

THERE WAS A MAN AND he had eight sons. Apart from that, he was nothing more than a comma on the page of History. It's sad, but that's all you can say about some people.

But the eighth son grew up and married and had eight sons, and because there is only one suitable profession for the eighth son of an eighth son, he became a wizard. And he became wise and powerful, or at any rate powerful, and wore a pointed hat and there it would have ended . . .

Should have ended . . .

But against the Lore of Magic and certainly against all reason – except the reasons of the heart, which are warm and messy and, well, *unreasonable* – he fled the halls of magic and fell in love and got married, not necessarily in that order.

And he had seven sons, each one from the cradle at least as powerful as any wizard in the world.

And then he had an eighth son . . .

A wizard squared. A source of magic.

A sourcerer.

Summer thunder rolled around the sandy cliffs. Far below, the sea sucked on the shingle as noisily as an old man with one tooth who had been given a

gobstopper. A few seagulls hung lazily in the updraughts, waiting for something to happen.

And the father of wizards sat among the thrift and rattling sea grasses at the edge of the cliff, cradling the child in his arms, staring out to sea.

There was a roil of black cloud out there, heading inland, and the light it pushed before it had that deep syrup quality it gets before a really serious thunderstorm.

He turned at a sudden silence behind him, and looked up through tear-reddened eyes at a tall hooded figure in a black robe.

IPSCORE THE RED? it said. The voice was as hollow as a cave, as dense as a neutron star.

Ipslore grinned the terrible grin of the suddenly mad, and held up the child for Death's inspection.

'My son,' he said. 'I shall call him Coin.'

A NAME AS GOOD AS ANY OTHER, said Death politely. His empty sockets stared down at a small round face wrapped in sleep. Despite rumour, Death isn't cruel – merely terribly, terribly good at his job.

'You took his mother,' said Ipslore. It was a flat statement, without apparent rancour. In the valley behind the cliffs Ipslore's homestead was a smoking ruin, the rising wind already spreading the fragile ashes across the hissing dunes.

IT WAS A HEART ATTACK AT THE END, said Death. THERE ARE WORSE WAYS TO DIE. TAKE IT FROM ME.

Ipslore looked out to sea. 'All my magic could not save her,' he said.

THERE ARE PLACES WHERE EVEN MAGIC MAY NOT GO.
'And now you have come for the child?'

NO. THE CHILD HAS HIS OWN DESTINY. I HAVE COME FOR YOU.

‘Ah.’ The wizard stood up, carefully laid the sleeping baby down on the thin grass, and picked up a long staff that had been lying there. It was made of a black metal, with a meshwork of silver and gold carvings that gave it a rich and sinister tastelessness; the metal was octiron, intrinsically magical.

‘I made this, you know,’ he said. ‘They all said you couldn’t make a staff out of metal, they said they should only be of wood, but they were wrong. I put a lot of myself into it. I shall give it to him.’

He ran his hands lovingly along the staff, which gave off a faint tone.

He repeated, almost to himself, ‘I put a lot of myself into it.’

IT IS A GOOD STAFF, said Death.

Ipslore held it in the air and looked down at his eighth son, who gave a gurgle.

‘She wanted a daughter,’ he said.

Death shrugged. Ipslore gave him a look compounded of bewilderment and rage.

‘What *is* he?’

THE EIGHTH SON OF AN EIGHTH SON OF AN EIGHTH SON, said Death, unhelpfully. The wind whipped at his robe, driving the black clouds overhead.

‘What does that make him?’

A SOURCERER, AS YOU ARE WELL AWARE.

Thunder rolled, on cue.

‘What is his destiny?’ shouted Ipslore, above the rising gale.

Death shrugged again. He was good at it.

SOURCERERS MAKE THEIR OWN DESTINY. THEY TOUCH THE EARTH LIGHTLY.

Ipslore leaned on the staff, drumming on it with his fingers, apparently lost in the maze of his own thoughts. His left eyebrow twitched.

‘No,’ he said, softly, ‘no. I will make his destiny for him.’

I ADVISE AGAINST IT.

‘Be quiet! And listen when I tell you that they drove me out, with their books and their rituals and their Lore! They called themselves wizards, and they had less magic in their whole fat bodies than I have in my little finger! Banished! *Me!* For showing that I was human! And what would humans be without love?’

RARE, said Death. NEVERTHELESS—

‘Listen! They drove us here, to the ends of the world, and that killed her! They tried to take my staff away!’ Ipslore was screaming above the noise of the wind.

‘Well, I still have some power left,’ he snarled. ‘And I say that my son shall go to Unseen University and wear the Archchancellor’s hat and the wizards of the world shall bow to him! And he shall show them what lies in their deepest hearts. Their craven, greedy hearts. He’ll show the *world* its true destiny, and there will be no magic greater than his.’

No. And the strange thing about the quiet way Death spoke the word was this: it was louder than the roaring of the storm. It jerked Ipslore back to momentary sanity.

Ipslore rocked back and forth uncertainly. ‘What?’ he said.

I SAID NO. NOTHING IS FINAL. NOTHING IS ABSOLUTE. EXCEPT ME, OF COURSE. SUCH TINKERING WITH DESTINY COULD MEAN THE DOWNFALL OF THE WORLD. THERE MUST BE A CHANCE, HOWEVER SMALL. THE LAWYERS OF FATE DEMAND A LOOPHOLE IN EVERY PROPHECY.

Ipslore stared at Death's implacable face.

'I must give them a chance?'

YES.

Tap, tap, tap went Ipslore's fingers on the metal of the staff.

'Then they shall have their chance,' he said, 'when hell freezes over.'

NO. I AM NOT ALLOWED TO ENLIGHTEN YOU, EVEN BY DEFAULT, ABOUT CURRENT TEMPERATURES IN THE NEXT WORLD.

'Then,' Ipslore hesitated, 'then they shall have their chance when my son throws his staff away.'

NO WIZARD WOULD EVER THROW HIS STAFF AWAY, said Death. THE BOND IS TOO GREAT.

'Yet it is possible, you must agree.'

Death appeared to consider this. *Must* was not a word he was accustomed to hearing, but he seemed to concede the point.

AGREED, he said.

'Is that a small enough chance for you?'

SUFFICIENTLY MOLECULAR.

Ipslore relaxed a little. In a voice that was nearly normal, he said: 'I don't regret it, you know. I would do it all again. Children are our hope for the future.'

THERE IS NO HOPE FOR THE FUTURE, said Death.

'What does it contain, then?'

ME.

‘Besides you I mean!’

Death gave him a puzzled look. I’M SORRY?

The storm reached its howling peak overhead. A seagull went past backwards.

‘I meant,’ said Ipslore, bitterly, ‘what is there in this world that makes living worth while?’

Death thought about it.

CATS, he said eventually, CATS ARE NICE.

‘Curse you!’

MANY HAVE, said Death, evenly.

‘How much longer do I have?’

Death pulled a large hourglass from the secret recesses of his robe. The two bulbs were enclosed in bars of black and gold, and the sand was nearly all in the bottom one.

OH, ABOUT NINE SECONDS.

Ipslore pulled himself up to his full and still impressive height, and extended the gleaming metal staff towards the child. A hand like a little pink crab reached out from the blanket and grasped it.

‘Then let me be the first and last wizard in the history of the world to pass on his staff to his eighth son,’ he said slowly and sonorously. ‘And I charge him to use it to—’

I SHOULD HURRY UP, IF I WERE YOU . . .

‘—the full,’ said Ipslore, ‘becoming the mightiest—’

The lightning screamed from the heart of the cloud, hit Ipslore on the point of his hat, crackled down his arm, flashed along the staff and struck the child.

The wizard vanished in a wisp of smoke. The staff glowed green, then white, then merely red-hot. The child smiled in his sleep.

When the thunder had died away Death reached down slowly and picked up the boy, who opened his eyes.

They glowed golden, from the inside. For the first time in what, for want of any better word, must be called his life, Death found himself looking at a stare that he found hard to return. The eyes seemed to be focused on a point several inches inside his skull.

I did not mean for that to happen, said the voice of Ipslore, from out of the empty air. *Is he harmed?*

NO. Death tore his gaze away from that fresh, knowing smile. HE CONTAINED THE POWER. HE IS A SOURCERER: NO DOUBT HE WILL SURVIVE MUCH WORSE. AND NOW — YOU WILL COME WITH ME.

No.

YES. YOU ARE DEAD, YOU SEE. Death looked around for Ipslore's wavering shade, and failed to find it. WHERE ARE YOU?

In the staff.

Death leaned on his scythe and sighed.

FOOLISH. HOW EASILY COULD I CUT YOU LOOSE.

Not without destroying the staff, said the voice of Ipslore, and it seemed to Death that there was a new, thick, exultant quality to it. *And now the child has accepted the staff you cannot destroy it without destroying him. And that you cannot do without upsetting destiny. My last magic. Rather neat, I feel.*

Death prodded the staff. It crackled, and sparks crawled obscenely along its length.

Strangely enough, he wasn't particularly angry. Anger is an emotion, and for emotion you need glands, and Death didn't have much truck with glands

and needed a good run at it to get angry. But he was mildly annoyed. He sighed again. People were always trying this sort of thing. On the other hand, it was quite interesting to watch, and at least this was a bit more original than the usual symbolic chess game, which Death always dreaded because he could never remember how the knight was supposed to move.

YOU'RE ONLY PUTTING OFF THE INEVITABLE, he said.

That's what being alive is all about.

BUT WHAT PRECISELY DO YOU EXPECT TO GAIN?

I shall be by my son's side. I shall teach him, even though he won't know it. I shall guide his understanding. And, when he is ready, I shall guide his steps.

TELL ME, said Death, HOW DID YOU GUIDE THE STEPS OF YOUR OTHER SONS?

I drove them out. They dared to argue with me, they would not listen to what I could teach them. But this one will.

IS THIS WISE?

The staff was silent. Beside it, the boy chuckled at the sound of a voice only he could hear.

There was no analogy for the way in which Great A'Tuin the world turtle moved against the galactic night. When you are ten thousand miles long, your shell pocked with meteor craters and frosted with comet ice, there is absolutely nothing you can realistically be like except yourself.

So Great A'Tuin swam slowly through the interstellar deeps like the largest turtle there has ever been, carrying on its carapace the four huge elephants that

bore on their backs the vast, glittering waterfall-fringed circle of the Discworld, which exists either because of some impossible blip on the curve of probability or because the gods enjoy a joke as much as anyone.

More than most people, in fact.

Near the shores of the Circle Sea, in the ancient, sprawling city of Ankh-Morpork, on a velvet cushion on a ledge high up in the Unseen University, was a hat.

It was a good hat. It was a *magnificent* hat.

It was pointy, of course, with a wide floppy brim, but after disposing of these basic details the designer had really got down to business. There was gold lace on there, and pearls, and bands of purest vermine, and sparkling Ankhstones*, and some incredibly tasteless sequins, and – a dead giveaway, of course – a circle of octarines.

Since they weren't in a strong magical field at the moment they weren't glowing, and looked like rather inferior diamonds.

Spring had come to Ankh-Morpork. It wasn't immediately apparent, but there were signs that were obvious to the cognoscenti. For example, the scum on the river Ankh, that great wide slow waterway that served the double city as reservoir, sewer and frequent morgue, had turned a particularly iridescent green. The city's drunken rooftops sprouted mattresses and bolsters as the winter bedding was put out to air in the

*Like rhinestones, but different river. When it comes to glittering objects, wizards have all the taste and self-control of a deranged magpie.

weak sunshine, and in the depths of musty cellars the beams twisted and groaned when their dry sap responded to the ancient call of root and forest. Birds nested among the gutters and eaves of Unseen University, although it was noticeable that however great the pressure on the nesting sites they never, ever, made nests in the invitingly open mouths of the gargoyles that lined the rooftops, much to the gargoyles' disappointment.

A kind of spring had even come to the ancient University itself. Tonight would be the Eve of Small Gods, and a new Archchancellor would be elected.

Well, not exactly *elected*, because wizards didn't have any truck with all this undignified voting business, and it was well known that Archchancellors were selected by the will of the gods, and this year it was a pretty good bet that the gods would see their way clear to selecting old Virrid Wayzygoose, who was a decent old boy and had been patiently waiting his turn for years.

The Archchancellor of Unseen University was the official leader of all the wizards on the Disc. Once upon a time it had meant that he would be the most powerful in the handling of magic, but times were a lot quieter now and, to be honest, senior wizards tended to look upon actual magic as a bit beneath them. They tended to prefer administration, which was safer and nearly as much fun, and also big dinners.

And so the long afternoon wore on. The hat squatted on its faded cushion in Wayzygoose's chambers, while he sat in his tub in front of the fire

and soaped his beard. Other wizards dozed in their studies, or took a gentle stroll around the gardens in order to work up an appetite for the evening's feast; about a dozen steps was usually considered quite sufficient.

In the Great Hall, under the carved or painted stares of two hundred earlier Archchancellors, the butler's staff set out the long tables and benches. In the vaulted maze of the kitchens – well, the imagination should need no assistance. It should include lots of grease and heat and shouting, vats of caviar, whole roast oxen, strings of sausages like paperchains strung from wall to wall, the head chef himself at work in one of the cold rooms putting the finishing touches to a model of the University carved for some inexplicable reason out of butter. He kept doing this every time there was a feast – butter swans, butter buildings, whole rancid greasy yellow menageries – and he enjoyed it so much no one had the heart to tell him to stop.

In his own labyrinth of cellars the butler prowled among his casks, decanting and tasting.

The air of expectation had even spread to the ravens who inhabited the Tower of Art, eight hundred feet high and reputedly the oldest building in the world. Its crumbling stones supported thriving miniature forests high above the city's rooftops. Entire species of beetles and small mammals had evolved up there and, since people rarely climbed it these days owing to the tower's distressing tendency to sway in the breeze, the ravens had it all to themselves. Now they were flying around it in a state of

some agitation, like gnats before a thunderstorm. If anyone below is going to take any notice of them it might be a good idea.

Something horrible was about to happen.

You can tell, can't you?

You're not the only one.

'What's got into them?' shouted Rincewind above the din.

The Librarian ducked as a leather-bound grimoire shot out from its shelf and jerked to a mid-air halt on the end of its chain. Then he dived, rolled and landed on a copy of *Maleficio's Discouverie of Demonologie* that was industriously bashing at its lectern.

'Oook!' he said.

Rincewind put his shoulder against a trembling bookshelf and forced its rustling volumes back into place with his knees. The noise was terrible.

Books of magic have a sort of life of their own. Some have altogether too much; for example, the first edition of the *Necrotelicomicon* has to be kept between iron plates, the *True Arte of Levitatione* has spent the last one hundred and fifty years up in the rafters, and *Ge Forge's Compenydyum of Sex Majick* is kept in a vat of ice in a room all by itself and there's a strict rule that it can only be read by wizards who are over eighty and, if possible, dead.

But even the everyday grimoires and incunabula on the main shelves were as restless and nervy as the inmates of a chicken-house with something rank scabbling under the door. From their shut covers came a muffled scratching, like claws.

‘What did you say?’ screamed Rincewind.

‘Oook!’*

‘Right!’

Rincewind, as honorary assistant librarian, hadn’t progressed much beyond basic indexing and banana-fetching, and he had to admire the way the Librarian ambled among the quivering shelves, here running a black-leather hand over a trembling binding, here comforting a frightened thesaurus with a few soothing simian murmurings.

After a while the Library began to settle down, and Rincewind felt his shoulder muscles relax.

It was a fragile peace, though. Here and there a page rustled. From distant shelves came the ominous creak of a spine. After its initial panic the Library was now as alert and jittery as a long-tailed cat in a rocking-chair factory.

The Librarian ambled back down the aisles. He had a face that only a lorry tyre could love and it was permanently locked in a faint smile, but Rincewind could tell by the way the ape crept into his cubbyhole under the desk and hid his head under a blanket that he was deeply worried.

*A magical accident in the Library, which as has already been indicated is not a place for your average rubber-stamp-and-Dewey-decimal employment, had some time ago turned the Librarian into an orang-utan. He had since resisted all efforts to turn him back. He liked the handy long arms, the prehensile toes and the right to scratch himself in public, but most of all he liked the way all the big questions of existence had suddenly resolved themselves into a vague interest in where his next banana was coming from. It wasn’t that he was unaware of the despair and nobility of the human condition. It was just that as far as he was concerned you could stuff it.

Examine Rincewind, as he peers around the sullen shelves. There are eight levels of wizardry on the Disc; after sixteen years Rincewind has failed to achieve even level one. In fact it is the considered opinion of some of his tutors that he is incapable even of achieving level zero, which most normal people are born at; to put it another way, it has been suggested that when Rincewind dies the average occult ability of the human race will actually go up by a fraction.

He is tall and thin and has the scrubby kind of beard that looks like the kind of beard worn by people who weren't cut out by nature to be beard wearers. He is dressed in a dark red robe that has seen better days, possibly better decades. But you can tell he's a wizard, because he's got a pointy hat with a floppy brim. It's got the word 'Wizzard' embroidered on it in big silver letters, by someone whose needlework is even worse than their spelling. There's a star on top. It has lost most of its sequins.

Clamping his hat on his head, Rincewind pushed his way through the Library's ancient doors and stepped out into the golden light of the afternoon. It was calm and quiet, broken only by the hysterical croaking of the ravens as they circled the Tower of Art.

Rincewind watched them for a while. The University's ravens were a tough bunch of birds. It took a lot to unsettle them.

On the other hand—

—the sky was pale blue tinted with gold, with a few high wisps of fluffy cloud glowing pinkly in the lengthening light. The ancient chestnut trees in the quadrangle were in full bloom. From an open

window came the sound of a student wizard practising the violin, rather badly. It was not what you would call ominous.

Rincewind leaned against the warm stonework. And screamed.

The building was shuddering. He could feel it come up through his hand and along his arms, a faint rhythmic sensation at just the right frequency to suggest uncontrollable terror. The stones themselves were frightened.

He looked down in horror at a faint clinking noise. An ornamental drain cover fell backwards and one of the University's rats poked its whiskers out. It gave Rincewind a desperate look as it scrambled up and fled past him, followed by dozens of its tribe. Some of them were wearing clothes but that wasn't unusual for the University, where the high level of background magic does strange things to genes.

As he stared around him Rincewind could see other streams of grey bodies leaving the University by every drainpipe and flowing towards the outside wall. The ivy by his ear rustled and a group of rats made a series of death-defying leaps on to his shoulders and slid down his robe. They otherwise ignored him totally but, again, this wasn't particularly unusual. Most creatures ignored Rincewind.

He turned and fled into the University, skirts flapping around his knees, until he reached the bursar's study. He hammered on the door, which creaked open.

'Ah. It's, um, Rincewind, isn't it?' said the bursar, without much enthusiasm. 'What's the matter?'

‘We’re sinking!’

The bursar stared at him for a few moments. His name was Spelter. He was tall and wiry and looked as though he had been a horse in previous lives and had only just avoided it in this one. He always gave people the impression that he was looking at them with his teeth.

‘Sinking?’

‘Yes. All the rats are leaving!’

The bursar gave him another stare.

‘Come inside, Rincewind,’ he said, kindly. Rincewind followed him into the low, dark room and across to the window. It looked out over the gardens to the river, oozing peacefully towards the sea.

‘You haven’t been, um, overdoing it?’ said the bursar.

‘Overdoing what?’ said Rincewind, guiltily.

‘This is a building, you see,’ said the bursar. Like most wizards when faced with a puzzle, he started to roll himself a cigarette. ‘It’s not a ship. There are ways of telling, you know. Absence of porpoises frolicking around the bows, a shortage of bilges, that sort of thing. The chances of foundering are remote. Otherwise, um, we’d have to man the sheds and row for shore. Um?’

‘But the rats—’

‘Grain ship in harbour, I expect. Some, um, spring-time ritual.’

‘I’m sure I felt the building shaking, too,’ said Rincewind, a shade uncertainly. Here in this quiet room, with the fire crackling in the grate, it didn’t seem quite so real.

'A passing tremor. Great A'Tuin hiccuping, um, possibly. A grip on yourself, um, is what you should get. You haven't been drinking, have you?'

'No!'

'Um. Would you like to?'

Spelter padded over to a dark oak cabinet and pulled out a couple of glasses, which he filled from the water jug.

'I tend to be best at sherry this time of day,' he said, and spread his hands over the glasses. 'Say, um, the word – sweet or dry?'

'Um, no,' said Rincewind. 'Perhaps you're right. I think I'll go and have a bit of rest.'

'Good idea.'

Rincewind wandered down the chilly stone passages. Occasionally he'd touch the wall and appear to be listening, and then he'd shake his head.

As he crossed the quadrangle again he saw a herd of mice swarm over a balcony and scamper towards the river. The ground they were running over seemed to be moving, too. When Rincewind looked closer he could see that it was because it was covered with ants.

These weren't ordinary ants. Centuries of magical leakage into the walls of the University had done strange things to them. Some of them were pulling very small carts, some of them were riding beetles, but all of them were leaving the University as quickly as possible. The grass on the lawn rippled as they passed.

He looked up as an elderly striped mattress was extruded from an upper window and flopped down on to the flagstones below. After a pause, apparently to catch its breath, it rose a little from the ground.

Then it started to float purposefully across the lawn and bore down on Rincewind, who managed to jump out of its way just in time. He heard a high-pitched chittering and caught a glimpse of thousands of determined little legs under the bulging fabric before it hurtled onward. Even the bedbugs were on the move, and in case they didn't find such comfortable quarters elsewhere they were leaving nothing to chance. One of them waved at him and squeaked a greeting.

Rincewind backed away until something touched the back of his legs and froze his spine. It turned out to be a stone seat. He watched it for some time. It didn't seem in any hurry to run away. He sat down gratefully.

There's probably a natural explanation, he thought. Or a perfectly normal unnatural one, anyway.

A gritty noise made him look across the lawn.

There was no natural explanation of this. With incredible slowness, easing themselves down parapets and drainpipes in total silence except for the occasional scrape of stone on stone, the gargoyles were leaving the roof.

It's a shame that Rincewind had never seen poor quality stop-motion photography, because then he would have known exactly how to describe what he was seeing. The creatures didn't exactly move, but they managed to progress in a series of high speed tableaux, and lurched past him in a spindly procession of beaks, manes, wings, claws and pigeon droppings.

'What's happening?' he squeaked.

A thing with a goblin's face, harpy's body and hen's legs turned its head in a series of little jerks and spoke in a voice like the peristalsis of mountains (although the deep resonant effect was rather spoiled because, of course, it couldn't close its mouth).

It said: 'A Ourcerer is umming! Eee orr ife!'

Rincewind said 'Pardon?' But the thing had gone past and was lurching awkwardly across the ancient lawn.*

So Rincewind sat and stared blankly at nothing much for fully ten seconds before giving a little scream and running as fast as he could.

He didn't stop until he'd reached his own room in the Library building. It wasn't much of a room, being mainly used to store old furniture, but it was home.

Against one shadowy wall was a wardrobe. It wasn't one of your modern wardrobes, fit only for nervous adulterers to jump into when the husband returned home early, but an ancient oak affair, dark as night, in whose dusty depths coat-hangers lurked and bred; herds of flaking shoes roamed its floor. It was quite possible that it was a secret doorway to fabulous worlds, but no one had ever tried to find out because of the distressing smell of mothballs.

And on top of the wardrobe, wrapped in scraps of yellowing paper and old dust sheets, was a large brass-bound chest. It went by the name of the Luggage. Why

*The furrow left by the fleeing gargoyles caused the University's head gardener to bite through his rake and led to the famous quotation: 'How do you get a lawn like this? You mows it and you rolls it for five hundred years and then a bunch of bastards walks across it.'

it consented to be owned by Rincewind was something only the Luggage knew, and it wasn't telling, but probably no other item in the entire chronicle of travel accessories had quite such a history of mystery and grievous bodily harm. It had been described as half suitcase, half homicidal maniac. It had many unusual qualities which may or may not become apparent soon, but currently there was only one that set it apart from any other brass-bound chest. It was snoring, with a sound like someone very slowly sawing a log.

The Luggage might be magical. It might be terrible. But in its enigmatic soul it was kin to every other piece of luggage throughout the multiverse, and preferred to spend its winters hibernating on top of a wardrobe.

Rincewind hit it with a broom until the sawing stopped, filled his pockets with odds and ends from the banana crate he used as a dressing table, and made for the door. He couldn't help noticing that his mattress had gone but that didn't matter because he was pretty clear that he was never going to sleep on a mattress again, ever.

The Luggage landed on the floor with a solid thump. After a few seconds, and with extreme care, it rose up on hundreds of little pink legs. It tilted backwards and forwards a bit, stretching every leg, and then it opened its lid and yawned.

'Are you coming or not?'

The lid shut with a snap. The Luggage manoeuvred its feet into a complicated shuffle until it was facing the doorway, and headed after its master.

The Library was still in a state of tension, with the

occasional clinking* of a chain or muffled crackle of a page. Rincewind reached under the desk and grabbed the Librarian who was still hunched under his blanket.

‘Come on, I said!’

‘Oook.’

‘I’ll buy you a drink,’ said Rincewind desperately.

The Librarian unfolded like a four-legged spider. ‘Oook?’

Rincewind half-dragged the ape from his nest and out through the door. He didn’t head for the main gates but for an otherwise undistinguished area of wall where a few loose stones had, for two thousand years, offered students an unobtrusive way in after lights-out. Then he stopped so suddenly that the Librarian cannoned into him and the Luggage ran into both of them.

‘Oook!’

‘Oh, gods,’ he said. ‘Look at that!’

‘Oook?’

There was a shiny black tide flowing out of a grating near the kitchens. Early evening starlight glinted off millions of little black backs.

But it wasn’t the sight of the cockroaches that was so upsetting. It was the fact that they were marching in step, a hundred abreast. Of course, like all the informal inhabitants of the University the roaches were a little unusual, but there was something particularly

*In most old libraries the books are chained to the shelves to prevent them being damaged by people. In the Library of Unseen University, of course, it’s more or less the other way about.

unpleasant about the sound of billions of very small feet hitting the stones in perfect time.

Rincewind stepped gingerly over the marching column. The Librarian jumped it.

The Luggage, of course, followed them with a noise like someone tapdancing over a bag of crisps.

And so, forcing the Luggage to go all the way around to the gates anyway, because otherwise it'd only batter a hole in the wall, Rincewind quit the University with all the other insects and small frightened rodents and decided that if a few quiet beers wouldn't allow him to see things in a different light, then a few more probably would. It was certainly worth a try.

That was why he wasn't present in the Great Hall for dinner. It would turn out to be the most important missed meal of his life.

Further along the University wall there was a faint clink as a grapnel caught the spikes that lined its top. A moment later a slim, black-clad figure dropped lightly into the University grounds and ran soundlessly towards the Great Hall, where it was soon lost in the shadows.

No one would have noticed it anyway. On the other side of the campus the Sourcerer was walking towards the gates of the University. Where his feet touched the cobbles blue sparks crackled and evaporated the early evening dew.

It was *very* hot. The big fireplace at the turnwise end of the Great Hall was practically incandescent.

Wizards feel the cold easily, so the sheer blast of heat from the roaring logs was melting candles twenty feet away and bubbling the varnish on the long tables. The air over the feast was blue with tobacco smoke, which writhed into curious shapes as it was bent by random drifts of magic. On the centre table the complete carcass of a whole roast pig looked extremely annoyed at the fact that someone had killed it without waiting for it to finish its apple, and the model University made of butter was sinking gently into a pool of grease.

There was a lot of beer about. Here and there red-faced wizards were happily singing ancient drinking songs which involved a lot of knee-slapping and cries of 'Ho!' The only possible excuse for this sort of thing is that wizards are celibate, and have to find their amusement where they can.

Another reason for the general conviviality was the fact that no one was trying to kill anyone else. This is an unusual state of affairs in magical circles.

The higher levels of wizardry are a perilous place. Every wizard is trying to dislodge the wizards above him while stamping on the fingers of those below; to say that wizards are healthily competitive by nature is like saying that piranhas are naturally a little peckish. However, ever since the great Mage Wars left whole areas of the Disc uninhabitable*, wizards have been forbidden to settle their differences by magical means, because it caused a lot of trouble for the population at

* At least, by anyone who wanted to wake up the same shape, or even the same species, as they went to bed.

large and in any case it was often difficult to tell which of the resultant patches of smoking fat had been the winner. So they traditionally resort to knives, subtle poisons, scorpions in shoes and hilarious booby traps involving razor-sharp pendulums.

On Small Gods' Eve, however, it was considered extremely bad form to kill a brother wizard, and wizards felt able to let their hair down without fear of being strangled with it.

The Archchancellor's chair was empty. Wayzygoose was dining alone in his study, as befits a man chosen by the gods after their serious discussion with sensible senior wizards earlier in the day. Despite his eighty years, he was feeling a little bit nervous and hardly touched his second chicken.

In a few minutes he would have to make a speech. Wayzygoose had, in his younger days, sought power in strange places; he'd wrestled with demons in blazing octagrams, stared into dimensions that men were not meant to wot of, and even outfaced the Unseen University grants committee, but nothing in the eight circles of nothingness was quite so bad as a couple of hundred expectant faces staring up at him through the cigar smoke.

The heralds would soon be coming by to collect him. He sighed and pushed his pudding away untasted, crossed the room, stood in front of the big mirror, and fumbled in the pocket of the robe for his notes.

After a while he managed to get them in some sort of order and cleared his throat.

'My brothers in art,' he began, 'I cannot tell you