked down as this week's special offer.'

The Luggage snapped its lid once or twice, a little uncertain about things. One of the men gingerly extended his sword and prodded Rincewind in the small of the back.

'They want to take us somewhere, see?' said Conina. She gritted her teeth. 'Oh, no,' she muttered.

'What's the matter now?'

'I can't do it!'

'What?'

Conina put her head in her hands. 'I can't let myself be taken prisoner without a fight! I can feel a thousand barbarian ancestors accusing me of betrayal!' she hissed urgently.

'Pull the other one.'

'No, really. This won't take a minute.'

There was a sudden blur and the nearest man collapsed in a small gurgling heap. Then Conina's elbows went back and into the stomachs of the men behind her. Her left hand rebounded past Rincewind's ear with a noise like tearing silk and felled the man behind him. The fifth made a run for it and was brought down by a flying tackle, hitting his head heavily on the wall.

Conina rolled off him and sat up, panting, her eyes bright.

'I don't like to say this, but I feel better for that,' she said. 'It's terrible to know that I betrayed a fine hairdressing tradition, of course. Oh.'

'Yes,' said Rincewind sombrely, 'I wondered if you'd noticed them.'

Conina's eyes scanned the line of bowmen who had appeared along the opposite wall. They had that stolid, impassive look of people who have been paid to do a job, and don't much mind if the job involves killing people.

'Time for those hairgrips,' said Rincewind.

Conina didn't move.

'My father always said that it was pointless to undertake a direct attack against an enemy extensively armed with efficient projectile weapons,' she said.

Rincewind, who knew Cohen's normal method of speech, gave her a look of disbelief.

'Well, what he actually said,' she added, 'was never enter an arse-kicking contest with a porcupine.'

Spelter couldn't face breakfast.

He wondered whether he ought to talk to Carding, but he had a chilly feeling that the old wizard wouldn't listen and wouldn't believe him anyway. In fact he wasn't quite sure he believed it himself ...

Yes he was. He'd never forget it, although he intended to make every effort.

One of the problems about living in the University these days was that the building you went to sleep in probably wasn't the same building when you woke up. Rooms had a habit of changing and moving around, a consequence of all this random magic. It built up in the carpets, charging up the wizards to such an extent that shaking hands with somebody was a sure-fire way of turning them into something. The build up of magic, in fact, was overflowing the capacity of the area to hold it. If something wasn't done about it soon, then even the common people would be able to use it - a chilling thought but, since Spelter's mind was already so full of chilling thoughts you could use it as an ice tray, not one he was going to spend much time worrying about.

Mere household geography wasn't the only difficulty, though. Sheer pressure of thaumaturgical inflow was even affecting the food. What was a forkful of kedgeree when you lifted it off the plate might well have turned into something else by the time it entered your mouth. If you were lucky, it was inedible. If you were unlucky, it was edible but probably not something you liked to think you were about to eat or, worse, had already eaten half of.

Spelter found Coin in what had been, late last night, a broom cupboard. It was a lot bigger now. It was only because Spelter had never heard of aircraft hangars that he didn't know what to compare it with, although, to be fair, very few aircraft hangars have marble floors and a lot of statuary around the place. A couple of brooms and a small battered bucket in one corner looked distinctly out of place, but not as out of place as the crushed tables in the former Great Hall which, owing to the surging tides of magic now flowing through the place, had shrunk to the approximate size of what Spelter, if he had ever seen one, would have called a small telephone box.

He sidled into the room with extreme caution and took his place among the council of wizards. The air was greasy with the feel of power.

Spelter created a chair beside Carding and leant across to him.

'You'll never believe-' he began.

'Quiet!' hissed Carding. 'This is amazing!'

Coin was sitting on his stool in the middle of the circle, one hand on his staff, the other extended and holding something small, white and egg-like. It was strangely fuzzy. In fact, Spelter thought, it wasn't something small seen close to. It was something huge, but a long way off. And the boy was holding it in his hand.

'What's he doing?' Spelter whispered.

'I'm not exactly sure,' murmured Carding. 'As far as we can understand it, he's creating a new home for wizardry'

Streamers of coloured light flashed about the indistinct ovoid, like a distant thunderstorm. The glow lit Coin's preoccupied face from below, giving it the semblance of a mask.

'I don't see how we will all fit in,' the bursar said. 'Carding, last night I saw-’

'It is finished,' said Coin. He held up the egg, which flashed occasionally from some inner light and gave off tiny white prominences. Not only was it a long way off, Spelter thought, it was also extremely heavy; it went right through heaviness and out the other side, into that strange negative realism where lead would be a vacuum. He grabbed Carding's sleeve again.

'Carding, listen, it's important, listen, when I looked in-'

'I really wish you’d stop doing that.'

'But the staff, his staff, it's not-’

Coin stood up and pointed the staff at the wall, where a doorway instantly appeared. He marched out through it, leaving the wizards to follow him.

He went through the Archchancellor's garden, followed by a gaggle of wizards in the same way that a comet is followed by its tail, and didn't stop until he reached the banks of the Ankh. There were some hoary old willows here, and the river flowed, or at any rate moved, in a horseshoe bend around a small newt-haunted meadow known rather optimistically as Wizards Pleasaunce. On summer evenings, if the wind was blowing towards the river, it was a nice area for an afternoon stroll.

The warm silver haze still hung over the city as Coin padded through the damp grass until he reached the centre. He tossed the egg, which drifted in a gentle arc and landed with a squelch.

He turned to the wizards as they hurried up.

'Stand well back,' he commanded. 'And be prepared to run.'

He pointed the octiron staff at the half-sunken thing. A bolt of octarine light shot from its tip and struck the egg, exploding into a shower of sparks that left blue and purple after-images.

There was a pause. A dozen wizards watched the egg expectantly.

A breeze shook the willow trees in a totally unmysterious way.

Nothing else happened.

'Er-' Spelter began.

And then came the first tremor. A few leaves fell out of the trees and some distant water bird took off in fright.

The sound started as a low groaning, experienced rather than heard, as though everyone's feet had suddenly become their ears. The trees trembled, and so did one or two wizards.

The mud around the egg began to bubble.

And exploded.

The ground peeled back like lemon rind. Gouts of steaming mud spattered the wizards as they dived for the cover of the trees. Only Coin, Spelter and Carding were left to watch the sparkling white building arise from the meadow, grass and dirt pouring off it. Other towers erupted from the ground behind them; buttresses grew through the air, linking tower with tower.

Spelter whimpered when the soil flowed away from around his feet, and was replaced by

flagstones flecked with silver. He lurched as the floor rose inexorably, carrying the three high above the treetops.

The rooftops of the University went past and fell away below them. Ankh-Morpork spread out like a map, the river a trapped snake, the plains a misty blur. Spelter's ears popped, but the climb went on, into the clouds.

They emerged drenched and cold into blistering sunlight with the cloud cover spreading away in every direction. Other towers were rising around them, glinting painfully in the sharpness of the day.

Carding knelt down awkwardly and felt the floor gingerly. He signalled to Spelter to do the same.

Spelter touched a surface that was smoother than stone. It felt like ice would feel if ice was slightly warm, and looked like ivory. While it wasn't exactly transparent, it gave the impression that it would like to be.

He got the distinct feeling that, if he closed his eyes, he wouldn't be able to feel it at all.

He met Carding's gaze.

'Don't look at, um, me,' he said. 'I don't know what it is either.'

They looked up at Coin, who said: 'It's magic.'

'Yes, lord, but what is it made of?' said Carding.

'It is made of magic. Raw magic. Solidified. Curdled. Renewed from second to second. Could you imagine a better substance to build the new home of sourcery?'

The staff flared for a moment, melting the clouds. The Discworld appeared below them, and from up here you could see that it was indeed a disc, pinned to the sky by the central mountain of Cori Celesti, where the gods lived. There was the Circle Sea, so close that it might even be possible to dive into it from here; there was the vast continent of Klatch, squashed by perspective. The Rimfall around the edge of the world was a sparkling curve.

'It's too big,' said Spelter under his breath. The world he had lived in hadn't stretched much further than the gates of the University, and he'd preferred it that way. A man could be comfortable in a world that size. He certainly couldn't be comfortable about being half a mile in the air standing on something that wasn't, in some fundamental way, there.

The thought shocked him. He was a wizard, and he was worrying about magic.

He sidled cautiously back towards Carding, who said: 'It isn't exactly what I expected.'

'Um?'

'It looks a lot smaller up here, doesn't it.'

'Well, I don't know. Listen, I must tell you-’

'Look at the Ramtops, now. You could almost reach out and touch them.'

They stared out across two hundred leagues towards the towering mountain range, glittering and white and cold. It was said that if you travelled hubwards through the secret valleys of the Ramtops, you would find, in the frozen lands under Cori Celesti itself, the secret realm of the Ice Giants, imprisoned after their last great battle with the Gods. In those days the mountains had been mere islands in a great sea of ice, and ice lived on them still.

Coin smiled his golden smile.

'What did you say, Carding?' he said.

'It's the clear air, lord. And they look so close and small. I only said I could almost touch them-’

Coin waved him into silence. He extended one thin arm, rolling back his sleeve in the traditional sign that magic was about to be performed without trickery. He reached out, and then turned back with his fingers closed around what was, without any shadow of a doubt, a handful of snow.

The two wizards observed it in stunned silence as it melted and dripped on to the floor.

Coin laughed.

'You find it so hard to believe?' he said. 'Shall I pick pearls from rim-most Krull, or sand from the Great Nef? Could your old wizardry do half as much?'

It seemed to Spelter that his voice took on a metallic edge. He stared intently at their faces.

Finally Carding sighed and said rather quietly, 'No. All my life I have sought magic, and all I found was coloured lights and little tricks and old, dry books. Wizardry has done nothing for the world.'

'And if I tell you that I intend to dissolve the Orders and close the University? Although, of course, my senior advisors will be accorded all due status.'

Carding's knuckles whitened, but he shrugged.

'There is little to say,' he said. 'What good is a candle at noonday?'

Coin turned to Spelter. So did the staff. The filigree carvings were regarding him coldly. One of them, near the top of the staff, looked unpleasantly like an eyebrow.

'You're very quiet, Spelter. Do you not agree?'

No. The world had sourcery once, and gave it up for wizardry. Wizardry is magic for men, not gods. It's not for us. There was something wrong with it, and we have forgotten what it was. I liked wizardry. It didn't upset the world. It fitted. It was right. A wizard was all I wanted to be.

He looked down at his feet.

'Yes,' he whispered.

'Good,' said Coin, in a satisfied tone of voice. He strolled to the edge of the tower and looked down at the street map of Ankh-Morpork far below. The Tower of Art came barely a tenth of the way towards them.

'I believe,' he said, 'I believe that we will hold the ceremony next week, at full moon.'

'Er. It won't be full moon for three weeks,' said Carding.

'Next week,' Coin repeated. 'If I say the moon will be full, there will be no argument.' He continued to stare down at the model buildings of the University, and then pointed.

'What's that?'

Carding craned.

'Er. The Library. Yes. It's the Library. Er.'

The silence was so oppressive that Carding felt something more was expected of him. Anything would be better than that silence.

'It's where we keep the books, you know. Ninety thousand volumes, isn't it, Spelter?'

'Um? Oh. Yes. About ninety thousand, I suppose.'

Coin leaned on the staff and stared.

'Burn them,' he said. 'All of them.'

Midnight strutted its black stuff along the corridors of Unseen University as Spelter, with rather less confidence, crept cautiously towards the impassive doors of the Library. He knocked, and the sound echoed so loudly in the empty building that he had to lean against the wall and wait for his heart to slow down a bit.

After a while he heard a sound like heavy furniture being moved about.

'Oook?'

'It's me.'

'Oook?'

'Spelter.'

'Oook.'

'Look, you've got to get out! He's going to burn the Library!'

There was no reply.

Spelter let himself sag to his knees.

'He'll do it, too,' he whispered. 'He'll probably make me do it, it's that staff, um, it knows everything that's going on, it knows that I know about it ... please help me ...'

'Oook?'

'The other night, I looked into his room ... the staff, the staff was glowing, it was standing there in the middle of the room like a beacon and the boy was on the bed sobbing, I could feel it reaching out, teaching him, whispering terrible things, and then it noticed me, you've got to help me, you're the only one who isn't under the-'

Spelter stopped. His face froze. He turned around very slowly, without willing it, because something was gently spinning him.

He knew the University was empty. The wizards had all moved into the New Tower, where the lowliest student had a suite more splendid than any senior mage had before.

The staff hung in the air a few feet away. It was surrounded by a faint octarine glow.

He stood up very carefully and, keeping his back to the stonework and his eyes firmly fixed on the thing, slithered gingerly along the wall until he reached the end of the corridor. At the corner he noted that the staff, while not moving had revolved on its axis to follow him.

He gave a little cry, grasped the skirts of his robe, and ran.

The staff was in front of him. He slid to a halt and stood there, catching his breath.

'You don't frighten me,' he lied, and turned on his heel and marched off in a different direction, snapping his fingers to produce a torch that burned with a fine white flame (only its penumbra of octarine proclaimed it to be of magical origin).

Once again, the staff was in front of him. The light of his torch was sucked into a thin, singing steam of white fire that flared and vanished with a 'pop'.

He waited, his eyes watering with blue after-images, but if the staff was still there it didn't seem to be inclined to take advantage of him. When vision returned he felt he could make out an even darker shadow on his left. The stairway down to the kitchens.

He darted for it, leaping down the unseen steps and landing heavily and unexpectedly on uneven flags. A little moonlight filtered through a grating in the distance and somewhere up there, he knew, was a doorway into the outside world.

Staggering a little, his ankles aching, the noise of his own breath booming in his ears as though he'd stuck his entire head in a seashell, Spelter set off across the endless dark desert of the floor.

Things clanked underfoot. There were no rats here now, of course, but the kitchen had fallen into disuse lately - the University's cooks had been the best in the world, but now any wizard could conjure up meals beyond mere culinary skill. The big copper pans hung neglected on the wall, their sheen already tarnishing, and the kitchen ranges under the giant chimney arch were filled with nothing but chilly ash ...

The staff lay across the back door like a bar. It spun up as Spelter tottered towards it and hung, radiating quiet malevolence, a few feet away. Then, quite smoothly, it began to glide towards him.

He backed away, his feet slipping on the greasy stones. A thump across the back of his thighs made him yelp, but as he reached behind him he found it was only one of the chopping blocks.

His hand groped desperately across its scarred surface and, against all hope, found a cleaver buried in the wood. In an instinctive gesture as ancient as mankind, Spelter's fingers closed around its handle.

He was out of breath and out of patience and out of space and time and also scared, very nearly, out of his mind.

So when the staff hovered in front of him he wrenched the chopper up and around with all the strength he could muster ...

And hesitated. All that was wizardly in him cried out against the destruction of so much power, power that perhaps even now could be used, used by him...

And the staff swung around so that its axis was pointing directly at him.

And several corridors away, the Librarian stood braced with his back against the Library door, watching the blue and white flashes that flickered across the floor. He heard the distant snap of raw energy, and a sound that started low and ended up in zones of pitch that even Wuffles, lying with his paws over his head, could not hear.

And then there was a faint, ordinary tinkling noise, such as might be made by a fused and twisted metal cleaver dropping on to flagstones.

It was the sort of noise that makes the silence that comes after it roll forward like a warm avalanche.

The Librarian wrapped the silence around him like a cloak and stood staring up at the rank on rank of books, each one pulsing faintly in the glow of its own magic. Shelf after shelf looked down[14] at him. They had heard. He could feel the fear.

The orang-utan stood statue-still for several minutes, and then appeared to reach a decision. He knuckled his way across to his desk and, after much rummaging, produced a heavy key-ring bristling with keys. Then he went back and stood in the middle of the floor and said, very deliberately, 'Oook.'

The books craned forward on their shelves. Now he had their full attention.

'What is this place?' said Conina.

Rincewind looked around him, and made a guess.

They were still in the heart of Al Khali. He could hear the hum of it beyond the walls. But in the middle of the teeming city someone had cleared a vast space, walled it off, and planted a garden so romantically natural that it looked as real as a sugar pig.

'It looks like someone has taken twice five miles of inner city and girdled them round with walls and towers,' he hazarded.

'What a strange idea,' said Conina.

'Well, some of the religions here-well, when you die, you see, they think you go to this

[14] Or up, or obliquely. The layout of the Library of Unseen University was a topographical nightmare, the sheer presence of so much stored magic twisting dimensions and gravity into the kind of spaghetti that would make M. C. Escher go for a good lie down, or possibly sideways.

sort of garden, where there's all this sort of music and, and,' he continued, wretchedly, 'sherbet and, and - young women.'

Conina took in the green splendour of the walled garden, with its peacocks, intricate arches and slightly wheezy fountains. A dozen reclining women stared back at her, impassively. A hidden string orchestra was playing the complicated Klatchian bhong music.

'I'm not dead,' she said. 'I'm sure I would have remembered. Besides, this isn't my idea of paradise.' She looked critically at the reclining figures, and added, 'I wonder who does their hair?'

A sword point prodded her in the small of the back, and the two of them set out along the ornate path towards a small domed pavilion surrounded by olive trees. She scowled.

'Anyway, I don't like sherbet.'

Rincewind didn't comment. He was busily examining the state of his own mind, and wasn't happy at the sight of it. He had a horrible feeling that he was falling in love.

He was sure he had all the symptoms. There were the sweaty palms, the hot sensation in the stomach, the general feeling that the skin of his chest was made of tight elastic. There was the feeling every time Conina spoke, that someone was running hot steel into his spine.

He glanced down at the Luggage, tramping stoically alongside him, and recognised the symptoms.

'Not you, too?' he said.

Possibly it was only the play of sunlight on the Luggage's battered lid, but it was just

possible that for an instant it looked redder than usual.

Of course, sapient pearwood has this sort of weird mental link with its owner ... Rincewind shook his head. Still, it'd explain why the thing wasn't its normal malignant self.

'It'd never work,' he said. 'I mean, she's a female and you're a, well, you're a-' He paused. 'Well, whatever you are, you're of the wooden persuasion. It'd never work. People would talk.'

He turned and glared at the black-robed guards behind him.

'I don't know what you're looking at,' he said severely.

The Luggage sidled over to Conina, following her so closely that she banged an ankle on it.

'Push off,' she snapped, and kicked it again, this time on purpose.

Insofar as the Luggage ever had an expression, it looked at her in shocked betrayal.

The pavilion ahead of them was an ornate onion-shaped dome, studded with precious stones and supported on four pillars. Its interior was a mass of cushions on which lay a rather fat, middle-aged man surrounded by three young women. He wore a purple robe interwoven with gold thread; they, as far as Rincewind could see, demonstrated that you could make six small saucepan lids and a few yards of curtain netting go a long way although - he shivered - not really far enough.

The man appeared to be writing. He glanced up at them.

'I suppose you don't know a good rhyme for "thou"?' he said peevishly.

Rincewind and Conina exchanged glances.

'Plough?' said Rincewind. 'Bough?'

'Cow?' suggested Conina, with forced brightness.

The man hesitated. 'Cow I quite like,' he said, 'Cow has got possibilities. Cow might, in fact, do. Do pull up a cushion, by the way. Have some sherbet. Why are you standing there like that?'

'It's these ropes,' said Conina.

'I have this allergy to cold steel,' Rincewind added.

'Really, how tiresome,' said the fat man, and clapped a pair of hands so heavy with rings that the sound was more of a clang. Two guards stepped forward smartly and cut the bonds, and then the whole battalion melted away, although Rincewind was acutely conscious of dozens of dark eyes watching them from the surrounding foliage. Animal instinct told him that, while he now appeared to be alone with the man and Conina, any aggressive moves on his part would suddenly make the world a sharp and painful place. He tried to radiate tranquillity and total friendliness. He tried to think of something to say.

'Well,' he ventured, looking around at the brocaded hangings, the ruby-studded pillars and the gold filigree cushions, 'you've done this place up nicely. It's-’ he sought for something suitably descriptive - 'well, pretty much of a miracle of rare device.'

'One aims for simplicity,' sighed the man, still scribbling busily. 'Why are you here? Not that it isn't always a pleasure to meet fellow students of the poetic muse.'

'We were brought here,' said Conina.

'Men with swords,' added Rincewind.

'Dear fellows, they do so like to keep in practice. Would you like one of these?'

He snapped his fingers at one of the girls.

'Not, er, right now,' Rincewind began, but she'd picked up a plate of golden-brown sticks and demurely passed it towards him. He tried one. It was delicious, a sort of sweet crunchy flavour with a hint of honey. He took two more.

'Excuse me,' said Conina, 'but who are you? And where is this?'

'My name is Creosote, Seriph of Al Khali,' said the fat man, 'and this is my Wilderness. One does one's best.'

Rincewind coughed on his honey stick.

'Not Creosote as in "As rich as Creosote"?' he said.

'That was my dear father. I am, in fact, rather richer. When one has a great deal of money, I am afraid, it is hard to achieve simplicity. One does one's best.' He sighed.

'You could try giving it away,' said Conina.

He sighed again. 'That isn't easy, you know. No, one just has to try to do a little with a lot.'

'No, no, but look', said Rincewind, spluttering bits of stick, 'they say, I mean, everything you touch turns into gold, for goodness sake.'

'That could make going to the lavatory a bit tricky,' said Conina brightly. 'Sorry.'

'One hears such stories about oneself,' said Creosote, affecting not to have heard. 'So tiresome. As if wealth mattered. True riches lie in the treasure houses of literature.'

'The Creosote I heard of,' said Conina slowly, 'was head of this band of, well, mad killers. The original Assassins, feared throughout hubward Klatch. No offence meant.'

'Ah yes, dear father,' said Creosote junior. 'The hashishim. Such a novel idea.[15] But not really very efficient. So we hired Thugs instead.'

'Ah. Named after a religious sect,' said Conina knowingly.

Creosote gave her a long look. 'No,' he said slowly, 'I don't think so. I think we named them after the way they push people's faces through the back of their heads. Dreadful, really.'

He picked up the parchment he had been writing on, and continued, 'I seek a more cerebral life, which is why I had the city centre converted into a Wilderness. So much better for the mental flow. One does one's best. May I read you my latest oeuvre?'

'Egg?' said Rincewind, who wasn't following this.

Creosote thrust out one pudgy hand and declaimed as follows:

[15] The Hashishim, who derived their name from the vast quantities of hashish they consumed, were unique among vicious killers in being both deadly and, at the same time, inclined to giggle, groove to interesting patterns of light and shade on their terrible knife blades and, in extreme cases, fall over.

'A summer palace underneath the bough,

A flask of wine, a loaf of bread, some lamb couscous

with courgettes, roast peacock tongues, kebabs, iced

sherbet, selection of sweets from the trolley and

choice of Thou,

Singing beside me in the Wilderness,

And Wilderness is-’

He paused, and picked up his pen thoughtfully.

'Maybe cow isn't such a good idea,' he said. 'Now that I come to look at it-’

Rincewind glanced at the manicured greenery, carefully arranged rocks and high surrounding walls. One of the Thous winked at him.

'This is a Wilderness?' he said.

'My landscape gardeners incorporated all the essential features, I believe. They spent simply ages getting the rills sufficiently sinuous. I am reliably informed that they contain prospects of rugged grandeur and astonishing natural beauty.'

'And scorpions,' said Rincewind, helping himself to another honey stick.

'I don't know about that,' said the poet. 'Scorpions sound unpoetic to me. Wild honey and locusts seem more appropriate, according to the standard poetic instructions, although I've never really developed the taste for insects.'

'I always understood that the kind of locust people ate in wildernesses was the fruit of a kind of tree,' said Conina. 'Father always said it was quite tasty.'

'Not insects?' said Creosote.

'I don't think so.'

The Seriph nodded at Rincewind. 'You might as well finish them up, then,' he said. 'Nasty crunchy things, I couldn't see the point.'

'I don't wish to sound ungrateful,' said Conina, over the sound of Rincewind's frantic coughing. 'But why did you have us brought here?'

'Good question.' Creosote looked at her blankly for a few seconds, as if trying to remember why they were there.

'You really are a most attractive young woman,' he said. 'You can't play a dulcimer, by any chance?'

'How many blades has it got?' said Conina.

'Pity,' said the Seriph, 'I had one specially imported.'

'My father taught me to play the harmonica,' she volunteered.

Creosote's lips moved soundlessly as he tried out the idea.

'No good,' he said. 'Doesn't scan. Thanks all the same, though.' He gave her another thoughtful look. 'You know, you really are most becoming. Has anyone ever told you your neck is as a tower of ivory?'

'Never,' said Conina.

'Pity,' said Creosote again. He rummaged among his cushions and produced a small bell, which he rang.

After a while a tall, saturnine figure appeared from behind the pavilion. He had the look of someone who could think his way through a corkscrew without bending, and a certain something about the eyes which would have made the average rabid rodent tiptoe away, discouraged.

That man, you would have said, has got Grand Vizier written all over him. No-one can tell him anything about defrauding widows and imprisoning impressionable young men in alleged jewel caves. When it comes to dirty work he probably wrote the book or, more probably, stole it from someone else.

He wore a turban with a pointy hat sticking out of it. He had a long thin moustache, of course.

'Ah, Abrim,' said Creosote.

'Highness?'

'My Grand Vizier,' said the Seriph.

- thought so -, said Rincewind to himself.

'These people, why did we have them brought here?'

The vizier twirled his moustache, probably foreclosing another dozen mortgages.

'The hat, highness,' he said. 'The hat, if you remember.'

'Ah, yes. Fascinating. Where did we put it?'

'Hold on,' said Rincewind urgently. 'This hat ... it wouldn't be a sort of battered pointy one, with lots of stuff on it? Sort of lace and stuff, and, and-' he hesitated-'no-one's tried to put it on, have they?'

'It specifically warned us not to,' said Creosote, 'so Abrim got a slave to try it on, of course. He said it gave him a headache.'

'It also told us that you would shortly be arriving,' said the vizier, bowing slightly at Rincewind, 'and therefore I - that is to say, the Seriph felt that you might be able to tell us more about this wonderful artifact?'

There is a tone of voice known as interrogative, and the vizier was using it; a slight edge to his words suggested that, if he didn't learn more about the hat very quickly, he had various activities in mind in which further words like 'red hot' and 'knives' would appear. Of course, all Grand Viziers talk like that all the time. There's probably a school somewhere.

'Gosh, I'm glad you've found it,' said Rincewind, 'That hat is gngngnh-'

'I beg your pardon?' said Abrim, signalling a couple of lurking guards to step forward. 'I missed the bit after the young lady-' he bowed at Conina-'elbowed you in the ear.'

'I think,' said Conina, politely but firmly, 'you'd better take us to see it.'

Five minutes later, from its resting place on a table in the Seriph's treasury, the hat said, At last. What kept you?

It is at a time like this, with Rincewind and Conina probably about to be the victims of a murderous attack, and Coin about to address the assembled cowering wizards on the subject of treachery, and the Disc about to fall under a magical dictatorship, that it is worth mentioning the subject of poetry and inspiration.

For example, the Seriph, in his bijou wildernessette, has just riffled back through his pages of verse to revise the lines which begin:

'Get up! For morning in the cup of day,

Has dropped the spoon that scares the stars away'

- and he has sighed, because the white-hot lines searing across his imagination never seem to come out exactly as he wants them.

It is, in fact, impossible that they ever will.

Sadly, this sort of thing happens all the time.

It is a well-known established fact throughout the many-dimensional worlds of the multiverse that most really great discoveries are owed to one brief moment of inspiration.

There's a lot of spadework first, of course, but what clinches the whole thing is the sight of, say, a falling apple or a boiling kettle or the water slopping over the edge of the bath. Something goes click inside the observer's head and then everything falls into place. The shape of DNA, it is popularly said, owes its discovery to the chance sight of a spiral staircase when the scientist's mind was just at the right receptive temperature. Had he used the lift, the whole science of genetics might have been a good deal different.[16]

This is thought of as somehow wonderful. It isn't. It is tragic. Little particles of inspiration sleet through the universe all the time travelling through the densest matter in the same way that a neutrino passes through a candyfloss haystack, and most of them miss.

Even worse, most of the ones that hit the exact cerebral target hit the wrong one.

For example, the weird dream about a lead doughnut on a mile-high gantry, which in the right mind would have been the catalyst for the invention of repressed-gravitational electricity generation (a cheap and inexhaustible and totally non-polluting form of power which the world in question had been seeking for centuries, and for the lack of which it was plunged into a terrible and pointless war) was in fact had by a small and bewildered duck.

By another stroke of bad luck, the sight of a herd of white horses galloping through a field of wild hyacinths would have led a struggling composer to write the famous Flying God Suite, bringing succour and balm to the souls of millions, had he not been at home in bed with shingles. The inspiration therefore fell to a nearby frog, who was not in much of a position to make a startling contribution to the field of tone poetry.

Many civilisations have recognised this shocking waste and tried various methods to prevent it, most of them involving enjoyable but illegal attempts to tune the mind into the

[16] Although, possibly, quicker. And only licensed to carry fourteen people

right wavelength by the use of exotic herbage or yeast products. It never works properly.

And so Creosote, who had dreamt the inspiration for a rather fine poem about life and philosophy and how they both look much better through the bottom of a wine glass, was totally unable to do anything about it because he had as much poetic ability as a hyena.

Why the gods allow this sort of thing to continue is a mystery.

Actually, the flash of inspiration needed to explain it clearly and precisely has taken place, but the creature who received it -a small female bluetit - has never been able to make the position clear, even after some really strenuous coded messages on the tops of milk bottles. By a strange coincidence, a philosopher who had been devoting some sleepless nights to the same mystery woke up that morning with a wonderful new idea for getting peanuts out of bird tables.

Which brings us rather neatly on to the subject of magic.

A long way out in the dark gulfs of interstellar space, one single inspiration particle is clipping along unaware of its destiny, which is just as well, because its destiny is to strike, in a matter of hours, a tiny area of Rincewind's mind.

It would be a tough destiny even if Rincewind's creative node was a reasonable size, but the particle's karma had handed it the problem of hitting a moving target the size of a small raisin over a distance of several hundred lightyears. Life can be very difficult for a little subatomic particle in a great big universe.

If it pulls it off, however, Rincewind will have a serious philosophic idea. If it doesn't, a nearby brick will have an important insight which it will be totally unequipped to deal with.

The Seriph's palace, known to legend as the Rhoxie, occupied most of the centre of Al Khali that wasn't occupied by the wilderness. Most things connected with Creosote were famed in mythology and the arched, domed, many-pillared palace was said to have more rooms than any man had been able to count. Rincewind didn't know which number he was in.

'It's magic, isn't it?' said Abrim the vizier.

He prodded Rincewind in the ribs.

'You're a wizard,' he said. 'Tell me what it does.'

'How do you know I'm a wizard?' said Rincewind desperately.

'It's written on your hat,' said the vizier.

'Ah.'

'And you were on the boat with it. My men saw you.'

'The Seriph employs slavers?' snapped Conina. 'That doesn't sound very simple!'

'Oh, I employ the slavers. I am the vizier, after all,' said Abrim. 'It is rather expected of me.'

He gazed thoughtfully at the girl, and then nodded at a couple of the guards.

'The current Seriph is rather literary in his views,' he said. 'I, on the other hand, am not. Take her to the seraglio, although,' he rolled his eyes and gave an irritable sigh, 'I'm sure the only fate that awaits her there is boredom, and possibly a sore throat.'

He turned to Rincewind.

'Don't say anything,' he said. 'Don't move your hands. Don't try any sudden feats of magic. I am protected by strange and powerful amulets.'

'Now just hold on a minute-’ Rincewind began, and Conina said, 'All right. I've always wondered what a harem looked like.'

Rincewind's mouth went on opening and shutting, but no sounds came out. Finally he managed, 'Have you?'

She waggled an eyebrow at him. It was probably a signal of some sort. Rincewind felt he ought to have understood it, but peculiar passions were stirring in the depths of his being. They weren't actually going to make him brave, but they were making him angry. Speeded up, the dialogue behind his eyes was going something like this:

Ugh.

Who's that?

Your conscience. I feel terrible. Look, they're marching her off to the harem.

Rather her than me, thought Rincewind, but without much conviction.

Do something!

There's too many guards! They'll kill me!

So they'll kill you, it's not the end of the world.

It will be for me, thought Rincewind grimly.

But just think how good you'll feel in your next life -

Look, just shut up, will I? I've had just about enough of me.

Abrim stepped across to Rincewind and looked at him curiously.

'Who are you talking to?' he said.

'I warn you,' said Rincewind, between clenched teeth, 'I have this magical box on legs which is absolutely merciless with attackers, one word from me and-'

'I'm impressed,' said Abrim. 'Is it invisible?'

Rincewind risked a look behind him.

'I'm sure I had it when I came in,' he said, and sagged.

It would be mistaken to say the Luggage was nowhere to be seen. It was somewhere to be seen, it was just that the place wasn't anywhere near Rincewind.

Abrim walked slowly around the table on which sat the hat, twirling his moustache.

'Once again,' he said, 'I ask you: this is an artifact of power, I feel it, and you must tell me what it does.'

'Why don't you ask it?' said Rincewind.

'It refuses to tell me.'

'Well, why do you want to know?'

Abrim laughed. It wasn't a nice sound. It sounded as though he had had laughter explained to him, probably slowly and repeatedly, but had never heard anyone actually do it.

'You're a wizard,' he said. 'Wizardry is about power. I have taken an interest in magic myself. I have the talent, you know.' The vizier drew himself up stiffly. 'Oh, yes. But they wouldn't accept me at your University. They said I was mentally unstable, can you believe that?'

'No,' said Rincewind, truthfully. Most of the wizards at Unseen had always seemed to him to be several bricks short of a shilling. Abrim seemed pretty normal wizard material.

Abrim gave him an encouraging smile.

Rincewind looked sideways at the hat. It said nothing. He looked back at the vizier. If the laughter had been weird, the smile made it sound as normal as birdsong. It looked as though the vizier had learned it from diagrams.

'Wild horses wouldn't get me to help you in any way,' he said.

Ah,' said the vizier. 'A challenge.' He beckoned to the nearest guard.

'Do we have any wild horses in the stables?'

'Some fairly angry ones, master.'

'Infuriate four of them and take them to the turnwise courtyard. And, oh, bring several lengths of chain.'

'Right away, master.'

'Um. Look,' said Rincewind.

'Yes?' said Abrim.

'Well, if you put it like that ...'

'You wish to make a point?'

'It's the Archchancellor's hat, if you must know,' said Rincewind. 'The symbol of wizardry.'

'Powerful?'

Rincewind shivered. 'Very,' he said.

'Why is it called the Archchancellor's hat?'

'The Archchancellor is the most senior wizard, you see. The leader. But, look -

Abrim picked up the hat and turned it around and around in his hands.

'It is, you might say, the symbol of office?'

'Absolutely, but look, if you put it on, I'd better warn you-’

Shut up.

Abrim leapt back, the hat dropping to the floor.

The wizard knows nothing. Send him away. We must negotiate.

The vizier stared down at the glittering octarines around the hat.

'I negotiate? With an item of apparel?'

I have much to offer, on the right head.

Rincewind was appalled. It has already been indicated that he had the kind of instinct for danger usually found only in certain small rodents, and it was currently battering on the side of his skull in an attempt to run away and hide somewhere.

'Don't listen!' he shouted.

Put me on, said the hat beguilingly, in an ancient voice that sounded as though the speaker had a mouthful of felt.

If there really was a school for viziers, Abrim had come top of the class.

'We'll talk first,' he said. He nodded at the guards, and pointed to Rincewind.

'Take him away and throw him in the spider tank,' he said.

'No, not spiders, on top of everything else!' moaned Rincewind.

The captain of the guard stepped forward and knuckled his forehead respectfully.

'Run out of spiders, master,' he said.

'Oh.' The vizier looked momentarily blank. 'In that case, lock him in the tiger cage.'

The guard hesitated, trying to ignore the sudden outburst of whimpering beside him. 'The tiger's been ill, master. Backwards and forwards all night.'

'Then throw this snivelling coward down the shaft of eternal fire!'

A couple of the guards exchanged glances over the head of Rincewind, who had sunk to his knees.

'Ah. We'll need a bit of notice of that, master-’

'- to get it going again, like.'

The vizier's fist came down hard on the table. The captain of the guard brightened up horribly.

'There's the snake pit, master,' he said. The other guards nodded. There was always the snake pit.

Four heads turned towards Rincewind, who stood up and brushed the sand off his knees.

'How do you feel about snakes?' said one of the guards.

'Snakes? I don't like snakes much-’

'The snake pit,' said Abrim.

'Right. The snake pit,' agreed the guards.

- I mean, some snakes are okay-’ Rincewind continued, as two guards grabbed him by the elbows.

In fact there was only one very cautious snake, which remained obstinately curled up in a corner of the shadowy pit watching Rincewind suspiciously, possibly because he reminded it of a mongoose.

'Hi,' it said eventually. 'Are you a wizard?'

As a line of snake dialogue this was a considerable improvement on the normal string of esses, but Rincewind was sufficiently despondent not to waste time wondering and simply replied, 'It's on my hat, can't you read?'

'In seventeen languages, actually. I taught myself.'

'Really?'

'I sent off for courses. But I try not to read, of course. It's not in character.'

'I suppose it wouldn't be.' It was certainly the most cultured snake voice that Rincewind had ever heard.

'It's the same with the voice, I'm afraid,' the snake added. 'I shouldn't really be talking to you now. Not like this, anyway. I suppose I could grunt a bit. I rather think I should be trying to kill you, in fact.'

'I have curious and unusual powers,' said Rincewind. Fair enough, he thought, an almost total inability to master any form of magic is pretty unusual for a wizard and anyway, it doesn't matter about lying to a snake.

'Gosh. Well, I expect you won't be in here long, then.'

'Hmm?'

'I expect you'll be levitating out of here like a shot, any minute.'

Rincewind looked up at the fifteen-foot-deep walls of the snake pit, and rubbed his bruises.

'I might,' he said cautiously.

'In that case, you wouldn't mind taking me with you, would you?'

'Eh?'

'It's a lot to ask, I know, but this pit is, well, it's the pits.'

'Take you? But you're a snake, it's your pit. The idea is that you stay here and people come to you. I mean, I know about these things.'

A shadow behind the snake unfolded itself and stood up.

'That's a pretty unpleasant thing to say about anyone,' it said.

The figure stepped forward, into the pool of light.

It was a young man, taller than Rincewind. That is to say, Rincewind was sitting down, but the boy would have been taller than him even if he was standing up.

To say that he was lean would be to miss a perfect opportunity to use the word 'emaciated'. He looked as though toast racks and deckchairs had figured in his ancestry, and the reason it was so obvious was his clothes.

Rincewind looked again.

He had been right the first time.

The lank-haired figure in front of him was wearing the practically traditional garb for barbarian heroes - a few studded leather thongs, big furry boots, a little leather holdall and goosepimples. There was nothing unusual about that, youd see a score of similarly-dressed adventurers in any street of Ankh-Morpork, except that you'd never see another one wearing -

The young man followed his gaze, looked down, and shrugged.

'I can't help it,' he said. 'I promised my mother.'

'Woolly underwear?'

Strange things were happening in Al Khali that night. There was a certain silveriness rolling in from the sea, which baffled the city's astronomers, but that wasn't the strangest thing. There were little flashes of raw magic discharging off sharp edges, like static electricity, but that wasn't the strangest thing.

The strangest thing walked into a tavern on the edge of the city, where the everlasting wind blew the smell of the desert through every unglazed window, and sat down in the middle of the floor.

The occupants watched it for some time, sipping their coffee laced with desert orakh. This drink, made from cacti sap and scorpion venom, is one of the most virulent alcoholic beverages in the universe, but the desert nomads don't drink it for its intoxicating effects. They use it because they need something to mitigate the effect of Klatchian coffee.

Not because you could use the coffee to waterproof roofs. Not because it went through

the untrained stomach lining like a hot ball bearing through runny butter. What it did was worse.

It made you knurd.[17]

The sons of the desert glanced suspiciously into their thimble-sized coffee-cups, and wondered whether they had overdone the orakh. Were they all seeing the same thing? Would it be foolish to pass a remark? These are the sort of things you need to worry about if you want to retain any credibility as a steely-eyed son of the deep desert. Pointing a shaking finger and saying, 'Hey, look, a box just walked in here on hundreds of little legs, isn't that extraordinary!' would show a terrible and possibly fatal lack of machismo.

The drinkers tried not to catch one another's eye, even when the Luggage slid up to the row of orakh jars against the far wall. The Luggage had a way of standing still that was somehow even more terrible than watching it move about.

Finally one of them said, 'I think it wants a drink.'

There was a long silence, and then one of the others said, with the precision of a chess Grand Master making a killing move, 'What does?'

The rest of the drinkers gazed impassively into their glasses.

There was no sound for a while other than the plop-plopping of a gecko's footsteps across

[17] In a truly magical universe everything has its opposite. For example, there's anti-light. That's not the same as darkness, because darkness is merely the absence of light. Anti-light is what you get if you pass through darkness and out the other side. On the same basis, a state of knurdness isn't like sobriety. By comparison, sobriety is like having a bath in cotton wool. Knurdness strips away all illlusion, all the comforting pink fog in which people normally spend their lives, and lets them see and think clearly for the first time ever. Then, after they've screamed a bit, they make sure they never get knurd again.

the sweating ceiling.

The first drinker said, 'The demon that's Just moved up behind you is what I was referring to, O brother of the sands.'

The current holder of the All-Wadi Imperturbability Championship smiled glassily until he felt a tugging on his robe. The smile stayed where it was but the rest of his face didn't seem to want to be associated with it.

The Luggage was feeling crossed in love and was doing what any sensible person would do in these circumstances, which was get drunk. It had no money and no way of asking for what it wanted, but the Luggage somehow never had much difficulty in making itself understood.

The tavern keeper spent a very long lonely night filling a saucer with orakh, before the Luggage rather unsteadily walked out through one of the walls.

The desert was silent. It wasn't normally silent. It was normally alive with the chirruping of crickets, the buzz of mosquitoes, the hiss and whisper of hunting wings skimming across the cooling sands. But tonight it was silent with the thick, busy silence of dozens of nomads folding their tents and getting the hell out of it.

'I promised my mother,' said the boy. 'I get these colds, you see.'

'Perhaps you should try wearing, well, a bit more clothing?'

'Oh, I couldn't do that. You've got to wear all this leather stuff.'

'I wouldn't call it all,' said Rincewind. 'There's not enough of it to call it all. Why have

you got to wear it?'

'So people know I'm a barbarian hero, of course.'

Rincewind leaned his back against the fetid walls of the snake pit and stared at the boy. He looked at two eyes like boiled grapes, a shock of ginger hair, and a face that was a battleground between its native freckles and the dreadful invading forces of acne.

Rincewind rather enjoyed times like this. They convinced him that he wasn't mad because, if he was mad, that left no word at all to describe some of the people he met.

'Barbarian hero,' he murmured.

'It's all right, isn't it? All this leather stuff was very expensive.'

'Yes, but, look - what's your name, lad?'

'Nijel-’

'You see, Nijel

'Nijel the Destroyer,' Nijel added.

'You see, Nijel

'- the Destroyer-’

'All right, the Destroyer-’ said Rincewind desperately. '- son of Harebut the Provision Merchant-’

'What?'

'You've got to be the son of someone,' Nijel explained. 'It says it here somewhere-' He half-turned and fumbled inside a grubby fur bag, eventually bringing out a thin, torn and grubby book.

'There's a bit in here about selecting your name,' he muttered.

'How come you ended up in this pit, then?'

'I was intending to steal from Creosote's treasury, but I had an asthma attack,' said Nijel, still fumbling through the crackling pages.

Rincewind looked down at the snake, which was still trying to keep out of everyone's way. It had a good thing going in the pit, and knew trouble when it saw it. It wasn't about to cause any aggro for anyone. It stared right back up at Rincewind and shrugged, which is pretty clever for a reptile with no shoulders.

'How long have you been a barbarian hero?'

'I'm just getting started. I've always wanted to be one, you see, and I thought maybe I could pick it up as I went along.' Nijel peered short-sightedly at Rincewind. 'That's all right, isn't it?'

'It's a desperate sort of life, by all accounts,' Rincewind volunteered.

'Have you thought what it might be like selling groceries for the next fifty years?' Nijel muttered darkly.

Rincewind thought.

'Is lettuce involved?' he said.

'Oh yes,' said Nijel, shoving the mysterious book back in his bag. Then he started to pay close attention to the pit walls.

Rincewind sighed. He liked lettuce. It was so incredibly boring. He had spent years in search of boredom, but had never achieved it. Just when he thought he had it in his grasp his life would suddenly become full of near-terminal interest. The thought that someone could voluntarily give up the prospect of being bored for fifty years made him feel quite weak. With fifty years ahead of him, he thought, he could elevate tedium to the status of an art form. There would be no end to the things he wouldn't do.

'Do you know any lamp-wick jokes?' he said, settling himself comfortably on the sand.

'I don't think so,' said Nijel politely, tapping a slab.

'I know hundreds. They are very droll. For example, do you know how many trolls it takes to change a lamp-wick?'

'This slab moves,' said Nijel. 'Look, it's a sort of door. Give me a hand.'

He pushed enthusiastically, his biceps standing out on his arms like peas on a pencil.

'I expect it's some sort of secret passage,' he added. 'Come on, use a bit of magic, will you? It's stuck.'

'Don't you want to hear the rest of the joke?' said Rincewind, in a pained voice. It was warm and dry down here, with no immediate danger, not counting the snake, which was trying to look inconspicuous. Some people were never satisfied.

'I think not right at the moment,' said Nijel. 'I think I would prefer a bit of magical assistance.'

'I'm not very good at it,' said Rincewind. 'Never got the hang of it, see, it's more than just pointing a finger at it and saying "Kazam-" '

There was a sound like a thick bolt of octarine lightning zapping into a heavy rock slab and smashing it into a thousand bits of spitting, white-hot shrapnel, and no wonder.

After a while Nijel slowly got to his feet, beating out the small fires in his vest.

'Yes,' he said, in the voice of one determined not to lose his self-control. 'Well. Very good. We'll just let it cool down a bit, shall we? And then we, then we, we might as well be going.'

He cleared his throat a bit.

'Nnh,' said Rincewind. He was starting fixedly at the end of his finger, holding it out at arm's length in a manner that suggested he was very sorry he hadn't got longer arms.

Nijel peered into the smouldering hole.

'It seems to open into some kind of room,' he said.

'Nnh.'

'After you,' said Nijel. He gave Rincewind a gentle push.

The wizard staggered forward, bumped his head on the rock and didn't appear to notice, and then rebounded into the hole.

Nijel patted the wall, and his brow wrinkled. 'Can you feel something?' he said. 'Should the stone be trembling?'

'Nnh.'

Are you all right?'

'Nnh.'

Nijel put his ear to the stones. 'There's a very strange noise,' he said. A sort of humming.' A bit of dust shook itself free from the mortar over his head and floated down.

Then a couple of much heavier rocks danced free from the walls of the pits and thudded into the sand.

Rincewind had already staggered off down the tunnel, making little shocked noises and completely ignoring the stones that were missing him by inches and, in some cases, hitting him by kilograms.

If he had been in any state to notice it, he would have known what was happening. The air had a greasy feel and smelled like burning tin. Faint rainbows filmed every point and edge. A magical charge was building up somewhere very close to them, and it was a big one, and it was trying to earth itself.

A handy wizard, even one as incapable as Rincewind, stood out like a copper lighthouse.

Nijel blundered out of the rumbling, broiling dust and bumped into him standing, surrounded by an octarine corona, in another cave.

Rincewind looked terrible. Creosote would have probably noted his flashing eyes and floating hair.

He looked like someone who had just eaten a handful of pineal glands and washed them

down with a pint of adrenochrome. He looked so high you could bounce intercontinental TV off him.

Every single hair stood out from his head, giving off little sparks. Even his skin gave the impression that it was trying to get away from him. His eyes appeared to be spinning horizontally; when he opened his mouth, peppermint sparks flashed from his teeth. Where he had trodden, stone melted or grew ears or turned into something small and scaly and purple and flew away.

'I say,' said Nijel, 'are you all right?'

'Nnh,' said Rincewind, and the syllable turned into a large doughnut.

'You don't look all right,' said Nijel with what might be called, in the circumstances, unusual perspicacity.

'Nnh.'

'Why not try getting us out of here?' Nijel added, and wisely flung himself flat on the floor.

Rincewind nodded like a puppet and pointed his loaded digit at the ceiling, which melted like ice under a blowlamp.

Still the rumbling went on, sending its disquieting harmonics dancing through the palace. It is a well-known factoid that there are frequencies that can cause panic, and frequencies that can cause embarrassing incontinence, but the shaking rock was resonating at the frequency that causes reality to melt and run out at the corners.

Nijel regarded the dripping ceiling and cautiously tasted it.

'Lime custard,' he said, and added, 'I suppose there's no chance of stairs, is there?'

More fire burst from Rincewind's ravaged fingers, coalescing into an almost perfect escalator, except that possibly no other moving staircase in the universe was floored with alligator skin.

Nijel grabbed the gently spinning wizard and leapt aboard.

Fortunately they had reached the top before the magic vanished, very suddenly.

Sprouting out of the centre of the palace, shattering rooftops like a mushroom bursting through an ancient pavement, was a white tower taller than any other building in Al Khali.

Huge double doors had opened at its base and out of them, striding along as though they owned the place, were dozens of wizards. Rincewind thought he could recognise a few faces, faces which he'd seen before bumbling vaguely in lecture theatres or peering amiably at the world in the University grounds. They weren't faces built for evil. They didn't have a fang between them. But there was some common denominator among their expressions that could terrify a thoughtful person.

Nijel pulled back behind a handy wall. He found himself looking into Rincewind's worried eyes.

'Hey, that's magic!'

'I know,' said Rincewind, 'It's not right!' Nijel peered up at the sparkling tower.

'But-’

'It feels wrong,' said Rincewind. 'Don't ask me why.'

Half a dozen of the Seriph's guards erupted from an arched doorway and plunged towards the wizards, their headlong rush made all the more sinister by their hastly battle silences. For a moment their swords flashed in the sunlight, and then a couple of the wizards turned, extended their hands and -

Nijel looked away.

'Urgh,' he said.

A few curved swords dropped on to the cobbles.

'I think we should very quietly go away,' said Rincewind.

'But didn't you see what they just turned them into?' 'Dead people,' said Rincewind. 'I know. I don't want to think about it.'

Nijel thought he'd never stop thinking about it, especially around Sam on windy nights. The point about being killed by magic was that it was much more inventive than, say, steel; there were all sorts of interesting new ways to die, and he couldn't put out of his mind the shapes he'd seen, just for an instant, before the wash of octarine fire had mercifully engulfed them.

'I didn't think wizards were like that,' he said, as they hurried down a passageway. 'I thought they were more, well, more silly than sinister. Sort of figures of fun.'

'Laugh that one off, then,' muttered Rincewind.

'But they just killed them, without even-’

'I wish you wouldn't go on about it. I saw it as well.'

Nijel drew back. His eyes narrowed.

'You're a wizard, too,' he said accusingly.

'Not that kind I'm not,' said Rincewind shortly.

'What kind are you, then?'

'The non-killing kind.'

'It was the way they looked at them as if it just didn't matter-’ said Nijel, shaking his head. 'That was the worst bit.'

'Yes.'

Rincewind dropped the single syllable heavily in front of Nijel's train of thought, like a tree trunk. The boy shuddered, but at least he shut up. Rincewind actually began to feel sorry for him, which was very unusual-he normally felt he needed all his pity for himself.

'Is that the first time you've seen someone killed?' he said.

'Yes.'

'Exactly how long have you been a barbarian hero?'

'Er. What year is this?'

Rincewind peered around a corner, but such people as were around and vertical were far too busy panicking to bother about them.

'Out on the road, then?' he said quietly. 'Lost track of time? I know how it is. This is the Year of the Hyena.'

'Oh. In that case, about-’ Nijel's lips moved soundlessly-’about three days. Look', he added quickly, 'how can people kill like that? Without even thinking about it?'

'I don't know,' said Rincewind, in a tone of voice that suggested he was thinking about it.

'I mean, even when the vizier had me thrown in the snake pit, at least he seemed to be taking an interest.'

'That's good. Everyone should have an interest.'

'I mean, he even laughed!'

Ah. A sense of humour, too.'

Rincewind felt that he could see his future with the same crystal clarity that a man falling off a cliff sees the ground, and for much the same reason. So when Nijel said: 'They just pointed their fingers without so much as-’ , Rincewind snapped: 'Just shut up, will you? How do you think I feel about it? I'm a wizard, too!'

'Yes, well, you'll be all right then,' muttered Nijel.

It wasn't a heavy blow, because even in a rage Rincewind still had muscles like tapioca, but it caught the side of Nijel's head and knocked him down more by the weight of surprise than its intrinsic energy.

'Yes, I'm a wizard all right,' Rincewind hissed. 'A wizard who isn't much good at magic! I've managed to survive up till now by not being important enough to die! And when all wizards are hated and feared, exactly how long do you think I'll last?'

'That's ridiculous!'

Rincewind couldn't have been more taken aback if Nijel had struck him.

'What?'

'Idiot! All you have to do is stop wearing that silly robe and get rid of that daft hat and no one will even know you're a wizard!'

Rincewind's mouth opened and shut a few times as he gave a very lifelike impression of a goldfish trying to grasp the concept of tap-dancing.

'Stop wearing the robe?' he said.

'Sure. All those tatty sequins and things, it's a total giveaway,' said Nijel, struggling to his feet.

'Get rid of the hat?'

'You've got to admit that going around with "wizzard" written on it is a bit of a heavy hint.'

Rincewind gave him a worried grin.

'Sorry,' he said, 'I don't quite follow you-'

'Just get rid of them. It's easy enough, isn't it? Just drop them somewhere and then you could be a, a, well, whatever. Something that isn't a wizard.'

There was a pause, broken only by the distant sounds of fighting.

'Er,' said Rincewind, and shook his head. 'You've lost me there ...'

'Good grief, it's perfectly simple to understand!'

'... not sure I quite catch your drift...' murmured Rincewind, his face ghastly with sweat.

'You can just stop being a wizard.'

Rincewind's lips moved soundlessly as he replayed every word, one at a time, then all at once.

'What?' he said, and then he said, 'Oh.'

'Got it? Want to try it one more time?'

Rincewind nodded gloomily.

'I don't think you understand. A wizard isn't what you do, it's what you are. If I wasn't a wizard, I wouldn't be anything.' He took off his hat and twiddled nervously with the loose star on its point, causing a few more cheap sequins to part company.

'I mean, it's got wizard written on my hat,' he said. 'It's very important -'

He stopped and stared at the hat.

'Hat,' he said vaguely, aware of some importunate memory pressing its nose up against the windows of his mind.

'It's a good hat,' said Nijel, who felt that something was expected of him.

'Hat,' said Rincewind again, and then added, 'the hat! We've got to get the hat!'

'You've got the hat,' Nijel pointed out.

'Not this hat, the other hat. And Conina!'

He took a few random steps along a passageway, and then sidled back.

'Where do you suppose they are?' he said.

'Who?'

'There's a magic hat I've got to find. And a girl.'

,Why?,

'It might be rather difficult to explain. I think there might be screaming involved somewhere.'

Nijel didn't have much of a jaw but, such as it was, he stuck it out.

'There's a girl needs rescuing?' he said grimly.

Rincewind hesitated. 'Someone will probably need rescuing,' he admitted. 'It might possibly be her. Or at least in her vicinity.'

'Why didn't you say so? This is more like it, this is what I was expecting. This is what heroism is all about. Let's go!'

There was another crash, and the sound of people yelling.

'Where?' said Rincewind.

Anywhere!'

Heroes usually have an ability to rush madly around crumbling palaces they hardly know, save everyone and get out just before the whole place blows up or sinks into the swamp. In fact Nijel and Rincewind visited the kitchens, assorted throne rooms, the stables (twice) and what seemed to Rincewind like several miles of corridor.

Occasionally groups of black-clad guards would scurry past them, without so much as a second glance.

'This is ridiculous,' said Nijel. 'Why don't we ask someone? Are you all right?'

Rincewind leaned against a pillar decorated with embarrassing sculpture and wheezed.

'You could grab a guard and torture the information out of him,' he said, gulping air. Nijel gave him an odd look.

'Wait here,' he said, and wandered off until he found a servant industriously ransacking a cupboard.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'which way to the harem?'

'Turn left three doors down,' said the man, without looking around.

'Right.'

He wandered back again and told Rincewind.

'Yes, but did you torture him?'

'No.'

'That wasn't very barbaric of you, was it?'

'Well, I'm working up to it,' said Nijel. 'I mean, I didn't say "thank you".'

Thirty seconds later they pushed aside a heavy bead curtain and entered the seraglio of the Seriph of Al Khali.

There were gorgeous songbirds in cages of gold filigree. There were tinkling fountains. There were pots of rare orchids through which humming-birds skimmed like tiny, brilliant jewels. There were about twenty young women wearing enough clothes for, say, about half a dozen, huddled together in a silent crowd.

Rincewind had eyes for none of this. That is not to say that the sight of several dozen square yards of hip and thigh in every shade from pink to midnight black didn't start certain tides flowing deep in the crevasses of his libido, but they were swamped by the considerably bigger flood of panic at the sight of four guards turning towards him with scimitars in their hands and the light of murder in their eyes.

Without hesitation, Rincewind took a step backwards.

'Over to you, friend,' he said.

'Right!'

Nijel drew his sword and held it out in front of him, his arms trembling at the effort.

There were a few seconds of total silence as everyone waited to see what would happen next. And then Nijel uttered the battle cry that Rincewind would never quite forget to the

end of his life.

'Erm,’ he said, 'excuse me...'

'It seems a shame,' said a small wizard.

The others didn't speak. It was a shame, and there wasn't a man among them who couldn't hear the hot whine of guilt all down their backbones. But, as so often happens by that strange alchemy of the soul, the guilt made them arrogant and reckless.

'Just shut up, will you?' said the temporary leader. He was called Benado Sconner, but there is something in the air tonight that suggests that it is not worth committing his name to memory. The air is dark and heavy and full of ghosts.

The Unseen University isn't empty, there just aren't any people there.

But of course the six wizards sent to burn down the Library aren't afraid of ghosts, because they're so charged with magic that they practically buzz as they walk, they're wearing robes more splendid than any Archchancellor has worn, their pointy hats are more pointed than any hats have hitherto been, and the reason they're standing so close together is entirely coincidental.

'It's awfully dark in here,' said the smallest of the wizards.

'It's midnight,' said Sconner sharply, 'and the only dangerous things in here are us. Isn't that right, boys?'

There was a chorus of vague murmurs. They were all in awe of Sconner, who was rumoured to do positive-thinking exercises.

'And we're not scared of a few old books, are we, lads?' He glowered at the smallest wizard. 'You're not, are you?' he added sharply.

'Me? Oh. No. Of course not. They're just paper, like he said,' said the wizard quickly.

'Well, then.'

'There's ninety thousand of them, mind,' said another wizard.

'I always heard there was no end to 'em,' said another. 'It's all down to dimensions, I heard, like what we see is only the tip of the whatever, you know, the thing that is mostly underwater-'

'Hippopotamus?'

Alligator?'

'Ocean?'

'Look, just shut up, all of you!' shouted Sconner. He hesitated. The darkness seemed to suck at the sound of his voice. It packed the air like feathers.

He pulled himself together a bit.

'Right then,' he said, and turned towards the forbidding doors of the Library.

He raised his hands, made a few complicated gestures in which his fingers, in some eye-watering way, appeared to pass through each other, and shattered the doors into sawdust.

The waves of silence poured back again, strangling the sound of falling woodchips.

There was no doubt that the doors were smashed. Four forlorn hinges hung trembling from the frame, and a litter of broken benches and shelves lay in the wreckage. Even Sconner was a little surprised.

'There,' he said. 'It's as easy as that. You see? Nothing happened to me. Right?'

There was a shuffling of curly-toed boots. The darkness beyond the doorway was limned with the indistinct, eye-aching glow of thaumaturgic radiation as possibility particles exceeded the speed of reality in a strong magical field.

'Now then,' said Sconner, brightly, 'who would like the honour of setting the fire?'

Ten silent seconds later he said, 'In that case I will do it myself. Honestly, I might as well be talking to the wall.'

He strode through the doorway and hurried across the floor to the little patch of starlight that lanced down from the glass dome high above the centre of the Library (although, of course, there has always been considerable debate about the precise geography of the place; heavy concentrations of magic distort time and space, and it is possible that the Library doesn't even have an edge, never mind a centre).

He stretched out his arms.

'There. See? Absolutely nothing has happened. Now come on in.'

The other wizards did so, with great reluctance and a tendency to duck as they passed through the ravished arch.

'Okay,' said Sconner, with some satisfaction. 'Now, has everyone got their matches as instructed? Magical fire won't work, not on these books, so I want everyone to

'Something moved up there,' said the smallest wizard.

Sconner blinked.

'What?'

'Something moved up by the dome,' said the wizard, adding by way of explanation, 'I saw it.'

Sconner squinted upwards into the bewildering shadows, and decided to exert a bit of authority.

'Nonsense,' he said briskly. He pulled out a bundle of foul-smelling yellow matches, and said, 'Now, I want you all to pile

'I did see it, you know,' said the small wizard, sulkily.

'All right, what did you see?'

'Well, I'm not exactly-’

'You don't know, do you?' snapped Sconner.

'I saw someth-’

'You don't know!' repeated Sconner, 'You're just seeing shadows, just trying to undermine my authority, isn't that it?' Sconner hesitated, and his eyes glazed momentarily. 'I am calm,' he intoned, 'I am totally in control. I will not let '

'It was-’

'Listen, shortarse, you can just jolly well shut up, all right?'

One of the other wizards, who had been staring upwards to conceal his embarrassment, gave a strangled little cough.

'Er, Sconner-’

'And that goes for you too!' Sconner pulled himself to his full, bristling height and flourished the matches.

'As I was saying,' he said, 'I want you to light the matches and -I suppose I'll have to show you how to light matches, for the benefit of shortarse there-and I'm not out of the window, you know. Good grief. Look at me. You take a match-’

He lit a match, the darkness blossomed into a ball of sulphurous white light, and the Librarian dropped on him like the descent of Man.

They all knew the Librarian, in the same definite but diffused way that people know walls and floors and all the other minor but necessary scenery on the stage of life. If they recall him at all, it was as a sort of gentle mobile sigh, sitting under his desk repairing books, or knuckling his way among the shelves in search of secret smokers. Any wizard unwise enough to hazard a clandestine rollup wouldn't know anything about it until a soft leathery hand reached up and removed the offending homemade, but the Librarian never made a fuss, he just looked extremely hurt and sorrowful about the whole sad business and then ate it.

Whereas what was now attempting with considerable effort to unscrew Sconner's head by the ears was a screaming nightmare with its lips curled back to reveal long yellow fangs.

The terrified wizards turned to run and found themselves bumping into bookshelves that

had unaccountably blocked the aisles. The smallest wizard yelped and rolled under a table laden with atlases, and lay with his hands over his ears to block out the dreadful sounds as the remaining wizards tried to escape.

Eventually there was nothing but silence, but it was that particularly massive silence created by something moving very stealthily, as it might be, in search of something else. The smallest wizard ate the tip of his hat out of sheer terror.

The silent mover grabbed him by the leg and pulled him gently but firmly out into the open, where he gibbered a bit with his eyes shut and then, when ghastly teeth failed to meet in his throat, ventured a quick glance.

The Librarian picked him up by the scruff of his neck and dangled him reflectively a foot off the ground, just out of reach of a small and elderly wire-haired terrier who was trying to remember how to bite people's ankles.

'Er-! said the wizard, and was then thrown in an almost flat trajectory through the broken doorway, where his fall was broken by the floor.

After a while a shadow next to him said, 'Well, that's it, then. Anyone seen that daft bastard Sconner?'

And a shadow on the other side of him said, 'I think my neck's broken.'

'Who's that?'

'That daft bastard,' said the shadow, nastily.

'Oh. Sorry, Sconner.'

Sconner stood up, his whole body now outlined in magical aura. He was trembling with

rage as he raised his hands.

'I'll show that wretched throwback to respect his evolutionary superiors-’ he snarled.

'Get him, lads!'

And Sconner was borne to the flagstones again under the weight of all five wizards.

'Sorry, but-’

'- you know that if you use-’

`- magic near the Library, with all the magic that's in there-’

'- get one thing wrong and it's a critical Mass and then -'

'BANG! Goodnight, world!'

Sconner growled. The wizards sitting on him decided that getting up was not the wisest thing they could do at this point.

Eventually he said, 'Right. You're right. Thank you. It was wrong of me to lose my temper like that. Clouded my judgement. Essential to be dispassionate. You're absolutely right. Thank you. Get off.

They risked it. Sconner stood up.

'That monkey,' he said, 'has eaten its last banana. Fetch-’

'Er. Ape, Sconner,' said the smallest wizard, unable to stop himself. 'It's an ape, you see. Not a monkey...'

He wilted under the stare.

'Who cares? Ape, monkey, what's the difference?' said Sconner. 'What's the difference, Mr Zoologist?'

'I don't know, Sconner,' said the wizard meekly. 'I think it's a class thing.'

'Shut up.'

'Yes, Sconner.'

'You ghastly little man,' said Sconner.

He turned and added, in a voice as level as a sawblade: 'I am perfectly controlled. My mind is as cool as a bald mammoth. My intellect is absolutely in charge. Which one of you sat on my head? No, I must not get angry. I am not angry. I am thinking positively. My faculties are fully engaged - do any of you wish to argue?'

'No, Sconner,' they chorused.

'Then get me a dozen barrels of oil and all the kindling you can find! That ape's gonna fry!'

From high in the Library roof, home of owls and bats and other things, there was a clink of chain and the sound of glass being broken as respectfully as possible.

'They don't look very worried,' said Nijel, slightly affronted.

'How can I put this?' said Rincewind. 'When they come to write the list of Great Battle Cries of the World, "Erm, excuse me" won't be one of them.'

He stepped to one side. 'I'm not with him,' he said earnestly to a grinning guard. 'I just met him, somewhere. In a pit.' He gave a little laugh. 'This sort of thing happens to me all the time,' he said.

The guards stared through him.

'Erm,' he said.

'Okay,' he said.

He sidled back to Nijel.

'Are you any good with that sword?'

Without taking his eyes off the guards, Nijel fumbled in his pack and handed Rincewind the book.

'I've read the whole of chapter three,' he said. 'It's got illustrations.'

Rincewind turned over the crumpled pages. The book had been used so hard you could have shuffled it, but what was probably once the front cover showed a rather poor woodcut of a muscular man. He had arms like two bags full of footballs, and he was standing kneedeep in languorous women and slaughtered victims with a smug expression on his face.

About him was the legend: Inne Juste 7 Dayes I wille make You a Barbearian Hero! Below it, in a slightly smaller type, was the name: Cohen the Barbarean. Rincewind rather doubted it. He had met Cohen and, while he could read after a fashion, the old boy

had never really mastered the pen and still signed his name with an 'X', which he usually spelled wrong. On the other hand, he gravitated rapidly to anything with money in it.

Rincewind looked again at the illustration, and then at Nijel.

'Seven days?'

'Well, I'm a slow reader.'

'Ah,' said Rincewind.

'And I didn't bother with chapter six, because I promised my mother I'd stick with just the looting and pillaging, until I find the right girl.'

'And this book teaches you how to be a hero?'

'Oh, yes. It's very good.' Nijel gave him a worried glance. 'That's all right, isn't it? It cost a lot of money.'

'Well, er. I suppose you'd better get on with it, then.'

Nijel squared his, for want of a better word, shoulders, and waved his sword again.

'You four had better just jolly well watch out,' he said, 'or ... hold on a moment.' He took the book from Rincewind and riffled through the pages until he found what he was looking for, and continued, 'Yes, or "the chill winds of fate will blow through your bleached skeletons,' the legions of Hell will drown your living soul in acid". There. How dyou like them ... excuse me a moment ... apples?'

There was a metallic chord as four men drew their swords in perfect harmony.

Nijel's sword became a blur. It made a complicated figure eight in the air in front of him, spun over his arm, flicked from hand to hand behind his back, seemed to orbit his chest twice, and leapt like a salmon.

One or two of the harem ladies broke into spontaneous applause. Even the guards looked impressed.

'That's a Triple Orcthrust with Extra Flip,' said Nijel proudly. 'I broke a lot of mirrors learning that. Look, they're stopping.'

'They've never seen anything like it, I imagine,' said Rincewind weakly, judging the distance to the doorway.

'I should think not.'

'Especially the last bit, where it stuck in the ceiling.'

Nijel looked upwards.

'Funny,' he said, 'it always did that at home, too. I wonder what I'm doing wrong.'

'Search me.'

'Gosh, I'm sorry,' said Nijel, as the guards seemed to realise that the entertainment was over and closed in for the kill.

'Don't blame youself-' said Rincewind, as Nijel reached up and tried unsuccessfully to free the blade.

'Thank you.'

'- I'll do it for you.'

Rincewind considered his next step. In fact, he considered several steps. But the door was too far away and anyway, by the sound of it, things were not a lot healthier out there.

There was only one thing for it. He'd have to try magic.

He raised his hand and two of the men fell over. He raised his other hand and the other two fell over.

Just as he was beginning to wonder about this, Conina stepped daintily over the prone bodies, idly rubbing the sides of her hands.

'I thought you'd never turn up,' she said. 'Who's your friend?'

As has already been indicated, the Luggage seldom shows any sign of emotion, or at least any emotion less extreme than blind rage and hatred, and therefore it is hard to gauge its feelings when it woke up, a few miles outside Al Khali, on its lid in a dried-up wadi with its legs in the air.

Even a few minutes after dawn the air was like the breath of a furnace. After a certain amount of rocking the Luggage managed to get most of its feet pointing the right way, and stood doing a complicated slow-motion jig to keep as few of them on the burning sand as possible.

It wasn't lost. It always knew exactly where it was. It was always here.

It was just that everywhere else seemed to have been temporarily mislaid.

After some deliberation the Luggage turned and walked very slowly, into a boulder.

It backed away and sat down, rather puzzled. It felt as though it had been stuffed with hot feathers, and it was dimly aware of the benefits of shade and a nice cool drink.

After a few false starts it walked to the top of a nearby sand dune, which gave it an unrivalled view of hundreds of other dunes.

Deep in its heartwood the Luggage was troubled. It had been spurned. It had been told to go away. It had been rejected. It had also drunk enough orakh to poison a small country.

If there is one thing a travel accessory needs more than anything else, it is someone to belong to. The Luggage set off unsteadily across the scorching sand, full of hope.

'I don't think we've got time for introductions,' said Rincewind, as a distant part of the palace collapsed with a thump that vibrated the floor. 'It's time we were-’

He realised he was talking to himself.

Nijel let go of the sword.

Conina stepped forward.

'Oh, no,' said Rincewind, but it was far too late. The world had suddenly separated into two parts - the bit which contained Nijel and Conina, and the bit which contained everything else. The air between them crackled. Probably, in their half, a distant orchestra was playing, bluebirds were tweeting, little pink clouds were barrelling through the sky, and all the other things that happen at times like this. When that sort of thing is going on, mere collapsing palaces in the next world don't stand a chance.

'Look, perhaps we can just get the introductions over with,' said Rincewind desperately. 'Nijel-’

'- the Destroyer-’ said Nijel dreamily.

'All right, Nijel the Destroyer,' said Rincewind, and added, 'Son of Harebut the-’

'Mighty,' said Nijel. Rincewind gaped a bit, and then shrugged.

'Well, whoever,' he conceded. 'Anyway, this is Conina. Which is rather a coincidence, because you'll be interested to know that her father was mmph.'

Conina, without turning her gaze, had extended a hand and held Rincewind's face in a gentle grip which, with only a slight increase in finger pressure, could have turned his head into a bowling ball.

'Although I could be mistaken,' he added, when she took her hand away. 'Who knows? Who cares? What does it matter?'

They didn't take any notice.

'I'll just go and see if I can find the hat, shall I?' he said.

'Good idea,' murmured Conina.

'I expect I shall get murdered, but I don't mind,' said Rincewind.

'Jolly good,' said Nijel.

'I don't expect anyone will even notice I'm gone,' said Rincewind.

'Fine, fine,' said Conina.

'I shall be chopped into small pieces, I expect,' said Rincewind, walking toward the door at the speed of a dying snail.

Conina blinked.

'What hat?' she said, and then, 'Oh, that hat.'

'I suppose there's no possible chance that you two might be of some assistance?' Rincewind ventured.

Somewhere inside Conina and Nijel's private world the bluebirds went to roost, the little pink clouds drifted away and the orchestra packed up and sneaked off to do a private gig at a nightclub somewhere. A bit of reality reasserted itself.

Conina dragged her admiring gaze away from Nijel's rapt face and turned it on to Rincewind, where it grew slightly cooler.

She sidled across the floor and grabbed the wizard by the arm.

'Look,' she said, 'you won't tell him who I really am, will you? Only boys get funny ideas and - well, anyway, if you do I will personally break all your-’

'I'll be far too busy,' said Rincewind, 'what with you helping me get the hat and everything. Not that I can imagine what you see in him,' he added, haughtily.

'He's nice. I don't seem to meet many nice people.'

'Yes, well-’

'He's looking at us!'

'So what? You're not frightened of him, are you?'

'Suppose he talks to me!'

Rincewind looked blank. Not for the first time in his life, he felt that there were whole areas of human experience that had passed him by, if areas could pass by people. Maybe he had passed them by. He shrugged.

'Why did you let them take you off to the harem without a fight?' he said.

'I've always wanted to know what went on in one.'

There was a pause. 'Well?' said Rincewind.

'Well, we all sat round, and then after a bit the Seriph came in, and then he asked me over and said that since I was new it would be my turn, and then, you'll never guess what he wanted me to do. The girls said it's the only thing he's interested in.'

'Er.'

'Are you all right?'

'Fine, fine,' Rincewind muttered.

'Your face has gone all shiny.'

'No, I'm fine, fine.'

'He asked me to tell him a story.'

'What about?' said Rincewind suspiciously.

'The other girls said he prefers something with rabbits in it.'

'Ah. Rabbits.'

'Small fluffy white ones. But the only stories I know are the ones father taught me when I was little, and I don't think they're really suitable.'

'Not many rabbits?'

'Lots of arms and legs being chopped off,' said Conina, and sighed. 'That's why you mustn't tell him about me you see? I'm just not cut out for a normal life.'

'Telling stories in a harem isn't bloody normal,' said Rincewind. 'It'll never catch on.'

'He's looking at us again!' Conina grabbed Rincewind's arm.

He shook her off. 'Oh, good grief,' he said, and hurried across the room to Nijel, who grabbed his other arm.

'You haven't been telling her about me, have you?' he demanded. 'I'll never live it down if you've told her that I'm only just learning how-’

'Nonono. She just wants you to help us. It's a sort of quest.'

Nijel's eyes gleamed.

'You mean a geas?' he said.

'Pardon?'

'It's in the book. To be a proper hero it says you've got to labour under a geas.'

Rincewind's forehead wrinkled. 'Is it a sort of bird?'

'I think it's more a sort of obligation, or something,' said Nijel, but without much certainty.

'Sounds more like a kind of bird to me,' said Rincewind, 'I'm sure I read it in a bestiary once. Large. Couldn't fly. Big pink legs, it had.' His face went blank as his ears digested what they had just heard his lips say.

Five seconds later they were out of the room, leaving behind four prone guards and the harem ladies themselves, who settled down for a bit of story-telling.

The desert rimwards of Al Khali is bisected by the river Tsort, famed in myth and lies, which insinuates its way through the brown landscapes like a long damp descriptive passage punctuated with sandbanks. And every sandbank is covered with sunbaked logs, and most of the logs are the kind of logs that have teeth, and most of the logs opened one lazy eye at the distant sounds of splashing from upstream, and suddenly most of the logs had legs. A dozen scaly bodies slipped into the turbid waters, which rolled over them again. The dark waters were unruffled, except for a few inconsequential V -shaped ripples.

The Luggage paddled gently down the stream. The water was making it feel a little better. It spun gently in the weak current, the focus of several mysterious little swirls that sped across the surface of the water.

The ripples converged.

The Luggage jerked. Its lid flew open. It shot under the surface with a brief, despairing creak.

The chocolate-coloured waters of the Tsort rolled back again. They were getting good at it.

And the tower of sourcery loomed over Al Khali like a vast and beautiful fungus, the kind that appear in books with little skull-and-crossbones symbols beside them.

The Seriph's guard had fought back, but there were now quite a lot of bewildered frogs and newts around the base of the tower, and they were the fortunate ones. They still had arms and legs, of a sort, and most of their essential organs were still on the inside. The city was under the rule of sourcery ... martial lore.

Some of the buildings nearest the base of the tower were already turning into the bright white marble that the wizards obviously preferred.

The trio stared out through a hole in the palace walls.

'Very impressive,' said Conina critically. 'Your wizards are more powerful than I thought.'

'Not my wizards,' said Rincewind. 'I don't know whose wizards they are. I don't like it. All the wizards I knew couldn't stick one brick on another.'

'I don't like the idea of wizards ruling everybody,' said Nijel. 'Of course, as a hero I am

philosophically against the whole idea of wizardry in any case. The time will come when,' his eyes glazed slightly, as if he was trying to remember something he'd seen somewhere, 'the time will come when all wizardry has gone from the face of the world and the sons of, of - anyway, we can all be a bit more practical about things,' he added lamely.

'Read it in a book, did you?' said Rincewind sourly. Any geas in it?'

'He's got a point,' said Conina. 'I've nothing against wizards, but it's not as if they do much good. There just a bit of decoration, really. Up to now.'

Rincewind pulled off his hat. It was battered, stained and covered with rock dust, bits of it had been sheared off, the point was dented and the star was shedding sequins like pollen, but the word "blizzard" was still just readable under the grime.

'See this?' he demanded, red in the face. 'Do you see it? Do you? What does it tell you?'

'That you can't spell?' said Nijel.

'What? No! It says I'm a wizard, that's what! Twenty years behind the staff, and proud of it! I've done my time, I have! I've pas - I've sat dozens of exams! If all the spells I've read were piled on top of one another, they'd ... it'd ... you'd have a lot of spells!'

'Yes, but-' Conina began.

'Yes?'

'You're not actually very good at them, are you?'

Rincewind glared at her. He tried to think of what to say next, and a small receptor area opened in his mind at the same time as an inspiration particle, its path bent and skewed

by a trillion random events, screamed down through the atmosphere and burst silently just at the right spot.

'Talent just defines what you do,' he said. 'It doesn't define what you are. Deep down, I mean. When you know what you are, you can do anything.'

He thought a bit more and added, 'That's what makes sourcerers so powerful. The important thing is to know what you really are.'

There was a pause full of philosophy.

'Rincewind?' said Conina, kindly.

'Hmm?' said Rincewind, who was still wondering how the words got into his head.

'You really are an idiot. Do you know that?'

'You will all stand very still.'

Abrim the vizier stepped out of a ruined archway. He was wearing the Archchancellor's hat.

The desert fried under the flame of the sun. Nothing moved except the shimmering air, hot as a stolen volcano, dry as a skull.

A basilisk lay panting in the baking shade of a rock, dribbling corrosive yellow slime. For the last five minutes its ears had been detecting the faint thump of hundreds of little legs moving unsteadily over the dunes, which seemed to indicate that dinner was on the way.

It blinked its legendary eyes and uncoiled twenty feet of hungry body, winding out and on to the sand like fluid death.

The Luggage staggered to a halt and raised its lid threateningly. The basilisk hissed, but a little uncertainly, because it had never seen a walking box before, and certainly never one with lots of alligator teeth stuck in its lid. There were also scraps of leathery hide adhering to it, as though it had been involved in a fight in a handbag factory, and in a way that the basilisk wouldn't have been able to describe even if it could talk, it appeared to be glaring.

Right, the reptile thought, if that's the way you want to play it.

It turned on the Luggage a stare like a diamond drill, a stare that nipped in via the staree's eyeballs and flayed the brain from the inside, a stare that tore the frail net curtains on the windows of the soul, a stare that

The basilisk realised something was very wrong. An entirely new and unwelcome sensation started to arise just behind its saucer-shaped eyes. It started small, like the little itch in those few square inches of back that no amount of writhing will allow you to scratch, and grew until it became a second, red-hot, internal sun.

The basilisk was feeling a terrible, overpowering and irresistible urge to blink ...

It did something incredibly unwise.

It blinked.

'He's talking through his hat,' said Rincewind.

'Eh?' said Nijel, who was beginning to realise that the world of the barbarian hero wasn't the clean, simple place he had imagined in the days when the most exciting thing he had ever done was stack parsnips.

'The hat's talking through him, you mean,' said Conina, and she backed away too, as one tends to do in the presence of horror.

'Eh?'

'I will not harm you. You have been of some service,' said Abrim, stepping forwards with his hands out. 'But you are right. He thought he could gain power through wearing me. Of course, it is the other way around. An astonishingly devious and clever mind.'

'So you tried his head on for size?' said Rincewind. He shuddered. He'd worn the hat. Obviously he didn't have the right kind of mind. Abrim did have the right kind of mind, and now his eyes were grey and colourless, his skin was pale and he walked as though his body was hanging down from his head.

Nijel had pulled out his book and was riffling feverishly through the pages.

'What on earth are you doing?' said Conina, not taking her eyes off the ghastly figure.

'I'm looking up the Index of Wandering Monsters,' said Nijel. 'Do you think it's an Undead? They're awfully difficult to kill, you need garlic and,-'

'You won't find this in there,' said Rincewind slowly. 'It's - it's a vampire hat.'

'Of course, it might be a Zombie,' said Nijel, running his finger down a page. 'It says here you need black pepper and sea salt, but-'

'You're supposed to fight the bloody things, not eat them,' said Conina.

'This is a mind I can use,' said the hat. 'Now I can fight back. I shall rally wizardry. There is room for only one magic in this world, and I embody it. Sourcery beware!'

'Oh, no,' said Rincewind under his breath.

'Wizardry has learned a lot in the last twenty centuries. This upstart can be beaten. You three will follow me.'

It wasn't a request. It wasn't even an order. It was a sort of forecast. The voice of the hat went straight to the hindbrain without bothering to deal with the consciousness, and Rincewind's legs started to move of their own accord.

The other two also jerked forward, walking with the awkward doll-like jerking that suggested that they, too, were on invisible strings.

'Why the oh, no?' said Conina, 'I mean, "Oh, no" on general principles I can understand, but was there any particular reason?'

'If we get a chance we must run,' said Rincewind.

'Did you have anywhere in mind?'

'It probably won't matter. We're doomed anyway.'

'Why?' said Nijel.

'Well,' said Rincewind, 'have you ever heard of the Mage Wars?'

There were a lot of things on the Disc that owed their origin to the Mage Wars. Sapient pearwood was one of them.

The original tree was probably perfectly normal and spent its days drinking groundwater and eating sunshine in a state of blessed unawareness and then the magic wars broke around it and pitchforked its genes into a state of acute perspicacity.

It also left it ingrained, as it were, with a bad temper. But sapient pearwood got off lightly.

Once, when the level of background magic on the Disc was young and high and found every opportunity to burst on the world, wizards were all as powerful as sourcerers and built their towers on every hilltop. And if there was one thing a really powerful wizard can't stand, it is another wizard. His instinctive approach to diplomacy is to hex 'em till they glow, then curse them in the dark.

That could only mean one thing. All right, two things. Three things.

All-out. Thaumaturgical. War.

And there were of course no alliances, no sides, no deals, no mercy, no cease. The skies twisted, the seas boiled. The scream and whizz of fireballs turned the night into day, but that was all right because the ensuing clouds of black smoke turned the day into night. The landscape rose and fell like a honeymoon duvet, and the very fabric of space itself was tied in multidimensional knots and bashed on a flat stone down by the river of Time. For example, a popular spell at the time was Pelepel's Temporal Compressor, which on one occasion resulted in a race of giant reptiles being created, evolving, spreading, flourishing and then being destroyed in the space of about five minutes, leaving only its bones in the earth to mislead forthcoming generations completely. Trees swam, fishes walked, mountains strolled down to the shops for a packet of cigarettes, and the mutability of existence was such that the first thing any cautious person would do when

they woke up in the mornings was count their arms and legs.

That was, in fact, the problem. All the wizards were pretty evenly matched and in any case lived in high towers well protected with spells, which meant that most magical weapons rebounded and landed on the common people who were trying to scratch an honest living from what was, temporarily, the soil, and lead ordinary, decent (but rather short) lives.

But still the fighting raged, battering the very structure of the universe of order, weakening the walls of reality and threatening to topple the whole rickety edifice of time and space into the darkness of the Dungeon Dimensions ...

One story said that the gods stepped in, but the gods don't usually take a hand in human affairs unless it amuses them. Another one - and this was the one that the wizards themselves told, and wrote down in their books - was that the wizards themselves got together and settled their differences amicably for the good of mankind. And this was generally accepted as the true account, despite being as internally likely as a lead lifebelt.

The truth isn't easily pinned to a page. In the bathtub of history the truth is harder to hold than the soap, and much more difficult to find ...

'What happened, then?' said Conina.

'It doesn't matter,' said Rincewind, mournfully. 'It's going to start all over again. I can feel it. I've got this instinct. There's too much magic flowing into the world. There's going to be a horrible war. It's all going to happen. The Disc is too old to take it this time. Everything's been worn too thin. Doom, darkness and destruction bear down on us. The Apocralypse is nigh.'

'Death walks abroad,' added Nijel helpfully.

'What?' snapped Rincewind, angry at being interrupted.

'I said, Death walks abroad,' said Nijel.

'Abroad I don't mind,' said Rincewind. 'They're all foreigners. It's Death walking around here I'm not looking forward to.'

'It's only a metaphor,' said Conina.

'That's all you know. I've met him.'

'What did he look like?' said Nijel.

'Put it like this-’

'Yes?'

'He didn't need a hairdresser.'

Now the sun was a blowlamp nailed to the sky, and the only difference between the sand and red-hot ash was the colour.

The Luggage plodded erratically across the burning dunes. There were a few traces of yellow slime rapidly drying on its lid.

The lonely little oblong was watched, from atop of a stone pinnacle the shape and

temperature of a firebrick, by a chimera.[18] The chimera was an extremely rare species, and this particular one wasn't about to do anything to help matters.

It judged its moment carefully, kicked away with its talons, folded its leathery wings and plummeted down towards its victim.

The chimera's technique was to swoop low over the prey, lightly boiling it with its fiery breath, and then turn and rend its dinner with its teeth. It managed the fire part but then, at the point where experience told the creature it should be facing a stricken and terrified victim, found itself on the ground in the path of a scorched and furious Luggage.

The only thing incandescent about the Luggage was its rage. It had spent several hours with a headache, during which it had seemed the whole world had tried to attack it. It had had enough.

When it had stamped the unfortunate chimera into a greasy puddle on the sand it paused for a moment, apparently considering its future. It was becoming clear that not belonging to anyone was a lot harder than it had thought. It had vague, comforting recollections of service and a wardrobe to call its own.

It turned around very slowly, pausing frequently to open its lid. It might have been sniffing the air, if it had a nose. At last it made up its mind, if it had a mind.

The hat and its wearer also strode purposefully across the rubble that had been the legendary Rhoxie to the foot of the tower of sourcery, their unwilling entourage straggling along behind them.

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[18] For a description of the chimera we shall turn to Broomfog's famous bestiary Anima Unnaturale: 'It have thee legges of an mermade, the hair of an tortoise, the teeth of an fowel, and the winges of an snake. Of course, I have only my worde for it, the beast having the breathe of an furnace and the temperament of an rubber balloon in a hurricane.

There were doors at the foot of the tower. Unlike those of Unseen University, which were usually propped wide open, they were tightly shut. They seemed to glow.

'You three are privileged to be here,' said the hat through Abrim's slack mouth. 'This is the moment when wizardry stops running,' he glanced witheringly at Rincewind, 'and starts fighting back. You will remember it for the rest of your lives.'

'What, until lunchtime?' said Rincewind weakly.

'Watch closely,' said Abrim. He extended his hands.

'If we get a chance,' whispered Rincewind to Nijel, 'we run, right?'

'Where to?'

'From,' said Rincewind, 'the important word is from.'

'I don't trust this man,' said Nijel. 'I try not to judge from first impressions, but I definitely think he's up to no good.'

'He had you thrown in a snake pit!'

'Perhaps I should have taken the hint.'

The vizier started to mutter. Even Rincewind, whose few talents included a gift for languages, didn't recognise it, but it sounded the kind of language designed specifically for muttering, the words curling out like scythes at ankle height, dark and red and merciless. They made complicated swirls in the air, and then drifted gently towards the doors of the tower.

Where they touched the white marble it turned black and crumbled.

As the remains drifted to the ground a wizard stepped through and looked Abrim up and down.

Rincewind was used to the dressy ways of wizards, but this one was really impressive, his robe so padded and crenellated and buttressed in fantastic folds and creases that it had probably been designed by an architect. The matching hat looked like a wedding cake that had collided intimately with a Christmas tree.

The actual face, peering through the small gap between the baroque collar and the filigreed fringe of the brim, was a bit of a disappointment. At some time in the past it had thought its appearance would be improved by a thin, scruffy moustache. It had been wrong.

'That was our bloody door!' it said. 'You're really going to regret this!'

Abrim folded his arms.

This seemed to infuriate the other wizard. He flung up his arms, untangled his hands from the lace on his sleeves, and sent a flare screaming across the gap.

It struck Abrim in the chest and rebounded in a gout of incandescence, but when the blue after-images allowed Rincewind to see he saw Abrim, unharmed.

His opponent frantically patted out the last of the little fires in his own clothing and looked up with murder in his eyes.

'You don't seem to understand,' he rasped. 'It's sourcery you're dealing with now. You can't fight sourcery.'

'I can use sourcery,' said Abrim.

The wizard snarled and lofted a fireball, which burst harmlessly inches from Abrim's dreadful grin.

A look of acute puzzlement passed across the other one's face. He tried again, sending lines of blue-hot magic lancing straight from infinity towards Abrim's heart. Abrim waved them away.

'Your choice is simple,' he said. 'You can join me, or you can die.'

It was at this point that Rincewind became aware of a regular scraping sound close to his ear. It had an unpleasant metallic ring.

He half-turned, and felt the familiar and very uncomfortable prickly feeling of Time slowing down around him.

Death paused in the act of running a whetstone along the edge of his scythe and gave him a nod of acknowledgement, as between one professional and another.

He put a bony digit to his lips, or rather, to the place where his lips would have been if he'd had lips.

All wizards can see Death, but they don't necessarily want to.

There was a popping in Rincewind's ears and the spectre vanished.

Abrim and the rival wizard were surrounded by a corona of randomised magic, and it was evidently having no effect on Abrim. Rincewind drifted back into the land of the living just in time to see the man reach out and grab the wizard by his tasteless collar.

'You cannot defeat me,' he said in the hat's voice. 'I have had two thousand years of harnessing power to my own ends. l can draw my power from your power. Yeld to me or you won't even have time to regret it.'

The wizard struggled and, unfortunately, let pride win over caution.

'Never!' he said.

'Die,' suggested Abrim.

Rincewind had seen many strange things in his life, most of them with extreme reluctance, but he had never seen anyone actually killed by magic.

Wizards didn't kill ordinary people because a) they seldom noticed them and b) it wasn't considered sporting and c) besides, who'd do all the cooking and growing food and things. And killing a brother wizard with magic was well-nigh impossible on account of the layers of protective spells that any cautious wizard maintained about his person at all times.[19] The first thing a young wizard learns at Unseen University - apart from where his peg is, and which way to the lavatory - is that he must protect himself at all times.

Some people think this is paranoia, but it isn't. Paranoids only think everyone is out to get them. Wizards know it.

The little wizard was wearing the psychic equivalent of three feet of tempered steel and it was being melted like butter under a blowlamp. It streamed away, vanished.

If there are words to describe what happened to the wizard next then they're imprisoned inside a wild thesaurus in the Unseen University Library. Perhaps it's best left to the

[19] Of course, wizards often killed one another by ordinary, nonmagical means, but this was perfectly allowable and death by assassination was considered natural causes for a wizard.

imagination, except that anyone able to imagine the kind of shape that Rincewind saw writhing painfully for a few seconds before it mercifully vanished must be a candidate for the famous white canvas blazer with the optional long sleeves.

'So perish all enemies,' said Abrim.

He turned his face up to the heights of the tower.

'I challenge,' he said. And those who will not face me must follow me, according to the Lore.'

There was a long, thick pause caused by a lot of people listening very hard. Eventually, from the top of the tower, a voice called out uncertainly, 'Whereabouts in the Lore?'

'I embody the Lore.'

There was a distant whispering and then the same voice called out, 'The Lore is dead. Sourcery is above the Lo-’

The sentence ended in a scream because Abrim raised his left hand and sent a thin beam of green light in the precise direction of the speaker.

It was at about this moment that Rincewind realised that he could move his limbs himself. The hat had temporarily lost interest in them. He glanced sideways at Conina. In instant, unspoken agreement they each grasped one of Nijel's arms and turned and ran, and didn't stop until they'd put several walls between them and the tower. Rincewind ran expecting something to hit him in the back of the neck. Possibly the world.

All three landed in the rubble and lay there panting.

'You needn't have done that,' muttered Nijel. 'I was just getting ready to really give him a

seeing-to. How can I ever-’

There was an explosion behind them and shafts of multicoloured fire screamed overhead, striking sparks off the masonry. Then there was a sound like an enormous cork being pulled out of a small bottle, and a peal of laughter that, somehow wasn't very amusing. The ground shook.

'What's going on?' said Conina.

'Magical war,' said Rincewind.

'Is that good?'

No.

'But surely you want wizardry to triumph?' said Nijel.

Rincewind shrugged, and ducked as something unseen and big whirred overhead making a noise like a partridge.

'I've never seen wizards fight,' said Nijel. He started to scramble up the rubble and screamed as Conina grabbed him by the leg.

'I don't think that would be a good idea,' she said. 'Rincewind?'

The wizard shook his head gloomily, and picked up a pebble. He tossed it up above the ruined wall, where it turned into a small blue teapot. It smashed when it hit the ground.

'The spells react with one another,' he said. 'There's no telling what they'll do.'

'But we're safe behind this wall?' said Conina.

Rincewind brightened a bit. 'Are we?' he said.

'I was asking you.'

'Oh. No. I shouldn't think so. It's just ordinary stone. The right spell and ... phooey.'

'Phooey?'

'Right.'

'Shall we run away again?'

'It's worth a try.'

They made it to another upright wall a few seconds before a randomly spitting ball of yellow fire landed where they had been lying and turned the ground into something awful. The whole area around the tower was a tornado of sparkling air.

'We need a plan,' said Nijel.

'We could try running again,' said Rincewind.

'That doesn't solve anything!'

'Solves most things,' said Rincewind.

'How far do we have to go to be safe?' said Conina.

Rincewind risked a look around the wall.

'Interesting philosophical question,' he said. 'I've been a long way, and I've never been safe.'

Conina sighed and stared at a pile of rubble nearby. She stared at it again. There was something odd there, and she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

'I could rush at them,' said Nijel, vaguely. He stared yearningly at Conina's back.

'Wouldn't work,' said Rincewind. 'Nothing works against magic. Except stronger magic. And then the only thing that beats stronger magic is even stronger magic. And next thing you know...'

'Phooey?' suggested Nijel.

'It happened before,' said Rincewind. 'Went on for thousands of years until not a-'

'Do you know what's odd about that heap of stone?' said Conina.

Rincewind glanced at it. He screwed up his eyes.

'What, apart from the legs?' he said.

It took several minutes to dig the Seriph out. He was still clutching a wine bottle, which was almost empty, and blinked at them all in vague recognition.

'Powerful,' he said, and then after some effort added, 'stuff, this vintage. Felt,' he continued, 'as though the place fell on me.'

'It did,' said Rincewind.

'Ah. That would be it, then.' Creosote focused on Conina, after several attempts, and

rocked backwards. 'My word,' he said, 'the young lady again. Very impressive.'

'I say-’ Nijel began.

'Your hair,' said the Seriph, rocking slowly forward again, 'is like, is like a flock of goats that graze upon the side of Mount Gebra.'

'Look here

'Your breasts are like, like,' the Seriph swayed sideways a little, and gave a brief, sorrowful glance at the empty bottle, 'are like the jewelled melons in the fabled gardens of dawn.'

Conina's eyes widened. 'They are?' she said.

'No,' said the Seriph, 'doubt about it. I know jewelled melons when I see them. As the white does in the meadows of the water margin are your thighs, which-’

'Erm, excuse me-’said Nijel, clearing his throat with malice aforethought.

Creosote swayed in his direction.

'Hmm?' he said.

'Where I come from,' said Nijel stonily, 'we don't talk to ladies like that.'

Conina sighed as Nijel shuffled protectively in front of her. It was, she reflected, absolutely true.

'In fact,' he went on, sticking out his jaw as far as possible, which still made it appear like a dimple, 'I've a jolly good mind-’

'Open to debate,' said Rincewind, stepping forward. 'Er, sir, sire, we need to get out. I suppose you wouldn't know the way?'

'Thousands of rooms,' said the Seriph,' in here, you know. Not been out in years.' He hiccuped. 'Decades. Ians. Never been out, in fact.' His face glazed over in the act of composition. 'The bird of Time has but, um, a little way to walk and lo! the bird is on its-feet.'

'It's a geas,' muttered Rincewind.

Creosote swayed at him. 'Abrim does all the ruling, you see. Terrible hard work.'

'He's not,' said Rincewind, 'making a very good job of it just at present.'

And we'd sort of like to get away,' said Conina, who was still turning over the phrase about the goats.

'And I've got this geas,' said Nijel, glaring at Rincewind.

Creosote patted him on the arm.

'That's nice,' he said. 'Everyone should have a pet.

'So if you happen to know if you own any stables or anything...' prompted Rincewind.

'Hundreds,' said Creosote. 'I own some of the finest, most ... finest horses in the world.' His brow wrinkled. 'So they tell me.'

'But you wouldn't happen to know where they are?'

'Not as such,' the Seriph admitted. A random spray of magic turned the nearby wall into arsenic meringue.

'I think we might have been better off in the snake pit,' said Rincewind, turning away.

Creosote took another sorrowful glance at his empty wine bottle.

'I know where there's a magic carpet,' he said.

'No,' said Rincewind, raising his hands protectively. 'Absolutely not. Don't even-'

'It belonged to my grandfather-'

'A real magic carpet?' said Nijel.

'Listen,' said Rincewind urgently. 'I get vertigo just listening to tall stories.'

'Oh, quite,' the Seriph burped gently, 'genuine. Very pretty pattern.' He squinted at the bottle again, and sighed. 'It was a lovely blue colour,' he added.

'And you wouldn't happen to know where it is?' said Conina slowly, in the manner of one creeping up very carefully to a wild animal that might take fright at any moment.

'In the treasury. I know the way there. I'm extremely rich, you know. Or so they tell me.' He lowered his voice and tried to wink at Conina, eventually managing it with both eyes. 'We could sit on it,' he said, breaking into a sweat. 'And you could tell me a story...'

Rincewind tried to scream through gritted teeth.

His ankles were already beginning to sweat.

'I'm not going to ride on a magic carpet!' he hissed. 'I'm afraid of grounds!'

'You mean heights,' said Conina. And stop being silly.'

'I know what I mean! It's the grounds that kill you!'

The battle of Al Khali was a hammer-headed cloud, in whose roiling depths weird shapes could be heard and strange sounds were seen. Occasional misses seared across the city. Where they landed things were ... different.

For example, a large part of the soak had turned into an impenetrable forest of giant yellow mushrooms. No-one knew what effect this had on its inhabitants, although possibly they hadn't noticed.

The temple of Offler the Crocodile God, patron deity of the city, was now a rather ugly sugary thing constructed in five dimensions. But this was no problem because it was being eaten by a herd of giant ants.

On the other hand, not many people were left to appreciate this statement against uncontrolled civic alteration, because most of them were running for their lives. They fled across the fertile fields in a steady stream. Some had taken to boats, but this method of escape had ceased when most of the harbour area turned into a swamp in which, for no obvious reason, a couple of small pink elephants were building a nest.

Down below the panic on the roads the Luggage paddled slowly up one of the reed-lined drainage ditches. A little way ahead of it a moving wave of small alligators, rats and snapping turtles was pouring out of the water and scrambling frantically up the bank, propelled by some vague but absolutely accurate animal instinct.

The Luggage's lid was set in an expression of grim determination. It didn't want much out of the world, except for the total extinction of every other lifeform, but what it needed more than anything else now was its owner.

It was easy to see that the room was a treasury by its incredible emptiness. Doors hung off hooks. Barred alcoves had been smashed in. Lots of smashed chests lay around, and this gave Rincewind a pang of guilt and he wondered, for about two seconds, where the Luggage had got to.

There was a respectful silence, as there always is when large sums of money have just passed away. Nijel wandered off and prodded some of the chests in a forlorn search for secret drawers, as per the instructions in Chapter Eleven.

Conina reached down and picked up a small copper coin.

'How horrible,' said Rincewind eventually. 'A treasury with no treasure in it.'

The seriph stood and beamed. 'Not to worry', he said.

'But all your money has been stolen!' said Conina.

'The servants, I expect,' said Creosote. 'Very disloyal of them.'

Rincewind gave him an odd look. 'Doesn't it worry you?'

'Not much. I never really spent anything. I've often wondered what being poor was like.'

'You're going to get a huge opportunity to find out.'

'Will I need training?'

'It comes naturally,' said Rincewind. 'You pick it up as you go along.' There was a distant explosion and part of the ceiling turned to jelly.

'Erm, excuse me,' said Nijel, 'this carpet ...'

'Yes,' said Conina, 'the carpet.'

Creosote gave them a benevolent, slightly tipsy smile.

'Ah, yes. The carpet. Push the nose of the statue behind you, peach-buttocked jewel of the desert dawn.'

Conina, blushing, performed this act of minor sacrilege on a large green statue of Offler the Crocodile God.

Nothing happened. Secret compartments assiduously failed to open.

'Um. Try the left hand.'

She gave it an experimental twist. Creosote scratched his head.

'Maybe it was the right hand...'

'I should try and remember, if I were you,' said Conina sharply, when that didn't work either. 'There aren't many bits left that I'd care to pull.'

'What's that thing there?' said Rincewind.

'You're really going to hear about it if it isn't the tail,' said Conina, and gave it a kick.

There was a distant metallic groaning noise, like a saucepan in pain. The statue shuddered. It was followed by a few heavy clonks somewhere inside the wall, and Offler the Crocodile God grated ponderously aside. There was a tunnel behind him.

'My grandfather had this built for our more interesting treasure,' said Creosote. 'He was very-' he groped for a word-'ingenious.'

'If you think I'm setting foot in there-' Rincewind began.

'Stand aside,' said Nijel, loftily. 'I will go first.'

'There could be traps-' said Conina doubtfully. She shot the Seriph a glance.

'Oh, probably, O gazelle of Heaven,' he said. 'I haven't been in there since I was six. There were some slabs you shouldn't tread on, I think.'

'Don't worry about that,' said Nijel, peering into the gloom of the tunnel. 'I shouldn't think there's a booby trap that I couldn't spot.'

'Had a lot of experience at this sort of thing, have you?' said Rincewind sourly.

'Well, I know Chapter Fourteen off by heart. It had illustrations,' said Nijel, and ducked into the shadows.

They waited for several minutes in what would have been a horrified hush if it wasn't for the muffled grunts and occasional thumping noises from the tunnel. Eventually Nijel's voice echoed back down to them from a distance.

'There's absolutely nothing,' he said. 'I've tried everything. It's as steady as a rock. Everything must have seized up, or something.'

Rincewind and Conina exchanged glances.

'He doesn't know the first thing about traps,' she said. 'When I was five, my father made me walk all the way down a passage that he'd rigged up, just to teach me-'

'He got through, didn't he?' said Rincewind.

There was a noise like a damp finger dragged across glass, but amplified a billion times, and the floor shook.

'Anyway, we haven't got a lot of choice,' he added, and ducked into the tunnel. The others followed him. Many people who had got to know Rincewind had come to treat him as a sort of two-legged miner's canary[20] and tended to assume that if Rincewind was still upright and not actually running then some hope remained.

'This is fun,' said Creosote. 'Me, robbing my own treasury. If I catch myself I can have myself flung into the snake pit.'

'But you could throw yourself on your mercy,' said Conina, running a paranoid eye over the dusty stonework.

'Oh, no. I think I would have to teach me a lesson, as an example to myself.'

There was a little click above them. A small slab slid aside and a rusty metal hook descended slowly and jerkily. Another bar creaked out of the wall and tapped Rincewind on the shoulder. As he swung around, the first hook hung a yellowing notice on his back and retracted into the roof.

[20] All right. But you've got the general idea.

'What'd it do? What'd it do?' screamed Rincewind, trying to read his own shoulderblades.

'It says, Kick Me,' said Conina.

A section of wall slid up beside the petrified wizard. A large boot on the end of a complicated series of metal joints gave a half-hearted wobble and then the whole thing snapped at the knee.

The three of them looked at it in silence. Then Conina said, 'We're dealing here with a warped brain, I can tell.'

Rincewind gingerly unhooked the sign and let it drop. Conina pushed past him and stalked along the passage with an air of angry caution, and when a metal hand extended itself on a spring and waggled in a friendly fashion she didn't shake it but instead traced its moulting wiring to a couple of corroded electrodes in a big glass jar.

'Your grandad was a man with a sense of humour?' she said.

'Oh, yes. Always liked a chuckle,' said Creosote.

'Oh, good,' said Conina. She prodded gingerly at a flagstone which, to Rincewind, looked no different to any of its fellows. With a sad little springy noise a moulting feather duster wobbled out of the wall at armpit height.

'I think I would have quite liked to meet the old Seriph,' she said, through gritted teeth, 'although not to shake him by the hand. You'd better give me a leg up here, wizard.'

'Pardon?'

Conina pointed irritably to a half-open stone doorway just ahead of them.

'I want to look up there,' she said. 'You just put your hands together for me to stand on, right? How do you manage to be so useless?'

'Being useful always gets me into trouble,' muttered Rincewind, trying to ignore the warm flesh brushing against his nose.

He could hear her rooting around above the door.

'I thought so,' she said.

'What is it? Fiendishly sharp spears poised to drop?'

No.'

'Spiked grill ready to skewer -?'

'It's a bucket,' said Conina flatly, giving it a push.

'What, of scalding, poisonous -?'

'Whitewash. Just a lot of old, dried-up whitewash.' Conina jumped down.

'That's grandfather for you,' said Creosote. 'Never a dull moment.'

'Well, I've just about had enough,' Conina said firmly, and pointed to the far end of the tunnel. 'Come on, you two.'

They were about three feet from the far end when Rincewind felt a movement in the air above him. Conina struck him in the small of the back, shoving him forward into the room beyond. He rolled when he hit the floor, and something nicked his foot at the same time as a loud thump deafened him.

The entire roof, a huge block of stone four feet thick, had dropped into the tunnel.

Rincewind crawled forward through the dust clouds and, with a trembling finger, traced the lettering on the side of the slab.

'Laugh This One Off,' he said.

He sat back.

'That's grandad,' said Creosote happily, 'always a-’

He intercepted Conina's gaze, which had the force of a lead pipe, and wisely shut up.

Nijel emerged from the clouds, coughing.

'I say, what happened?' he said. 'Is everyone all right? It didn't do that when I went through.'

Rincewind sought for a reply, and couldn't find anything better than, 'Didn't it?'

Light filtered into the deep room from tiny barred windows up near the roof. There was no way out except by walking through the several hundred tons of stone that blocked the tunnel or, to put it in another way, which was the way Rincewind put it, they were undoubtedly trapped. He relaxed a bit.

At least there was no mistaking the magic carpet. It lay rolled up on a raised slab in the middle of the room. Next to it was a small, sleek oil lamp and - Rincewind craned to see - a small gold ring. He groaned. A faint octarine corona hung over all three items, indicating that they were magical.

When Conina unrolled the carpet a number of small objects tumbled on to the floor, including a brass herring, a wooden ear, a few large square sequins and a lead box with a preserved soap bubble in it.

'What on earth are they?' said Nijel.

'Well,' said Rincewind, 'before they tried to eat that carpet, they were probably moths.'

'Gosh.'

'That's what you people never understand,' said Rincewind, wearily. 'You think magic is just something you can pick up and use, like a, a-’

'Parsnip?' said Nijel.

'Wine bottle?' said the Seriph.

'Something like that,' said Rincewind cautiously, but rallied somewhat and went on, 'But the truth is, is-’

'Not like that?'

'More like a wine bottle?' said the Seriph hopefully.

'Magic uses people,' said Rincewind hurriedly. 'It affects you as much as you affect it, sort of thing. You can't mess around with magical things without it affecting you. I just thought I'd better warn you.'

'Like a wine bottle,' said Creosote, 'that-’

'-drinks you back,' said Rincewind. 'So you can put down that lamp and ring for a start,

and for goodness' sake don't rub anything.'

'My grandfather built up the family fortunes with them,' said Creosote wistfully. 'His wicked uncle locked him in a cave, you know. He had to set himself up with what came to hand. He had nothing in the whole world but a magic carpet, a magic lamp, a magic ring and a grotto-ful of assorted jewels.'

'Came up the hard way, did he?' said Rincewind.

Conina spread the carpet on the floor. It had a complex pattern of golden dragons on a blue background. They were extremely complicated dragons, with long beards, ears and wings, and they seemed to be frozen in motion, caught in transition from one state to another, suggesting that the loom which wove them had rather more dimensions than the usual three, but the worst thing about it was that if you looked at it long enough the pattern became blue dragons on a gold background, and a terrible feeling stole over you that if you kept on trying to see both types of dragon at once your brains would trickle out of your ears.

Rincewind tore his gaze away with some difficulty as another distant explosion rocked the building.

'How does it work?' he said.

Creosote shrugged. 'I've never used it,' he said. 'I suppose you just say "up" and "down" and things like that.'

'How about "fly through the wall"?' said Rincewind.

All three of them looked up at the high, dark and, above all, solid walls of the room.

'We could try sitting on it and saying "rise",' Nijel volunteered. 'And then, before we hit

the roof, we could say, well, "stop".' He considered this for a bit, and then added, 'If that's the word.'

'Or, "drop",' said Rincewind, 'or "descend", "dive", "fall", "sink". Or "plunge".'

"Plummet",' suggested Conina gloomily.

'Of course,' said Nijel, 'with all this wild magic floating around, you could try using some of it.'

Ah-' said Rincewind, and, 'Well-'

'You've got "wizzard" written on your hat,' said Creosote.

'Anyone can write things on their hat,' said Conina. 'You don't want to believe everything you read.'

'Now hold on a minute,' said Rincewind hotly.

They held on a minute.

They held on for a further seventeen seconds.

'Look, it's a lot harder than you think,' he said.

'What did I tell you?' said Conina. 'Come on, let's dig the mortar out with our fingernails.'

Rincewind waved her into silence, removed his hat, pointedly blew the dust off the star, put the hat on again, adjusted the brim, rolled up his sleeves, flexed his fingers and panicked.

In default of anything better to do, he leaned against the stone.

It was vibrating. It wasn't that it was being shaken; it felt that the throbbing was coming from inside the wall.

It was very much the same sort of trembling he had felt back at the University, just before the sourcerer arrived. The stone was definitely very unhappy about something.

He sidled along the wall and put his ear to the next stone, which was a smaller, wedge-shaped stone cut to fit an angle of the wall, not a big, distinguished stone, but a bantam stone, patiently doing its bit for the greater good of the wall as a whole. It was also shaking.

'Shh!' said Conina.

'I can't hear anything,' said Nijel loudly. Nijel was one of those people who, if you say "don't look now", would immediately swivel his head like an owl on a turntable. These are the same people who, when you point out, say, an unusual crocus just beside them, turn round aimlessly and put their foot down with a sad little squashy noise. If they were lost in a trackless desert you could find them by putting down, somewhere on the sand, something small and fragile like a valuable old mug that had been in your family for generations, and then hurrying back as soon as you heard the crash.

Anyway.

'That's the point! What happened to the war?'

A little cascade of mortar poured down from the ceiling on to Rincewind's hat.

'Something's acting on the stones,' he said quietly. 'They're trying to break free.'

'We're right underneath quite a lot of them,' observed Creosote.

There was a grinding noise above them and a shaft of daylight lanced down. To Rincewind's surprise it wasn't accompanied by sudden death from crushing. There was another silicon creak, and the hole grew. The stones were falling out, and they were falling up.

'I think,' he said, 'that the carpet might be worth a try at this point.'

The wall beside him shook itself like a dog and drifted apart, its masonry giving Rincewind several severe blows as it soared away.

The four of them landed on the blue and gold carpet in a storm of flying rock.

'We've got to get out of here,' said Nijel, keeping up his reputation for acute observation.

'Hang on,' said Rincewind. 'I'll say-’

'You won't,' snapped Conina, kneeling beside him. 'I'll say. I don't trust you.'

'But you've-’

'Shut up,' said Conina. She patted the carpet.

'Carpet - rise,' she commanded.

There was a pause.

,Up.,

'Perhaps it doesn't understand the language,' said Nijel.

'Lift. Levitate. Fly.'

'Or it could be, say, sensitive to one particular voice-’

'Shut. Up.'

'You tried up,' said Nijel. 'Try ascend.'

'Or soar,' said Creosote. Several tons of flagstone swooped past an inch from his head.

'If it was going to answer to them it would have done, wouldn't it?' said Conina. The air round her was thick with dust as the flying stones ground together. She thumped the carpet.

'Take off, you blasted mat! Arrgh!'

A piece of cornice clipped her shoulder. She rubbed the bruise irritably, and turned to Rincewind, who was sitting with his knees under his chin and his hat pulled down over his head.

'Why doesn't it work?' she said.

'You're not saying the right words,' he said.

'It doesn't understand the language?'

'Language hasn't got anything to do with it. You've neglected something fundamental.'

'Well?'

'Well what?' sniffed Rincewind.

'Look, this isn't the time to stand on your dignity!'

'You keep on trying, don't you mind me.'

'Make it fly!'

Rincewind pulled his hat further over his ears.

'Please?' said Conina.

The hat rose a bit.

'Wed all be terribly bucked,' said Nijel.

'Hear, hear,' said Creosote.

The hat rose some more. 'You're quite sure?' said Rincewind.

'Yes!'

Rincewind cleared his throat.

'Down,' he commanded.

The carpet rose from the ground and hovered expectantly a few feet over the dust.

'How did-’ Conina began, but Nijel interrupted her.

'Wizards are privy to arcane knowledge, that's probably what it is,' he said. 'Probably the

carpet's got a geas on it to do the opposite of anything that's said. Can you make it go up further?'

'Yes, but I'm not going to,' said Rincewind. The carpet drifted slowly forward and, as happens so often at times like this, a rolling of masonry bounced right across the spot where it had lain.

A moment later they were out in the open air, the storm of stone behind them.

The palace was pulling itself to pieces, and the pieces were funnelling up into the air like a volcanic eruption in reverse. The sourcerous tower had completely disappeared, but the stones were dancing towards the spot where it had stood and ...

'They're building another tower!' said Nijel.

'Out of my palace, too,' said Creosote.

'The hat's won,' said Rincewind. 'That's why it's building its own tower. It's a sort of reaction. Wizards always used to build a tower around themselves, like those ... what do you call those things you find at the bottom of rivers?'

'Frogs.'

'Stones.'

'Unsuccessful gangsters.'

'Caddis flies is what I meant,' said Rincewind. 'When a wizard set out to fight, the first thing he always did was build a tower.'

'It's very big,' said Nijel.

Rincewind nodded glumly.

'Where are we going?' said Conina.

Rincewind shrugged.

'Away,' he said.

The outer palace wall drifted just below them. As they passed over it began to shake, and small bricks began to loop towards the storm of flying rock that buzzed around the new tower.

Eventually Conina said, 'All right. How did you get the carpet to fly? Does it really do the opposite of what you command?'

'No. I just paid attention to certain fundamental details of laminar and spatial arrangements.'

'You've lost me there,' she admitted.

'You want it in non-wizard talk?'

'Yes.'

'You put it on the floor upside down,' said Rincewind.

Conina sat very still for a while. Then she said, 'I must say this is very comfortable. It's the first time I've ever flown on a carpet.'

'It's the first time I've ever flown one,' said Rincewind vaguely.

'You do it very well,' she said.

'Thank you.'

'You said you were frightened of heights.'

'Terrified.'

'You don't show it.'

'I'm not thinking about it.'

Rincewind turned and looked at the tower behind them. It had grown quite a lot in the last minute, blossoming at the top into a complexity of turrets and battlements. A swarm of tiles was hovering over it, individual tiles swooping down and clinking into place like ceramic bees on a bombing run. It was impossibly high - the stones at the bottom would have been crushed if it wasn't for the magic that crackled through them.

Well, that was just about it as far as organised wizardry was concerned. Two thousand years of peaceful magic had gone down the drain, the towers were going up again, and with all this new raw magic floating around something was going to get very seriously hurt. Probably the universe. Too much magic could wrap time and space around itself, and that wasn't good news for the kind of person who had grown used to things like effects following things like causes.

And, of course, it would be impossible to explain things to his companions. They didn't seem to grasp ideas properly; more particularly, they didn't seem able to get the hang of doom. They suffered from the terrible delusion that something could be done. They seemed prepared to make the world the way they wanted it or die in the attempt, and the trouble with dying in the attempt was that you died in the attempt.

The whole point about the old University organisation was that it kept a sort of peace between wizards who got along with one another about as easily as cats in a sack, and now the gloves were off anyone who tried to interfere was going to end up severely scratched. This wasn't the old, gentle, rather silly magic that the Disc was used to; this was magic war, white-hot and searing.

Rincewind wasn't very good at precognition; in fact he could barely see into the present. But he knew with weary certainty that at some point in the very near future, like thirty seconds or so, someone would say: 'Surely there's something we could do?'

The desert passed below them, lit by the low rays of the setting sun.

'There don't seem to be many stars,' said Nijel. 'Perhaps they're scared to come out.'

Rincewind looked up. There was a silver haze high in the air.

'It's raw magic settling out of the atmosphere,' he said. 'It's saturated.'

Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twen-

'Surely there's-' Conina began.

'There isn't,' said Rincewind flatly, but with just the faintest twinge of satisfaction. 'The wizards will fight each other until there's one victor. There isn't anything anyone else can do.'

'I could do with a drink,' said Creosote. 'I suppose we couldn't stop somewhere where I could buy an inn?'

'What with?' said Nijel. 'You're poor, remember?'

'Poor I don't mind,' said the Seriph. 'It's sobriety that is giving me difficulties.'

Conina prodded Rincewind gently in the ribs.

'Are you steering this thing?' she said.

No.'

'Then where is it going?'

Nijel peered downwards.

'By the look of it,' he said, 'it's going hubwards. Towards the Circle Sea.'

'Someone must be guiding it.'

Hallo, said a friendly voice in Rincewind's head.

You’re not my conscience again, are you? thought Rincewind.

I'm feeling really bad.

Well, I'm sorry, Rincewind thought, but none of this is my fault. I'm just a victim of circuses. I don't see why I should take the blame.

Yes, but you could do something about it.

Like what?

You could destroy the sourcerer. All this would collapse then.

I wouldn't stand a chance.

Then at least you could die in the attempt. That might be preferable to letting magical war break out.

'Look, just shut up, will you?' said Rincewind.

'What?' said Conina.

'Um?' said Rincewind, vaguely. He looked down blankly at the blue and gold pattern underneath him, and added, 'You're flying this, aren't you?' Through me! That's sneaky!'

'What are you talking about?'

'Oh. Sorry. Talking to myself.'

'I think,' said Conina, 'that we'd better land.'

They glided down towards a crescent of beach where the desert reached the sea. In a normal light it would have been blinding white with a sand made up of billions of tiny shell fragments, but at this time of day it was blood-red and primordial. Ranks of driftwood, carved by the waves and bleached by the sun, were piled up on the tideline like the bones of ancient fish or the biggest floral art accessory counter in the universe. Nothing stirred, apart from the waves. There were a few rocks around, but they were firebrick hot and home to no mollusc or seaweed.

Even the sea looked arid. If any proto-amphibian emerged on to a beach like this, it would have given up there and then, gone back into the water and told all its relatives to forget the legs, it wasn't worth it. The air felt as though it had been cooked in a sock.

Even so, Nijel insisted that they light a fire.

'It's more friendly,' he said. 'Besides, there could be monsters.'

Conina looked at the oily wavelets, rolling up the beach in what appeared to be a half-hearted attempt to get out of the sea.

'In that?' she said.

'You never can tell.'

Rincewind mooched along the waterline, distractedly picking up stones and throwing them in the sea. One or two were thrown back.

After a while Conina got a fire going, and the bone-dry, salt-saturated wood sent blue and green flames roaring up under a fountain of sparks. The wizard went and sat in the dancing shadows, his back against a pile of whitened wood, wrapped in a cloud of such impenetrable gloom that even Creosote stopped complaining of thirst and shut up.

Conina woke up after midnight. There was a crescent moon on the horizon and a thin, chilly mist covered the sand. Creosote was snoring on his back. Nijel, who was theoretically on guard, was sound asleep.

Conina lay perfectly still, every sense seeking out the thing that had awoken her.

Finally she heard it again. It was a tiny, diffident clinking noise, barely audible above the muted slurp of the sea.

She got up, or rather, she slid into the vertical as bonelessly as a jellyfish, and flicked Nijel's sword out of his unresisting hand. Then she sidled through the mist without causing so much as an extra swirl.

The fire sank down further into its bed of ash. After a while Conina came back, and shook the other two awake.

'Warrizit?'

'I think you ought to see this,' she hissed. 'I think it could be important.'

'I just shut my eyes for a second-’ Nijel protested.

'Never mind about that. Come on.'

Creosote squinted around the impromptu campsite.

'Where's the wizard fellow?'

'You'll see. And don't make a noisy. It could be dangerous.'

They stumbled after her knee-deep in vapour, towards the sea.

Eventually Nijel said, 'Why dangerous-’

'Shh! Did you hear it?'

Nijel listened.

'Like a sort of ringing noise?'

'Watch...

Rincewind walked jerkily up the beach, carrying a large round rock in both hands. He

walked past them without a word, his eyes staring straight ahead.

They followed him along the cold beach until he reached a bare area between the dunes, where he stopped and, still moving with all the grace of a clothes horse, dropped the rock. It made a clinking noise.

There was a wide circle of other stones. Very few of them had actually stayed on top of another one.

The three of them crouched down and watched him.

'Is he asleep?' said Creosote.

Conina nodded.

'What's he trying to do?'

'I think he's trying to build a tower.'

Rincewind lurched back into the ring of stones and, with great care, placed another rock on empty air. It fell down.

'He's not very good at it, is he,' said Nijel.

'It is very sad,' said Creosote.

'Maybe we ought to wake him up,' said Conina. 'Only I heard that if you wake up sleepwalkers their legs fall off, or something. What do you think?'

'Could be risky, with wizards,' said Nijel.

They tried to make themselves comfortable on the chilly sand.

'It's rather pathetic, isn't it?' said Creosote. 'It's not as if he's really a proper wizard.'

Conina and Nijel tried to avoid one another's gaze. Finally the boy coughed, and said, 'I'm not exactly a barbarian hero, you know. You may have noticed.'

They watched the toiling figure of Rincewind for a while, and then Conina said, 'If it comes to that, I think I lack a certain something when it comes to hairdressing.'

They both stared fixedly at the sleepwalker, busy with their own thoughts and red with mutual embarrassment.

Creosote cleared his throat.

'If it makes anyone feel better,' he said, 'I sometimes perceive that my poetry leaves a lot to be desired.'

Rincewind carefully tried to balance a large rock on a small pebble. It fell off, but he appeared to be happy with the result.

'Speaking as a poet,' said Conina carefully, 'what would you say about this situation?'

Creosote shifted uneasily. 'Funny old thing, life,' he said.

'Pretty apt.'

Nijel lay back and looked up at the hazy stars. Then he sat bolt upright.

'Did you see that?' he demanded.

'What?'

'It was a sort of flash, a kind of-’

The hubward horizon exploded into a silent flower of colour, which expanded rapidly through all the hues of the conventional spectrum before flashing into brilliant octarine. It etched itself on their eyeballs before fading away.

After a while there was a distant rumble.

'Some sort of magical weapon,' said Conina, blinking. A gust of warm wind picked up the mist and streamed it past them.

'Blow this,' said Nijel, getting to his feet. 'I'm going to wake him up, even if it means we end up carrying him.'

He reached out for Rincewind's shoulder just as something went past very high overhead, making a noise like a flock of geese on nitrous oxide. It disappeared into the desert behind them. Then there was a sound that would have set false teeth on edge, a flash of green light, and a thump.

'I'll wake him up,' said Conina. 'You get the carpet.'

She clambered over the ring of rocks and took the sleeping wizard gently by the arm, and this would have been a textbook way of waking a somnambulist if Rincewind hadn't dropped the rock he was carrying on his foot.

He opened his eyes.

'Where am I?' he said.

'On the beach. You've been ... er ... dreaming.'

Rincewind blinked at the mist, the sky, the circle of stones, Conina, the circle of stones again, and finally back at the sky.

'What's been happening?' he said.

'Some sort of magical fireworks.'

'Oh. It's started, then.'

He lurched unsteadily out of the circle, in a way that suggested to Conina that perhaps he wasn't quite awake yet, and staggered back towards the remains of the fire. He walked a few steps and then appeared to remember something.

He looked down at his foot, and said, 'Ow.'

He'd almost reached the fire when the blast from the last spell reached them. It had been aimed at the tower in Al Khali, which was twenty miles away, and by now the wavefront was extremely diffuse. It was hardly affecting the nature of things as it surged over the dunes with a faint sucking noise; the fire burned red and green for a second, one of Nijel's sandals turned into a small and irritated badger, and a pigeon flew out of the Seriph's turban.

Then it was past and boiling out over the sea.

'What was that?' said Nijel. He kicked the badger, who was sniffing at his foot.

'Hmm?' said Rincewind.

'That!'

'Oh, that,' said Rincewind. 'Just the backwash of a spell. They probably hit the tower in Al Khali.'

'It must have been pretty big to affect us here.'

'It probably was.'

'Hey, that was my palace,' said Creosote weakly. 'I mean, I know it was a lot, but it was all I had.'

'Sorry.'

'But there were people in the city!'

They're probably all right,' said Rincewind.

'Good.'

'Whatever they are.'

'What?'

Conina grabbed his arm. 'Don't shout at him,' she said. 'He's not himself.'

Ah,' said Creosote dourly, 'an improvement.'

'I say, that's a bit unfair,' Nijel protested. 'I mean, he got me out of the snake pit and, well, he knows a lot-’

'Yes, wizards are good at getting you out of the sort of trouble that only wizards can get

you into,' said Creosote. 'Then they expect you to thank them.'

'Oh, I think-’

'It's got to be said,' said Creosote, waving his hands irritably. He was briefly illuminated by the passage of another spell across the tormented sky.

'Look at that!' he snapped. 'Oh, he means well. They all mean well. They probably all think the Disc would be a better place if they were in charge. Take it from me, there's nothing more terrible than someone out to do the world a favour. Wizards! When all's said and done, what good are they? I mean, can you name me something worthwhile any wizard's done?'

'I think that's a bit cruel,' said Conina, but with an edge in her voice that suggested that she could be open to persuasion on the subject.

'Well, they make me sick,' muttered Creosote, who was feeling acutely sober and didn't like it much.

'I think we'll all feel better if we try to get a bit more sleep,' said Nijel diplomatically. 'Things always look better by daylight. Nearly always, anyway.'

'My mouth feels all horrible, too,' muttered Creosote, determined to cling on to the remnant of his anger.

Conina turned back to the fire, and became aware of a gap in the scenery. It was Rincewind-shaped.

'He's gone!'

In fact Rincewind was already half a mile out over the dark sea, squatting on the carpet

like an angry buddha, his mind a soup of rage, humiliation and fury, with a side order of outrage.

He hadn't wanted much, ever. He'd stuck with wizardry even though he wasn't any good at it, he'd always done his best, and now the whole world was conspiring against him. Well, he'd show them. Precisely who "they" were and what they were going to be shown was merely a matter of detail.

He reached up and touched his hat for reassurance, even as it lost its last few sequins in the slipstream.

The Luggage was having problems of its own.

The area around the tower of Al Khali, under the relentless magical bombardment, was already drifting beyond that reality horizon where time, space and matter lose their separate identities and start wearing one another's clothes. It was quite impossible to describe.

Here is what it looked like.

It looked like a piano sounds shortly after being dropped down a well. It tasted yellow, and felt Paisley. It smelled like a total eclipse of the moon. Of course, nearer to the tower it got really weird.

Expecting anything unprotected to survive in that would be like expecting snow on a supernova. Fortunately the Luggage didn't know this, and slid through the maelstrom with raw magic crystallising on its lid and hinges. It was in a foul mood but, again, there was nothing very unusual about this, except that the crackling fury earthing itself spectacularly all over the Luggage in a multi-coloured corona gave it the appearance of

an early and very angry amphibian crawling out of a burning swamp.

It was hot and stuffy inside the tower. There were no internal floors, just a series of walkways around the walls. They were lined with wizards, and the central space was a column of octarine light that creaked loudly as they poured their power into it. At its base stood Abrim, the octarine gems on the hat blazing so brightly that they looked more like holes cut through into a different universe where, in defiance of probability, they had come out inside a sun.

The vizier stood with his hands out, fingers splayed, eyes shut, mouth a thin line of concentration, balancing the forces. Usually a wizard could control power only to the extent of his own physical capability, but Abrim was learning fast.

You made yourself the pinch in the hourglass, the fulcrum on the balance, the roll around the sausage.

Do it right and you were the power, it was part of you and you were capable of-

Has it been pointed out that his feet were several inches off the ground? His feet were several inches off the ground.

Abrim was pulling together the potency for a spell that would soar away into the sky and beset the Ankh tower with a thousand screaming demons when there came a thunderous knock at the door.

There is a mantra to be said on these occasions. It doesn't matter if the door is a tent flap, a scrap of hide on a wind-blown yurt, three inches of solid oak with great iron nails in or a rectangle of chipboard with mahogany veneer, a small light over it made of horrible bits of coloured glass and a bellpush that plays a choice of twenty popular melodies that no music lover would want to listen to even after five years' sensory deprivation.

One wizard turned to another and duly said: 'I wonder who that can be at this time of night?'

There was another series of thumps on the woodwork.

'There can't be anyone alive out there,' said the other wizard, and he said it nervously, because if you ruled out the possibility of it being anyone alive that always left the suspicion that perhaps it was someone dead.

This time the banging rattled the hinges.

'One of us had better go out,' said the first wizard.

'Good man.'

'Ah. Oh. Right.'

He set off slowly down the short, arched passage.

'I'll just go and see who it is, then?' he said.

'First class.'

It was a strange figure that made its hesitant way to the door. Ordinary robes weren't sufficient protection in the high-energy field inside tower, and over his brocade and velvet the wizard wore a thick, padded overall stuffed with rowan shavings and embroidered with industrial-grade sigils. He'd affixed a smoked glass visor to his pointy hat and his gauntlets, which were extremely big, suggested that he was a wicket keeper in a game of cricket played at supersonic speeds. The actinic flashes and pulsations from the great work in the main hall cast harsh shadows around him as he fumbled for the bolts.

He pulled down the visor and opened the door a fraction.

'We don't want any-’ he began, and ought to have chosen his words better, because they were his epitaph.

It was sometime before his colleague noticed his continued absence, and wandered down the passage to find him. The door had been thrown wide open, the thaumatic inferno outside roaring against the web of spells that held it in check. In fact the door hadn't been pushed completely back; he pulled it aside to see why, and gave a little whimper.

There was a noise behind him. He turned around.

'Wha-’ he began, which is a pretty poor syllable on which to end a life.

High over the Circle Sea Rincewind was feeling a bit of an idiot.

This happens to everyone sooner or later.

For example, in a tavern someone jogs your elbow and you turn around quickly and give a mouthful of abuse to, you become slowly aware, the belt buckle of a man who, it turns out, was probably hewn rather than born.

Or a little car runs into the back of yours and you rush out to show a bunch of fives to the driver who, it becomes apparent as he goes on unfolding more body like some horrible conjuring trick, must have been sitting on the back seat.

Or you might be leading your mutinous colleagues to the captain's cabin and you hammer on the door and he sticks his great head out with a cutlass in either hand and you say 'We're taking over the ship, you scum, and the lads are right with me!' and he says 'What

lads?' and you suddenly feel a great emptiness behind you and you say 'Um ...'

In other words, it's the familiar hot sinking feeling experienced by everyone who has let the waves of their own anger throw them far up on the beach of retribution, leaving them, in the poetic language of the everyday, up shit creek.

Rincewind was still angry and humiliated and so forth, but these emotions had died down a bit and something of his normal character had reasserted itself. It was not very pleased to find itself on a few threads of blue and gold wool high above the phosphorescent waves.

He'd been heading for Ankh-Morpork. He tried to remember why.

Of course, it was where it had all started. Perhaps it was the presence of the University, which was so heavy with magic it lay like a cannonball on the incontinence blanket of the Universe, stretching reality very thin. Ankh was where things started, and finished.

It was also his home, such as it was, and it called to him.

It has already been indicated that Rincewind appeared to have a certain amount of rodent in his ancestry, and in times of stress he felt an overpowering urge to make a run for his burrow.

He let the carpet drift for a while on the air currents while dawn, which Creosote would probably have referred to as pink-fingered, made a ring of fire around the edge of the Disc. It spread its lazy light over a world that was subtly different.

Rincewind blinked. There was a weird light. No, now he came to think about it, not weird but wyrd, which was much weirder. It was like looking at the world through a heat haze, but a haze that had a sort of life of its own. It danced and stretched, and gave more than a hint that it wasn't just an optical illusion but that it was reality itself that was being tensed

and distended, like a rubber balloon trying to contain too much gas.

The wavering was greatest in the direction of Ankh-Morpork, where flashes and fountains of tortured air indicated that the struggle hadn't abated. A similar column hung over Al Khali, and then Rincewind realised that it wasn't the only one.

Wasn't that a tower over in Quirm, where the Circle Sea opened on to the great Rim Ocean? And there were others.

It had all gone critical. Wizardry was breaking up. Goodbye to the University, the levels, the Orders; deep in his heart, every wizard knew that the natural unit of wizardry was one wizard. The towers would multiply and fight until there was one tower left, and then the wizards would fight until there was one wizard.

By then, he'd probably fight himself.

The whole edifice that operated as the balance wheel of magic was falling to bits. Rincewind resented that, deeply. He'd never been any good at magic, but that wasn't the point. He knew where he fitted. It was right at the bottom, but at least he fitted. He could look up and see the whole delicate machine ticking away, gently, browsing off the natural magic generated by the turning of the Disc.

All he had was nothing, but that was something, and now it had been taken away.

Rincewind turned the carpet until it was facing the distant gleam that was Ankh-Morpork, which was a brilliant speck in the early morning light, and a part of his mind that wasn't doing anything else wondered why it was so bright. There also seemed to be a full moon, and even Rincewind, whose grasp of natural philosophy was pretty vague, was sure there had been one of those only the other day.

Well, it didn't matter. He'd had enough. He wasn't going to try to understand anything any

more. He was going home.

Except that wizards can never go home.

This is one of the ancient and deeply meaningful sayings about wizards and it says something about most of them that they have never been able to work out what it means. Wizards aren't allowed to have wives but they are allowed to have parents, and many of them go back to the old home town for Hogswatch Night or Soul Cake Thursday, for a bit of a singsong and the heart-warming sight of all their boyhood bullies hurriedly avoiding them in the street.

It's rather like the other saying they've never been able to understand, which is that you can't cross the same river twice. Experiments with a long-legged wizard and a small river say you can cross the same river thirty, thirty-five times a minute.

Wizards don't like philosophy very much. As far as they are concerned, one hand clapping makes a noise like 'cl'.

In this particular case, though, Rincewind couldn't go home because it actually wasn't there any more. There was a city straddling the river Ankh, but it wasn't one he'd ever seen before; it was white and clean and didn't smell like a privy full of dead herrings.

He landed in what had once been the Plaza of Broken Moons, and also in a state of some shock. There were fountains. There had been fountains before, of course, but they had oozed rather than played and they had looked like thin soup. There were milky flagstones underfoot, with little glittery bits in. And, although the sun was sitting on the horizon like half a breakfast grapefruit, there was hardly anyone around. Normally Ankh was permanently crowded, the actual shade of the sky being a mere background detail.

Smoke drifted over the city in long greasy coils from the crown of boiling air above the University. It was the only movement, apart from the fountains.

Rincewind had always been rather proud of the fact that he always felt alone, even in the teeming city, but it was even worse being alone when he was by himself.

He rolled up the carpet and slung it over one shoulder and padded through the haunted streets towards the University.

The gates hung open to the wind. Most of the building looked half ruined by misses and ricochets. The tower of sourcery, far too high to be real, seemed to be unscathed. Not so the old Tower of Art. Half the magic aimed at the tower next door seemed to have rebounded on it. Parts of it had melted and started to run; some parts glowed, some parts had crystallised, a few parts seemed to have twisted partly out of the normal three dimensions. It made you feel sorry even for stone that it should have to undergo such treatment. In fact nearly everything had happened to the tower except actual collapse. It looked so beaten that possibly even gravity had given up on it.

Rincewind sighed, and padded around the base of the tower towards the Library.

Towards where the Library had been.

There was the arch of the doorway, and most of the walls were still standing, but a lot of the roof had fallen in and everything was blackened by soot.

Rincewind stood and stared for a long time.

Then he dropped the carpet and ran, stumbling and sliding through the rubble that half-blocked the doorway. The stones were still warm underfoot. Here and there the wreckage of a bookcase still smouldered.

Anyone watching would have seen Rincewind dart backwards and forwards across the shimmering heaps, scrabbling desperately among them, throwing aside charred furniture,

pulling aside lumps of fallen roof with less than superhuman strength.

They would have seen him pause once or twice to get his breath back, then dive in again, cutting his hands on shards of half-molten glass from the dome of the roof. They would have noticed that he seemed to be sobbing.

Eventually his questing fingers touched something warm and soft.

The frantic wizard heaved a charred roof beam aside, scrabbled through a drift of fallen tiles and peered down.

There, half squashed by the beam and baked brown by the fire, was a large bunch of overripe, squashy bananas.

He picked one up, very carefully, and sat and watched it for sometime until the end fell off.

Then he ate it.

'We shouldn't have let him go like that,' said Conina.

'How could we have stopped him, oh, beauteous doeeyed eaglet?'

'But he may do something stupid!'

'I should think that is very likely,' said Creosote primly.

'While we do something clever and sit on a baking beach with nothing to eat or drink, is that it?'

'You could tell me a story,' said Creosote, trembling slightly.

'Shut up.'

The Seriph ran his tongue over his lips.

'I suppose a quick anecdote is out of the question?' he croaked.

Conina sighed. 'There's more to life than narrative, you know.'

'Sorry. I lost control a little, there.'

Now that the sun was well up the crushed-shell beach glowed like a salt flat. The sea didn't look any better by daylight. It moved like thin oil.

Away on either side the beach stretched in long, excruciatingly flat curves, supporting nothing but a few clumps of withered dune grass which lived off the moisture in the spray. There was no sign of any shade.

'The way I see it,' said Conina, 'this is a beach, and that means sooner or later we'll come to a river, so all we have to do is keep walking in one direction.'

'And yet, delightful snow on the slopes of Mount Eritor, we do not know which one.'

Nijel sighed, and reached into his bag.

'Erm,' he said, 'excuse me. Would this be any good? I stole it. Sorry.'

He held out the lamp that had been in the treasury.

'It's magic, isn't it?' he said hopefully. 'I've heard about them, isn't it worth a try?'

Creosote shook his head.

'But you said your grandfather used it to make his fortune!' said Conina.

'A lamp,' said the Seriph, 'he used a lamp. Not this lamp. No, the real lamp was a battered old thing, and one day this wicked pedlar came round offering new lamps for old and my greatgrandmother gave it to him for this one. The family kept it in the vault as a sort of memorial to her. A truly stupid woman. It doesn't work, of course.'

'You tried it?'

'No, but he wouldn't have given it away if it was any good, would he?'

'Give it a rub,' said Conina. 'It can't do any harm.'

'I wouldn't,' warned Creosote.

Nijel held the lamp gingerly. It had a strangely sleek look, as if someone had set out to make a lamp that could go fast.

He rubbed it.

The effects were curiously unimpressive. There was a half-hearted pop and a puff of wispy smoke near Nijel's feet. A line appeared in the beach several feet away from the smoke. It spread quickly to outline a square of sand, which vanished.

A figure barrelled out of the beach, jerked to a stop, and groaned.

It was wearing a turban, an expensive tan, a small gold medallion, shiny shorts and

advanced running shoes with curly toes.

It said, 'I want to get this absolutely straight. Where am I?'

Conina recovered first.

'It's a beach,' she said.

'Yah,' said the genie. 'What I mean was, which lamp? What world?'

'Don't you know?'

The creature took the lamp out of Nijel's unresisting grasp.

'Oh, this old thing,' he said. 'I'm on time share. Two weeks every August but, of course, usually one can never get away.'

'Got a lot of lamps, have you?' said Nijel.

'I am somewhat over-committed on lamps,' the genie agreed. 'In fact I am thinking of diversifying into rings. Rings are looking big at the moment. There's a lot of movement in rings. Sorry, people; what can I do you for?' The last phrase was turned in that special voice which people use for humorous self-parody, in the mistaken hope that it will make them sound less like a prat.

'We-' Conina began.

'I want a drink,' snapped Creosote. 'And you are supposed to say that my wish is your command.'

'Oh, absolutely no-one says that sort of thing any more,' said the genie, and produced a

glass out of nowhere. He treated Creosote to a brilliant smile lasting a small percentage of one second.

'We want you to take us across the sea to Ankh-Morpork,' said Conina firmly.

The genie looked blank. Then he pulled a very thick book[21] from the empty air and consulted it.

'It sounds a really neat concept,' he said eventually. 'Let's do lunch next Tuesday, okay?'

'Do what?'

'I'm a little energetic right now.'

'You're a little-?' Conina began.

'Great,' said the genie, sincerely, and glanced at his wrist. 'Hey, is that the time?' He vanished.

The three of them looked at the lamp in thoughtful silence, and then Nijel said, 'Whatever happened to, you know, the fat guys with the baggy trousers and I Hear And Obey O Master?'

Creosote snarled. He'd just drunk his drink. It had turned out to be water with bubbles in it and a taste like warm flatirons.

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[21] It was a Fullomyth, an invaluable aid for all whose business is with the arcane and hermetic. It contained lists of things that didn't exist and, in a very significant way, weren't important. Some of its pages could only be read after midnight, or by strange and improbable illuminations. There were descriptions of underground constellations and wines as yet unfermented. For the really up-to-the-epoch occultist, who could afford the version bound in spider skin, there was even an insert showing the London Underground with the three stations they never dare show on the public maps.

'I'm bloody well not standing for it,' snarled Conina. She snatched the lamp from his hand and rubbed it as if she was sorry she wasn't holding a handful of emery cloth.

The genie reappeared at a different spot, which still managed to be several feet away from the weak explosion and obligatory cloud of smoke.

He was now holding something curved and shiny to his ear, and listening intently. He looked hurriedly at Conina's angry face and contrived to suggest, by waggling his eyebrows and waving his free hand urgently, that he was currently and inconveniently tied up by irksome matters which, regretfully, prevented him giving her his full attention as of now but, as soon as he had disentangled himself from this importunate person, she could rest assured that her wish, which was certainly a wish of tone and brilliance, would be his command.

'I shall smash the lamp,' she said quietly.

The genie flashed her a smile and spoke hastily into the thing he was cradling between his chin and his shoulder.

'Fine,' he said. 'Great. It's a slice, believe me. Have your people call my people. Stay beyond, okay? Bye.' He lowered the instrument. 'Bastard,' he said vaguely.

'I really shall smash the lamp,' said Conina.

'Which lamp is this?' said the genie hurriedly.

'How many have you got?' said Nijel. 'I always thought genies had just the one.'

The genie explained wearily that in fact he had several lamps. There was a small but well-appointed lamp where he lived during the week, another rather unique lamp in the

country, a carefully restored peasant rushlight in an unspoilt winegrowing district near Quirm, and just recently a set of derelict lamps in the docks area of Ankh-Morpork that had great potential, once the smart crowd got there, to become the occult equivalent of a suite of offices and a wine bar.

They listened in awe, like fish who had inadvertently swum into a lecture on how to fly.

'Who are your people the other people have got to call?' said Nijel, who was impressed, although he didn't know why or by what.

'Actually, I don't have any people yet,' said the genie, and gave a grimace that was definitely upwardly-mobile at the corners. 'But I will.'

'Everyone shut up,' said Conina firmly, 'and you, take us to Ankh-Morpork.'

'I should, if I were you,' said Creosote. 'When the young lady's mouth looks like a letter box, it's best to do what she says.'

The genie hesitated.

'I'm not very deep on transport,' he said.

'Learn,' said Conina. She was tossing the lamp from hand to hand.

'Teleportation is a major headache,' said the genie, looking desperate. 'Why don't we do lun-'

'Right, that's it,' said Conina. 'Now I just need a couple of big flat rocks-'

'Okay, okay. Just hold hands, will you? I'll give it my best shot, but this could be one big mistake-'

The astro-philosophers of Krull once succeeded in proving conclusively that all places are one place and that the distance between them is an illusion, and this news was an embarrassment to all thinking philosophers because it did not explain, among other things, signposts. After years of wrangling the whole thing was then turned over to Ly Tin Wheedle, arguably the Disc's greatest philosopher[22], who after some thought proclaimed that although it was indeed true that all places were one place, that place was very large.

And so psychic order was restored. Distance is, however, an entirely subjective phenomenon and creatures of magic can adjust it to suit themselves.

They are not necessarily very good at it.

Rincewind sat dejectedly in the blackened ruins of the Library, trying to put his finger on what was wrong with them.

Well, everything, for a start. It was unthinkable that the Library should be burned. It was the largest accumulation of magic on the Disc. It underpinned wizardry. Every spell ever used was written down in it somewhere. Burning them was, was, was ...

There weren't any ashes. Plenty of wood ashes, lots of chains, lots of blackened stone, lots of mess. But thousands of books don't burn easily. They would leave bits of cover and piles of feathery ash. And there wasn't any.

Rincewind stirred the rubble with his toe.

[22] He always argued that he was.

There was only the one door into the Library. Then there were the cellars - he could see the stairs down to them, choked with garbage - but you couldn't hide all the books down there. You couldn't teleport them out either, they would be resistant to such magic; anyone who tried something like that would end up wearing his brains outside his hat.

There was an explosion overhead. A ring of orange fire formed about halfway up the tower of sourcery, ascended quickly and soared off towards Quirm.

Rincewind slid around on his makeshift seat and stared up at the Tower of Art. He got the distinct impression that it was looking back at him. It was totally without windows, but for a moment he thought he saw a movement up among the crumbling turrets.

He wondered how old the tower really was. Older than the University, certainly. Older than the city, which had formed about it like scree around a mountain. Maybe older than geography. There had been a time when the continents were different, Rincewind understood, and then they'd sort of shuffled more comfortably together like puppies in a basket. Perhaps the tower had been washed up on the waves of rock, from somewhere else. Maybe it had been there before' the Disc itself, but Rincewind didn't like to consider that, because it raised uncomfortable questions about who built it and what for.

He examined his conscience.

It said: I'm out of options. Please yourself.

Rincewind stood up and brushed the dust and ash off his robe, removing quite a lot of the moulting red plush as well. He removed his hat, made a preoccupied attempt at straightening the point, and replaced it on his head.

Then he walked unsteadily towards the Tower of Art.

There was a very old and quite small door at the base. He wasn't at all surprised when it

opened as he approached.

'Strange place,' said Nijel. 'Funny curve to the walls.'

'Where are we?' said Conina.

'And is there any alcohol?' said Creosote. 'Probably not,' he added.

'And why is it rocking?' said Conina. 'I've never been anywhere with metal walls before.' She sniffed. 'Can you smell oil?' she added, suspiciously.

The genie reappeared, although this time without the smoke and erratic trapdoor effects. It was noticeable that he tried to keep as far away from Conina as politely possible.

'Everyone okay?' he said.

'Is this Ankh?' she said. 'Only when we wanted to go there, we rather hoped you'd put us somewhere with a door.'

'You're on your way,' said the genie.

'In what?'

Something about the way in which the spirit hesitated caused Nijel's mind to leap a tall conclusion from a standing start. He looked down at the lamp in his hands.

He gave it an experimental jerk. The floor shook.

'Oh, no,' he said. 'It's physically impossible.'

'We're in the lamp?' said Conina.

The room trembled again as Nijel tried to look down the spout.

'Don't worry about it,' said the genie. 'In fact, don't think about it if possible.'

He explained - although 'explained' is probably too positive a word, and in this case really means failed to explain but at some length - that it was perfectly possible to travel across the world in a small lamp being carried by one of the party, the lamp itself moving because it was being carried by one of the people inside it,

because of a) the fractal nature of reality, which meant that everything could be thought of as being inside everything else and b) creative public relations. The trick relied on the laws of physics failing to spot the flaw until the journey was complete.

'In the circumstances it is best not to think about it, yuh?' said the genie.

'Like not thinking about pink rhinoceroses,' said Nijel, and gave an embarrassed laugh as they stared at him.

'It was a sort of game we had,' he said. 'You had to avoid thinking of pink rhinoceroses.' He coughed. 'I didn't say it was a particularly good game.'

He squinted down the spout again.

'No,' said Conina, 'not very.'

'Uh,' said the genie, 'Would anyone like coffee? Some sounds? A quick game of

Significant Quest?'[23]

'Drink?' said Creosote.

'White wine?'

'Foul muck.'

The genie looked shocked.

'Red is bad for -’ it began.

'- but any port in a storm,' said Creosote hurriedly. 'Or sauterne, even. But no umbrella in it.' It dawned on the Seriph that this wasn't the way to talk to the genie. He pulled himself together a bit. 'No umbrella, by the Five Moons of Nasreem. Or bits of fruit salad or olives or curly straws or ornamental monkeys, I command thee by the Seventeen Siderites of Sarudin '

'I'm not an umbrella person,' said the genie sulkily.

'It's pretty sparse in here,' said Conina, 'Why don't you furnish it?'

'What I don't understand,' said Nijel, 'is, if we're all in the lamp I'm holding, then the me in the lamp is holding a smaller lamp and in that lamp-’

The genie waved his hands urgently.

'Don't talk about it!' he commanded. 'Please!'

[23] Very popular among gods, demi-gods, daemons and other supernatural creatures, who feel at home with questions like 'What is It all About?' and 'Where will It all End?'

Nijel's honest brow wrinkled. 'Yes, but,' he said, 'is there a lot of me, or what?'

'It's all cyclic, but stop drawing attention to it, yuh? ... Oh, shit.'

There was the subtle, unpleasant sound of the universe suddenly catching on.

It was dark in the tower, a solid core of antique darkness that had been there since the dawn of time and resented the intrusion of the upstart daylight that nipped in around Rincewind.

He felt the air move as the door shut behind him and the dark poured back, filling up the space where the light had been so neatly that you couldn't have seen the join even if the light had still been there.

The interior of the tower smelled of antiquity, with a slight suspicion of raven droppings.

It took a great deal of courage to stand there in that dark. Rincewind didn't have that much, but stood there anyway.

Something started to snuffle around his feet, and Rincewind stood very still. The only reason he didn't move was for fear of treading on something worse.

Then a hand like an old leather glove touched his, very gently, and a voice said: 'Oook.'

Rincewind looked up.

The dark yielded, just once, to a vivid flash of light. And Rincewind saw.

The whole tower was lined with books. They were squeezed on every step of the rotting spiral staircase that wound up inside. They were piled up on the floor, although something about the way in which they were piled suggested that the word 'huddled' would be more appropriate. They had lodged -all right, they had perched - on every crumbling ledge.

They were observing him, in some covert way that had nothing to do with the normal six senses. Books are pretty good at conveying meaning, not necessarily their own personal meanings of course, and Rincewind grasped the fact that they were trying to tell him something.

There was another flash. He realised that it was magic from the sourcerer's tower, reflected down from the distant hole that led on to the roof.

At least it enabled him to identify Wuffles, who was wheezing at his right foot. That was a bit of a relief. Now if he could just put a name to the soft, repetitive slithering noise near his left ear ...

There was a further obliging flash, which found him looking directly into the little yellow eyes of the Patrician, who was clawing patiently at the side of his glass jar. It was a gentle, mindless scrabbling, as if the little lizard wasn't particularly trying to get out but was just vaguely interested in seeing how long it would take to wear the glass away.

Rincewind looked down at the pear-shaped bulk of the Librarian.

'There's thousands of them,' he whispered, his voice being sucked away and silenced by the massed ranks of books. 'How did you get them all in here?'

'Oook oook.'

'They what?'

'Oook,’ repeated the Librarian, making vigorous flapping motions with his bald elbows.

'Fly?'

'Oook.'

'Can they do that?'

'Oook,’ nodded the Librarian.

'That must have been pretty impressive. I'd like to see that one day.'

'Oook.'

Not every book had made it. Most of the important grimoires had got out but a seven-volume herbal had lost its index to the flames and many a trilogy was mourning for its lost volume. Quite a few books had scorch marks on their bindings; some had lost their covers, and trailed their stitching unpleasantly on the floor.

A match flared, and pages rippled uneasily around the walls. But it was only the Librarian, who lit a candle and shambled across the floor at the base of a menacing shadow big enough to climb skyscrapers. He had set up a rough table against one wall and it was covered with arcane tools, pots of rare adhesives and a bookbinder's vice which was already holding a stricken folio. A few weak lines of magic fire crawled across it.

The ape pushed the candlestick into Rincewind's hand, picked up a scalpel and a pair of tweezers, and bent low over the trembling book. Rincewind went pale.

'Um,' he said, 'er, do you mind if I go away? I faint at the sight of glue.'

The Librarian shook his head and jerked a preoccupied thumb towards a tray of tools.

'Oook,' he commanded. Rincewind nodded miserably, and obediently handed him a pair of long-nosed scissors. The wizard winced as a couple of damaged pages were snipped free and dropped to the floor.

'What are you doing to it?' he managed.

'Oook.'

'An appendectomy? Oh.'

The ape jerked his thumb again, without looking up. Rincewind fished a needle and thread out of the ranks on the tray and handed them over. There was silence broken only by the scritching sound of thread being pulled through paper until the Librarian straightened up and said:

'Oook.'

Rincewind pulled out his handkerchief and mopped the ape's brow.

'Oook.'

'Don't mention it. Is it - going to be all right?'

The Librarian nodded. There was also a general,

almost inaudible sigh of relief from the tier of books above them.

Rincewind sat down. The books were frightened. In fact they were terrified. The presence

of the sourcerer made their spines creep, and the pressure of their attention closed in around him like a vice.

'All right,' he mumbled, 'but what can I do about it?'

'Oook.' The Librarian gave Rincewind a look that would have been exactly like a quizzical look over the top of a pair of half-moon spectacles, if he had been wearing any, and reached for another broken book.

'I mean, you know I'm no good at magic.'

'Oook.'

'The sourcery that's about now, it's terrible stuff. I mean, it's the original stuff, from right back in the dawn of time. Or around breakfast, at any rate.'

'Oook.'

'It'll destroy everything eventually, won't it?'

'Oook.'

'It's about time someone put a stop to this sourcery, right?'

'Oook.'

'Only it can't be me, you see. When I came here I thought I could do something, but that tower! It's so big! It must be proof against all magic! If really powerful wizards won't do anything about it, how can I?'

'Oook,' agreed the Librarian, sewing a ruptured spine.

'So, you see, I think someone else can save the world this time. I'm no good at it.'

The ape nodded, reached across and lifted Rincewind's hat from his head.

'Hey!'

The Librarian ignored him, picked up a pair of shears.

'Look, that's my hat, if you don't mind don't you dare do that to my-’

He leapt across the floor and was rewarded with a thump across the side of the head, which would have astonished him if he'd had time to think about it; the Librarian might shuffle around the place like a good-natured wobbly balloon, but underneath that oversized skin was a framework of superbly-cantilevered bone and muscle that could drive a fistful of calloused knuckles through a thick oak plank. Running into the Librarian's arm was like hitting a hairy iron bar.

Wuffles started to bounce up and down, yelping with excitement.

Rincewind screamed a hoarse, untranslatable yell of fury, bounced off the wall, snatched up a fallen rock as a crude club, kicked forward and stopped dead.

The Librarian was crouched in the centre of the floor with the shears touching-but not yet cutting-the hat.

And he was grinning at Rincewind.

They stood like a frozen tableau for some seconds. Then the ape dropped the shears, flicked several imaginary flecks of dust off the hat, straightened the point, and placed it on Rincewind's head.

A few shocked moments after this Rincewind realised that he was holding up, at arm's length, a very large and extremely heavy rock. He managed to force it away on one side before it recovered from the shock and remembered to fall on him.

'I see,' he said, sinking back against the wall and rubbing his elbows. And all that's supposed to tell me something, is it? A moral lesson, let Rincewind confront his true self, let him work out what he's really prepared to fight for. Eh? Well, it was a very cheap trick. And I've news for you. If you think it worked-’ he snatched the hat brim - 'if you think it worked. If you think I've. You've got another thought. Listen, it's. If you think.'

His voice stuttered into silence. Then he shrugged.

'All right. But when you get down to it, what can I actually do?'

The Librarian replied with an expansive gesture that indicated, as clearly as if he had said 'oook', that Rincewind was a wizard with a hat, a library of magical books and a tower. This could be regarded as everything a magical practitioner could need. An ape, a small terrier with halitosis and a lizard in a jar were optional extras.

Rincewind felt a slight pressure on his foot. Wuffles, who was extremely slow on the uptake, had fastened his toothless gums on the toe of Rincewind's boot and was giving it a vicious suck.

He picked the little dog up by the scruff of its neck and the bristly stub that, for the want of a better word, it called its tail, and gently lifted it sideways.

'Okay,' he said. 'You'd better tell me what's been happening here.'

From the Carrack Mountains, overlooking the vast cold Sto Plain in the middle of which Ankh-Morpork sprawled like a bag of dropped groceries, the view was particularly impressive. Mishits and ricochets from the magical battle were expanding outwards and upwards, in a bowl-shaped cloud of curdled air at the heart of which strange lights flashed and sparkled.

The roads leading away from it were packed with refugees, and every inn and wayside tavern was crowded out. Or nearly every one.

No-one seemed to want to stop at the rather pleasant little pub nestling among trees just off the road to Quirm. It wasn't that they were frightened to go inside, it was just that, for the moment, they weren't being allowed to notice it.

There was a disturbance in the air about half a mile away and three figures dropped out of nowhere into a thicket of lavender.

They lay supine in the sunshine among the broken, fragrant branches, until their sanity came back. Then Creosote said, 'Where are we, do you suppose?'

'It smells like someone's underwear drawer,' said Conina.

'Not mine,' said Nijel, firmly.

He eased himself up gently and added, 'Has anyone seen the lamp?'

'Forget it. It's probably been sold to build a wine-bar,' said Conina.

Nijel scrabbled around among the lavender stems until his hands found something small and metallic.

'Got it!' he declared.

'Don't rub it!' said the other two, in harmony. They were too late anyway, but that didn't much matter, because all that happened when Nijel gave it a cautious buff was the appearance of some small smoking red letters in mid-air.

' 'Hi",' Nijel read aloud. ' "Do not put down the lamp, because your custom is important to us. Please leave a wish after the tone and, very shortly, it will be our command. In the meantime, have a nice eternity." ' He added, 'You know, I think he's a bit over-committed.'

Conina said nothing. She was staring out across the plains to the broiling storm of magic. Occasionally some of it would detach and soar away to some distant tower. She shivered, despite the growing heat of the day.

'We ought to get down there as soon as possible,' she said. 'It's very important.'

'Why?' said Creosote. One glass of wine hadn't really restored him to his former easygoing nature.

Conina opened her mouth, and - quite unusually for her - shut it again. There was no way to explain that every gene in her body was dragging her onwards, telling her that she should get involved; visions of swords and spiky balls on chains kept invading the hairdressing salons of her consciousness.

Nijel, on the other hand, felt no such pounding. All he had to drive him onwards was imagination, but he did have enough of that to float a medium-sized war galley. He looked towards the city with what would have been, but for his lack of chin, an expression of setjawed determination.

Creosote realised that he was outnumbered.

'Do they have any drink down there?' he said.

'Lots,' said Nijel.

'That might do for a start,' the Seriph conceded. 'All right, lead on, O peach-breasted daughter of-’

And no poetry.'

They untangled themselves from the thicket and walked down the hillside until they reached the road which, before very long, went past the aforementioned tavern or, as Creosote persisted in calling it, caravanserai.

They hesitated about going in. It didn't seem to welcome visitors. But Conina, who by breeding and upbringing tended to skulk around the back of buildings, found four horses tethered in the yard.

They considered them carefully.

'It would be stealing,' said Nijel, slowly.

Conina opened her mouth to agree and the words 'Why not?' slid past her lips. She shrugged.

'Perhaps we should leave some money-’ Nijel suggested.

'Don't look at me,' said Creosote.

'- or maybe write a note and leave it under the bridle. Or something. Don't you think?'

By way of an answer Conina vaulted up on to the largest horse, which by the look of it

belonged to a soldier. Weaponry was slung all over it.

Creosote hoisted himself uneasily on to the second horse, a rather skittish bay, and sighed.

'She's got that letter-box look,' he said. 'I should do what she says.'

Nijel regarded the other two horses suspiciously. One of them was very large and extremely white, not the off-white which was all that most horses could manage, but a translucent, ivory white tone which Nijel felt an unconscious urge to describe as 'shroud'. It also gave him a distinct impression that it was more intelligent than he was.

He selected the other one. It was a bit thin, but docile, and he managed to get on after only two tries.

They set off.

The sound of their hoofbeats barely penetrated the gloom inside the tavern. The innkeeper moved like someone in a dream. He knew he had customers, he'd even spoken to them, he could even see them sitting round a table by the fire, but if asked to describe who he'd talked to and what he had seen he'd have been at a loss. This is because the human brain is remarkably good at shutting out things it doesn't want to know. His could currently have shielded a bank vault.

And the drinks! Most of them he'd never heard of, but strange bottles kept appearing on the shelves above the beer barrels. The trouble was that whenever he tried to think about it, his thoughts just slid away ...

The figures around the table looked up from their cards.

One of them raised a hand. It's stuck on the end of his arm and it's got five fingers, the

innkeeper's mind said. It must be a hand.

One thing the innkeeper's brain couldn't shut out was the sound of the voices. This one sounded as though someone was hitting a rock with a roll of sheet lead.

BAR PERSON.

The innkeeper groaned faintly. The thermic lances of horror were melting their way steadily through the steel door of his mind.

LET ME SEE, NOW. THAT'S A - WHAT WAS IT AGAIN

'A Bloody Mary.' This voice made a simple drinks order sound like the opening of hostilities.

OH, YES. AND

'Mine was a small egg none,' said Pestilence.

AN EGG NOW.

'With a cherry in it.'

GOOD, lied the heavy voice. AND THAT'LL BE A SMALL PORT WINE FOR ME AND, the speaker glanced across the table at the fourth member of the quartet and sighed, YOU'D BETTER BRING ANOTHER BOWL OF PEANUTS.

About three hundred yards down the road the horse thieves were trying to come to terms with a new experience.

'Certainly a smooth ride,' Nijel managed eventually.

'And a lovely - a lovely view,' said Creosote, his voice lost in the slipstream.

'But I wonder,' said Nijel, 'if we have done exactly the right thing.'

'We're moving, aren't we?' demanded Conina. 'Don't be petty.'

'It's just that, well, looking at cumulus clouds from above is-'

'Shut up.'

'Sorry.'

'Anyway, they're stratus. Cumulus at most.'

'Right,' said Nijel miserably.

'Does it make any difference?' said Creosote, who was lying flat on his horse's neck with his eyes shut.

'About a thousand feet.'

'Oh.'

'Could be seven hundred and fifty,' conceded Conina.

'Ah.'

The tower of sourcery trembled. Coloured smoke rolled through its vaulted rooms and

shining corridors. In the big room at the very tip, where the air was thick and greasy and tasted of burning tin, many wizards had passed out with the sheer mental effort of the battle. But enough remained. They sat in a wide circle, locked in concentration.

It was just possible to see the shimmering in the air as the raw sourcery swirled out of the staff in Coin's hand and into the centre of the octogram.

Outlandish shapes appeared for a brief instant and vanished. The very fabric of reality was being put through the wringer in there.

Carding shuddered, and turned away in case he saw anything he really couldn't ignore.

The surviving senior wizards had a simulacrum of the Disc hovering in front of them. As Carding looked at it again the little red glow over the city of Quirm flared and went out.

The air creaked.

'There goes Quirm,' murmured Carding.

'That just leaves Al Khali,' said one of the others.

'There's some clever power there.'

Carding nodded glumly. He'd quite liked Quirm, which was a -had been a pleasant little city overlooking the Rim Ocean.

He dimly recalled being taken there, once, when he was small. For a moment he gazed sadly into the past. It had wild geraniums, he recalled, filling the sloping cobbled streets with their musky fragrance.

'Growing out of the walls,' he said out loud. 'Pink. They were pink.'

The other wizards looked at him oddly. One or two, of a particularly paranoid frame of mind even for wizards, glanced suspiciously at the walls.

'Are you all right?' said one of them.

'Um?' said Carding, 'Oh. Yes, Sorry. Miles away.'

He turned back to look at Coin, who was sitting off to one side of the circle with the staff across his knees. The boy appeared to be asleep. Perhaps he was. But Carding knew in the tormented pit of his soul that the staff didn't sleep. It was watching him, testing his mind.

It knew. It even knew about the pink geraniums.

'I never wanted it to be like this,' he said softly. 'All we really wanted was a bit of respect.'

'Are you sure you’re all right?'

Carding nodded vaguely. As his colleagues resumed their concentration he glanced sideways at them.

Somehow, all his old friends had gone. Well, not friends. A wizard never had friends, at least not friends who were wizards. It needed a different word. Ah yes, that was it. Enemies. But a very decent class of enemies. Gentlemen. The cream of their profession. Not like these people, for all that they seemed to have risen in the craft since the sourcerer had arrived.

Other things besides the cream floated to the top, he reflected sourly.

He turned his attention to Al Khali, probing with his mind, knowing that the wizards there were almost certainly doing the same, seeking constantly for a point of weakness.

He thought: am I a point of weakness? Spelter tried to tell me something. It was about the staff. A man should lean on his staff, not the other way around ... it's steering him, leading him ... I wish I'd listened to Spelter ... this is wrong, I'm a point of weakness ...

He tried again, riding the surges of power, letting them carry his mind into the enemy tower. Even Abrim was making use of sourcery, and Carding let himself modulate the wave, insinuating himself past the defences erected against him.

The image of the interior of the Al Khali tower appeared, focused ...

... the Luggage trundled along the glowing corridors. It was exceedingly angry now. It had been awoken from hibernation, it had been scorned, it had been briefly attacked by a variety of mythological and now extinct lifeforms, it had a headache and now, as it entered the Great Hall, it detected the hat. The horrible hat, the cause of everything it was currently suffering. It advanced purposefully ...

Carding, testing the resistance of Abrim's mind, felt the man's attention waver. For a moment he saw through the enemy's eyes, saw the squat oblong cantering across the stone. For a moment Abrim attempted to shift his concentration and then, no more able to help himself than is a cat when it sees something small and squeaky run across the floor, Carding struck.

Not much. It didn't need much. Abrim's mind was attempting to balance and channel huge forces, and it needed hardly any pressure to topple it from its position.

Abrim extended his hands to blast the Luggage, gave the merest beginnings of a scream,

and imploded.

The wizards around him thought they saw him grow impossibly small in a fraction of a second and vanish, leaving a black after-image ...

The more intelligent of them started to run ...

And the magic he had been controlling surged back out and flooded free in one great, randomised burst that blew the hat to bits, took out the entire lower levels of the tower and quite a large part of what remained of the city.

So many wizards in Ankh had been concentrating on the hall that the sympathetic resonance blew them across the room. Carding ended up on his back, his hat over his eyes.

They hauled him out and dusted him off and carried him to Coin and the staff, amid cheers - although some of the older wizards forbore to cheer. But he didn't seem to pay any attention.

He stared sightlessly down at the boy, and then slowly raised his hands to his ears.

'Can't you hear them?' he said.

The wizards fell silent. Carding still had power, and the tone of his voice would have quelled a thunderstorm.

Coin's eyes glowed.

'I hear nothing,' he said.

Carding turned to the rest of the wizards.

'Can't you hear them?'

They shook their heads. One of them said, 'Hear what, brother?'

Carding smiled, and it was a wide, mad smile. Even Coin took a step backwards.

'You'll hear them soon enough,' he said. 'You've made a beacon. You'll all hear them. But you won't hear them for long.' He pushed aside the younger wizards who were holding his arms and advanced on Coin.

'You're pouring sourcery into the world and other things are coming with it,' he said. 'Others have given them a pathway but you've given them an avenue!'

He sprang forward and snatched the black staff out of Coin's hands and swung it up in the air to smash it against the wall.

Carding went rigid as the staff struck back. Then his skin began to blister ...

Most of the wizards managed to turn their heads away. A few -and there are always a few like that watched in obscene fascination.

Coin watched, too. His eyes widened in wonder. One hand went to his mouth. He tried to back away. He couldn't.

'They're cumulus.'

'Marvellous,' said Nijel weakly.

WEIGHT DOESN'T COME INTO IT. MY STEED HAS CARRIED ARMIES. MY STEED HAS CARRIED CITIES. YEA, HE HATH CARRIED ALL THINGS IN THEIR DUE TIME, said Death. BUT HE'S NOT GOING TO CARRY YOU THREE.

'Why not?'

IT'S A MATTER OF THE LOOK OF THE THING.

'It's going to look pretty good, then, isn't it,' said War testily, 'the One Horseman and Three Pedestrians of the Apocralypse.'

'Perhaps you could ask them to wait for us?' said Pestilence, his voice sounding like something dripping out of the bottom of a coffin.

I HAVE THINGS TO ATTEND TO, said Death. He made a little clicking noise with his teeth. I'M SURE YOU'LL MANAGE. YOU NORMALLY DO.

War watched the retreating horse.

'Sometimes he really gets on my nerves. Why is he always so keen to have the last word?' he said.

'Force of habit, l suppose.'

They turned back to the tavern. Neither spoke for some time, and then War said, 'Where's Famine?'

'Went to find the kitchen.'

'Oh.' War scuffed one armoured foot in the dust, and thought about the distance to Ankh. It was a very hot afternoon. The Apocralypse could jolly well wait.

'One for the road?' he suggested.

'Should we?' said Pestilence, doubtfully. 'I thought we were expected. l mean, l wouldn't like to disappoint people.'

'We've got time for a quick one, I'm sure,' War insisted. 'Pub clocks are never right. We've got bags of time. All the time in the world.'

Carding slumped forward and thudded on the shining white floor. The staff rolled out of his hands and upended itself.

Coin prodded the limp body with his foot.

'I did warn him,' he said. 'I told him what would happen if he touched it again. What did he mean, them?'

There was an outbreak of coughing and a considerable inspection of fingernails.

'What did he mean?' Coin demanded.

Ovin Hakardly, lecturer in Lore, once again found that the wizards around him were parting like morning mist. Without moving he appeared to have stepped forward. His eyes swivelled backwards and forwards like trapped animals.

'Er,' he said. He waved his thin hands vaguely. 'The world, you see, that is, the reality in which we live, in fact, it can be thought of as, in a manner of speaking, a rubber sheet.'

He hesitated, aware that the sentence was not going to appear in anyone's book of quotable quotes.

'In that,' he added hurriedly, 'it is distorted, uh, distended by the presence of magic in any degree and, if I may make a point here, too much magical potentiality, if foregathered in one spot, forces our reality, um, downwards, although of course one should not take the term literally (because in no sense do I seek to suggest a physical dimension) and it has been postulated that a sufficient exercise of magic can, shall we say, um, break through the actuality at its lowest point and offer, perhaps, a pathway to the inhabitants or, if I may use a more correct term, denizens of the lower plane (which is called by the loose-tongued the Dungeon Dimensions) who, because perhaps of the difference in energy levels, are naturally attracted to the brightness of this world. Our world.'

There was the typical long pause which usually followed Hakardly's speeches, while everybody mentally inserted commas and stitched the fractured clauses together.

Coin's lips moved silently for a while. 'Do you mean magic attracts these creatures?' he said eventually.

His voice was quite different now. It lacked its former edge. The staff hung in the air above the prone body of Carding, rotating slowly. The eyes of every wizard in the place were on it.

'So it appears,' said Hakardly. 'Students of such things say their presence is heralded by a coarse susurration.'

Coin looked uncertain.

'They buzz,' said one of the other wizards helpfully.

The boy knelt down and peered closely at Carding.

'He's very still,' he said cautiously. 'Is anything bad happening to him?'

'It may be,' said Hakardly, guardedly. 'He's dead.'

'I wish he wasn't.'

'It is a view, I suspect, which he shares.'

'But I can help him,' said Coin. He held out his hands and the staff glided into them. If it had a face, it would have smirked.

When he spoke next his voice once again had the cold distant tones of someone speaking in a steel room.

'If failure had no penalty success would not be a prize,' he said.

'Sorry?' said Hakardly. 'You've lost me there.'

Coin turned on his heel and strode back to his chair.

'We can fear nothing,' he said, and it sounded more like a command. 'What of these Dungeon Dimensions? If they should trouble us, away with them! A true wizard will fear nothing! Nothing!'

He jerked to his feet again and strode to the simulacrum of the world. The image was perfect in every detail, down to a ghost of Great A'Tuin paddling slowly through the interstellar deeps a few inches above the floor.

Coin waved his hand through it disdainfully.

'Ours is a world of magic,' he said. 'And what can be found in it that can stand against us?'

Hakardly thought that something was expected of him.

'Absolutely no-one,' he said. 'Except for the gods, of course.'

There was a dead silence.

'The gods?' said Coin quietly.

'Well, yes. Certainly. We don't challenge the gods. They do their job, we do ours. No sense in-’

'Who rules the Disc? Wizards or gods?'

Hakardly thought quickly.

'Oh, wizards. Of course. But, as it were, under the gods.'

When one accidentally puts one boot in a swamp it is quite unpleasant. But not as unpleasant as pushing down with the other boot and hearing that, too, disappear with a soft sucking noise. Hakardly pressed on.

'You see, wizardry is more-’

'Are we not more powerful than the gods, then?' said Coin.

Some of the wizards at the back of the crowd began to shuffle their feet.

'Well. Yes and no,' said Hakardly, up to his knees in it now.

The truth was that wizards tended to be somewhat nervous about the gods. The beings who dwelt on Cori Celesti had never made their feelings plain on the subject of ceremonial magic, which after all had a certain godness about it, and wizards tended to avoid the whole subject. The trouble with gods was that if they didn't like something they didn't just drop hints, so common sense suggested that it was unwise to put the gods in a position where they had to decide.

'There seems to be some uncertainty?' said Coin.

'If I may counsel-' Hakardly began.

Coin waved a hand. The walls vanished. The wizards stood at the top of the tower of sourcery, and as one man their eyes turned to the distant pinnacle of Cori Celesti, home of the gods.

'When you've beaten everyone else, there's only the gods left to fight,' said Coin. 'Have any of you seen the gods?'

There was a chorus of hesitant denials.

'I will show them to you.'

'You've got room for another one in there, old son,' said War.

Pestilence swayed unsteadily. 'I'm sure we should be getting along,' he muttered, without much conviction.

'Oh, go on.'

'Just a half, then. And then we really must be going.'

War slapped him on the back, and glared at Famine.

'And wed better have another fifteen bags of peanuts,' he added.

'Oook,' the Librarian concluded.

'Oh,' said Rincewind. 'It's the staff that's the problem, then.'

'Oook.'

'Hasn't anyone tried to take it away from him?'

'Oook.'

'What happened to them, then?'

'Eeek.'

Rincewind groaned.

The Librarian had put his candle out because the presence of the naked flame was unsettling the books, but now that Rincewind had grown accustomed to the dark, he realised it wasn't dark at all. The soft octarine glow from the books filled the inside of the tower with something that, while it wasn't exactly light, was a blackness you could see by. Now and again the ruffle of stiff pages floated down from the gloom.

'So, basically, there's no way our magic could defeat him, isn't that right?'

The Librarian cooked disconsolate agreement and continued to spin around gently on his bottom.

'Pretty pointless, then. It may have struck you that I am not exactly gifted in the magical department? I mean, any duel is going to go on the lines of "Hallo, I'm Rincewind" closely followed by bazaam!'

'Oook.'

'Basically, what you're saying is that I'm on my own.'

'Oook.'

'Thanks.'

By their own faint glow Rincewind regarded the books that had stacked themselves around the inner walls of the ancient tower.

He sighed, and marched briskly to the door, but slowed down noticeably as he reached it.

'I'll be off, then,' he said.

'Oook.'

'To face who knows what dreadful perils,' Rincewind added. 'To lay down my life in the service of mankind-’

'Eeek.'

'All right, bipeds-’

'Woof.'

'- and quadrapeds, all right.' He glanced at the Patrician's jamjar, a beaten man.

'And lizards,' he added. 'Can I go now?'

A gale was howling down out of a clear sky as Rincewind toiled towards the tower of sourcery. Its high white doors were shut so tightly it was barely possible to see their outline in the milky surface of the stone.

He hammered on it for a bit, but nothing much happened. The doors seemed to absorb the sound.

'Fine thing,' he muttered to himself, and remembered the carpet. It was lying where he had left it, which was another sign that Ankh had changed. In the thieving days before the sourcerer nothing stayed for long where you left it. Nothing printable, anyway.

He rolled it out on the cobbles so that the golden dragons writhed against the blue ground, unless of course the blue dragons were flying against a golden sky.

He sat down.

He stood up.

He sat down again and hitched up his robe and, with some effort, unrolled one of his socks. Then he replaced his boot and wandered around for a bit until he found, among the rubble, a half-brick. He inserted the half-brick into the sock and gave the sock a few thoughtful swings.

Rincewind had grown up in Morpork. What a Morpork citizen liked to have on his side in a fight was odds of about twenty to one, but failing that a sockful of half-brick and a dark alley to lurk in was generally considered a better bet than any two magic swords you cared to name.

He sat down again.

'Up,' he commanded.

The carpet did not respond. Rincewind peered at the pattern, then lifted a corner of the carpet and tried to make out if the underside was any better.

'All right,' he conceded, 'down. Very, very carefully. Down.'

'Sheep,' slurred War. 'It was sheep.' His helmeted head hit the bar with a clang. He raised it again. 'Sheep.'

'Nonono,' said Famine, raising a thin finger unsteadily. 'Some other domess ... dummist ... tame animal. Like pig. Heifer. Kitten? Like that. Not sheep.'

'Bees,' said Pestilence, and slid gently out of his seat.

'O-kay,' said War, ignoring him, 'right. Once again, then. From the top.' He rapped the side of his glass for the note.

'We are poor little ... unidentified domesticated animals ... that have lost our way ...' he quavered.

'Baabaabaa,' muttered Pestilence, from the floor.

War shook his head. 'It isn't the same, you know,' he said. 'Not without him. He used to come in beautifully on the bass.'

'Baabaabaa,' Pestilence repeated.

'Oh, shut up,' said War, and reached uncertainly for a bottle.

The gale buffeted the top of the tower, a hot, unpleasant wind that whispered with strange voices and rubbed the skin like fine sandpaper.

In the centre of it Coin stood with the staff over his head. As dust filled the air the wizards saw the lines of magic force pouring from it.

They curved up to form a vast bubble that expanded until it must have been larger than the city. And shapes appeared in it. They were shifting and indistinct, wavering horribly like visions in a distorting mirror, no more substantial than smoke rings or pictures in the clouds, but they were dreadfully familiar.

There, for a moment, was the fanged snout of Offler. There, clear for an instant in the writhing storm, was Blind lo, chief of the gods, with his orbiting eyes.

Coin muttered soundlessly and the bubble began to contract. It bulged and jerked obscenely as the things inside fought to get out, but they could not stop the contraction.

Now it was bigger than the University grounds.

Now it was taller than the tower.

Now it was twice the height of a man, and smoke grey.

Now it was an iridescent pearl, the size of ... well, the size of a large pearl.

The gale had gone, replaced by a heavy, silent calm. The very air groaned with the strain. Most of the wizards were flat on the floor, pressed there by the unleashed forces that thickened the air and deadened sound like a universe of feathers, but every one of them could hear his own heart beating loud enough to smash the tower.

'Look at me,' Coin commanded.

They turned their eyes upwards. There was no way they could disobey.

He held the glistening thing in one hand. The other held the staff, which had smoke pouring from its ends.

'The gods,' he said. 'Imprisoned in a thought. And perhaps they were never more than a dream.'

His voice become older, deeper. 'Wizards of Unseen University,' it said, 'have I not given you absolute dominion?'

Behind. them the carpet rose slowly over the side of the tower, with Rincewind trying hard to keep his balance. His eyes were wide with the sort of terror that comes naturally to anyone standing on a few threads and several hundred feet of empty air.

He lurched off the hovering thing and on to the tower, swinging the loaded sock around his head in wide, dangerous sweeps.

Coin saw him reflected in the astonished stares of the assembled wizards. He turned carefully and watched the wizard stagger erratically towards him.

'Who are you?' he said.

'I have come,' said Rincewind thickly, 'to challenge the sourcerer. Which one is he?'

He surveyed the prostrate wizardry, hefting the half-brick in one hand.

Hakardly risked a glance upwards and made frantic eyebrow movements at Rincewind who, even at the best of times, wasn't much good at interpreting non-verbal communication. This wasn't the best of times.

'With a sock?' said Coin. 'What good is a sock?'

The arm holding the staff rose. Coin looked down at it in mild astonishment.

'No, stop,' he said. 'I want to talk to this man.' He stared at Rincewind, who was swaying back and forth under the influence of sleeplessness, horror and the after-effects of an adrenaline overdose.

'Is it magical?' he said, curiously. 'Perhaps it is the sock of an Archchancellor? A sock of force?'

Rincewind focused on it.

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I think I bought it in a shop or something. Um. I've got another one somewhere.'

'But in the end it has something heavy?'

'Um. Yes,' said Rincewind. He added, 'It's a half-brick.'

'But it has great power.'

'Er. You can hold things up with it. If you had another one, you'd have a brick.' Rincewind spoke slowly. He was assimilating the situation by a kind of awful osmosis, and watching the staff turn ominously in the boy's hand.

'So. It is a brick of ordinariness, within a sock. The whole becoming a weapon.'

'Um. Yes.'

'How does it work?'

'Um. You swing it, and then you. Hit something with it. Or sometimes the back of your hand, sometimes.'

'And then perhaps it destroys a whole city?' said Coin.

Rincewind stared into Coin's golden eyes, and then at his sock. He had pulled it on and off several times a year for years. It had darns he'd grown to know and lo-well, know. Some of them had whole families of darns of their own. There were a number of descriptions that could be applied to the sock, but slayer-of-cities wasn't among them.

'Not really,' he said at last. 'It sort of kills people but leaves buildings standing.'

Rincewind's mind was operating at the speed of continental drift. Parts of it were telling him that he was confronting the sourcerer, but they were in direct conflict with other parts. Rincewind had heard quite a lot about the power of the sourcerer, the staff of the sourcerer, the wickedness of the sourcerer and so on. The only thing no-one had mentioned was the age of the sourcerer.

He glanced towards the staff.

'And what does that do?' he said slowly.

And the staff said, You must kill this man.

The wizards, who had been cautiously struggling upright, flung themselves flat again.

The voice of the hat had been bad enough, but the voice of the staff was metallic and precise; it didn't sound as though it was offering advice but simply stating the way the future had to be. It sounded quite impossible to ignore.

Coin half-raised his arm, and hesitated.

'Why?' he said.

You do not disobey me.

'You don't have to,' said Rincewind hurriedly. 'It's only a thing.'

'I do not see why I should hurt him,' said Coin. 'He looks so harmless. Like an angry rabbit.'

He defies us.

'Not me,' said Rincewind, thrusting the arm with the sock behind his back and trying to ignore the bit about the rabbit.

'Why should I do everything you tell me?' said Coin to the staff. 'I always do everything you tell me, and it doesn't help people at all.'

People must fear you. Have I taught you nothing?

'But he looks so funny, He's got a sock,' said Coin.

He screamed, and his arm jerked oddly. Rincewind's hair stood on end.

You will do as you are commanded.

'I won't'.

You know what happens to boys who are bad.

There was a crackle and a smell of scorched flesh. Coin dropped to his knees.

'Here, hang on a minute-’ Rincewind began.

Coin opened his eyes. They were gold still, but flecked with brown.

Rincewind swung his sock around in a wide humming arc that connected with the staff halfway along its length. There was a brief explosion of brick dust and burnt wool and the staff spun out of the boy's hand. Wizards scattered as it tumbled end over end across the floor.

It reached the parapet, bounced upwards and shot over the edge.

But, instead of falling, it steadied itself in the air, spun in its own length and sped back again trailing octarine sparks and making a noise like a buzzsaw.

Rincewind pushed the stunned boy behind him, threw away the ravaged sock and whipped his hat off, flailing wildly as the staff bored towards him. It caught him on the side of the head, delivering a shock that almost welded his teeth together and toppled him like a thin and ragged tree.

The staff turned again in mid-air, glowing red-hot now, and swept back for another and quite definitely final run.

Rincewind struggled up on his elbows and watched in horrified fascination as it swooped through the chilly air which, for some reason he didn't understand, seemed to be full of snowflakes.

And became tinged with purple, blotched with blue. Time slowed and ground to a halt like an underwound phonograph.

Rincewind looked up at the tall black figure that had appeared a few feet away.

It was, of course, Death.

He turned his glowing eyesockets towards Rincewind and said, in a voice like the collapse of undersea chasms, GOOD AFTERNOON.

He turned away as if he had completed all necessary business for the time being, stared at the horizon for a while, and started to tap one foot idly. It sounded like a bagful of maracas.

'Er,' said Rincewind.

Death appeared to remember him. I'M SORRY? he said politely.

'I always wondered how it was going to be,' said Rincewind.

Death took an hourglass out from the mysterious folds of his ebon robes and peered at it.

DID YOU? he said, vaguely.

'I suppose I can't complain,' said Rincewind virtuously. 'I've had a good life. Well, quite good.' He hesitated. 'Well, not all that good. I suppose most people would call it pretty awful.' He considered it further. 'I would,' he added, half to himself.

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT, MAN?

Rincewind was nonplussed. 'Don't you make an appearance when a wizard is about to die?'

OF COURSE. AND I MUST SAY YOU PEOPLE ARE GIVING ME A BUSY DAY

'How do you manage to be in so many places at the same time?'

GOOD ORGANISATION.

Time returned. The staff, which had been hanging in the air a few feet away from Rincewind, started to scream forward again.

And there was a metallic thud as Coin caught it onehandedly in mid-flight.

The staff uttered a noise like a thousand fingernails dragging across glass. It thrashed wildly up and down, flailing at the arm that held it, and bloomed into evil green flame along its entire length.

So. At the last, you fail me.

Coin groaned but held on as the metal under his fingertips went red, then white.

He thrust the arm out in front of him, and the force streaming from the staff roared past him and drew sparks from his hair and whipped his robe up into weird and unpleasant

shapes. He screamed and whirled the staff round and smashed it on the parapet, leaving a long bubbling line in the stone.

Then he threw it away. It clattered against the stones and rolled to a halt, wizards scattering out of its path.

Coin sagged to his knees, shaking.

'I don't like killing people,' he said. 'I'm sure it can't be right.'

'Hold on to that thought,' said Rincewind fervently.

'What happens to people after they're dead?' said Coin.

Rincewind glanced up at Death.

'I think this one's for you,' he said.

HE CANNOT SEE OR HEAR ME, said Death, UNTIL HE WANTS TO. There was a little clinking noise. The staff was rolling back towards Coin, who looked down at it in horror.

Pick me up.

'You don't have to,' said Rincewind again.

You cannot resist me. You cannot defeat yourself, said the staff.

Coin reached out very slowly, and picked it up.

Rincewind glanced at his sock. It was a stub of burnt wool, its brief career as a weapon of

war having sent it beyond the help of any darning needle.

Now kill him.

Rincewind held his breath. The watching wizards held their breath. Even Death, who had nothing to hold but his scythe, held it tensely.

'No,' said Coin.

You know what happens to boys who are bad.

Rincewind saw the sourcerer's face go pale.

The staff's voice changed. Now it wheedled.

Without me, who would there be to tell you what to do?

'That is true,' said Coin slowly.

See what you have achieved.

Coin stared slowly around at the frightened faces.

'I am seeing,' he said.

I taught you everything I know.

'I am thinking,' said Coin, 'that you do not know enough.'

Ingrate! Who gave you your destiny?

'You did,' said the boy. He raised his head.

'I realise that I was wrong,' he added, quietly.

Good -

'I did not throw you far enough!'

Coin got to his feet in one movement and swung the staff over his head. He stood still as a statue, his hand lost in a ball of light that was the colour of molten copper. It turned green, ascended through shades of blue, hovered in the violet and then seared into pure octarine.

Rincewind shaded his eyes against the glare and saw Coin's hand, still whole, still gripping tight, with beads of molten metal glittering between his fingers.

He slithered away, and bumped into Hakardly. The old wizard was standing like a statue, with his mouth open.

'What'll happen?' said Rincewind.

'He'll never beat it,' said Hakardly hoarsely. 'It's his. It's as strong as him. He's got the power, but it knows how to channel it.'

'You mean they'll cancel each other out?'

'Hopefully.'

The battle was hidden in its own infernal glow. Then the floor began to tremble.

'They're drawing on everything magical,' said Hakardly. 'We'd better leave the tower.'

'Why?'

'I imagine it will vanish soon enough.'

And, indeed, the white flagstones around the glow looked as though they were unravelling and disappearing into it.

Rincewind hesitated.

'Aren't we going to help him?' he said.

Hakardly stared at him, and then at the iridescent tableau. His mouth opened and shut once or twice.

'I'm sorry', he said.

'Yes, but just a bit of help on his side, you've seen what that thing is like-'

'I'm sorry."

'He helped you.' Rincewind turned on the other wizards, who were scurrying away. 'All of you. He gave you what you wanted, didn't he?'

'We may never forgive him,' said Hakardly.

Rincewind groaned.

'What will be left when it's all over?' he said. 'What will be left?'

Hakardly looked down.

'I'm sorry,' he repeated.

The octarine light had grown brighter and was beginning to turn black around the edge. It wasn't the black that is merely the opposite of light, though; it was the grainy, shifting blackness that glows beyond the glare and has no business in any decent reality. And it buzzed.

Rincewind did a little dance of uncertainty as his feet, legs, instincts and incredibly well-developed sense of self-preservation overloaded his nervous system to the point where, just as it was on the point of fusing, his conscience finally got its way.

He leapt into the fire and reached the staff.

The wizards fled. Several of them levitated down from the tower.

They were a lot more perspicacious than those that used the stairs because, about thirty seconds later, the tower vanished.

The snow continued to fall around a column of blackness, which buzzed.

And the surviving wizards who dared to look back saw, tumbling slowly down the sky, a small object trailing flames behind it. It crashed into the cobbles, where it smouldered for a bit before the thickening snow put it out.

Pretty soon it became just a small mound.

A little while later a squat figure swung itself across the courtyard on its knuckles, scrabbled in the snow, and hauled the thing out.

It was, or rather it had been, a hat. Life had not been kind to it. A large part of the wide

brim had been burned off, the point was entirely gone, and the tarnished silver letters were almost unreadable. Some of them had been torn off in any case. Those that were left spelled out: WIZD.

The Librarian turned around slowly. He was entirely alone, except for the towering column of burning blackness and the steadily falling flakes.

The ravaged campus was empty. There were a few other pointy hats that had been trampled by terrified feet, and no other sign that people had been there.

All the wizards were wazards.

'War?'

'Wazzat?'

'Wasn't there,' Pestilence groped for his glass, 'something?'

'Wazzat?'

'We ought to be ... there's something we ought to be doing,' said Famine.

'S'right. Got an appointment.'

'The-’ Pestilence gazed reflectively into his drink. 'Thingy.'

They stared gloomily at the bar counter. The innkeeper had long ago fled. There were several bottles still unopened.

'Okra,' said Famine, eventually. 'That was it.'

'Nah.'

'The Apos ... the Apostrophe,' said War, vaguely.

They shook their heads. There was a lengthy pause.

'What does "apocrustic" mean?' said Pestilence, gazing intently into some inner world.

'Astringent,' said War, 'I think.'

'It's not that, then?'

'Shouldn't think so,' said Famine, glumly.

There was another long, embarrassed silence.

'Better have 'nother drink,' said War, pulling himself together.

'S'right.'

About fifty miles away and several thousand feet up, Conina at last managed to control her stolen horse and brought it to a gentle trot on the empty air, displaying some of the most determined nonchalance the Disc had ever seen.

'Snow?' she said.

Clouds were roaring soundlessly from the direction of the Hub. They were fat and heavy

and shouldn't be moving so fast. Blizzards trailed beneath them, covering the landscape like a sheet.

It didn't look like the kind of snow that whispers down gently in the pit of the night and in the morning turns the landscape into a glittering wonderland of uncommon and ethereal beauty. It looked like the kind of snow that intends to make the world as bloody cold as possible.

'Bit late in the year,' said Nijel. He glanced downwards, and then immediately closed his eyes.

Creosote watched in delighted astonishment. 'Is that how it happens?' he said. 'I've only heard about it in stories. I thought it sprouted out of the ground somehow. Bit like mushrooms, I thought.'

'Those clouds aren't right,' said Conina.

'Do you mind if we go down now?' said Nijel weakly. 'Somehow it didn't look so bad when we were moving.'

Conina ignored this. 'Try the lamp,' she commanded. 'I want to know about this.'

Nijel fumbled in his pack and produced the lamp.

The voice of the genie sounded rather tinny and far off, and said: 'If you would care to relax a little ... trying to connect you.' There then followed some tinkly little music, the kind that perhaps a Swiss chalet would make if you could play it, before a trapdoor outlined itself in the air and the genie himself appeared. He looked around him, and then at them.

'Oh, wow,' he said.

'Something's happening to the weather,' said Conina. ,Why?,

'You mean you don't know?' said the genie.

'We're asking you, aren't we?'

'Well, I'm no judge, but it rather looks like the Apocralypse, yuh?'

'What?'

The genie shrugged. 'The gods have vanished, okay?' he said. 'And according to, you know, legend, that means-’

'The Ice Giants,' said Nijel, in a horrified whisper.

'Speak up,' said Creosote.

'The Ice Giants,' Nijel repeated loudly, with a trace of irritation. 'The gods keep them imprisoned, see. At the Hub. But at the end of the world they'll break free at last, and ride out on their dreadful glaciers and regain their ancient domination, crushing out the flames of civilisation until the world lies naked and frozen under the terrible cold stars until Time itself freezes over. Or something like that, apparently.'

'But it isn't time for the Apocralypse,' said Conina desperately. 'I mean, a dreadful ruler has to arise, there must be a terrible war, the four dreadful horsemen have to ride, and then the Dungeon Dimensions will break into the world-’She stopped, her face nearly as white as the snow.

'Being buried under a thousand-foot ice sheet sounds awfully like it, anyway,' said the genie. He reached forward and snatched his lamp out of Nijel's hands.

'Mucho apologies,' he said, 'but it's time to liquidise my assets in this reality. See you around. Or something.' He vanished up to the waist, and then with a faint last cry of 'Shame about lunch', disappeared entirely.

The three riders peered through the veils of driving snow towards the Hub.

'It may be my imagination,' said Creosote, 'but can either of you hear a sort of creaking and groaning?'

'Shut up,' said Conina distractedly.

Creosote leaned over and patted her hand.

'Cheer up,' he said, 'it's not the end of the world.' He thought about this statement for a bit, and then added, 'Sorry. Just a figure of speech.'

'What are we going to do?' she wailed.

Nijel drew himself up.

'I think,' he said, 'that we should go and explain.'

They turned towards him with the kind of expression normally reserved for messiahs or extreme idiots.

'Yes,' he said, with a shade more confidence. 'We should explain.'

'Explain to the Ice Giants?' said Conina.

'Yes.'

'Sorry,' said Conina, 'have I got this right? You think we should go and find the terrifying Ice Giants and sort of tell them that there are a lot of warm people out here who would rather they didn't sweep across the world crushing everyone under mountains of ice, and could they sort of reconsider things? Is that what you think we should do?'

'Yes. That's right. You've got it exactly.'

Conina and Creosote exchanged glances. Nijel remained sitting proudly in the saddle, a faint smile on his face.

'Is your geese giving you trouble?' said the Seriph.

'Geas,' said Nijel calmly. 'It's not giving me trouble, it's just that I must do something brave before I die.'

'That's it though,' said Creosote. 'That's the whole rather sad point. You'll do something brave, and then you'll die.'

'What alternative have we got?' said Nijel.

They considered this.

'I don't think I'm much good at explaining,' said Conina, in a small voice.

'I am,' said Nijel, firmly. 'I'm always having to explain.'

The scattered particles of what had been Rincewind's mind pulled themselves together and drifted up through the layers of dark unconsciousness like a three-day corpse rising to

the surface.

It probed its most recent memories, in much the same way that one might scratch a fresh scab.

He could recall something about a staff, and a pain so intense that it appeared to insert a chisel between every cell in his body and hammer on it repeatedly.

He remembered the staff fleeing, dragging him after it. And then there had been that dreadful bit where Death had appeared and reached past him, and the staff had twisted and become suddenly alive and Death had said, IPSLORE THE RED, I HAVE YOU NOW.

And now there was this.

By the feel of it Rincewind was lying on sand. It was very cold.

He took the risk of seeing something horrible and opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was his left arm and, surprisingly, his hand. It was its normal grubby self. He had expected to see a stump.

It seemed to be night-time. The beach, or whatever it was, stretched on towards a line of distant low mountains, under night sky frosted with a million white stars.

A little closer to him there was a rough line in the silvery sand. He lifted his head slightly and saw the scatter of molten droplets. They were octiron, a metal so intrinsically magical that no forge on the Disc could even warm it up.

'Oh,' he said. 'We won, then.'

He flopped down again.

After a while his right hand came up automatically and patted the top of his head. Then it patted the sides of his head. Then it began to grope, with increasing urgency, in the sand around him.

Eventually it must have communicated its concern to the rest of Rincewind, because he pulled himself upright and said, 'Oh, bugger.'

There seemed to be no hat anywhere. But he could see a small white shape lying very still in the sand a little way away and, further off -

A column of daylight.

It hummed and swayed in the air, a three-dimensional hole into somewhere else. Occasional flurries of snow blew out of it. He could see skewed images in the light, that might be buildings or landscapes warped by the weird curvature. But he couldn't see them very clearly, because of the tall, brooding shadows that surrounded it.

The human mind is an astonishing thing. It can operate on several levels at once. And, in fact, while Rincewind had been wasting his intellect in groaning and looking for his hat, an inner part of his brain had been observing, assessing, analysing and comparing.

Now it crept up to his cerebellum, tapped it on the shoulder, thrust a message into its hand and ran for it.

The message ran something like this: I hope I find me well. The last trial of magic has been too much for the tortured fabric of reality. It has opened a hole. I am in the Dungeon Dimensions. And the things in front of me are ... the Things. It has been nice knowing me.

The particular thing nearest Rincewind was at least twenty feet high. It looked like a dead horse that had been dug up after three months and then introduced to a range of new experiences, at least one of which had included an octopus.

It hadn't noticed Rincewind. It was too busy concentrating on the light.

Rincewind crawled back to the still body of Coin and nudged it gently.

'Are you alive?' he said. 'If you're not, I'd prefer it if you didn't answer.'

Coin rolled over and stared up at him with puzzled eyes. After a while he said, 'I remember-’

'Best not to,' said Rincewind.

The boy's hand groped vaguely in the sand beside him.

'It isn't here any more,' said Rincewind, quietly. The hand stopped its searching.

Rincewind helped Coin to sit up. He looked blankly at the cold silver sand, then at the sky, then at the distant Things, and then at Rincewind.

'I don't know what to do,' he said.

'No harm in that. I've never known what to do,' said Rincewind with hollow cheerfulness. 'Been completely at a loss my whole life.' He hesitated. 'I think it's called being human, or something.'

'But I've always known what to do!'

Rincewind opened his mouth to say that he'd seen some of it, but changed his mind.

Instead he said, 'Chin up. Look on the bright side. It could be worse.'

Coin took another look around.

'In what respect, exactly?' he said, his voice a shade more normal.

Um.'

'What is this place?'

'It's a sort of other dimension. The magic broke through and we went with it, I think.'

'And those things?'

They regarded the Things.

'I think they're Things. They're trying to get back through the hole,' said Rincewind. 'It isn't easy. Energy levels, or something. I remember we had a lecture on them once. Er.'

Coin nodded, and reached out a thin pale hand towards Rincewind's forehead.

'Do you mind-?' he began.

Rincewind shuddered at the touch. 'Mind what?' he said.

- if I have a look in your head?

'Aargh.'

It's rather a mess in here. No wonder you can't find things.

'Ergh.'

You ought to have a clear out.

'Oogh.'

Ah.'

Rincewind felt the presence retreat. Coin frowned.

'We can't let them get through,' he announced. 'They have horrible powers. They're trying to will the hole bigger, and they can do it. They've been waiting to break into our world for-’ he frowned -’ians?'

'Aeons,' said Rincewind.

Coin opened his other hand, which had been tightly clenched, and showed Rincewind the small grey pearl.

'Do you know what this is?' he said.

'No. What is it?'

'I--can't remember. But we should put it back.'

'Okay. Just use sourcery. Blow them to bits and let's go home.'

'No. They live on magic. It'd only make them worse. I can't use magic.'

'Are you sure?' said Rincewind.

'I'm afraid your memory was very clear on the subject.'

'Then what shall we do?'

'I don't know!'

Rincewind thought about this and then, with an air of finality, started to take off his last sock.

'No half-bricks,' he said, to no-one in particular. 'Have to use sand.'

'You're going to attack them with a sockful of sand?'

'No. I'm going to run away from them. The sockful of sand is for when they follow.'

People were returning to Al Khali, where the ruined tower was a smoking heap of stones. A few brave souls turned their attention to the wreckage, on the basis that there might be survivors who could be rescued or looted or both.

And, among the rubble, the following conversation might have been heard:

'There's something moving under here!'

'Under that? By the two beards of Imtal, you are mishearing. It must weigh a ton.'

'Over here, brothers!'

And then sounds of much heaving would have been heard, and then:

'It's a box!'

'It could be treasure, do you think?'

'It's growing legs, by the Seven Moons of Nasreem!'

'Five moons-’

'Where'd it go? Where'd it go?'

'Never mind about that, it's not important. Let's get this straight, according to the legend it was five moons-'

In Klatch they take their mythology seriously. It's only real life they don't believe.

The three horsepersons sensed the change as they descended through the heavy snowclouds at the Hub end of the Sto Plain. There was a sharp scent in the air.

'Can't you smell it?' said Nijel, 'I remember it when I was a boy, when you lay in bed on that first morning in winter, and you could sort of taste it in the air and-’

The clouds parted below them and there, filling the high plains country from end to end, were the herds of the Ice Giants.

They stretched for miles in every direction, and the thunder of their stampede filled the air.

The bull glaciers were in the lead, bellowing their vast creaky calls and throwing up great sheets of earth as they ploughed relentlessly forward. Behind them pressed the great mass

of cows and their calves, skimming over land already ground down to the bedrock by the leaders.

They bore as much resemblance to the familiar glaciers the world thought it knew as a lion dozing in the shade bears to three hundred pounds of wickedly coordinated muscle bounding towards you with its mouth open.

'... and ... and ... when you went to the window,' Nijel's mouth, lacking any further input from his brain, ran down.

Moving, jostling ice packed the plain, roaring forward under a great cloud of clammy steam. The ground shook as the leaders passed below, and it was obvious to the onlookers that whoever was going to stop this would need more than a couple of pounds of rock salt and a shovel.

'Go on, then,' said Conina, 'explain. I think you'd better shout.

Nijel looked distractedly at the herd.

'I think I can see some figures,' said Creosote helpfully. 'Look, on top of the leading ... things.'

Nijel peered through the snow. There were indeed beings moving around on the backs of the glaciers. They were human, or humanoid, or at least humanish. They didn't look very big.

That turned out to be because the glaciers themselves were very big, and Nijel wasn't very good at perspective. As the horses flew lower over the leading glacier, a huge bull heavily crevassed and scarred by moraine, it became apparent that one reason why the Ice Giants were known as the Ice Giants was because they were, well, giants.

The other was that they were made of ice.

A figure the size of a large house was crouched at the crest of the bull, urging it to greater efforts by means of a spike on a long pole. It was craggy, in fact it was more nearly faceted, and glinted green and blue in the light; there was a thin band of silver in its snowy locks, and its eyes were tiny and black and deep set, like lumps of coal.[24]

There was a splintering crash ahead as the leading glaciers smacked into a forest. Birds rattled up in panic. Snow and splinters rained down around Nijel as he galloped on the air alongside the giant.

He cleared his throat.

'Erm,' he said, 'excuse me?'

Ahead of the boiling surf of earth, snow and smashed timber a herd of caribou was running in blind panic, their rear hooves a few feet from the tumbling mess.

Nijel tried again.

'I say?' he shouted.

The giant's head turned towards him.

'Vot you want?' it said. 'Go avay, hot person.'

'Sorry, but is this really necessary?'

[24] Although this was the only way in which they resembled the idols built, in response to ancient and unacknowledged memories, by children in snowy weather; it was extremely unlikely that this Ice Giant would be a small mound of grubby ice with a carrot in it by the morning.

The giant looked at him in frozen astonishment. It turned around slowly and regarded the rest of the herd, which seemed to stretch all the way to the Hub. It looked at Nijel again.

'Yarss,' it said, 'I tink so. Otherwise, why ve do it?'

'Only there's a lot of people out there who would prefer you not to, you see', said Nijel, desperately. A rock spire loomed briefly ahead of the glacier, rocked for a second and then vanished.

He added, Also children and small furry animals.'

'They vill suffer in the cause of progress. Now is the time ve reclaim the world,' rumbled the giant. 'Whole vorld of ice. According to inevitability of history and triumph of thermodynamics.'

'Yes, but you don't have to,' said Nijel.

'Ve vant to,' said the giant. 'The gods are gone, ve throw off shackles of outmoded superstition.'

'Freezing the whole world solid doesn't sound very progressive to me,' said Nijel.

'Ve like it.'

'Yes, yes,' said Nijel, in the maniacally glazed tones of one who is trying to see all sides of the issue and is certain that a solution will be found if people of goodwill will only sit around a table and discuss things rationally like sensible human beings. 'But is this the right time? Is the world ready for the triumph of ice?'

'It bloody veil better be,' said the giant, and swung his glacier prod at Nijel. It missed the

horse but caught him full in the chest, lifting him clean out of the saddle and flicking him on to the glacier itself. He spun, spreadeagled, down its freezing flanks, was carried some way by the boil of debris, and rolled into the slush of ice and mud between the speeding walls.

He staggered to his feet, and peered hopelessly into the freezing fog. Another glacier bore down directly on him.

So did Conina. She leaned over as her horse swept down out of the fog, caught Nijel by his leather barbarian harness, and swung him up in front of her.

As they rose again he wheezed, 'Cold-hearted bastard. I really thought I was getting somewhere for a moment there. You just can't talk to some people.'

The herd breasted another hill, scraping off quite a lot of it, and the Sto Plain, studded with cities, lay helpless before it.

Rincewind sidled towards the nearest Thing, holding Coin with one hand and swinging the loaded sock in the other.

'No magic, right?' he said.

'Yes,' said the boy.

'Whatever happens, you musn't use magic?'

'That's it. Not here. They haven't got much power here, if you don't use magic. Once they break through, though ...'

His voice trailed away.

'Pretty awful,' Rincewind nodded.

'Terrible,' said Coin.

Rincewind sighed. He wished he still had his hat. He'd just have to do without it.

All right,' he said. 'When I shout, you make a run for the light. Do you understand? No looking back or anything. No matter what happens.'

'No matter what?' said Coin uncertainly.

'No matter what.' Rincewind gave a brave little smile. 'Especially no matter what you hear.'

He was vaguely cheered to see Coin's mouth become an 'O' of terror.

'And then,' he continued, 'when you get back to the other side-'

'What shall I do?'

Rincewind hesitated. 'I don't know,' he said. 'Anything you can. As much magic as you like. Anything. Just stop them. And ... um ...'

'Yes?'

Rincewind gazed up at the Thing, which was still staring into the light.

'If it ... you know ... if anyone gets out of this, you know, and everything is all right after all, sort of thing, Id like you to sort of tell people I sort of stayed here. Perhaps they could

sort of write it down somewhere. I mean, I wouldn't want a statue or anything,' he added virtuously.

After a while he added, 'I think you ought to blow your nose.'

Coin did so, on the hem of his robe, and then shook Rincewind's hand solemnly.

'If ever you ...' he began, 'that is, you're the first ... it's been a great ... you see, I never really ...' His voice trailed off, and then he said, 'I just wanted you to know that.'

'There was something else I was trying to say,' said Rincewind, letting go of the hand. He looked blank for a moment, and then added, 'Oh, yes. It's vital to remember who you really are. It's very important. It isn't a good idea to rely on other people or things to do it for you, you see. They always get it wrong.'

'I'll try and remember,' said Coin.

'It's very important,' Rincewind repeated, almost to himself. 'And now I think you'd better run.'

Rincewind crept closer to the Thing. This particular one had chicken legs, but most of the rest of it was mercifully hidden in what looked like folded wings.

It was, he thought, time for a few last words. What he said now was likely to be very important. Perhaps they would be words that would be remembered, and handed down, and maybe even carved deeply in slabs of granite.

Words without too many curly letters in, therefore.

'I really wish I wasn't here,' he muttered.

He hefted the sock, whirled it once or twice, and smashed the Thing on what he hoped was its kneecap.

It gave a shrill buzz, spun wildly with its wings creaking open, lunged vaguely at Rincewind with its vulture head and got another sockful of sand on the upswing.

Rincewind looked around desperately as the Thing staggered back, and saw Coin still standing where he had left him. To his horror he saw the boy begin to walk towards him, hands raised instinctively to fire the magic which, here, would doom both of them.

'Run away, you idiot!' he screamed, as the Thing began to gather itself for a counter-attack. From out of nowhere he found the words, 'You know what happens to boys who are bad!'

Coin went pale, turned and ran towards the light. He moved as though through treacle, fighting against the entropy slope. The distorted image of the world turned inside out hovered a few feet away, then inches, wavering uncertainly ...

A tentacle curled around his leg, tumbling him forward.

He flung his hands out as he fell, and one of them touched snow. It was immediately grabbed by something else that felt like a warm, soft leather glove, but under the gentle touch was a grip as tough as tempered steel and it tugged him forward, also dragging whatever it was that had caught him.

Light and grainy dark flicked around him and suddenly he was sliding over cobbles slicked with ice.

The Librarian let go his hold and stood over Coin with a length of heavy wooden beam in his hand. For a moment the ape reared against the darkness, the shoulder, elbow and wrist of his right arm unfolding in a poem of applied leverage, and in a movement as

unstoppable as the dawn of intelligence brought it down very heavily. There was a squashy noise and an offended screech, and the burning pressure on Coin's leg vanished.

The dark column wavered. There were squeals and thumps coming from it, distorted by distance.

Coin struggled to his feet and started to run back into the dark, but this time the Librarian's arm blocked his path.

'We can't just leave him in there!'

The ape shrugged.

There was another crackle from the dark, and then a moment of almost complete silence.

But only almost complete. Both of them thought they heard, a long way off but very distinct, the sound of running feet fading into the distance.

They found an echo in the outside world. The ape glanced around, and then pushed Coin hurriedly to one side as something squat and battered and with hundreds of little legs barrelled across the stricken courtyard and, without so much as pausing in its stride, leapt into the disappearing darkness, which flickered for one last time and vanished.

There was a sudden flurry of snow across the air where it had been.

Coin wrenched free of the Librarian's grip and ran into the circle, which was already turning white. His feet scuffed up a sprinkle of fine sand.

'He didn't come out!' he said.

'Oook,' said the Librarian, in a philosophic manner.

'I thought he'd come out. You know, just at the last minute.'

'Oook?'

Coin looked closely at the cobbles, as if by mere concentration he could change what he saw. 'Is he dead?'

'Gook,' observed the Librarian, contriving to imply that Rincewind was in a region where even things like time and space were a bit iffy, and that it was probably not very useful to speculate as to his exact state at this point in time, if indeed he was at any point in time at all, and that, all in all, he might even turn up tomorrow or, for that matter, yesterday, and finally that if there was any chance at all of surviving then Rincewind almost certainly would.

'Oh,' said Coin.

He watched the Librarian shuffle around and head back for the Tower of Art, and a desperate loneliness overcame him.

'I say!' he yelled.

'Gook?'

'What should I do now?'

'Gook?'

Coin waved vaguely at the desolation.

'You know, perhaps I could do something about all this?', he said in a voice tilting on the

edge of terror. 'Do you think that would be a good idea? I mean, I could help people. I'm sure you'd like to be human again, wouldn't you?'

The Librarian's everlasting smile hoisted itself a little further up his face, just enough to reveal his teeth.

'Okay, perhaps not,' said Coin hurriedly, 'but there's other things I could do, isn't there?'

The Librarian gazed at him for some time, then dropped his eyes to the boy's hand. Coin gave a guilty start, and opened his fingers.

The ape caught the little silver ball neatly before it hit the ground and held it up to one eye. He sniffed it, shook it gently, and listened to it for a while.

Then he wound up his arm and flung it away as hard as possible.

'What-' Coin began, and landed full length in the snow when the Librarian pushed him over and dived on top of him.

The ball curved over at the top of its arc and tumbled down, its perfect path interrupted suddenly by the ground. There was a sound like a harp string breaking, a brief babble of incomprehensible voices, a rush of hot wind, and the gods of the Disc were free.

They were very angry.

'There is nothing we can do, is there?' said Creosote.

'No,' said Conina.

'The ice is going to win, isn't it?' said Creosote.

'Yes,' said Conina.

'No,' said Nijel.

He was trembling with rage, or possibly with cold, and was nearly as pale as the glaciers that rumbled past below them.

Conina sighed. 'Well, just how do you think-’ she began.

'Take me down somewhere a few minutes ahead of them,' said Nijel.

'I really don't see how that would help.'

'I wasn't asking your opinion,' said Nijel, quietly. 'Just do it. Put me down a little way ahead of them so I've got a while to get sorted out.'

'Get what sorted out?'

Nijel didn't answer.

'I said,' said Conina, 'get what-’

'Shut up!'

'I don't see why-’

'Look,' said Nijel, with the patience that lies just short of axe-murdering. 'The ice is going to cover the whole world, right? Everyone's going to die, okay? Except for us for a little while, I suppose, until these horses want their, their, their oats or the lavatory or

whatever, which isn't much use to us except maybe Creosote will just about have time to write a sonnet or something about how cold it is all of a sudden, and the whole of human history is about to be scraped up and in these circumstances I would like very much to make it completely clear that I am not about to be argued with, is that absolutely understood?'

He paused for breath, trembling like a harpstring.

Conina hesitated. Her mouth opened and shut a few times, as though she was considering arguing, and then she thought better of it.

They found a small clearing in a pine forest a mile or two ahead of the herd, although the sound of it was clearly audible and there was a line of steam above the trees and the ground was dancing like a drumtop.

Nijel strolled to the middle of the clearing and made a few practice swings with his sword. The others watched him thoughtfully.

'If you don't mind,' whispered Creosote to Conina, 'I'll be off. It's at times like this that sobriety loses its attractions and I'm sure the end of the world will look a lot better through the bottom of a glass, if it's all the same to you. Do you believe in Paradise, o peachcheeked blossom?'

'Not as such, no.'

'Oh,' said Creosote. 'Well, in that case we probably won't be seeing each other again.' He sighed. 'What a waste. All this was just because of a geas. Um. Of course, if by some unthinkable chance-’

'Goodbye,' said Conina.

Creosote nodded miserably, wheeled the horse and disappeared over the treetops.

Snow was shaking down from the branches around the clearing. The thunder of the approaching glaciers filled the air.

Nijel started when she tapped him on the shoulder, and dropped his sword.

'What are you doing here?' he snapped, fumbling desperately in the snow.

'Look, I'm not prying or anything,' said Conina meekly, 'but what exactly do you have in mind?'

She could see a rolling heap of bulldozed snow and soil bearing down on them through the forest, the mind-numbing sound of the leading glaciers now overlaid with the rhythmic snapping of tree trunks. And, advancing implacably above the treeline, so high that the eye mistook them at first for sky, the blue-green prows.

'Nothing,' said Nijel, 'nothing at all. We've just got to resist them, that's all there is to it. That's what we're here for.'

'But it won't make any difference,' she said.

'It will to me. If we're going to die anyway, Iii rather die like this. Heroically.'

'Is it heroic to die like this?' said Conina.

'I think it is,' he said, 'and when it comes to dying, there's only one opinion that matters.'

'Oh.'

A couple of deer blundered into the clearing, ignored the humans in their blind panic, and

rocketed away.

'You don't have to stay,' said Nijel. 'I've got this geas, you see.'

Conina looked at the backs of her hands.

'I think I should,' she said, and added, 'You know, I thought maybe, you know, if we could just get to know one another better-’

'Mr and Mrs Harebut, was that what you had in mind?' he said bluntly.

Her eyes widened. 'Well-’ she began.

'Which one did you intend to be?' he said.

The leading glacier smashed into the clearing just behind its bow wave, its top lost in a cloud of its own creation.

At exactly the same time the trees opposite it bent low as a hot wind blew from the Rim. It was loaded with voices - petulant, bickering voices - and tore into the clouds like a hot iron into water.

Conina and Nijel threw themselves down into snow which turned to warm slush under them. Something like a thunderstorm crashed overhead, filled with shouting and what they at first thought were screams although, thinking about them later, they seemed more like angry arguments. It went on for a long time, and then began to fade in the direction of the Hub.

Warm water flooded down the front of Nijel's vest. He lifted himself cautiously, and then nudged Conina.

Together they scrambled through the slush and mud to the top of the slope, climbed through a logjam of smashed timber and boulders, and stared at the scene.

The glaciers were retreating, under a cloud stuffed with lightning. Behind them the landscape was a network of lakes and pools.

'Did we do that?' said Conina.

'It would be nice to think so, wouldn't it?' said Nijel.

'Yes, but did-’ she began.

'Probably not. Who knows? Let's just find a horse,' he said.

'The Apogee,' said War, 'or something. I'm pretty sure.'

They had staggered out of the inn and were sitting on a bench in the afternoon sunshine. Even War had been persuaded to take off some of his armour.

'Dunno,' said Famine, 'Don't think so.'

Pestilence shut his crusted eyes and leaned back against the warm stones.

'I think,' he said, 'it was something about the end of the world.'

War sat and thoughtfully scratched his chin. He hiccuped.

'What, the whole world?' he said.

'I reckon.'

War gave this some further consideration. 'I reckon we're well out of it, then,' he said.

People were returning to Ankh-Morpork, which was no longer a city of empty marble but was once again its old self, sprawling as randomly and colourfully as a pool of vomit outside the all-night takeaway of History.

And the University had been rebuilt, or had rebuilt itself, or in some strange way had never been unbuilt; every strand of ivy, every rotting casement, was back in place. The sourcerer had offered to replace everything as good as new, all wood sparkling, all stone unstained, but the Librarian had been very firm on the subject. He wanted everything replaced as good as old.

The wizards came creeping back with the dawn, in ones or twos, scuttling for their old rooms, trying to avoid one another's gaze, trying to remember a recent past that was already becoming unreal and dream-like.

Conina and Nijel arrived around breakfast time and, out of kindness, found a livery stable for War's horse.[25] It was Conina who insisted that they look for Rincewind at the University, and who, therefore, first saw the books.

They were flying out of the Tower of Art, spiralling around the University buildings and swooping through the door of the reincarnated Library. One or two of the more impudent grimoires were chasing sparrows, or hovering hawk-like over the quad.

[25] Which wisely decided not to fly again, was never claimed, and lived out the rest of its days as the carriage horse of an elderly lady. What War did about this is unrecorded; it is pretty certain that he got another one.

The Librarian was leaning against the doorway, watching his charges with a benevolent eye. He waggled his eyebrows at Conina, the nearest he ever got to a conventional greeting.

'Is Rincewind here?' she said.

'Oook.'

'Sorry?'

The ape didn't answer but took them both by the hand and, walking between them like a sack between two poles, led them across the cobbles to the tower.

There were a few candles alight inside, and they saw Coin seated on a stool. The Librarian bowed them into his presence like an ancient retainer in the oldest family of all, and withdrew.

Coin nodded at them. 'He knows when people don't understand him,' he said. 'Remarkable, isn't he?'

'Who are you?' said Conina.

'Coin,' said Coin.

Are you a student here?'

'I'm learning quite a lot, I think.'

Nijel was wandering around the walls, giving them the occasional prod. There had to be some good reason why they didn't fall down, but if there was it didn't lie in the realms of

civil engineering.

'Are you looking for Rincewind?' said Coin.

Conina frowned. 'How did you guess that?'

'He told me some people would come looking for him.'

Conina relaxed. 'Sorry,' she said, 'we've had a bit of a trying time. I thought perhaps it was magic, or something. He's all right, isn't he? I mean, what's been happening? Did he fight the sourcerer?'

'Oh, yes. And he won. It was very ... interesting. I saw it all. But then he had to go,' said Coin, as though reciting.

'What, just like that?' said Nijel.

'Yes.'

'I don't believe it,' said Conina. She was beginning to crouch, her knuckles whitening.

'It is true,' said Coin. 'Everything I say is true. It has to be.'

'I want to-' Conina began, and Coin stood up, extended a hand and said, 'Stop.'

She froze. Nijel stiffened in mid-frown.

'You will leave,' said Coin, in a pleasant, level voice, 'and you will ask no more questions. You will be totally satisfied. You have all your answers. You will live happily ever after. You will forget hearing these words. You will go now.'

They turned slowly and woodenly, like puppets, and trooped to the door. The Librarian opened it for them, ushered them through and shut it behind them.

Then he stared at Coin, who sagged back on to the stool.

'All right, all right,' said the boy, 'but it was only a little magic. I had to. You said yourself people had to forget.'

'Oook?'

'I can't help it! It's too easy to change things!' He clutched his head. 'I've only got to think of something! I can't stay, everything I touch goes wrong, it's like trying to sleep on a heap of eggs! This world is too thin! Please tell me what to do!'

The Librarian spun around on his bottom a few times, a sure sign of deep thought.

Exactly what he said is not recorded, but Coin smiled, nodded, shook the Librarian's hand, and opened his own hands and drew them up and around him and stepped into another world. It had a lake in, and some distant mountains, and a few pheasants watching him suspiciously from under the trees. It was the magic all sourcerers learned, eventually.

Sourcerers never become part of the world. They merely wear it for a while.

He looked back, halfway across the turf, and waved at the Librarian. The ape gave him an encouraging nod.

And then the bubble shrank inside itself, and the last sourcerer vanished from this world and into a world of his own.

Although it has nothing much to do with the story, it is an interesting fact that, about five hundred miles away, a small flock, or rather in this case a herd, of birds were picking their way cautiously through the trees. They had heads like a flamingo, bodies like a turkey, and legs like a Sumo wrestler; they walked in a jerky, bobbing fashion, as though their heads were attached to their feet by elastic bands. They belonged to a species unique even among Disc fauna, in that their prime means of defence was to cause a predator to laugh so much that they could run away before it recovered. Rincewind would have been vaguely satisfied to know that they were geas.

Custom was slow in the Mended Drum. The troll chained to the doorpost sat in the shade and reflectively picked someone out of his teeth.

Creosote was singing softly to himself. He had discovered beer and wasn't having to pay for it, because the coinage of compliments - rarely employed by the swains of Ankh - was having an astonishing effect on the landlord's daughter. She was a large, good-natured girl, with a figure that was the colour and, not to put too fine a point on it, the same shape as unbaked bread. She was intrigued. No-one had ever referred to her breasts as jewelled melons before.

Absolutely,' said the Seriph, sliding peacefully off his bench, 'no doubt about it.' Either the big yellow sort or the small green ones with huge warty veins, he told himself virtuously.

'And what was that about my hair?' she said encouragingly, hauling him back and refilling his glass.

'Oh.' The Seriph's brow wrinkled. 'Like a goat of flocks that grazes on the slopes of Mount Wossname, and no mistake. And as for your ears,' he added quickly, 'no pink-

hued shells that grace the sea-kissed sands of-’

'Exactly how like a flock of goats?' she said.

The Seriph hesitated. He'd always considered it one of his best lines. Now it was meeting Ankh-Morpork's famous literal-mindedness head-on for the first time. Strangely enough, he felt rather impressed.

'I mean, in size, shape or smell?' she went on.

'I think,' said the Seriph, 'that perhaps the phrase I had in mind was exactly not like a flog of gits.'

'Ah?' The girl pulled the flagon towards her.

And I think perhaps I would like another drink,' he said indistinctly, 'and then - and then-’ He looked sideways at the girl, and took the plunge. Are you much of a raconteur?'

'What?'

He licked his suddenly dry lips. 'I mean, do you know many stories?' he croaked.

'Oh, yes. Lots.'

'Lots?' whispered Creosote. Most of his concubines only knew the same old one or two.

'Hundreds. Why, do you want to hear one?'

'What, now?'

'If you like. It's not very busy in here.'

Perhaps I did die, Creosote thought. Perhaps this is Paradise. He took her hands. 'You know,' he said, 'it's ages since I've had a good narrative. But I wouldn't want you to do anything you don't want to.'

She patted his arm. What a nice old gentleman, she thought. Compared to some we get in here.

'There's one my granny used to tell me. I know it backwards,' she said.

Creosote sipped his beer and watched the wall in a warm glow. Hundreds, he thought. And she knows some of them backwards.

She cleared her throat, and said, in a sing-song voice that made Creosote's pulse fuse. 'There was a man and he had eight sons-'

The Patrician sat by his window, writing. His mind was full of fluff as far as the last week or two was concerned, and he didn't like that much.

A servant had lit a lamp to dispel the twilight, and a few early evening moths were orbiting it. The Patrician watched them carefully. For some reason he felt very uneasy in the presence of glass but that, as he stared fixedly at the insects, wasn't what bothered him most.

What bothered him was that he was fighting a terrible urge to catch them with his tongue.

And Wuffles lay on his back at his master's feet, and barked in his dreams.

Lights were going on all over the city, but the last few strands of sunset illuminated the gargoyles as they helped one another up the long climb to the roof.

The Librarian watched them from the open door, while giving himself a philosophic scratch. Then he turned and shut out the night.

It was warm in the Library. It was always warm in the Library, because the scatter of magic that produced the glow also gently cooked the air.

The Librarian looked at his charges approvingly, made his last rounds of the slumbering shelves, and then dragged his blanket underneath his desk, ate a goodnight banana, and fell asleep.

Silence gradually reclaimed the Library. Silence drifted around the remains of a hat, heavily battered and frayed and charred around the edges, that had been placed with some ceremony in a niche in the wall. No matter how far a wizard goes, he will always come back for his hat.

Silence filled the University in the same way that air fills a hole. Night spread across the Disk like plum jam, or possibly blackberry preserve.

But there would be a morning. There would always be another morning.

THE END