

THIS IS WHERE THE GODS PLAY GAMES WITH THE lives of men, on a board which is *at one and the same time* a simple playing area and the whole world.

And Fate always wins.

Fate always wins. Most of the gods throw dice but Fate plays chess, and you don't find out until too late that he's been using two queens all along.

Fate wins. At least, so it is claimed. Whatever happens, they say afterwards, it must have been Fate.*

Gods can take any form, but the one aspect of themselves they cannot change is their eyes, which show their nature. The eyes of Fate are hardly eyes at all – just dark holes into an infinity speckled with

*People are always a little confused about this, as they are in the case of miracles. When someone is saved from certain death by a strange concatenation of circumstances, they say that's a miracle. But of course if someone is *killed* by a freak chain of events – the oil spilled just *there*, the safety fence broken just *there* – that must *also* be a miracle. Just because it's not nice doesn't mean it's not miraculous.

what may be stars or, there again, may be other things.

He blinked them, smiled at his fellow players in the smug way winners do just before they become winners, and said:

‘I accuse the High Priest of the Green Robe in the library with the double-handed axe.’

And he won.

He beamed at them.

‘No one likesh a poor winner,’ grumbled Oflfer the Crocodile God, through his fangs.

‘It seems that I am favouring myself today,’ said Fate. ‘Anyone fancy something else?’

The gods shrugged.

‘Mad Kings?’ said Fate pleasantly. ‘Star-Crossed Lovers?’

‘I think we’ve lost the rules for that one,’ said Blind Io, chief of the gods.

‘Or Tempest-Wrecked Mariners?’

‘You always win,’ said Io.

‘Floods and Droughts?’ said Fate. ‘That’s an easy one.’

A shadow fell across the gaming table. The gods looked up.

‘Ah,’ said Fate.

‘Let a game begin,’ said the Lady.

There was always an argument about whether the newcomer was a goddess at all. Certainly no one ever got anywhere by worshipping her, and she tended to turn up only where she was least expected, such as now. And people who trusted in her seldom

survived. Any temples built to her would surely be struck by lightning. Better to juggle axes on a tight-rope than say her name. Just call her the waitress in the Last Chance saloon.

She was generally referred to as the Lady, and her eyes were green; not as the eyes of humans are green, but emerald green from edge to edge. It was said to be her favourite colour.

‘Ah,’ said Fate again. ‘And what game will it be?’

She sat down opposite him. The watching gods looked sidelong at one another. This looked interesting. These two were ancient enemies.

‘How about . . .’ she paused, ‘. . . Mighty Empires?’

‘Oh, I *hate* that one,’ said Offler, breaking the sudden silence. ‘Everyone dief at the end.’

‘Yes,’ said Fate, ‘I believe they do.’ He nodded at the Lady, and in much the same voice as professional gamblers say ‘Aces high?’ said, ‘The Fall of Great Houses? Destinies of Nations Hanging by a Thread?’

‘Certainly,’ she said.

‘Oh, *good*.’ Fate waved a hand across the board. The Discworld appeared.

‘And where shall we play?’ he said.

‘The Counterweight Continent,’ said the Lady. ‘Where five noble families have fought one another for centuries.’

‘Really? Which families are these?’ said Io. He had little involvement with individual humans. He generally looked after thunder and lightning, so

from his point of view the only purpose of humanity was to get wet or, in occasional cases, charred.

‘The Honges, the Sunges, the Tanges, the McSweeneys and the Fanges.’

‘Them? I didn’t know they were noble,’ said Io.

‘They’re all very rich and have had millions of people butchered or tortured to death merely for reasons of expediency and pride,’ said the Lady.

The watching gods nodded solemnly. That was certainly noble behaviour. That was exactly what they would have done.

‘*McFweeneyf?*’ said Offler.

‘Very old established family,’ said Fate.

‘Oh.’

‘And they wrestle one another for the Empire,’ said Fate. ‘Very good. Which will you be?’

The Lady looked at the history stretched out in front of them.

‘The Honges are the most powerful. Even as we speak, they have taken yet more cities,’ she said. ‘I see they are fated to win.’

‘So, no doubt, you’ll pick a weaker family.’

Fate waved his hand again. The playing pieces appeared, and started to move around the board as if they had a life of their own, which was of course the case.

‘But,’ he said, ‘we shall play without dice. I don’t trust you with dice. You throw them where I can’t see them. We will play with steel, and tactics, and politics, and war.’

The Lady nodded.

Fate looked across at his opponent.

‘And your move?’ he said.

She smiled. ‘I’ve already made it.’

He looked down. ‘But I don’t see your pieces on the board.’

‘They’re not on the board yet,’ she said.

She opened her hand.

There was something black and yellow on her palm. She blew on it, and it unfolded its wings.

It was a butterfly.

Fate always wins . . .

At least, when people stick to the rules.

According to the philosopher Ly Tin Wheedle, chaos is found in greatest abundance wherever order is being sought. It always defeats order, because it is better organized.

This is the butterfly of the storms.

See the wings, slightly more ragged than those of the common fritillary. In reality, thanks to the fractal nature of the universe, this means that those ragged edges are infinite – in the same way that the edge of any rugged coastline, when measured to the ultimate microscopic level, is infinitely long – or, if not infinite, then at least so close to it that Infinity can be seen on a clear day.

And therefore, if their edges are infinitely long, the wings must logically be infinitely big.

They may *look* about the right size for a butterfly’s

wings, but that's only because human beings have always preferred common sense to logic.

The Quantum Weather Butterfly (*Papilio tempestae*) is an undistinguished yellow colour, although the mandelbrot patterns on the wings are of considerable interest. Its outstanding feature is its ability to create weather.

This presumably began as a survival trait, since even an extremely hungry bird would find itself inconvenienced by a nasty localized tornado.* From there it possibly became a secondary sexual characteristic, like the plumage of birds or the throat sacs of certain frogs. Look at *me*, the male says, flapping his wings lazily in the canopy of the rain forest. I may be an undistinguished yellow colour but in a fortnight's time, a thousand miles away, Freak Gales Cause Road Chaos.

This is the butterfly of the storms.

It flaps its wings . . .

This is the Discworld, which goes through space on the back of a giant turtle.

Most worlds do, at some time in their perception. It's a cosmological view the human brain seems pre-programmed to take.

On veldt and plain, in cloud jungle and silent red desert, in swamp and reed marsh, in fact in any place where something goes 'plop' off a floating log as you approach, variations on the following take place at a

*Usually about six inches across.

crucial early point in the development of the tribal mythology . . .

‘You see dat?’

‘What?’

‘It just went plop off dat log.’

‘Yeah? Well?’

‘I reckon . . . I reckon . . . like, I *reckon* der world is carried on der back of one of dem.’

A moment of silence while this astrophysical hypothesis is considered, and then . . .

‘The whole world?’

‘Of course, when I say one of dem, I mean a *big* one of dem.’

‘It’d have to be, yeah.’

‘Like . . . really big.’

‘S funny, but . . . I see what you mean.’

‘Makes sense, right?’

‘Makes sense, yeah. Thing is . . .’

‘What?’

‘I just hope it never goes plop.’

But this *is* the Discworld, which has not only the turtle but also the four giant elephants on which the wide, slowly turning wheel of the world revolves.*

There is the Circle Sea, approximately halfway between the Hub and the Rim. Around it are those countries which, according to History, constitute

*People wonder how this works, since a terrestrial elephant would be unlikely to bear a revolving load for any length of time without some serious friction burns. But you may as well ask why the axle of a planet doesn’t squeak, or where love goes, or what sound yellow makes.

the civilized world, i.e., a world that can support historians: Ephebe, Tsort, Omnia, Klatch and the sprawling city state of Ankh-Morpork.

This is a story that starts somewhere else, where a man is lying on a raft in a blue lagoon under a sunny sky. His head is resting on his arms. He is happy – in his case, a mental state so rare as to be almost unprecedented. He is whistling an amiable little tune, and dangling his feet in the crystal clear water.

They're pink feet with ten toes that look like little piggy-wiggies.

From the point of view of a shark, skimming over the reef, they look like lunch, dinner and tea.

It was, as always, a matter of protocol. Of discretion. Of careful etiquette. Of, ultimately, alcohol. Or at least the illusion of alcohol.

Lord Vetinari, as supreme ruler of Ankh-Morpork, could in theory summon the Archchancellor of Unseen University to his presence and, indeed, have him executed if he failed to obey.

On the other hand Mustrum Ridcully, as head of the college of wizards, had made it clear in polite but firm ways that *he* could turn *him* into a small amphibian and, indeed, start jumping around the room on a pogo stick.

Alcohol bridged the diplomatic gap nicely. Sometimes Lord Vetinari invited the Archchancellor to the palace for a convivial drink. And of course the Archchancellor went, because it would be *bad manners* not to. And everyone understood the

position, and everyone was on their best behaviour, and thus civil unrest and slime on the carpet were averted.

It was a beautiful afternoon. Lord Vetinari was sitting in the palace gardens, watching the butterflies with an expression of mild annoyance. He found something very slightly offensive about the way they just fluttered around enjoying themselves in an unprofitable way.

He looked up.

‘Ah, Archchancellor,’ he said. ‘So good to see you. Do sit down. I trust you are well?’

‘Yes indeed,’ said Mustrum Ridcully. ‘And yourself? You are in good health?’

‘Never better. The weather, I see, has turned out nice again.’

‘I thought yesterday was particularly fine, certainly.’

‘Tomorrow, I am told, could well be even better.’

‘We could certainly do with a fine spell.’

‘Yes, indeed.’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah . . .’

‘Certainly.’

They watched the butterflies. A butler brought long, cool drinks.

‘What is it they actually do with the flowers?’ said Lord Vetinari.

‘What?’

The Patrician shrugged. ‘Never mind. It was not at all important. But – since you are here,

Archchancellor, having dropped by on your way to something infinitely more important, I am sure, most kind – I wonder if you could tell me: who is the Great Wizard?’

Ridcully considered this.

‘The Dean, possibly,’ he said. ‘He must be all of twenty stone.’

‘Somehow I feel that is not perhaps the right answer,’ said Lord Vetinari. ‘I suspect from context that “great” means superior.’

‘Not the Dean, then,’ said Ridcully.

Lord Vetinari tried to recollect the faculty of Unseen University. The mental picture that emerged was of a small range of foothills in pointy hats.

‘The context does not, I feel, suggest the Dean,’ he said.

‘Er . . . what context would this be?’ said Ridcully. The Patrician picked up his walking stick.

‘Come this way,’ he said. ‘I suppose you had better see for yourself. It is very vexing.’

Ridcully looked around with interest as he followed Lord Vetinari. He did not often have a chance to see the gardens, which had been written up in the ‘How Not To Do It’ section of gardening manuals everywhere.

They had been laid out, and a truer phrase was never used, by the renowned or at least notorious landscape gardener and all round inventor ‘Bloody Stupid’ Johnson, whose absent-mindedness and blindness to elementary mathematics made every step a walk with danger. His genius . . . well, as far as

Ridcully understood it, his genius was exactly the opposite of whatever kind of genius it was that built earthworks that tapped the secret yet beneficent forces of the ley-lines.

No one was quite certain what forces Bloody Stupid's designs tapped, but the chiming sundial frequently exploded, the crazy paving had committed suicide and the cast iron garden furniture was known to have melted on three occasions.

The Patrician led the way through a gate and into something like a dovecot. A creaking wooden stairway led around the inside. A few of Ankh-Morpork's indestructible feral pigeons muttered and sniggered in the shadows.

'What's this?' said Ridcully, as the stairs groaned under him.

The Patrician took a key out of his pocket. 'I have always understood that Mr Johnson originally planned this to be a beehive,' he said. 'However, in the absence of bees ten feet long we have found . . . other uses.'

He unlocked a door to a wide, square room with a big unglazed window in each wall. Each rectangle was surrounded by a wooden arrangement to which was affixed a bell on a spring. It was apparent that anything large enough, entering by one of the windows, would cause the bell to ring.

In the centre of the room, standing on a table, was the largest bird Ridcully had ever seen. It turned and fixed him with a beady yellow eye.

The Patrician reached into a pocket and took out

a jar of anchovies. ‘This one caught us rather unexpectedly,’ he said. ‘It must be almost ten years since a message last arrived. We used to keep a few fresh mackerel on ice.’

‘Isn’t that a Pointless Albatross?’ said Ridcully.

‘Indeed,’ said Lord Vetinari. ‘And a highly trained one. It will return this evening. Six thousand miles on one jar of anchovies and a bottle of fish paste my clerk Drumknott found in the kitchens. Amazing.’

‘I’m sorry?’ said Ridcully. ‘Return to where?’

Lord Vetinari turned to face him.

‘*Not*, let me make it clear, to the Counterweight Continent,’ he said. ‘This is *not* one of those birds the Agatean Empire uses for its message services. It is a well-known fact that we have no contact with that mysterious land. And this bird is *not* the first to arrive here for many years, and it did *not* bring a strange and puzzling message. Do I make myself clear?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’

‘This is not an albatross?’

The Patrician smiled. ‘Ah, I can see you’re getting the hang of it.’

Mustrum Ridcully, though possessed of a large and efficient brain, was not at home with duplicity. He looked at the long vicious beak.

‘Looks like a bloody albatross to me,’ he said. ‘And you just said it was. I said, isn’t that a—’

The Patrician waved a hand irritably. ‘Leaving

aside our ornithological studies,' he said, 'the point is that this bird had, in its message pouch, the following piece of paper—'

'You mean did *not* have the following piece of paper?' said Ridcully, struggling for a grip.

'Ah, yes. Of course, that is what I mean. And this isn't it. Observe.'

He handed a single small sheet to the Arch-chancellor.

'Looks like paintin',' said Ridcully.

'Those are Agatean pictograms,' said the Patrician.

'You mean they're *not* Agatean pictograms?'

'Yes, yes, certainly,' sighed the Patrician, 'I can see you are well alongside the essential business of diplomacy. Now . . . your views, please.'

'Looks like slosh, slosh, slosh, slosh, Wizzard,' said Ridcully.

'And from that you deduce . . . ?'

'He took Art because he wasn't any good at spelling? I mean, who wrote it? Painted it, I mean?'

'I don't know. The Grand Viziers used to send the occasional message, but I gather there has been some turmoil in recent years. It is unsigned, you notice. However, I cannot ignore it.'

'Wizzard, wizzard,' said Ridcully, thoughtfully.

'The pictograms mean "Send Us Instantly The Great",' said Lord Vetinari.

' . . . wizzard . . . ' said Ridcully to himself, tapping the paper.

The Patrician tossed an anchovy to the albatross, which swallowed it greedily.

‘The Empire has a million men under arms,’ he said. ‘Happily, it suits the rulers to pretend that everywhere outside the Empire is a valueless howling waste peopled only by vampires and ghosts. They usually have no interest whatsoever in our affairs. This is fortunate for us, because they are both cunning, rich and powerful. Frankly, I had hoped they had forgotten about us altogether. And now this. I was hoping to be able to dispatch the wretched person and forget about it.’

‘. . . wizzard,’ said Ridcully.

‘Perhaps you would like a holiday?’ said the Patrician, a hint of hope in his voice.

‘Me? No. Can’t abide foreign food,’ said Ridcully quickly. He repeated, half to himself, ‘Wizzard . . .’

‘The word seems to fascinate you,’ said Lord Vetinari.

‘Seen it spelled like that before,’ said Ridcully. ‘Can’t remember where.’

‘I’m sure you *will* remember. And will be in a position to send the Great Wizard, however he is spelled, to the Empire by teatime.’

Ridcully’s jaw dropped.

‘Six thousand miles? By magic? Do you know how hard that is?’

‘I cherish my ignorance on the subject,’ said Lord Vetinari.

‘Besides,’ Ridcully went on, ‘they’re, well . . . foreign over there. I thought they had enough wizards of their own.’

‘I really couldn’t say.’

‘We don’t know why they want this wizard?’

‘No. But I’m sure there is someone you could spare. There seems to be such a lot of you down there.’

‘I mean, it could be for some terrible foreign purpose,’ said Ridcully. For some reason the face of the Dean waddled across his mind, and he brightened up. ‘They might be happy with *a* great wizard, do you think?’ he mused.

‘I leave that entirely to you. But by tonight I would like to be able to send back a message saying that the Great Wizzard is duly on his way. And then we can forget about it.’

‘Of course, it would be very hard to bring the chap back,’ said Ridcully. He thought of the Dean again. ‘Practically impossible,’ he added, in an inappropriately happy way. ‘I expect we’d try for months and months without succeeding. I expect we’d attempt everything with no luck. Damn it.’

‘I can see you are agog to rise to this challenge,’ said the Patrician. ‘Let me not detain you from rushing back to the University and putting measures in hand.’

‘But... “wizzard” ...’ Ridcully murmured. ‘Rings a faint bell, that. Think I’ve seen it before, somewhere.’

The shark didn’t think much. Sharks don’t. Their thought processes can largely be represented by ‘=’. You see it = you eat it.

But, as it arrowed through the waters of the

lagoon, its tiny brain began to receive little packages of selachian existential dread that could only be called doubts.

It knew it was the biggest shark around. All the challengers had fled, or run up against good old '='. Yet its body told it that something was coming up fast behind it.

It turned gracefully, and the first thing it saw was *hundreds* of legs and *thousands* of toes, a whole pork pie factory of piggy-wiggies.

Many things went on at Unseen University and, regrettably, teaching had to be one of them. The faculty had long ago confronted this fact and had perfected various devices for avoiding it. But this was perfectly all right because, to be fair, so had the students.

The system worked quite well and, as happens in such cases, had taken on the status of a tradition. Lectures clearly took place, because they were down there on the timetable in black and white. The fact that no one attended was an irrelevant detail. It was occasionally maintained that this meant that the lectures did not in fact happen at all, but no one ever attended them to find out if this was true. Anyway, it was argued (by the Reader in Woolly Thinking*) that lectures had taken place *in essence*, so that was all right, too.

And therefore education at the University mostly

*Which is like Fuzzy Logic, only less so.

worked by the age-old method of putting a lot of young people in the vicinity of a lot of books and hoping that something would pass from one to the other, while the actual young people put themselves in the vicinity of inns and taverns for exactly the same reason.

It was the middle of the afternoon. The Chair of Indefinite Studies was giving a lecture in room 3B and therefore his presence asleep in front of the fire in the Uncommon Room was a technicality upon which no diplomatic man would comment.

Ridcully kicked him on the shins.

‘Ow!’

‘Sorry to interrupt, Chair,’ said Ridcully, in a very perfunctory way. ‘God help me, I need the Council of Wizards. Where is everybody?’

The Chair of Indefinite Studies rubbed his leg. ‘I know the Lecturer in Recent Runes is giving a lecture in 3B,’* he said. ‘But I don’t know where he is. You know, that really hurt—’

‘Round everyone up. My study. Ten minutes,’ said Ridcully. He was a great believer in this approach. A less direct Archchancellor would have wandered around looking for everyone. His policy was to find one person and make their life difficult until everything happened the way he wanted it to.†

*All *virtual* lectures took place in room 3B, a room not locatable on any floor plan of the University and also, it was considered, infinite in size.

†A policy adopted by almost all managers and several notable gods.

* * *

Nothing in nature had that many feet. True, some things had that many *legs* – damp, wriggling things that live under rocks – but those weren't legs with feet, they were just legs that ended without ceremony.

Something brighter than the shark might have been wary.

But '=' swung treacherously into play and shot it forward.

That was its first mistake.

In these circumstances, one mistake = oblivion.

Ridcully was waiting impatiently when, one by one, the senior wizards filed in from serious lecturing in room 3B. Senior wizards needed a lot of lecturing in order to digest their food.

'Everyone here?' he said. 'Right. Sit down. Listen carefully. Now . . . Vetinari hasn't had an albatross. It hasn't come all the way from the Counterweight Continent, and there isn't a strange message that we've got to obey, apparently. Follow me so far?'

The senior wizards exchanged glances.

'I think we may be a shade unclear on the detail,' said the Dean.

'I was using diplomatic language.'

'Could you, perhaps, try to be a little more indiscreet?'

'We've got to send a wizard to the Counterweight Continent,' said Ridcully. 'And we've got to do it by teatime. Someone's asked for a Great Wizard and

it seems we've got to send one. Only they spell it Wizzard—'

'Oook?'

'Yes, Librarian?'

Unseen University's Librarian, who had been dozing with his head on the table, was suddenly sitting bolt upright. Then he pushed back his chair and, arms waving wildly for balance, left the room at a bow-legged run.

'Probably remembered an overdue book,' said the Dean. He lowered his voice. 'Am I alone in thinking, by the way, that it doesn't add to the status of this University to have an ape on the faculty?'

'Yes,' said Ridcully flatly. 'You are. We've got the only librarian who can rip off your arm with his leg. People respect that. Only the other day the head of the Thieves' Guild was asking me if we could turn *their* librarian into an ape and, besides, he's the only one of you buggers who stays awake more'n an hour a day. Anyway—'

'Well, I find it embarrassing,' said the Dean. 'Also, he's not a proper orang-utan. I've been reading a book. It says a dominant male should have huge cheek pads. Has he got huge cheek pads? I don't think so. And—'

'Shut up, Dean,' said Ridcully, 'or I won't let you go to the Counterweight Continent.'

'I don't see what raising a perfectly valid— What?'

'They're asking for the Great Wizzard,' said Ridcully. 'And I immediately thought of you.' As

the only man I know who can sit on two chairs at the same time, he added silently.

‘The Empire?’ squeaked the Dean. ‘Me? But they hate foreigners!’

‘So do you. You should get on famously.’

‘It’s six thousand miles!’ said the Dean, trying a new tack. ‘Everyone knows you can’t get that far by magic.’

‘Er. As a matter of fact you can, I think,’ said a voice from the other end of the table.

They all looked at Ponder Stibbons, the youngest and most depressingly keen member of the faculty. He was holding a complicated mechanism of sliding wooden bars and peering at the other wizards over the top of it.

‘Er. Shouldn’t be too much of a problem,’ he added. ‘People used to think it was, but I’m pretty sure it’s all a matter of energy absorption and attention to relative velocities.’

The statement was followed with the kind of mystified and suspicious silence that generally succeeded one of his remarks.

‘Relative velocities,’ said Ridcully.

‘Yes, Archchancellor.’ Ponder looked down at his prototype slide rule and waited. He *knew* that Ridcully would feel it necessary to add a comment at this point in order to demonstrate that he’d grasped something.

‘My mother could move like lightning when—’

‘I mean how fast things are going when compared to other things,’ Ponder said quickly, but not

quite quickly enough. ‘We should be able to work it out quite easily. Er. On Hex.’

‘Oh, no,’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes, pushing his chair back. ‘Not that. That’s meddling with things you don’t understand.’

‘Well, we *are* wizards,’ said Ridcully. ‘We’re supposed to meddle with things we don’t understand. If we hung around waitin’ till we understood things we’d never get anything done.’

‘Look, I don’t mind summoning some demon and asking it,’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes. ‘That’s normal. But building some mechanical contrivance to do your thinking for you, that’s . . . against Nature. Besides,’ he added in slightly less foreboding tones, ‘last time you did a big problem on it the wretched thing broke and we had ants all over the place.’

‘We’ve sorted that out,’ said Ponder. ‘We—’

‘I must admit there was a ram’s skull in the middle of it last time I looked,’ said Ridcully.

‘We had to add that to do occult transformations,’ said Ponder, ‘but—’

‘And cogwheels and springs,’ the Archchancellor went on.

‘Well, the ants aren’t very good at differential analysis, so—’

‘And that strange wobbly thing with the cuckoo?’

‘The unreal time clock,’ said Ponder. ‘Yes, we think that’s essential for working out—’

‘Anyway, it’s all quite immaterial, because I certainly have no intention of going anywhere,’ said

the Dean. 'Send a student, if you must. We've got a lot of spare ones.'

'Good so be would you if, duff plum of helping second A,' said the Bursar.

The table fell silent.

'Anyone understand that?' said Ridcully.

The Bursar was not technically insane. He had passed through the rapids of insanity some time previously, and was now sculling around in some peaceful pool on the other side. He was often quite coherent, although not by normal human standards.

'Um, he's going through yesterday again,' said the Senior Wrangler. 'Backwards, this time.'

'We should send the Bursar,' said the Dean firmly.

'Certainly not! You probably can't get dried frog pills there—'

'Oook!'

The Librarian re-entered the study at a bandy-legged run, waving something in the air.

It was red, or at least had at some time been red. It might well once have been a pointy hat, but the point had crumpled and most of the brim was burned away. A word had been embroidered on it in sequins. Many had been burned off, but:

WIZZARD

. . . could just be made out as pale letters on the scorched cloth.

'I *knew* I'd seen it before,' said Ridcully. 'On a shelf in the Library, right?'

‘Oook.’

The Archchancellor inspected the remnant.

‘Wizzard?’ he said. ‘What kind of sad, hopeless person needs to write WIZZARD on their hat?’

A few bubbles broke the surface of the sea, causing the raft to rock a little. After a while, a couple of pieces of shark skin floated up.

Rincewind sighed and put down his fishing rod. The rest of the shark would be dragged ashore later, he knew it. He couldn’t imagine why. It wasn’t as if they were good eating. They tasted like old boots soaked in urine.

He picked up a makeshift oar and set out for the beach.

It wasn’t a bad little island. Storms seemed to pass it by. So did ships. But there were coconuts, and breadfruit, and some sort of wild fig. Even his experiments in alcohol had been quite successful, although he hadn’t been able to walk properly for two days. The lagoon provided prawns and shrimps and oysters and crabs and lobsters, and in the deep green water out beyond the reef big silver fish fought each other for the privilege of biting a piece of bent wire on the end of a bit of string. After six months on the island, in fact, there was only one thing Rincewind lacked. He’d never really thought about it before. Now he thought about it – or, more correctly, *them* – all the time.

It was odd. He’d hardly ever thought about them in Ankh-Morpork, because they were there if ever he wanted them. Now they weren’t, and he *craved*.

His raft bumped the white sand at about the same moment as a large canoe rounded the reef and entered the lagoon.

Ridcully was sitting at his desk now, surrounded by his senior wizards. They were trying to tell him things, despite the known danger of trying to tell Ridcully things, which was that he picked up the facts he liked and let the others take a running jump.

‘So,’ he said, ‘*not* a kind of cheese.’

‘*No*, Archchancellor,’ said the Chair of Indefinite Studies. ‘Rincewind is a kind of wizard.’

‘Was,’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

‘Not a cheese,’ said Ridcully, unwilling to let go of a fact.

‘No.’

‘Sounds a sort of name you’d associate with cheese. I mean, a pound of Mature Rincewind, it rolls off the tongue . . .’

‘*Godsdammit*, Rincewind is not a cheese!’ shouted the Dean, his temper briefly cracking. ‘Rincewind is not a yoghurt or any kind of sour milk derivative! Rincewind is a bloody nuisance! A complete and utter disgrace to wizardry! A fool! A failure! Anyway, he hasn’t been seen here since that . . . unpleasantness with the Sourcerer, years ago.’

‘Really?’ said Ridcully, with a certain kind of nasty politeness. ‘A lot of wizards behaved very badly then, I understand.’

‘Yes indeed,’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes, scowling at the Dean, who bridled.

‘I don’t know anything about that, Runes. I wasn’t Dean at the time.’

‘No, but you were very senior.’

‘Perhaps, but it just so happens that at the time I was visiting my aunt, for your information.’

‘They nearly blew up the whole city!’

‘She lives in Quirm.’

‘*And* Quirm was heavily involved, as I recall.’

‘—*near* Quirm. *Near* Quirm. Not all that near, actually. Quite a way along the coast—’

‘Hah!’

‘Anyway, *you* seem to be very well informed, eh, Runes?’ said the Dean.

‘I— What? – I – was studying hard at the time. Hardly knew what was going on—’

‘Half the University was blown down!’ The Dean remembered himself and added, ‘That is, so I heard. Later. After getting back from my aunt’s.’

‘Yes, but I’ve got a very thick door—’

‘And I happen to *know* the Senior Wrangler was here, because—’

‘—with that heavy green baize stuff you can hardly hear any—’

‘Nap my for time it’s think I.’

‘*Will you all shut up right now this minute!*’

Ridcully glared at his faculty with the clear, innocent glare of someone who was blessed at birth with no imagination whatsoever, and who had genuinely been hundreds of miles away during the University’s recent embarrassing history.

‘Right,’ he said, when they had quietened down.

‘This Rincewind. Bit of an idiot, yes? You talk, Dean. Everyone else will shut up.’

The Dean looked uncertain.

‘Well, er . . . I mean, it makes no sense, Archchancellor. He couldn’t even do proper magic. What good would he be to anyone? Besides . . . where Rincewind went’ – he lowered his voice – ‘*trouble followed behind.*’

Ridcully noticed that the wizards drew a little closer together.

‘Sounds all right to me,’ he said. ‘Best place for trouble, behind. You certainly don’t want it in front.’

‘You don’t understand, Archchancellor,’ said the Dean. ‘It followed behind on hundreds of little legs.’

The Archchancellor’s smile stayed where it was while the rest of his face went solid behind it.

‘You been on the Bursar’s pills, Dean?’

‘I assure you, Mustrum—’

‘Then don’t talk rubbish.’

‘Very *well*, Archchancellor. But you do realize, don’t you, that it might take years to find him?’

‘Er,’ said Ponder, ‘if we can work out his thaumic signature, I think Hex could probably do it in a day . . .’

The Dean glared.

‘That’s not magic!’ he snapped. ‘That’s just . . . engineering!’

Rincewind trudged through the shallows and used a sharp rock to hack the top off a coconut that had

been cooling in a convenient shady rock pool. He put it to his lips.

A shadow fell across him.

It said, 'Er, hello?'

It was possible, if you kept on talking at the Archchancellor for long enough, that some facts might squeeze through.

'So what you're *tellin'* me,' said Ridcully, eventually, 'is that this Rincewind fella has been chased by just about every army in the world, has been bounced around life like a pea on a drum, and probably is the one wizard who knows anything about the Agatean Empire on account of once being friends with,' he glanced at his notes, "'a strange little man in glasses" who came from there and gave him this funny thing with the legs you all keep alluding to. And he can speak the lingo. Am I right so far?'

'Exactly, Archchancellor. Call me an idiot if you like,' said the Dean, 'but why would anyone want him?'

Ridcully looked down at his notes again. '*You've* decided to go, then?' he said.

'No, of course not—'

'What I don't think you've spotted here, Dean,' he said, breaking into a determinedly cheery grin, 'is what I might call the common denominator. Chap stays alive. Talented. Find him. And bring him here. Wherever he is. Poor chap could be facing something *dreadful*.'

* * *

The coconut stayed where it was, but Rincewind's eyes swivelled madly from side to side.

Three figures stepped into his line of vision. They were obviously female. They were *abundantly* female. They were not wearing a great deal of clothing and seemed to be altogether too fresh-from-the-hairdressers for people who have just been paddling a large war canoe, but this is often the case with beautiful Amazonian warriors.

A thin trickle of coconut milk began to dribble off the end of Rincewind's beard.

The leading woman brushed aside her long blonde hair and gave him a bright smile.

'I know this sounds a little unlikely,' she said, 'but I and my sisters here represent a hitherto undiscovered tribe whose menfolk were recently destroyed in a deadly but short-lived and highly specific plague. Now we have been searching these islands for a man to enable us to carry on our line.'

'How much do you think he weighs?'

Rincewind's eyebrows raised. The woman looked down shyly.

'You may be wondering why we are all blonde and white-skinned when everyone else in the islands around here is dark,' she said. 'It just seems to be one of those genetic things.'

'About 120, 125 pounds. Put another pound or two of junk on the heap. Er. Can you detect . . . you know . . . IT?'

'This is all going to go wrong, Mr Stibbons, I just know it.'

'He's only six hundred miles away and we know where we are, and he's on the right half of the Disc. Anyway, I've worked this out on Hex so nothing can possibly go wrong.'

'Yes, but can anyone see . . . that . . . you know . . . with the . . . feet?'

Rincewind's eyebrows waggled. A sort of choking noise came from his throat.

'Can't see . . . it. Will you lot stop huffing on my crystal ball?'

'And, of course, if you were to come with us we could promise you . . . earthly and sensual pleasures such as those of which you may have dreamed . . .'

'All right. On the count of three—'

The coconut dropped away. Rincewind swallowed. There was a hungry, dreamy look in his eyes.

'Can I have them mashed?' he said.

'NOW!'

First there was the sensation of pressure. The world opened up in front of Rincewind and sucked him into it.

Then it stretched out thin and went *twang*.

Cloud rushed past him, blurred by speed. When he dared open his eyes again it was to see, far ahead of him, a tiny black dot.

It got bigger.

It resolved itself into a tight cloud of objects. There were a couple of heavy saucepans, a large brass candlestick, a few bricks, a chair and a large brass blancmange mould in the shape of a castle.

They hit him one after the other, the blancmange mould making a humorous clang as it bounced off his head, and then whirled away behind him.

The next thing ahead of him was an octagon. A chalked one.

He hit it.

Ridcully stared down.

‘A shade less than 125 pounds, I fancy,’ he said. ‘All the same . . . well done, gentlemen.’

The dishevelled scarecrow in the centre of the circle staggered to its feet and beat out one or two small fires in its clothing. Then it looked around blearily and said, ‘Hehehe?’

‘He could be a little disorientated,’ the Arch-chancellor went on. ‘More than six hundred miles in two seconds, after all. Don’t give him a nasty shock.’

‘Like sleepwalkers, you mean?’ said the Senior Wrangler.

‘What do you mean, sleepwalkers?’

‘If you wake sleepwalkers, their legs drop off. So my grandmother used to aver.’

‘And are we *sure* it’s Rincewind?’ said the Dean.

‘Of *course* it’s Rincewind,’ said the Senior Wrangler. ‘We spent *hours* looking for him.’

‘It could be some dangerous occult creature,’ said the Dean stubbornly.

‘With that hat?’

It was a pointy hat. In a way. A kind of cargo-cult pointy hat, made out of split bamboo and coconut

leaves, in the hope of attracting passing wizardliness. Picked out on it, in seashells held in place with grass, was the word WIZZARD.

Its wearer gazed right through the wizards and, as if driven by some sudden recollection of purpose, lurched abruptly out of the octagon and headed towards the door of the hall.

The wizards followed cautiously.

'I'm not sure I believe her. How many times did she see it happen?'

'I don't know. She never said.'

'The Bursar sleepwalks most nights, you know.'

'Does he? Tempting . . .'

Rincewind, if that was the creature's name, headed out into Sator Square.

It was crowded. The air shimmered over the braziers of chestnut sellers and hot potato merchants and echoed with the traditional street cries of Old Ankh-Morpork.*

The figure sidled up to a skinny man in a huge overcoat who was frying something over a little oil-heater in a wide tray around his neck.

The possibly-Rincewind grabbed the edge of the tray.

'Got . . . any . . . potatoes?' it growled.

'Potatoes? No, squire. Got some sausages inna bun.'

*Such as 'Ouch!', 'Aargh!', 'Give me back my money, you scoundrel!' and 'You call these chestnuts? I call them little balls of charcoal, that's what I call them!'

The possibly-Rincewind froze. And then it burst into tears.

‘Sausage inna *buuunnnnnn!*’ it bawled. ‘Dear old sausage inna inna inna buuunnn! Gimme saussaaage inna *buunnnnnn!*’

It grabbed three off the tray and tried to eat them all at once.

‘Good grief!’ said Ridcully.

The figure half ran, half capered away, fragments of bun and pork-product debris cascading from its unkempt beard.

‘I’ve never seen anyone eat three of Throat Dibbler’s sausages inna bun and look so happy,’ said the Senior Wrangler.

‘*I’ve* never seen someone eat three of Throat Dibbler’s sausages inna bun and look so upright,’ said the Dean.

‘I’ve never seen anyone eat anything of Dibbler’s and get away without paying,’ said the Lecturer in Recent Runes.

The figure spun happily around the square, tears streaming down its face. The gyrations took it past an alley mouth, whereupon a smaller figure stepped out behind it and with some difficulty hit it on the back of the head.

The sausage-eater fell to his knees, saying, to the world in general, ‘Ow!’

‘*Nononononono!*’

A rather older man stepped out and removed the cosh from the young man’s hesitant hands, while the victim knelt and moaned.

‘I think you ought to apologize to the poor gentleman,’ said the older man. ‘I don’t know, what’s he going to think? I mean, look at him, he made it so easy for you and what does he get? I mean, what did you think you were doing?’

‘Mumblemumble, Mr Boggis,’ said the boy, looking at his feet.

‘What was that again? Speak up!’

‘Overarm Belter, Mr Boggis.’

‘*That* was an Overarm Belter? You call that an Overarm Belter? That was an Overarm Belter, was it? *This* – excuse me, sir, we’ll just have you up on your feet for a moment, sorry about this – *this* is an Overarm Belter—’

‘Ow!’ shouted the victim and then, to the surprise of all concerned, he added: ‘Hahahaha!’

‘What *you* did was – sorry to impose again, sir, this won’t take a minute – what you did was *this*—’

‘Ow! Hahahaha!’

‘Now, you lot, you saw that? Come on, gather round . . .’

Half a dozen other youths slouched out of the alleyway and formed a ragged audience around Mr Boggis, the luckless student and the victim, who was staggering in a circle and making little ‘oomph oomph’ sounds but still, for some reason, apparently enjoying himself immensely.

‘Now,’ said Mr Boggis, with the air of an old skilled craftsman imparting his professional expertise to an ungrateful posterity, ‘when inconveniencing a customer from your basic alley entrance, the correct

procedure is— Oh, hello, Mr Ridcully, didn't see you there.'

The Archchancellor gave him a friendly nod.

'Don't mind us, Mr Boggis. Thieves' Guild training, is it?'

Boggis rolled his eyes.

'Dunno what they teaches 'em at school,' he said. 'It's jus' nothing but reading and writing all the time. When I was a lad school was where you learned somethin' *useful*. Right – you, Wilkins, stop that giggling, you have a go, excuse us just another moment, sir—'

'Ow!'

'Nononononono! My old granny could do better than that! Now *look*, you steps up trimly, places one hand on his shoulder here, for control . . . go on, you do it . . . and then smartly—'

'Ow!'

'All right, can anyone tell me what he was doing wrong?'

The figure crawled away unnoticed, except by the wizards, while Mr Boggis was demonstrating the finer points of head percussion on Wilkins.

It staggered to his feet and plunged on along the road, still moving like one hypnotized.

'He's crying,' said the Dean.

'Not surprising,' said the Archchancellor. 'But why's he grinnin' at the same time?'

'Curiouser and curiouser,' said the Senior Wrangler.

Bruised and possibly poisoned, the figure headed