

About the Book

As it moves towards a seemingly inevitable collision with a malevolent red star, the Discworld has only one possible saviour. Unfortunately, this happens to be the singularly inept and cowardly wizard called Rincewind, who was last seen falling off the edge of the world...

The funniest and most unorthodox fantasy in this or any other galaxy.

Terry Pratchett

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC



CORGI BOOKS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Pratchett is the acclaimed creator of the Discworld series, started in 1983 with *The Colour of Magic*, and which has now reached 38 novels. Worldwide sales of his books are now 60 million, and they have been translated into 37 languages. Terry Pratchett was knighted for services to literature in 2009.

INTRODUCING DISCWORLD

The Discworld Series is a continuous history of a world not totally unlike our own except that it is a flat disc carried on the backs of four elephants astride a giant turtle floating through space, and that it is peopled by, among others, wizards, dwarves, policemen, thieves, beggars, vampires and witches. Within the history of Discworld there are many individual stories, which can be read in any order, but reading them in sequence can increase your enjoyment through the accumulation of all the fine detail that contributes to the teeming imaginative complexity of this brilliantly conceived world.

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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 all 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 were 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 archaeologists 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 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, terrorized, 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 not an 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 'Where 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 elephant 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 black wax whose precise origin a wise man wouldn't enquire 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 halfbrick.

The only furnishing in the room was a lectern of 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 chains 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 harnesses for elephants.

The air thickened and swirled. The pages of the book began to crinkle in a quite horribly 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 Elevenis 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 and beckoning. In much the same way that gnats appear before a thunderstorm, really heavy build-ups of magic always attracted things from the chaotic Dungeons and Dimensions – nasty Things, all misplaced organs and spittle, forever searching for any gap through which they might sidle into the world of men.¹

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 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 nightshirt

billowing the 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 over 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 wizard 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 within-lookmen!’ 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

eye for a moment 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 belong to them, slitting throats, mugging one another, listening to loud music in smoky cellars and generally 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 entirely accurate and during the reign of Olaf Quimby II as 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 on 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, thessalous! 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 rotting stone far above.

It fell. By a finely calculated exchange of velocities Galder rose, nightshirt flapping around his bony legs. Higher and higher he soared, hurtling through the pale light like a, like a – all right, like a

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 the Disc dawn.

At this time of the long year the Circle Sea was almost on the sunset side of Cori Celesti, and the daylight sloshed down into the lands around Ankh-Morpork the shadow of the mountain scythes across the landscape like the gnomon of God's sundial. But nightwards, racing the slow light toward 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 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 previously 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 organization charts that show lots of squares with arrows pointing to 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 shimmering white skin that fitted perfectly.

Galder looked down at his own hands and saw them covered with a pale network of shining threads that followed every movement.

He recognized 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 at 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 was different was 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 a 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 into 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 the tree the moss grew on. These trees had moss everywhere, and wooden warts, and scabbly 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 realized 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 strange 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 sprang 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 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-organized 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 knowledge 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 on the 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 it’s 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 probabilistic 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. ‘Look,’ 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, not 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 seventh rank wizards trying to bump him off, and senior wizards had to develop an enquiring attitude, 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-organized 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. Runic 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 preparation normally took several hours, but the combined powers of the senior wizard 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 wizard’s 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 business of 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 his 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 HOGSWATCHNIGHT 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 Cheliliki 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 Trym

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 librarian 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 their 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 an 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 smel 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 floated 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: *Iyt Gryet Teymple hy 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.

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