



## *Author's Note*

By and large, most Discworld books have stood by themselves, as complete books. It *helps* to have read them in some kind of order, but it's not essential.

This one is different. I can't ignore the history of what has gone before. Granny Weatherwax first turned up in *Equal Rites*. In *Wyrd Sisters* she became the unofficial head of a tiny coven consisting of the easy-going, much-married Nanny Ogg and young Magrat, she of the red nose and unkempt hair and tendency to be soppy about raindrops and roses and whiskers on kittens.

And what took place was a plot not unadjacent to that of a famous play about a Scottish king, which ended with Verence II becoming king of the little hilly, forested country of Lancre.

Technically this shouldn't have happened, since strictly speaking he was not the heir, but to the witches he looked like being the best man for the job and, as they say, all's well that ends well. It also ended with Magrat reaching a very tentative Understanding with Verence . . . very tentative indeed, since both of them were so shy they immediately

forgot whatever it was they were going to say to one another whenever they met, and whenever either of them did manage to say anything the other one misunderstood it and took offence, and both of them spent a lot of time wondering what the other one was thinking. This might be love, or the next best thing.

In *Witches Abroad* the three witches had to travel halfway across the continent to face down the God-mother (who had made Destiny an offer it couldn't refuse).

This is the story of what happened when they came home.

NOW READ ON . . .

NOW READ ON . . .  
N When does it start?

There are very few starts. Oh, some things *seem* to be beginnings.

The curtain goes up, the first pawn moves, the first shot is fired\* – but *that's* not the start. The play, the game, the war is just a little window on a ribbon of events that may extend back thousands of years. The point is, there's always something *before*. It's *always* a case of Now Read On.

Much human ingenuity has gone into finding the ultimate Before.

The current state of knowledge can be summarized thus:

In the beginning, there was nothing, which exploded.

Other theories about the ultimate start involve gods creating the universe out of the ribs, entrails and testicles of their father.\*\* There are quite a lot of these. They are interesting, not for what they tell

\*Probably at the first pawn.

\*\*Gods like a joke as much as anyone else.

you about cosmology, but for what they say about people. Hey, kids, which part do you think they made *your* town out of?

But *this* story starts on the Discworld, which travels through space on the back of four giant elephants which stand on the shell of an enormous turtle and is not made of any bits of anyone's bodies.

But when to begin?

Thousands of years ago? When a great hot cascade of stones came screaming out of the sky, gouged a hole out of Copperhead Mountain and flattened the forest for ten miles around?

The dwarfs dug them up, because they were made of a kind of iron, and dwarfs, contrary to general opinion, love iron more than gold. It's just that although there's more iron than gold it's harder to sing songs about. Dwarfs love iron.

And that's what the stones contained. The love of iron. A love so strong that it drew all iron things to itself. The three dwarfs who found the first of the rocks only got free by struggling out of their chain-mail trousers.

Many worlds are iron, at the core. But the Discworld is as coreless as a pancake.

On the Disc, if you enchant a needle it will point to the Hub, where the magical field is strongest. It's simple.

Elsewhere, on worlds designed with less imagination, the needle turns because of the love of iron.

At the time, the dwarfs and the humans had a very pressing need for the love of iron.

And now, spool time forward for thousands of

years to a point fifty years or more before the ever-moving *now*, to a hillside and a young woman, running. Not running away from something, exactly, or precisely running towards anything, but running just fast enough to keep ahead of a young man although, of course, not so far ahead that he'll give up. Out from the trees and into the rushy valley where, on a slight rise in the ground, are the stones.

They're about man-height, and barely thicker than a fat man.

And somehow they don't seem *worth* it. If there's a stone circle you mustn't go near, the imagination suggests, then there should be big brooding trilithons and ancient altar stones screaming with the dark memory of blood-soaked sacrifice. Not these dull stubby lumps.

It will turn out that she was running a bit too fast this time, and in fact the young man in laughing pursuit will get lost and fed up and will eventually wander off back to the town alone. She does not, at this point, know this, but stands absent-mindedly adjusting the flowers twined in her hair. It's been that kind of afternoon.

She knows about the stones. No-one ever gets *told* about the stones. And no-one is ever told not to go there, because those who refrain from talking about the stones also know how powerful is the attraction of prohibition. It's just that going to the stones is not . . . what we do. Especially if we're nice girls.

But what we have here is not a nice girl, as generally understood. For one thing, she's not beautiful. There's

a certain set to the jaw and arch to the nose that might, with a following wind and in the right light, be called handsome by a good-natured liar. Also, there's a certain glint in her eye generally possessed by those people who have found that they are more intelligent than most people around them but who haven't yet learned that one of the most intelligent things they can do is prevent said people ever finding this out. Along with the nose, this gives her a piercing expression which is extremely disconcerting. It's not a face you can talk to. Open your mouth and you're suddenly the focus of a penetrating stare which declares: what you're about to say had better be interesting.

Now the eight little stones on their little hill are being subjected to the same penetrating gaze.

Hmm.

And then she approaches, cautiously. It's not the caution of a rabbit about to run. It's closer to the way a hunter moves.

She puts her hands on her hips, such as they are.

There's a skylark in the hot summer sky. Apart from that, there's no sound. Down in the little valley, and higher in the hills, grasshoppers are sizzling and bees are buzzing and the grass is alive with micro-noise. But it's always quiet around the stones.

'I'm here,' she says. 'Show me.'

A figure of a dark-haired woman in a red dress appears inside the circle. The circle is wide enough to throw a stone across, but somehow the figure manages to approach from a great distance.

Other people would have run away. But the girl

doesn't, and the woman in the circle is immediately interested.

'So you're real, then.'

'Of course. What is your name, girl?'

'Esmerelda.'

'And what do you want?'

'I don't want anything.'

'Everyone wants something. Otherwise, why are *you* here?'

'I just wanted to find out if you was real.'

'To you, certainly . . . you have *good* sight.'

The girl nods. You could bounce rocks off her pride.

'And now you have learned this,' said the woman in the circle, 'what is it that you really want?'

'Nothing.'

'Really? Last week you went all the way up to the mountains above Copperhead to talk to the trolls. What did you want from them?'

The girl put her head on one side.

'How do you know I did that?'

'It's at the top of your mind, girl. Anyone could see it. Anyone with . . . *good* sight.'

'I shall be able to do that one day,' said the girl smugly.

'Who knows? Possibly. What did you want from the trolls?'

'I . . . wanted to talk to them. D'you know they think time goes backwards? Because you can see the past, they say, and—'

The woman in the circle laughed.

'But they are like the stupid dwarfs! All they are



interested in is pebbles. There is nothing of interest in pebbles.'

The girl gives a kind of one-shoulder uni-shrug, as if indicating that pebbles may be full of quiet interest.

'Why can't you come out from between the stones?'

There was a distinct impression that this was the wrong question to have asked. The woman carefully ignored it.

'I can help you find far more than pebbles,' she said.

'You can't come out of the circle, can you?'

'Let me give you what you want.'

'I can go anywhere, but you're stuck in the circle,' said the girl.

'*Can* you go anywhere?'

'When I am a witch I shall be able to go *anywhere*.'

'But you'll never be a witch.'

'What?'

'They say you won't listen. They say you can't keep your temper. They say you have no discipline.'

The girl tossed her hair. 'Oh, you know that too, do you? Well, they would say that, wouldn't they? But I mean to be a witch whatever they say. You can find things out for yourself. You don't have to listen to a lot of daft old ladies who've never had a life. And, circle lady, I shall be the best witch there has ever been.'

'With my help, I believe you may,' said the

woman in the circle. ‘Your young man is looking for you, I think,’ she added mildly.

Another of those one-shoulder shrugs, indicating that the young man can go on looking all day.

‘I will, will I?’

‘You could be a great witch. You could be anything. Anything you want. Come into the circle. Let me show you.’

The girl takes a few steps forward, and then hesitates. There is something about the woman’s tone. The smile is pleasant and friendly, but there is something in the voice – too desperate, too urgent, too *hungry*.

‘But I’m learning a lot—’

‘Step through the stones *now!*’

The girl hesitates again.

‘How do I know—’

‘Circle time is nearly over! Think of what you can learn! *Now!*’

‘But—’

‘*Step through!*’

But that was a long time ago, in the past.\* And besides, the bitch is . . .

. . . older.

A land of ice . . .

Not winter, because that presumes an autumn and perhaps one day a spring. This is a land of ice, not just a time of ice.

And three figures on horseback, looking down

\*Which is another country.

the snow-covered slope to a ring of eight stones. From this side they look much bigger.

You might watch the figures for some time before you realized what it was about them that was strange – stranger, that is, than their clothing. The hot breath of their horses hung in the freezing air. But the breath of the riders did not.

‘And this time,’ said the figure in the centre, a woman in red, ‘there will be no defeat. The land will welcome us. It must hate humans now.’

‘But there were witches,’ said one of the other riders. ‘I remember the witches.’

‘Once, yes,’ said the woman. ‘But now . . . poor things, *poor* things. Scarce any power in them at all. And suggestible. Pliant minds. I have crept about, my deary. I have crept about o’ nights. I know the witches they have now. Leave the witches to me.’

‘I remember the witches,’ said the third rider insistently. ‘Minds like . . . like metal.’

‘Not any more. I tell you, leave them to me.’

The Queen smiled benevolently at the stone circle.

‘And then you can have them,’ she said. ‘For me, I rather fancy a mortal husband. A *special* mortal. A union of the worlds. To show them that this time we mean to stay.’

‘The King will not like that.’

‘And when has *that* ever mattered?’

‘Never, lady.’

‘The time is right, Lankin. The circles are opening. Soon we can return.’

The second rider leaned on the saddlehorn.

‘And I can hunt again,’ it said. ‘When? *When?*’  
‘Soon,’ said the Queen. ‘Soon.’

It was a dark night, the kind of darkness which is not simply explainable by absence of moon or stars, but the darkness that appears to flow in from somewhere else – so thick and tangible that maybe you could snatch a handful of air and squeeze the night out of it.

It was the kind of darkness which causes sheep to leap fences and dogs to skulk in kennels.

Yet the wind was warm, and not so much strong as loud – it howled around the forests and wailed in chimneys.

On nights like this, normal people would pull the covers over their head, sensing that there were times when the world belonged to something else. In the morning it would be human again; there would be fallen branches, a few tiles off the roof, but *human*. For now . . . better to snuggle down . . .

But there was one man awake.

Jason Ogg, master blacksmith and farrier, pumped the bellows of his forge once or twice for the look of the thing, and sat down on his anvil again. It was always warm in the forge, even with the wind whistling around the eaves.

He could shoe anything, could Jason Ogg. They’d brought him an ant once, for a joke, and he’d sat up all night with a magnifying glass and an anvil made out of the head of a pin. The ant was still around, somewhere – sometimes he could hear it clatter across the floor.

But tonight . . . well, tonight, in some way, he was going to pay the rent. Of course, he owned the forge. It had been passed down for generations. But there was more to a forge than bricks and mortar and iron. He couldn't put a name to it, but it was there. It was the difference between being a master farrier and just someone who bent iron in complicated ways for a living. And it had something to do with iron. And something to do with being allowed to be very good at his job. Some kind of rent.

One day his dad had taken him aside and explained what he had to do, on nights like this.

There'd be times, he said, there'd be times – and he'd know when they were without being told – there'd be times when someone would come with a horse to shoe. Make them welcome. Shoe the horse. Don't let your mind wander. And try not to think about anything except horseshoes.

He'd got quite used to it now.

The wind rose, and somewhere there was the creak of a tree going over.

The latch rattled.

Then there was a knock at the door. Once. Twice.

Jason Ogg picked up his blindfold and put it on. That was important, his dad had said. It saved you getting distracted.

He undid the door.

'Evening, m'lord,' he said.

A WILD NIGHT.

He smelled wet horse as it was led into the forge, hooves clattering on the stones.

'There's tea brewing on the forge and our Dreen

done us some biscuits in the tin with A Present from Ankh-Morpork on it.'

THANK YOU. I TRUST YOU ARE WELL.

'Yes, m'lord. I done the shoes already. Won't hold you up long. I know you're . . . very busy, like.'

He heard the click-click of footsteps cross the floor to the old kitchen chair reserved for customers, or at least for the owners of customers.

Jason had laid the tools and the horseshoes and the nails ready to hand on the bench beside the anvil. He wiped his hands on his apron, picked up a file and set to work. He didn't like cold shoeing, but he'd shod horses ever since he was ten. He could do it by feel. He picked up a rasp and set to work.

And he had to admit it. It was the most obedient horse he'd ever encountered. Pity he'd never actually seen it. It'd be a pretty good horse, a horse like that . . .

His dad had said: don't try to sneak a look at it.

He heard the glug of the teapot and then the gling-glong sound of a spoon being stirred and then the clink as the spoon was laid down.

Never any sound, his dad had said. Except when he walks and talks, you'll never hear him make a sound. No smacking of lips, stuff like that.

No breathing.

Oh, and another thing. When you takes the old shoes off, don't chuck 'em in the corner for to go for melt with the other scrap. Keep 'em separate. Melt 'em separate. Keep a pot special for it, and make the new shoes out of that metal. Whatever else you do, never put that iron on another living thing.

In fact, Jason had saved one set of the old shoes for pitching contests at the various village fairs, and never lost when he used them. He won so often that it made him nervous, and now they spent most of their time hanging on a nail behind the door.

Sometimes the wind rattled the window frame, or made the coals crackle. A series of thumps and a squawk a little way off suggested that the chicken house at the end of the garden had parted company with the ground.

The customer's owner poured himself another cup of tea.

Jason finished one hoof and let it go. Then he held out his hand. The horse shifted its weight and raised the last hoof.

This was a horse in a million. Perhaps more.

Eventually, he had finished. Funny, that. It never seemed to take very long. Jason had no use for a clock, but he had a suspicion that a job which took the best part of an hour was *at the same time* over in a matter of minutes.

'There,' he said. 'Tis done.'

THANK YOU. I MUST SAY THESE ARE VERY GOOD BISCUITS. HOW DO THEY GET THE BITS OF CHOCOLATE IN?

'Dunno, m'lord,' said Jason, staring fixedly at the inside of his blindfold.

I MEAN, THE CHOCOLATE OUGHT TO MELT OUT WHEN THEY'RE BAKED. HOW DO THEY DO IT, DO YOU THINK?

'Tis probably a craft secret,' said Jason, 'I never asks that kind o' question.'

GOOD MAN. VERY WISE. I MUST—

He had to ask, if only so's he'd always know that he had asked.

'M'lord?'

YES, MR OGG?

'I 'as got one question . . .'

YES, MR OGG?

Jason ran his tongue over his lips.

'If I were to . . . take the blindfold off, what'd I see?'

There. It was done now.

There was a clicking sound on the flagstones, and a change in the air movement which suggested to Jason that the speaker was now standing in front of him.

ARE YOU A MAN OF FAITH, MR OGG?

Jason gave this some swift consideration. Lancre was not knee-deep in religions. There were the Nine Day Wonderers, and the Strict Offlians, and there were various altars to small gods of one sort or another, tucked away in distant clearings. He'd never really felt the need, just like the dwarfs. Iron was iron and fire was fire – start getting metaphysical and you were scraping your thumb on the bottom of your hammer.

WHAT DO YOU REALLY HAVE *FAITH* IN, RIGHT AT THIS MOMENT?

He's inches away, Jason thought. I could reach out and touch . . .

There was a smell. It wasn't unpleasant. It was hardly anything at all. It was the smell of air in old forgotten rooms. If centuries could smell, then old ones would smell like that.



MR OGG?

Jason swallowed.

‘Well, m’lord,’ he said, ‘right now . . . I really *believe* in this blindfold.’

GOOD MAN. GOOD MAN. AND NOW . . . I MUST BE GOING.

Jason heard the latch lift. There was a thud as the doors scraped back, driven by the wind, and then there was the sound of hooves on the cobbles again.

YOUR WORK, AS ALWAYS, IS SUPERB.

‘Thank you, m’lord.’

I SPEAK AS ONE CRAFTSMAN TO ANOTHER.

‘Thank you, m’lord.’

WE WILL MEET AGAIN.

‘Yes, m’lord.’

WHEN NEXT MY HORSE NEEDS SHOEING.

‘Yes, m’lord.’

Jason closed the door and bolted it, although there was probably no point, when you thought about it.

But that was the bargain – you shod anything they brought to you, *anything*, and the payment was that you *could* shoe anything. There had always been a smith in Lancre, and everyone knew the smith in Lancre was a very powerful smith indeed.

It was an ancient bargain, and it had something to do with iron.

The wind slackened. Now it was a whisper around the horizons, as the sun rose.

This was the octarine grass country. Good growing country, especially for corn.

And here was a field of it, waving gently between the hedges. Not a big field. Not a remarkable one, really. It was just a field with corn in it, except of course during the winter, when there were just pigeons and crows in it.

The wind dropped.

The corn still waved. They weren't the normal swells of the wind. They spread out from the centre of the field like ripples from a dropped stone.

The air sizzled and was filled with an angry buzzing.

Then, in the centre of the field, rustling as it bent, the young corn lay down.

In a circle.

And in the sky the bees swarmed and teemed, buzzing angrily.

It was a few weeks to midsummer. The kingdom of Lancre dozed in the heat, which shimmered on the forests and the fields.

Three dots appeared in the sky.

After a while, they became identifiable as three female figures on broomsticks, flying in a manner reminiscent of the famous three plaster flying ducks.

Observe them closely.

The first one – let us call her the leader – flies sitting bolt upright, in defiance of air resistance, and seems to be winning. She has features that would generally be described as striking, or even handsome, but she couldn't be called beautiful, at least by anyone who didn't want their nose to grow by three feet.

The second is dumpy and bandy-legged with a

face like an apple that's been left for too long and an expression of near-terminal good nature. She is playing a banjo and, until a better word comes to mind, singing. It is a song about a hedgehog.

Unlike the broomstick belonging to the first figure, which is more or less unburdened except for a sack or two, this one is overladen with things like fluffy purple toy donkeys, corkscrews in the shape of small boys urinating, bottles of wine in straw baskets and other international cultural items. Nestling among them is the smelliest and most evil-minded cat in the world, currently asleep.

The third, and definitely the last, broomstick rider is also the youngest. Unlike the other two, who dress like ravens, she wears bright, cheerful clothes which don't suit her now and probably didn't even suit her ten years ago. She travels with an air of vague good-natured hopefulness. There are flowers in her hair but they're wilting slightly, just like her.

The three witches pass over the borders of Lancre, the kingdom, and very shortly afterwards over the town of Lancre itself. They begin their descent over the moorlands beyond, eventually touching down near a standing stone which happens to mark the boundaries of their territories.

They're back.

And everything's all right again.

For about five minutes.

There was a badger in the privy.

Granny Weatherwax poked it with her broom until it got the message and lumbered off. Then she

took down the key which hung on the nail beside the copy of last year's *Almanack And Booke Of Dayes*, and walked back up the path to her cottage.

A whole winter away! There'd be a lot to do. Go and pick the goats up from Mr Skindle, get the spiders out of the chimney, fish the frogs out of the well, and generally get back into the business of minding everyone's business for them because there'd be no telling what business people'd get up to without a witch around . . .

But she could afford an hour with her feet up first.

There was a robin's nest in the kettle, too. The birds had got in through a broken window pane. She carefully took the kettle outside and wedged it over the door so's to be safe from weasels, and boiled up some water in a saucepan.

Then she wound up the clock. Witches didn't have much use for clocks, but she kept it for the tick . . . well, mainly for the tick. It made a place seem lived in. It had belonged to her mother, who'd wound it up every day.

It hadn't come as a surprise to her when her mother died, firstly because Esme Weatherwax was a witch and witches have an insight into the future and secondly because she was already pretty experienced in medicine and knew the signs. So she'd had a chance to prepare herself, and hadn't cried at all until the day afterwards, when the clock stopped right in the middle of the funeral lunch. She'd dropped a tray of ham rolls and then had to go and sit by herself in the privy for a while, so that no one would see.

Time to think about that sort of thing, now. Time to think about the past . . .

The clock ticked. The water boiled. Granny Weatherwax fished a bag of tea from the meagre luggage on her broomstick, and swilled out the teapot.

The fire settled down. The clamminess of a room un-lived-in for months was gradually dispelled. The shadows lengthened.

Time to think about the past. Witches have an insight into the future. The business she'd have to mind soon enough would be her own . . .

And then she looked out of the window.

Nanny Ogg balanced carefully on a stool and ran a finger along the top of the dresser. Then she inspected the finger. It was spotless.

'Hummph,' she said. 'Seems to be moderately clean.'

The daughters-in-law shivered with relief.

'So far,' Nanny added.

The three young women drew together in their mute terror.

Her relationship with her daughters-in-law was the only stain on Nanny Ogg's otherwise amiable character. Sons-in-law were different – she could remember their names, even their birthdays, and they joined the family like overgrown chicks creeping under the wings of a broody bantam. And grandchildren were treasures, every one. But any woman incautious enough to marry an Ogg son might as well resign herself to a life of mental torture and nameless domestic servitude.

Nanny Ogg never did any housework herself, but she was the cause of housework in other people.

She got down from the stool and beamed at them.

‘You kept the place quite nice,’ she said. ‘Well done.’

Her smile faded.

‘Under the bed in the spare room,’ she said. ‘Haven’t looked under there yet, have I?’

Inquisitors would have thrown Nanny Ogg out of their ranks for being too nasty.

She turned as more members of the family filed into the room, and her face contorted into the misty grin with which she always greeted grandchildren.

Jason Ogg pushed his youngest son forward. This was Pewsey Ogg, aged four, who was holding something in his hands.

‘What you got there, then?’ said Nanny. ‘You can show your Nan.’

Pewsey held it up.

‘My word, you *have* been a—’

It happened right there, right then, right in front of her.

And then there was Magrat.

She’d been away eight months.

Now panic was setting in. Technically she was engaged to the king, Verence II. Well . . . not exactly *engaged*, as such. There was, she was almost sure, a general unspoken understanding that engagement was a definite option. Admittedly she’d kept on

telling him that she was a free spirit and definitely didn't want to be tied down in any way, and of course this was the case, more or less, but . . . but . . .

But . . . well . . . eight months. Anything could have happened in eight months. She should have come straight back from Genua, but the other two had been enjoying themselves.

She wiped the dust off her mirror and examined herself critically. Not a lot to work with, really. No matter what she did with her hair it took about three minutes for it to tangle itself up again, like a garden hosepipe left in a shed.\* She'd bought herself a new green dress, but what had looked exciting and attractive on the plaster model looked like a furled umbrella on a Magrat.

Whereas Verence had been here reigning for eight months. Of course, Lancre was so small that you couldn't lie down without a passport, but he was a genuine king and genuine kings tended to attract young women looking for career opportunities in the queening department.

She did her best with the dress and dragged a vengeful brush through her hair.

Then she went up to the castle.

Guard duty at Lancre castle was the province of anyone who didn't have much of anything else to do at the moment. On duty today was Nanny Ogg's youngest son Shawn, in ill-fitting chain-mail. He

\*Which, no matter how carefully coiled, will always uncoil overnight and tie the lawnmower to the bicycles.

brought himself to what he probably thought was attention as Magrat pattered past, and then dropped his pike and hurried after her.

‘Can you slow down a bit, please, miss?’

He overtook her, ran up the steps to the door, picked up a trumpet that was hanging from a nail by a bit of string, and blew an amateurish fanfare. Then he looked panicky again.

‘Wait right there, miss, right there . . . count to five and then knock,’ he said, and darted through the door, slamming it behind him.

Magrat waited, and then tried the knocker.

After a few seconds Shawn opened the door. He was red in the face and had a powdered wig on back to front.

‘Yeeeuuss?’ he drawled, and tried to look like a butler.

‘You’ve still got your helmet on under the wig,’ said Magrat helpfully.

Shawn deflated. His eyes swivelled upwards.

‘Everyone at the haymaking?’ said Magrat.

Shawn raised his wig, removed the helmet, and put the wig back. Then he distractedly put the helmet back on top of the wig.

‘Yes, and Mr Spriggins the butler is in bed with his trouble again,’ said Shawn. ‘There’s only me, miss. *And* I’ve got to get the dinner started before I’m off ’ome because Mrs Scorbic is poorly.’

‘You don’t have to show me in,’ said Magrat. ‘I do know the way.’

‘No, it’s got to be done proper,’ said Shawn. ‘You just keep movin’ slow and leave it to me.’



He ran on ahead and flung open some double doors—

‘Meeyiss Magraaaaat Garrrrli-ick!’

—and scurried towards the next set of doors.

By the third pair he was out of breath, but he did his best.

‘Meeyiss . . . Magraaaa . . . Garrrrli-ick . . . His Majesteeeyaa the Ki— Oh, bugger, *now* where’s he gone?’

The throne room was empty.

They eventually found Verence II, King of Lancre, in the stable yard.

Some people are born to kingship. Some achieve kingship, or at least Arch-Generalissimo-Father-of-His-Countryship. But Verence had kingship thrust upon him. He hadn’t been raised to it, and had only arrived at the throne by way of one of those complicated mix-ups of fraternity and parentage that are all too common in royal families.

He had in fact been raised to be a Fool, a man whose job it was to caper and tell jokes and have custard poured down his trousers. This had naturally given him a grave and solemn approach to life and a grim determination never to laugh at anything ever again, especially in the presence of custard.

In the role of ruler, then, he had started with the advantage of ignorance. No one had ever told him how to be a king, so he had to find out for himself. He’d sent off for books on the subject. Verence was a great believer in the usefulness of knowledge derived from books.

He had formed the unusual opinion that the job

of a king is to make the kingdom a better place for everyone to live in.

Now he was inspecting a complicated piece of equipment. It had a pair of shafts for a horse, and the rest of it looked like a cartful of windmills.

He glanced up, and smiled in an absent-minded way.

‘Oh, hello,’ he said. ‘All back safe then?’

‘Um—’ Magrat began.

‘It’s a patent crop rotator,’ said Verence. He tapped the machine. ‘Just arrived from Ankh-Morpork. The wave of the future, you know. I’ve really been getting interested in agricultural improvement and soil efficiency. We’ll really have to get cracking on this new three-field system.’

Magrat was caught off balance.

‘But I think we’ve only *got* three fields,’ she said, ‘and there isn’t much soil in—’

‘It’s very important to maintain the correct relationship between grains, legumes and roots,’ said Verence, raising his voice. ‘Also, I’m seriously considering clover. I should be interested to know what you think!’

‘Um—’

‘And I think we should do something about the pigs!’ Verence shouted. ‘The Lancre Stripe! Is very hardy! But we could really bring the poundage up! By careful cross-breeding! With, say, the Sto Saddleback! I’m having a boar sent up – Shawn, will you *stop* blowing that *damn* trumpet!’

Shawn lowered the trumpet.

‘I’m doin’ a fanfare, your majesty.’

‘Yes, yes, but you’re not supposed to go *on*. A few brief notes are a sufficiency.’ Verence sniffed. ‘And something’s burning.’

‘Oh, blow . . . it’s the carrots . . .’ Shawn hurried away.

‘That’s better,’ said Verence. ‘Where were we?’

‘Pigs, I think,’ said Magrat, ‘but I really came to—’

‘It all comes down to the soil,’ said Verence. ‘Get the soil right, and everything else follows. Incidentally, I’m arranging the marriage for Midsummer Day. I thought you’d like that.’

Magrat’s mouth formed an O.

‘We could move it, of course, but not too much because of the harvest,’ said Verence.

‘I’ve had some invitations sent out already, to the more obvious guests,’ said Verence.

‘And I thought it might be a nice idea to have some sort of fair or festival beforehand,’ said Verence.

‘I asked Boggi’s in Ankh-Morpork to send up their best dressmaker with a selection of materials and one of the maids is about your size and I think you’ll be very pleased with the result,’ said Verence.

‘And Mr Ironfoundersson, the dwarf, came down the mountain *especially* to make the crown,’ said Verence.

‘And my brother and Mr Vittoller’s Men can’t come because they’re touring Klatch, apparently, but Hwel the playsmith has written a special play for the wedding entertainment. Something even rustics can’t muck up, he says,’ said Verence.

‘So that’s all settled then?’ said Verence.

Finally, Magrat’s voice returned from some distant apogee, slightly hoarse.

‘Aren’t you supposed to *ask* me?’ she demanded.

‘What? Um. No, actually,’ said Verence. ‘No. Kings don’t ask. I looked it up. I’m the king, you see, and you are, no offence meant, a subject. I don’t have to ask.’

Magrat’s mouth opened for the scream of rage but, at last, her brain jolted into operation.

Yes, it said, of *course* you can yell at him and sweep away. And he’ll probably come after you.

Very probably.

Um.

Maybe not *that* probably. Because he might be a nice little man with gentle runny eyes but he’s also a king and he’s been looking things up. But very probably quite probably.

But . . .

Do you want to bet the rest of your life? Isn’t this what you wanted anyway? Isn’t it what you came here hoping for? Really?

Verence was looking at her with some concern.

‘Is it the witching?’ he said. ‘You don’t have to give that up entirely, of course. I’ve got a great respect for witches. And you can be a witch queen, although I think that means you have to wear rather revealing clothes and keep cats and give people poisoned apples. I read that somewhere. The witching’s a problem, is it?’

‘No,’ Magrat mumbled, ‘it’s not that . . . um . . . did you mention a crown?’

'You've got to have a crown,' said Verence. 'Queens do. I looked it up.'

Her brain cut in again. Queen Magrat, it suggested. It held up the mirror of the imagination . . .

'You're not upset, are you?' said Verence.

'What? Oh. No. Me? No.'

'Good. That's all sorted out, then. I think that just about covers everything, don't you?'

'Um—'

Verence rubbed his hands together.

'We're doing some marvellous things with legumes,' he said, as if he hadn't just completely rearranged Magrat's life without consulting her. 'Beans, peas . . . you know. Nitrogen fixers. And marl and lime, of course. Scientific husbandry. Come and look at this.'

He bounced away enthusiastically.

'You know,' he said, 'we could really make this kingdom *work*.'

Magrat trailed after him.

So that was all settled, then. Not a proposal, just a statement. She hadn't been quite sure how the moment would be, even in the darkest hours of the night, but she'd had an idea that roses and sunsets and bluebirds might just possibly be involved. Clover had not figured largely. Beans and other leguminous nitrogen fixers were not a central feature.

On the other hand Magrat was, at the core, far more practical than most people believed who saw no further than her vague smile and collection of more than three hundred pieces of occult jewellery, none of which worked.

So this was how you got married to a king. It all got arranged for you. There were no white horses. The past flipped straight into the future, carrying you with it.

Perhaps that was normal. Kings were busy people. Magrat's experience of marrying them was limited.

'Where are we going?' she said.

'The old rose garden.'

Ah . . . well, this was more like it.

Except that there weren't any roses. The walled garden had been stripped of its walks and arbours and was now waist high in green stalks with white flowers. Bees were furiously at work in the blossoms.

'Beans?' said Magrat.

'Yes! A specimen crop. I keep bringing the farmers up here to show them,' said Verence. He sighed. 'They nod and mumble and smile but I'm afraid they just go off and do the same old things.'

'I know,' said Magrat. 'The same thing happened when I tried to give people lessons in natural childbirth.'

Verence raised an eyebrow. Even to him the thought of Magrat giving lessons in childbirth to the fecund and teak-faced women of Lancre was slightly unreal.

'Really? How had they been having babies before?' he said.

'Oh, any old way,' said Magrat.

They looked at the little buzzing bean field.

'Of course, when you're queen, you won't need to—' Verence began.

It happened softly, almost like a kiss, as light as the touch of sunlight.

There was no wind, only a sudden heavy calmness that made the ears pop.

The stems bent and broke, and lay down in a circle. The bees roared, and fled.

The three witches arrived at the standing stone together.

They didn't even bother with explanations. There were some things you *know*.

'In the middle of my bloody herbs!' said Granny Weatherwax.

'On the palace garden!' said Magrat.

'Poor little mite! And he was holding it up to show me, too!' said Nanny Ogg.

Granny Weatherwax paused.

'What're you talking about, Gytha Ogg?' she said.

'Our Pewsey was growing mustard-and-cress on a flannel for his Nan,' said Nanny Ogg, patiently. 'He shows it to me, right enough, and just as I bends down and – splat! Crop circle!'

'This,' said Granny Weatherwax, 'is serious. It's been years since they've been as bad as this. We all know what it means, don't we. What we've got—'

'Um,' said Magrat.

'—to do now is—'

'Excuse me,' said Magrat. There were some things you had to be told.

'Yes?'

'I don't know what it means,' said Magrat. 'I mean, old Goodie Whemper—'

‘—maysherestinpeace—’ the older witches chorused.

‘—told me once that the circles were dangerous, but she never said anything about *why*.’

The older witches shared a glance.

‘Never told you about the Dancers?’ said Granny Weatherwax.

‘Never told you about the Long Man?’ said Nanny Ogg

‘What Dancers? You mean those old stones up on the moor?’

‘All you need to know *right now*,’ said Granny Weatherwax, ‘is that we’ve got to put a stop to Them.’

‘*What Them?*’

Granny radiated innocence . . .

‘The circles, of course,’ she said.

‘Oh, no,’ said Magrat. ‘I can tell by the way you said it. You said Them as though it was some sort of curse. It wasn’t just a them, it was a them with a capital The.’

The old witches looked awkward again.

‘And who’s the Long Man?’ said Magrat.

‘We do not,’ said Granny, ‘ever talk about the Long Man.’

‘No harm in telling her about the Dancers, at any rate,’ mumbled Nanny Ogg.

‘Yes, but . . . you know . . . I mean . . . she’s Magrat,’ said Granny.

‘What’s that meant to mean?’ Magrat demanded.

‘You probably won’t feel the same way about Them, is what I am saying,’ said Granny.