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A beetle began to crawl laboriously up Rincewind's leg.

The wizard wondered how much damage a half solid dragon could do. Would it only half-kill him? He decided not to stay and find out.

Moving on heels, fingertips and shoulder muscles, Rincewind wriggled sideways until foliage masked the oak and its occupants. Then he scrambled to his feet and hared off between the trees.

He had no destination in mind, no provisions, and no horse. But while he still had legs he could run. Ferns and brambles whipped at him, but he didn't feel them at all.

When he had put about a mile between him and the dragon he stopped and collapsed against a tree, which then spoke to him.

"Psst," it said.

Dreading what he might see, Rincewind let his gaze slide upwards. It tried to fasten on innocuous bits of bark and leaf, but the scourge of curiosity forced it to leave them behind. Finally it fixed on a black sword thrust straight through the branch above Rincewind's head.

"Don't just stand there," said the sword (in a voice like the sound of a finger dragged around the rim of a large empty wine glass). "Pull me out."

"What?" said Rincewind, his chest still heaving.

"Pull me out," repeated Kring. "It's either that or I'll be spending the next million years in a coal measure. Did I ever tell you about the time I was thrown into a lake up in th-"

"What happened to the others?" said Rincewind, still clutching the tree desperately.

"Oh, the dragons got them. And the horses. And that box thing. Me too, except that Hrun dropped me. What a stroke of luck for you."

"Well-" began Rincewind. Kring ignored him.

"I expect you'll be in a hurry to rescue them," it added.

"Yes, well-"

"So if you'll just pull me out we can be off."

Rincewind squinted up at the sword. A rescue attempt had hitherto been so far at the back of his mind that, if some advanced

speculations on the nature and shape of the many-dimensional multiplexity of the universe were correct, it was right at the front; but a magic sword was a valuable item...

And it would be a long trek back home, wherever that was...

He scrambled up the tree and inched along the branch. Kring was buried very firmly in the wood. He gripped the pommel and heaved until lights flashed in front of his eyes.

"Try again," said the sword encouragingly.

Rincewind groaned and gritted his teeth.

"Could be worse," said Kring. "This could have been an anvil."

"Yaargh," hissed the wizard, fearing for the future of his groin.

"I have had a multidimensional existence," said the sword.

"Ungh?"

"I have had many names, you know."

"Amazing," said Rincewind. He swayed backwards as the blade slid free. It felt strangely light. back on the ground again he decided to break the news. "I really don't think rescue is a good idea," he said. "I think we'd better head back to a city, you know. To raise a search party."

"The dragons headed hubwards," said Kring.

"However, I suggest we start with the one in the trees over there."

"Sorry, but-

"You can't leave them to their fate!"

Rincewind looked surprised. "I can't?" he said.

"No. You can't. Look, I'll be frank. I've worked with better material than you, but it's either that or-have you ever spent a million years in a coal measure?"

"Look, I-

"So if you don't stop arguing I'll chop your head off."

Rincewind saw his own arm snap up until the shimmering blade was humming a mere inch from his throat. He tried to force his fingers to let go. They wouldn't.

"I don't know how to be a hero!" he shouted.

"I propose to teach you."

Bronze Psepha rumbled deep in his throat.

K!sdra the dragonrider leaned forward and squinted across the

clearing. "I see him," he said. He swung himself down easily from branch to branch and landed lightly on the tussocky grass, drawing his sword. He took a long look at the approaching man, who was obviously not keen on leaving the shelter of the trees. He was armed, but the dragonrider observed with some interest the strange way in which the man held the sword in front of him at arm's length, as though embarrassed to be seen in its company.

K!sdra hefted his own sword and grinned expansively as the wizard shuffled towards him. Then he leapt.

Later, he remembered only two things about the fight. He recalled the uncanny way in which the wizard's sword curved up and caught his own blade with a shock that jerked it out of his grip. The other thing - and it was this, he averred, that led to his downfall - was that the wizard was covering his eyes with one hand.

K!sdra jumped back to avoid another thrust and fell full length on the turf. With a snarl Psepha unfolded his great wings and launched himself from his tree.

A moment later the wizard was standing over him, shouting, "Tell it that if it singes me I'll let the sword go. I will. I'll let it go! So tell it!"

The tip of the black sword was hovering over K!sdra's throat, What was odd was that the wizard was obviously struggling with it, and it appeared to be singing to itself.

"Psepha!" K!sdra shouted.

The dragon roared in defiance, but pulled out of the dive that would have removed Rincewind's head, and flapped ponderously back to the tree.

"Talk!" screamed Rincewind.

K!sdra squinted at him up the length of the sword.

"What would you like me to say?" he asked.

"What?"

"I said what would you like me to say?"

"Where are my friends? The barbarian and the little man is what I mean."

"I expect they have been taken back to the Wyrnberg."

Rincewind tugged desperately against the surge of the sword, trying to shut his mind to Kring's bloodthirsty humming.

"The Wyrnberg. There is only one. It is Dragonhome."

"And I suppose you were waiting to take me there, eh?"

K!sdra gulped involuntarily as the tip of the sword pricked a bead of blood from his adam's apple.

"Don't want people to know you've got dragons here, eh?" snarled Rincewind.

The dragonrider forgot himself enough to nod, and came within a quarter-inch of cutting his own throat.

Rincewind looked around desperately, and realized that this was something he was really going to have to go through with.

"Right then," he said as diffidently as he could manage. "You'd better take me to this Wyrnberg of yours, hadn't you?"

"I was supposed to take you in dead," muttered K!sdra sullenly.

Rincewind looked down at him and grinned slowly. It was a wide, manic and utterly humourless rictus that was the sort of grin that is normally accompanied by small riverside birds wandering in and out picking scraps out of the teeth.

"Alive will do," said Rincewind. "If we're talking about anyone being dead, remember whose sword is in which hand."

"If you kill me, nothing will prevent Psepha killing you," shouted the prone dragonrider.

"So what I'll do is, I'll chop bits off," agreed the wizard. He tried the effect of the grin again.

"Oh, all right," said K!sdra sulkily. "Do you think I've got an imagination?"

He wriggled out from under the sword and waved at the dragon, which took wing again and glided in towards them. Rincewind swallowed.

"You mean we've got to go on that?" he said. K!sdra looked at him scornfully, the point of Kring still aimed at his neck.

"How else would anyone get to the Wyrnberg?"

"I don't know," said Rincewind. "How else?"

"I mean, there is no other way. It's flying or nothing."

Rincewind looked again at the dragon before him. He could quite clearly see through it to the crushed grass on which it lay but, when he gingerly touched a scale that was a mere golden sheen on thin air, it felt solid enough. Either dragons should exist completely or fail to exist at all, he felt. A dragon only half-existing was worse than the extremes.

"I didn't know dragons could be seen through," he said.

K!sdra shrugged. "Didn't you?" he said.

He swung himself astride the dragon awkwardly because Rincewind was hanging on to his belt. Once uncomfortably aboard the wizard moved his white-knuckle grip to a convenient piece of harness and prodded K!sdra lightly with the sword.

"Have you ever flown before?" said the dragonrider, without looking round.

"Not as such, no."

"Would you like something to suck?"

Rincewind gazed at the back of the man's head, then dropped to the bag of red and yellow sweets that was being proffered.

"Is it necessary?" he asked.

"It is traditional," said K!sdra. "Please yourself."

The dragon stood up, lumbered heavily across the meadow, and fluttered into the air.

Rincewind occasionally had nightmares about teetering on some intangible but enormously high place, and seeing a blue-distanced, cloud-punctuated landscape reeling away below him (this usually woke him up with his ankles sweating; he would have been even more worried had he known that the nightmare was not, as he thought, just the usual discworld vertigo. It was a backwards memory of an event in his future so terrifying that it had generated harmonics of fear all the way along his lifeline).

This was not that event, but it was good practise for it. Psepha clawed its way into the air with a series of vertebrae-shattering bounds. At the top of its last leap the wide wings unfolded with a snap and spread out with a thump which shook the trees. Then the ground was gone, dropping away in a series of gentle jerks. Psepha was suddenly rising gracefully, the afternoon sunlight gleaming off wings that were still no more than a golden film. Rincewind made the mistake of glancing downwards, and found himself looking through the dragon to the treetops below. Far below. His stomach shrank at the sight.

Closing his eyes wasn't much better, because it gave his imagination full rein. He compromised by gazing fixedly into the middle distance, where moorland and forest drifted by and could be contemplated almost casually.

Wind Snatched at him. K!sdra half turned and shouted into his ear. "Behold the Wyrmborg!"

Rincewind turned his head slowly, taking care to keep Kring resting lightly on the dragon's back. His streaming eyes saw the impossibly inverted mountain rearing out of the deep forested valley like a trumpet in a tub of nose. Even at this distance he could make out the faint octarine glow in the air that must be indicating a stable magic aura of at least - he gasped - several milliPrime? At least!

"Oh no," he said.

Even looking at the ground was better than that. He averted his eyes quickly, and realized that he could now no longer see the ground through the dragon. As they glided around in a wide circle towards the Wyrmborg it was definitely taking on a more solid form, as if the creature's body was filling with a gold mist. By the time the Wyrmborg was in front of them, swinging wildly across the sky, the dragon was as real as a rock.

Rincewind thought he could see a faint streak in the air, as if something from the mountain had reached out and touched the beast. He got the strange feeling that the dragon was being made more genuine.

Ahead of it the Wyrmborg turned from a distant toy to several billion tons of rock poised between heaven and earth. He could see small fields, woods and a lake up there, and from the lake a river spilled out and over the edge...

He made the mistake of following the thread of foaming water with his eyes, and jerked himself back just in time.

The flared plateau of the upturned mountain drifted towards them. The dragon didn't even slow. As the mountain loomed over Rincewind like the biggest fly-swatter in the universe he saw a cave mouth. Psepha skimmed towards it, shoulder muscles pumping.

The wizard screamed as the dark spread and enfolded him. There was a brief vision of rock flashing past, blurred by speed. Then the dragon was in the open again.

It was inside a cave, but bigger than any cave had a right to be. The dragon, gliding across its vast emptiness, was a mere gilded fly in a banqueting hall.

There were other dragons - gold, silver, black, white - flapping across the sun-shafted air on errands of their own or perched on

outcrops of rock. High in the domed roof of the cavern scores of others hung from huge rings, their wings wrapped bat-like around their bodies. There were men up there, too. Rincewind swallowed hard when he saw them, because they were walking on that broad expanse of ceiling like flies.

Then he made out the thousands of tiny rings that studded the ceiling. A number of inverted men were watching Psepha's flight with interest. Rincewind swallowed again. For the life of him he couldn't think of what to do next.

"Well?" he asked, in a whisper. "Any suggestions?"

"Obviously you attack," said Kring scornfully.

"Why didn't I think of that?" said Rincewind

"Could it be because they all have crossbows?"

"You're a defeatist."

"Defeatist? That's because I'm going to be defeated!"

"You're your own worst enemy, Rincewind," said the sword.

Rincewind looked up at grinning men.

"Bet?" he said wearily.

Before Kring could reply Psepha reared in midair and alighted on one of the large rings, which rocked alarmingly.

"Would you like to die now, or surrender first?" asked K!sdra calmly.

Men were converging on the ring from all directions, walking with a swaying motion as their hooked boots engaged the ceiling rings. There were more boots on a rack that hung in a small platform built on the side of the perch-ring. Before Rincewind could stop him the dragonrider had leapt from the creature's back to land on the platform, where he stood grinning at the wizard's discomfiture.

There was a small expressive sound made by a number of crossbows being cocked. Rincewind looked up at a number of impassive, upside down faces. The dragonfolk's taste in clothing didn't run to anything much more imaginative than a leather harness, studded with bronze ornaments. Knives and sword sheaths were worn inverted. Those who were not wearing helmets let their hair flow freely, so that it moved like seaweed in the ventilation breeze near the roof. There were several women among them. The inversion did strange things to their anatomy. Rincewind stared.

"Surrender," said K!sdra again.

Rincewind opened his mouth to do so. Kring hummed a warning, and agonising waves of pain shot up his arm. "Never," he squeaked. The pain stopped.

"Of course he won't!" boomed an expansive voice behind him. "He's a hero, isn't he?"

Rincewind turned and looked into a pair of hairy nostrils. They belonged to a heavily built young man, hanging nonchalantly from the ceiling by his boots.

"What is your name, hero?" said the man. "so that we know who you were."

Agony shot up Rincewind's arm. "I-I'm Rincewind of Ankh," he managed to gasp.

"And I am Lio!rt Dragonlord," said the hanging man, pronouncing the word with the harsh click in the back of the throat that Rincewind could only think of as a kind of integral punctuation. "You have come to challenge me in mortal combat."

"Well, no, I didn't-"

"You are mistaken. K!sdra, help our hero into a pair of hookboots. I am sure he is anxious to get started."

"No, look, I just came here to find my friends. I'm sure there's no-" Rincewind began, as the dragonrider guided him firmly onto the platform, pushed him onto a seat, and proceeded to strap hookboots to his feet.

"Hurry up, K!sdra. We mustn't keep our hero from his destiny," said Lio!rt.

"Look, I expect my friends are happy enough here, so if you could just, you know, set me down somewhere

"You will see your friends soon enough," said the dragonlord airily. "If you are religious, I mean. None who enter the Wyrnberg ever leave again. Except metaphorically, of course. Show him how to reach the rings, K!sdra."

"Look what you've got me into!" Rincewind hissed.

Kring vibrated in his hand. "Remember that I am a magic sword," it hummed.

"How can I forget?"

"Climb the ladder and grab a ring," said the dragonrider, "then bring your feet up until the hooks catch." He helped the protesting wizard climb until he was hanging upside down, robe tucked into his

britches, Kring dangling from one hand. At this angle the dragonfolk looked reasonably bearable but the dragons themselves, hanging from their perches, loomed over the scene like immense gargoyles. Their eyes glowed with interest.

"Attention, please," said Lio!rt. A dragonrider handed him a long shape, wrapped in red silk.

"We fight to the death," he said. "Yours."

"And I suppose I earn my freedom if I win?" said Rincewind, without much hope.

Lio!rt indicated the assembled dragonriders with a tilt of his head.

"Don't be naive, he said.

Rincewind took a deep breath "I suppose I should warn you," he said, his voice hardly quavering at all, "that this is a magic sword."

Lio!rt let the red silk wrapping drop away into the gloom and flourished a jet-black blade. Runes glowed on its surface.

"What a coincidence," he said, and lunged.

Rincewind went rigid with fright, but his arm swung out as Kring shot forward. The swords met in an explosion of octarine light.

Lio!rt swung himself backwards, his eyes narrowing. Kring leapt past his guard and, although the dragonlord's sword jerked up to deflect most of the force, the result was a thin red line across its master's torso.

With a growl he launched himself at the wizard boots clattering as he slid from ring to ring. The swords met again in another violent discharge of magic and, at the same time, Lio!rt brought his other hand down against Rincewind's head, jarring him so hard that one foot jerked out of its ring and flailed desperately.

Rincewind knew himself to be almost certainly the worst wizard on the Discworld since he knew but one spell; yet for all that he was still a wizard, and thus by the inexorable laws of magic this meant that upon his demise it would be Death himself who appeared to claim him (instead of sending one of his numerous servants, as is usually the case). Thus it was that, as a grinning Lio!rt swung back and brought his sword around in a lazy arc, time ran into treacle.

To Rincewind's eyes the world was suddenly lit by a flickering octarine light, tinged with violet as photons impacted on the sudden magical aura. Inside it the dragonlord was a ghastly-hued statue, his sword moving at a snail's pace in the glow.

Beside Lio!rt was another figure, visible only to those who can see into the extra four dimensions of magic. It was tall and dark and thin and, against a sudden night of frosty stars, it swung a two-handed scythe of proverbial sharpness...

Rincewind ducked. The blade hissed coldly through the air beside his head and entered the rock of the cavern roof without slowing. Death screamed a curse in his cold crypt voice. The scene vanished. What passed for reality on the Discworld reasserted itself with a rush of sound. Lio!rt gasped at the sudden turn of speed with which the wizard had dodged his killing stroke and, with that desperation only available to the really terrified, Rincewind uncoiled like a snake and launched himself across the space between them. He locked both hands around the dragonlord's sword arm, and wrenched.

It was at that moment that Rincewind's one remaining ring, already overburdened, slid out of the rock with a nasty little metal sound.

He plunged down, swung wildly, and ended up dangling over a bone-splintering death with his hands gripping the dragonlord's arm so tightly that the man screamed.

Lio!rt looked up at his feet. Small flakes of rock were dropping out of the roof around the ring pitons.

"Let go, damn you." he screamed. "Or we'll both die!"

Rincewind said nothing. He was concentrating on maintaining his grip and keeping his mind closed to the pressing images of his fate on the rocks below.

"Shoot him!" bellowed Lio!rt.

Out of the corner of his eye Rincewind saw several crossbows levelled at him. Lio!rt chose that moment to flail down with his free hand, and a fistful of rings stabbed into the wizard's fingers.

He let go.

Twoflower grabbed the bars and pulled himself up.

"See anything?" said Hrun, from the region of his feet.

"Just clouds."

Hrun lifted him down again, and sat on the edge of one of the wooden beds that were the only furnishings in the cell. "Bloody hell," he said.

"Don't despair," said Twoflower.

"I'm not despairing."

"I expect it's all some sort of misunderstanding. I expect they'll release us soon. They seem very civilised."

Hrun stared at him from under bushy eyebrows. He started to say something, then appeared to think better of it. He sighed instead.

"And when we get back we can say we've seen dragons," Twoflower continued. "What about that, eh?"

"Dragons don't exist," said Hrun flatly. "Codice of Chimeria killed the last one two hundred years ago. I don't know what we're seeing, but they aren't dragons."

"But they carried us up in the air! In that hall there must have been hundreds-"

"I expect it was just magic," said Hrun, dismissively.

"Well, they looked like dragons," said Twoflower, an air of defiance about him. "I always wanted to see dragons, ever since I was a little lad. Dragons flying around in the sky, breathing flames..."

"They just used to crawl around in swamps and stuff, and all they breathed was stink," said Hrun lying down in the bunk. "They weren't very big either. They used to collect firewood."

"I heard they used to collect treasure," said Twoflower.

"And firewood. Hey," Hrun added, brightening "did you notice all those rooms they brought us through? Pretty impressive, I thought. Lot of good stuff about, plus some of those tapestries have got to be worth a fortune." He scratched his chin thoughtfully, making a noise like a porcupine shouldering its way through gorse.

"What happens next?" asked Twoflower.

Hrun screwed a finger in his ear and inspected it absently. "Oh," he said, "I expect in a minute the door will be flung back and I'll be dragged off to some sort of temple arena where I'll fight maybe a couple of giant spiders and an eight-foot slave from the jungles of Klatch and then I'll rescue some kind of a princess from the altar and then kill off a few guards or whatever and then this girl will show me the secret passage out of the place and we'll liberate a couple of horses and escape with the treasure." Hrun leaned his head back on his hands and looked at the ceiling, whistling tunelessly.

"All that?" said Twoflower.

"Usually."

Twoflower sat down on his bunk and tried to think. This proved difficult, because his mind was awash with dragons.

Dragons!

Ever since he was two years old he had been captivated by the pictures of the fiery beasts in *The Octarine Fairy Book*. His sister had told him they didn't really exist, and he recalled the bitter disappointment. If the world didn't contain those beautiful creatures, he'd decided, it wasn't half the world it ought to be. And then later he had been bound apprentice to Ninereeds the Masteraccount, who in his grey-mindedness was everything that dragons were not, and there was no time for dreaming.

But there was something wrong with these dragons. They were too small and sleek, compared to the ones in his mind's eye. Dragons ought to be big and green and clawed and exotic and firebreathing - big and green with long sharp... Something moved at the edge of his vision, in the furthest, darkest corner of the dungeon. When he turned his head it vanished, although he thought he heard the faintest of noises that might have been made by claws scrabbling on stone.

"Hrun?" he said.

There was a snore from the other bunk.

Twoflower padded over to the corner, peering gingerly at the stones in case there was a secret panel. At that moment the door was flung back thumping against the wall. Half a dozen guards hurtled through it, spread out and flung them selves down on one knee. Their weapons were aimed exclusively at Hrun. When he thought about this later, Twoflower felt quite offended.

Hrun snored.

A woman strode into the room. Not many women can stride convincingly, but she managed it. She glanced briefly at Twoflower, as one might look at a piece of furniture, then glared down at the man on the bed.

She was wearing the same sort of leather harness that the dragonriders had been wearing but in her case it was much briefer. That, and the magnificent mane of chestnut-red hair that fell to her waist, was her only concession to what even on the Discworld passed for decency. She was also wearing a thoughtful expression.

Hrun made a glubbing noise, turned over, and slept on.

With a careful movement, as though handling some instrument of rare delicacy, the woman drew a slim black dagger from her belt and stabbed downward.

Before it was halfway through its arc Hrun's right hand moved so fast that it appeared to travel between two points in space without at any time occupying the intervening air. It closed around the woman's wrist with a dull smack. His other hand groped feverishly for a sword that wasn't there... Hrun awoke.

"Gngh?" he said, looking up at the woman with a puzzled frown. Then he caught sight of the bowmen.

"Let go," said the woman, in a voice that was calm and quiet and edged with diamonds. Hrun released his grip slowly.

She stepped back, massaging her wrist and looking at Hrun in much the same way that a cat watches a mousehole.

"So," she said at last. "You pass the first test. What is your name, barbarian?"

"Who are you calling a barbarian?" snarled Hrun.

"That is what I want to know."

Hrun counted the bowmen slowly and made a brief calculation. His shoulders relaxed.

"I am Hrun of Chimeria. And you?"

"Liessa Dragonlady."

"You are the lord of this place?"

"That remains to be seen. You have the look about you of a hired sword, Hrun of Chimeria. I could use you - if you pass the tests, of course. There are three of them. You have passed the first."

"What are the other-" Hrun paused, his lips moved soundlessly and then he hazarded, "two?"

"Perilous."

"And the fee?"

"Valuable."

"Excuse me," said Twoflower

"And if I fail these tests?" said Hrun, ignoring him. The air between Hrun and Liessa crackled with small explosions of charisma as their gazes sought for a hold.

"If you had failed the first test you would now be dead. This may be considered a typical penalty."

"Um, look," began Twoflower. Liessa spared him a brief glance,

and appeared actually to notice him for the first time.

"Take that away," she said calmly, and turned back to Hrun. Two of the guards shouldered their bows, grasped Twoflower by the elbows and lifted him off the ground. Then they trotted smartly through the doorway.

"Hey," said Twoflower, as they hurried down the corridor outside, "where" (as they stopped in front of another door) "is my" (as they dragged the door open) "Luggage?" He landed in a heap of what might once have been straw. The door banged shut, its echoes punctuated by the sound of bolts being slammed home.

In the other cell Hrun had barely blinked.

"Okay," he said, "what is the second test?"

"You must kill my two brothers." Hrun considered this.

"Both at the same time, or one after the other?" he said.

"Consecutively or concurrently," she assured him

"What?"

"Just kill them," she said sharply

"Good fighters, are they?"

"Renowned."

"So in return for all this...?"

"You will wed me and become Lord of the Wyrmsberg."

There was a long pause. Hrun's eyebrows twisted themselves in unaccustomed calculation.

"I get you and this mountain?" he said at last.

"Yes." She looked him squarely in the eye, and her lips twitched. "The fee is worthwhile, I assure you."

Hrun dropped his gaze to the rings on her hand. The stones were large, being the incredibly rare blue milk diamonds from the clay basins of Mithos. When he managed to turn his eyes from them he saw Liessa glaring down at him in fury.

"So calculating?" she rasped. "Hrun the Barbarian who would boldly walk into the jaws of Death Himself?"

Hrun shrugged. "Sure," he said, "the only reason for walking into the jaws of Death is so's you can steal His gold teeth." He brought one arm around expansively, and the wooden bunk was at the end of it. It cannoned into the bowmen and Hrun followed it joyously, felling one man with a blow and snatching the weapon from another. A moment later it was all over.

Liessa had not moved.

"Well?" she said.

"Well what?" said Hrun, from the carnage

"Do you intend to kill me?"

"What? Oh no. No, this is just, you know, kind of a habit. Just keeping in practice. So where are these brothers?" He grinned.

Twoflower sat on his straw and stared into the darkness. He wondered how long he had been there. Hours, at least. Days, probably. He speculated that perhaps it had been years, and he had simply forgotten.

No, that sort of thinking wouldn't do. He tried to think of something else - grass, trees, fresh air, dragons. Dragons...

There was the faintest of scrablblings in the darkness. Twoflower felt the sweat prickle on his forehead.

Something was in the cell with him. Something that made small noises, but even in the pitch blackness gave the impression of hugeness. He felt the air move.

When he lifted his arm there was the greasy feel and faint shower of sparks that betokened a localised magical field. Twoflower found himself fervently wishing for light.

A gout of flame rolled past his head and struck the far wall. As the rocks flashed into furnace heat he looked up at the dragon that now occupied more than half the cell.

*I obey, lord* said a voice in his head.

By the glow of the crackling, spitting stone Twoflower looked into his own reflection in two enormous green eyes. Beyond them the dragon was as multi-hued, horned, spiked and lithe as the one in his memory - a real dragon. Its folded wings were nevertheless still wide enough to scrape the wall on both sides of the room. It lay with him between its talons.

"Obey?" he said, his voice vibrating with terror and delight.

*Of course, lord.*

The glow faded away. Twoflower pointed a trembling finger at where he remembered the door to be and said, "Open it!"

The dragon raised its huge head. Again the ball of flame rolled out but this time, as the dragon's neck muscles contracted, its colour

faded from orange to yellow, from yellow to white, and finally to the faintest of blues. By that time the flame was also very thin, and where it touched the wall the molten rock spat and ran. When it reached the door the metal exploded into a shower of hot droplets.

Black shadows arced and jiggered over the walls. The metal bubbled for an eye-aching moment, and then the door fell in two pieces in the passage beyond. The flame winked out with a suddenness that was almost as startling as its arrival.

Twoflower stepped gingerly over the cooling door and looked up and down the corridor. It was empty.

The dragon followed. The heavy door frame caused it some minor difficulty, which it overcame with a swing of its shoulders that tore the timber out and tossed it to one side. The creature looked expectantly at Twoflower, its skin rippling and twitching as it sought to open its wings in the confines of the passage.

"How did you get in there?" said Twoflower.

*You summoned me, master.*

"I don't remember doing that."

*In your mind. You called me up, in, your mind* thought the dragon, patiently.

"You mean I just thought of you and there You were?"

Yes.

"It was magic?"

Yes.

"But I've thought about dragons all my life."

*In this place the frontier between thought and reality is probably a little confused. All I know is that once I was not, and then you thought of me, and then I was. Therefore, of course, I am yours to command.*

"Good grief"

Half a dozen guards chose that moment to turn the bend in the corridor. They stopped, openmouthed. Then one remembered himself sufficiently to raise his crossbow and fire.

The dragon's chest heaved. The quarrel exploded into flaming fragments in mid-air. The guards scurried out of sight. A fraction of a second later a wash of flame played over the stones where they had been standing.

Twoflower looked up in admiration

"Can you fly too?" he said.

*Of course.*

Twoflower glanced up and down the corridor, and decided against following the guards. Since he knew himself to be totally lost already, any direction was probably an improvement. He edged past the dragon and hurried away, the huge beast turning with difficulty to follow him.

They padded down a series of passages that crisscrossed like a maze. At one point Twoflower thought he heard shouts, a long way behind them but they soon faded away. Sometimes the dark arch of a crumbling doorway loomed past them in the gloom. Light filtered through dimly from various shafts and, here and there, bounced off big mirrors that had been mortared into angles of the passage. Sometimes there was a brighter glow from a distant light-well.

What was odd, thought Twoflower as he strolled down a wide flight of stairs and kicked up billowing clouds of silver dust motes, was that the tunnels here were much wider. And better constructed, too. There were statues in niches set in the walls, and here and there faded but interesting tapestries had been hung. They mainly showed dragons - dragons by the hundreds in flight or hanging from their perch rings, dragons with men on their backs hunting down deer and, sometimes other men. Twoflower touched one tapestry gingerly. The fabric crumbled instantly in the hot dry air, leaving only a dangling mesh where some threads had been plaited with fine gold wire.

"I wonder why they left all this?" he said.

*I don't know* said a polite voice in his head.

He turned and looked up into the scaly horse face above him.

"What is your name, dragon?" said Twoflower.

*I don't know.*

"I think I shall call you Ninereeds."

*That is my name, then.*

They waded through the all-encroaching dust in a series of huge, dark-pillared halls which had been delved out of the solid rock. With some cunning too, from floor to ceiling the walls were a mass of statues, gargoyles, bas-reliefs and fluted columns that cast weirdly-moving shadows when the dragon gave an obliging illumination at Twoflower's request. They crossed the lengthy galleries and vast

carven amphitheatres, all awash with deep soft dust and completely uninhabited. No-one had come to these dead caverns in centuries.

Then he saw the path, leading away into yet another dark tunnel mouth. Someone had been using it regularly, and recently. It was a deep narrow trail in the grey blanket.

Twoflower followed it. It led through still more lofty halls and winding corridors quite big enough for a dragon (and dragons had come this way once, it seemed; there was a room full of rotting harness, dragon-sized, and another room containing plate and chain mail big enough for elephants). They ended in a pair of green bronze doors, each so high that they disappeared into the gloom. In front of Twoflower, at chest height, was a small handle shaped like a brass dragon.

When he touched it the doors swung open instantly and with a disconcerting noiselessness.

Instantly sparks crackled in Twoflower's hair and there was a sudden gust of hot dry wind that didn't disturb the dust in the way that ordinary wind should but, instead, whipped it up momentarily into unpleasantly half-living shapes before it settled again. In Twoflower's ears came the strange shrill twittering of the Things locked in the distant dungeon Dimensions, out beyond the fragile lattice of time and space. Shadows appeared where there was nothing to cause them. The air buzzed like a hive.

In short, there was a vast discharge of magic going on around him.

The chamber beyond the door was lit by a pale green glow. Stacked around the walls, each on its own marble shelf, were tier upon tier of coffins. In the centre of the room was a stone chair on a raised dais, and it contained a slumped figure which did not move but said, in a brittle old voice, "Come in, young man."

Twoflower stepped forward. The figure in the seat was human, as far as he could make out in the murky light, but there was something about the awkward way it was sprawled in the chair that made him glad he couldn't see it any clearer.

"I'm dead, you know," came a voice from what Twoflower fervently hoped was a head, in conversational tones. "I expect you can tell."

"Um," said Twoflower. "Yes." He began to back away.

"Obvious, isn't it?" agreed the voice. "You'd be Twoflower, wouldn't you? Or is that later?"

"Later?" said Twoflower. "Later than what?" He stopped.

"Well," said the voice. "You see, one of the disadvantages of being dead is that one is released as it were from the bonds of time and therefore I can see everything that has happened or will happen, all at the same time except that of course I now know that Time does not, for all practical purposes, exist."

"That doesn't sound like a disadvantage," said Twoflower.

"You don't think so? Imagine every moment being at one and the same time a distant memory and a nasty surprise and you'll see what I mean. Anyway, I now recall what it was I am about to tell you. Or have I already done so? That's a fine looking dragon, by the way. Or don't I say that, yet?"

"It is rather good. It just turned up," said Twoflower.

"It turned up?" said the voice. "You summoned it!"

"Yes, well, all I did-"

"You have the Power! "

"All I did was think of it."

"That's what the Power is. Have I already told you that I am Greicha the First? Or is that next? I'm sorry, but I haven't had too much experience of transcendence. Anyway, yes - the Power. It summons dragons, you know."

"I think you already told me that," said Twoflower.

"Did I? I certainly intended to," said the dead man.

"But how does it? I've been thinking about dragons all my life, but this is the first time one has turned up."

"Oh well, you see, the truth of the matter is that dragons have never existed as you (and, until I was poisoned some three months ago,) I understand existence. I'm talking about the true dragon, *draconis nobilis*, you understand; the swamp dragon, *draconis vulgaris*, is a base creature and not worth our consideration. The true dragon, on the other hand, is a creature of such refinement of spirit that they can only take on form in this world if they are conceived by the most skilled imagination. And even then the said imagination must be in some place heavily impregnated with magic which helps to weaken the walls between the world of the seen and unseen. Then the dragons pop through, as it were, and impress their form on

this world's possibility matrix. I was very good at it when I was alive. I could imagine up to, oh, five hundred dragons at a time. Now Liessa, the most skilled of my children, can barely imagine fifty rather nondescript creatures. So much for a progressive education. She doesn't really believe in them. That's why her dragons are rather boring while yours," said the voice of Greicha, "is almost as good as some of mine used to be. A sight for sore eyes, not that I have any to speak of now."

Twoflower said hurriedly, "You keep saying you're dead..."

"Well?"

"Well, the dead, er, they, you know, don't talk much. As a rule."

"I used to be an exceptionally powerful wizard. My daughter poisoned me, of course. It is the generally accepted method of succession in our family, but," the corpse sighed, or at least a sigh came from the air a few feet above it, "it soon became obvious that none of my three children is sufficiently powerful to wrest the lordship of the Wyrnberg from the other two. A most unsatisfactory arrangement. A kingdom like ours has to have one ruler. So I resolved to remain alive in an unofficial capacity, which of course annoys them all immensely. I won't give my children the satisfaction of burying me until there is only one of them left to perform the ceremony." There was a nasty wheezing noise. Twoflower decided that it was meant to be a chuckle.

"So it was one of them that kidnapped us?" said Twoflower.

"Liessa," said the dead wizard's voice. "My daughter. Her power is strongest, you know. My sons' dragons are incapable of flying more than a few miles before they fade."

"Fade? I did notice that we could see through the one that brought us here," said Twoflower. "I thought that was a bit odd."

"Of course," said Greicha. "The Power only works near the Wyrnberg. It's the inverse square law you know. At least, I think it is. As the dragons fly further away they begin to dwindle. Otherwise my little Liessa would be ruling the whole world by now, if I know anything about it. But I can see I mustn't keep you. I expect you'll be wanting to rescue your friend."

Twoflower gaped. "Hrun?" he said.

"Not him. The skinny wizard. My son Liort is trying to hack him to pieces. I admired the way you rescued him. Will, I mean."

Twoflower drew himself up to his full height, an easy task. "Where is he?" he said, heading towards the door with what he hoped was an heroic stride.

"Just follow the pathway in the dust," said the voice. "Liessa comes to see me sometimes. She still comes to see her old dad, my little girl. She was the only one with the strength of character to murder me. A chip off the old block. Good luck, by the way. I seem to recall I said that. Will say it now, I mean."

The rambling voice got lost in a maze of tunnels as Twoflower ran along the dead tunnels, with the dragon loping along easily behind him. But soon he was leaning against a pillar, completely out of breath. It seemed ages since he'd had anything to eat.

*Why don't you fly?* said Ninereeds, inside his head. The dragon spread its wings and gave an experimental flap, which lifted it momentarily off the ground. Twoflower stared for a moment, then ran forward and clambered quickly on to the beast's neck. Soon they were airborne, the dragon skimming along easily a few feet from the floor and leaving a billowing cloud of dust in its wake.

Twoflower hung on as best he could as Ninereeds swooped through a succession of caverns and soared around a spiral staircase that could easily have accommodated a retreating army. At the top they emerged into the more inhabited regions, the mirrors at every corridor corner brightly polished and reflecting a pale light.

*I smell other dragons.*

The wings became a blur and Twoflower was jerked back as the dragon veered and sped off down a side corridor like a gnat-crazed swallow. Another sharp turn sent them soaring out of a tunnel mouth in the side of a vast cavern. There were rocks far below, and up above were broad shafts of light from great holes near the roof. A lot of activity on the ceiling, too... as Ninereeds hovered, thumping the air with his wings, Twoflower peered up at the shapes of roosting beasts and tiny men-shaped dots that were somehow walking upside down.

*This is a roosting hall,* said the dragon in a satisfied tone.

As Twoflower watched, one of the shapes far above detached itself from the roof and began to grow larger...

Rincewind watched as Lio!rt's pale face dropped away from him. This is funny, gibbered a small part of his mind, why am I rising?

Then he began to tumble in the air and reality took over. He was dropping to the distant, guano-speckled rocks.

His brain reeled with the thought. The words of the Spell picked just that moment to surface from the depths of his mind, as they always did in time of crisis. Why not say us, they seemed to urge. What have you got to lose?

Rincewind waved a hand in the gathering slipstream.

"Ashonai," he called. The word formed in front of him in a cold blue flame that streamed in the wind.

He waved the other hand, drunk with terror and magic.

"Ebiris," he intoned. The sound froze into a flickering orange word that hung beside its companion.

"Urshoring. Kvant. Pythan. N'gurad. Feringomalee." As the words blazed their rainbow colours around him he flung his hands back and prepared to say the eighth and final word that would appear in corruscating octarine and seal the spell. The imminent rocks were forgotten.

"-" he began.

The breath was knocked out of him, the spell scattered and snuffed out. A pair of arms locked around his waist and the whole world jerked sideways as the dragon rose out of its long dive claws grazing just for a moment the topmost rock on the Wyrmsberg's noisome floor. Twoflower laughed triumphantly.

"Got him!"

And the dragon, curving gracefully at the top of his flight, gave a lazy flip of his wings and soared through a cavemouth into the morning air.

At noon, in a wide green meadow on the lush tableland that was the top of the impossibly-balanced Wyrmsberg, the dragons and their riders formed a wide circle. There was room beyond them for a rabble of servants and slaves and others who scratched a living here on the roof of the world, and they were all watching the figures clustered in the centre of the grassy arena.

The group contained a number of senior dragon lords, and among

them were Lio!rt and his brother Liartes. The former was still rubbing his legs, with Small grimaces of pain. Slightly to one side stood Liessa and Hrun, with some of the woman's own followers. Between the two factions stood the Wyrmborg's hereditary Loremaster.

"As you know," he said uncertainly, "the not-fully-late Lord of the Wyrmborg, Greicha the First, has stipulated that there will be no succession until one of his children feels himself - or as it might be, herself - powerful enough to challenge and defeat his or her siblings in mortal combat."

"Yes", yes, we know all that. Get on with it," said a thin peevish voice from the air beside him.

The loremaster swallowed. He had never come to terms with his former master's failure to expire properly. Is the old buzzard dead or isn't he? he wondered.

"It is not certain," he quavered, "whether it is allowable to issue a challenge by proxy-"

"It is, it is," snapped Greicha's disembodied voice. "It shows intelligence. Don't take all day about it."

"I challenge you," said Hrun, glaring at the brothers, "both at once."

Lio!rt and Liartes exchanged looks.

"You'll fight us both together?" said Liartes, a tall, wiry man with long black hair.

"Yah."

"That's pretty uneven odds, isn't it?"

"Yah. I outnumber you one to two."

Lio!rt scowled. "You arrogant barbarian-"

"That just about does it," growled Hrun. "I'll-"

The Loremaster put out a blue-veined hand to restrain him.

"It is forbidden to fight on the Killing Ground," he said, and paused while he considered the sense of this. "You know what I mean, anyway," he hazarded, giving up, and added "As the challenged parties my lords Lio!rt and Liartes have choice of weapons."

"Dragons," they said together. Liessa snorted.

"Dragons can be used offensively, therefore they are weapons," said Lio!rt firmly. "if you disagree we can fight over it."

"Yah," said his brother, nodding at Hrun.

The Loremaster felt a ghostly finger prod him in the chest "Don't

stand there with your mouth open," said Greicha's graveyard voice. "Just hurry up, will you?"

Hrun stepped back, shaking his head.

"Oh no," he said. "Once was enough. I'd rather be dead than fight on one of those things."

"Die, then," said the Loremaster, as kindly as he could manage.

Lio!rt and Liartes were already striding back across the turf to where the servants stood waiting with their mounts. Hrun turned to Liessa. She shrugged.

"Don't I even get a sword?" he pleaded. "A knife, even?"

"No," she said. "I didn't expect this." She suddenly looked smaller, all defiance gone. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Yes, I thought you said you're sorry."

"Don't glare at me like that! I can imagine you the finest dragon to ride"

"NO!"

The Loremaster wiped his nose on a handkerchief, held the little silken square aloft for a moment, then let it fall.

A boom of wings made Hrun spin around.

Lio!rt's dragon was already airborne and circling around towards them. As it swooped low over the turf a billow of flame shot from its mouth, scoring a black streak across the grass that rushed towards Hrun.

At the last minute he pushed Liessa aside, and felt the wild pain of the flame on his arm as he dived for safety. He rolled as he hit the ground, and flipped on to his feet again while he looked around frantically for the other dragon. It came in from one side, and Hrun was forced to take a badly-judged standing jump to escape the flame. The dragon's tail whipped around as it passed and caught him a stinging blow across the forehead. He pushed himself upright, shaking his head to make the wheeling stars go away. His blistered back screamed pain at him.

Lio!rt came in for a second run, but slower this time to allow for the big man's unexpected agility. As the ground drifted up he saw the barbarian standing stock still, chest heaving, arms hanging loosely by his sides. An easy target. As his dragon swooped away

Lio!rt turned his head, expecting to see a dreadfully big cinder. There was nothing there. Puzzled, Lio!rt turned back.

Hrun, heaving himself over the dragon's shoulder scales with one hand and beating out his flaming hair with the other, presented himself to his view. Lio!rt's hand flew to his dagger, but pain had sharpened Hrun's normally excellent reflexes to needle point. A backhand blow hammered into the dragonlord's wrist, sending the dagger arcing away towards the ground, and another caught the man full on the chin.

The dragon, carrying the weight of two men, was only a few yards above the grass. This turned out to be fortunate, because at the moment Lio!rt lost consciousness the dragon winked out of existence. Liessa hurried across the grass and helped Hrun stagger to his feet. He blinked at her.

"What happened? What happened?" he said thickly.

"That was really fantastic," she said. "The way you turned that somersault in mid-air and everything."

"Yah, but what happened?"

"It's rather difficult to explain-"

Hrun peered up at the sky. Liartes, by far the most cautious of the two brothers, was circling high above them.

"Well, you've got about ten seconds to try," he said "The dragons-"

"Yah?"

"They're imaginary."

"Like all these imaginary burns on my arm, you mean?"

"Yes. No!" she shook her head violently. "I'll have to tell you later!"

"Fine, if you can find a really good medium," snapped Hrun. He glared up at Liartes, who was beginning to descend in wide sweeps.

"Just listen, will you? Unless my brother is conscious his dragon can't exist, it's got no pathway through to this-"

"Run!" shouted Hrun. He threw her away from him and flung himself flat on the ground as Liartes' dragon thundered by, leaving another smoking scar across the turf.

While the creature sought height for another sweep Hrun scrambled to his feet and set off at a dead run for the woods at the edge of the arena. They were sparse, little more than a wide and overgrown hedge, but at least no dragon would be able to fly through them.

It didn't try. Liartes brought his mount in to land on the turf a few yards away and dismounted casually. The dragon folded its wings and poked its head in among the greenery, while its master leaned against a tree and whistled tunelessly.

"I can burn you out," said Liartes, after a while. The bushes remained motionless.

"Perhaps you're in that holly bush over there?" The holly bush became a waxy ball of flame.

"I'm sure I can see movement in those ferns."

The ferns became mere skeletons of white ash.

"You're only prolonging it, barbarian. Why not give in now? I've burned lots of people; it doesn't hurt a bit," said Liartes, looking sideways at the bushes.

The dragon continued through the spinney, incinerating every likely-looking bush and clump of ferns. Liartes drew his sword and waited.

Hrun dropped from a tree and landed running. Behind him the dragon roared and crashed through the bushes as it tried to turn around, but Hrun was running, running, with his gaze fixed on Liartes and a dead branch in his hands.

It is a little known but true fact that a two legged creature can usually beat a four legged creature over a short distance, simply because of the time it takes the quadruped to get its legs sorted out. Hrun heard the scrabble of claws behind him and then an ominous thump. The dragon had half-opened its wings and was trying to fly.

As Hrun bore down on the dragonlord Liartes' sword came up wickedly, to be caught on the branch. Then Hrun cannoned into him and the two men sprawled on the ground.

The dragon roared.

Liarthes screamed as Hrun brought a knee upwards with anatomical precision, but managed a wild blow that rebroke the barbarian's nose for him.

Hrun kicked away and scrambled to his feet, to find himself looking up into the wild horse-face of the dragon, its nostrils distended.

He lashed out with a foot and caught Liartes, who was trying to stand up, on the side of his head. The man slumped.

The dragon vanished. The ball of fire that was billowing towards Hrun faded until, when it reached him, it was no more than a puff of

warm air. Then there was no sound but the crackle of burning bushes.

Hrun slung the unconscious dragonlord over his shoulder and set off at a trot back to the arena. Halfway there he found Liort sprawled on the ground, one leg bent awkwardly. He stooped and, with a grunt, hoisted the man on to his vacant shoulder.

Liessa and the Loremaster were waiting on a raised dais at one end of the meadow. The dragonwoman had quite recovered her composure now, and looked levelly at Hrun as he threw the two men down on the steps before her. The people around her were standing in deferential poses, like a court.

"Kill them," she said.

"I kill in my own time," he said. "In any case, killing unconscious people isn't right."

"I can't think of a more opportune time," said the Loremaster. Liessa snorted.

"Then I shall banish them," she said. "Once they are beyond the reach of the Wyrnberg's magic then they'll have no Power. They'll be simply brigands. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes."

"I am surprised that you are so merciful, Hrun."

Hrun shrugged. "A man in my position, he can't afford to be anything else, he's got to consider his image." He looked around. "Where's the next test, then?"

"I warn you that it is perilous. If you wish, you may leave now. If you pass the test, however, you will become lord of the Wyrnberg and, of course, my lawful husband."

Hrun met her gaze. He thought about his life, to date. It suddenly seemed to him to have been full of long damp nights sleeping under the stars, desperate fights with trolls, city guards, countless bandits and evil priests and, on at least three occasions, actual demigods - and for what? Well, for quite a lot of treasure, he had to admit - but where had it all gone? Rescuing beleaguered maidens had a certain passing reward, but most of the time he'd finished up by setting them up in some city somewhere with a handsome dowry, because after a while even the most agreeable exmaiden became possessive and had scant sympathy for his efforts to rescue her sister sufferers. In short, life had really left him with little more than a reputation and

a network of scars. Being a lord might be fun. Hrun grinned. With a base like this, all these dragons and a good bunch of fighting men, a man could really be a contender.

Besides, the wench was not uncomely.

"The third test?" she said.

"Am I to be weaponless again?" said Hrun.

Liessa reached up and removed her helmet letting the coils of red hair tumble out. Then she unfastened the brooch of her robe. Underneath, she was naked.

As Hrun's gaze swept over her his mind began to operate two notional counting machines. One assessed the gold in her bangles, the tiger-rubies that ornamented her toe-rings, the diamond spangle that adorned her navel, and two highly individual whirligigs of silver filigree. The other was plugged straight into his libido. Both produced tallies that pleased him mightily.

As she raised a hand and proffered a glass of wine she smiled, and said, "I think not."

"He didn't attempt to rescue you," Rincewind pointed out as a last resort.

He clung desperately to Twoflower's waist as the dragon circled slowly, tilting the world at a dangerous angle. The new knowledge that the scaly back he was astride only existed as a sort of threedimensional daydream did not, he had soon realised, do anything at all for his ankle-wrenching sensations of vertigo. His mind kept straying towards the possible results of Twoflower losing his concentration.

"Not even Hrun could have prevailed against those crossbows," said Twoflower stoutly.

As the dragon rose higher above the patch of woodland, where the three of them had slept a damp and uneasy sleep, the sun rose over the edge of the disc. Instantly the gloomy blues and greys of pre-dawn were transformed into a bright bronze river that flowed across the world, flaring into gold where it struck ice or water or a light-dam. (Owing to the density of the magical field surrounding the disc, light itself moved at sub-sonic speeds; this interesting property was well utilized by the Sorca people of the Great Nef, for example, who

over the centuries had constructed intricate and delicate dams, and valleys walled with polished silica, to catch the slow sunlight and sort of store it. The Scintillating reservoirs of the Nef, overflowing after several weeks of uninterrupted sunlight, were a truly magnificent sight from the air and it is therefore unfortunate that Twoflower and Rincewind did not happen to glance in that direction.)

In front of them the billion-ton impossibility that was the magic-wrought Wyrnberg hung against the sky and that was not too bad, until Rincewind turned his head and saw the mountain's shadow slowly unroll itself across the cloudscape of the world...

"What can you see?" said Twoflower to the dragon.

*I see fighting on the top of the mountain* came the gentle reply.

"See?" said Twoflower. "Hrun's probably fighting for his life at this very moment."

Rincewind was silent. After a moment Twoflower looked around. The wizard was staring intently at nothing at all, his lips moving soundlessly.

"Rincewind?"

The wizard made a small croaking noise.

"I'm sorry," said Twoflower. "What did you say?"

"...all the way... the great fall..." muttered Rincewind, His eyes focused, looked puzzled for a moment, then widened in terror. He made the mistake of looking down.

"Aargh," he opined, and began to slide.

Twoflower grabbed him.

"What's the matter?"

Rincewind tried shutting his eyes, but there were no eyelids to his imagination and it was staring widely.

"Don't you get scared of heights?" he managed to say.

Twoflower looked down at the tiny landscape, mottled with cloud shadows. The thought of fear hadn't actually occurred to him.

"No," he said. "Why should I? You're just as dead if you fall from forty feet as you are from four thousand fathoms, that's what I say."

Rincewind tried to consider this dispassionately, but couldn't see the logic of it. It wasn't the actual falling, it was the hitting he...

Twoflower grabbed him quickly.

"Steady on," he said cheerfully. "We're nearly there."

"I wish I was back in the city," moaned Rincewind. "I wish I was

back on the ground."

"I wonder if dragons can fly all the way to the stars?" mused Twoflower. "Now that would be something..."

"You're mad," said Rincewind flatly. There was no reply from the tourist, and when the wizard craned around he was horrified to see Twoflower looking up at the paling stars with an odd smile on his face.

"Don't" you even think about it," added Rincewind, menacingly.

*The man you seek is talking to the dragon-woman* said the dragon.

"Hmm?" said Twoflower, still looking at the paling stars.

"What?" said Rincewind urgently.

"Oh yes. Hrun," said Twoflower. "I hope we're in time. Dive now. Go low."

Rincewind opened his eyes as the wind increased to a whistling gale. Perhaps they were blown open - the wind certainly made them impossible to shut.

The flat summit of the Wyrnberg rose up at them, lurched alarmingly, then somersaulted into a green blur that flashed by on either side. Tiny woods and fields blurred into a rushing patchwork. A brief silvery flash in the landscape may have been the little river that overflowed into the air at the plateau's rim. Rincewind tried to force the memory out of his mind, but it was rather enjoying itself there, terrorizing the other occupants and kicking over the furniture.

"I think not," said Liessa.

Hrun took the wine cup, slowly. He grinned like a pumpkin.

Around the arena the dragons started to bay. Their riders looked up. And something like a green blur flashed across the arena, and Hrun had gone. The winecup hung momentarily in the air, then crashed down on the steps. Only then did a single drop spill.

This was because, in the instant of enfolding Hrun gently in his claws, Ninereeds the dragon had momentarily synchronized their bodily rhythms. Since the dimension of the imagination is much more complex than those of time and space, which are very junior dimensions indeed, the effect of this was to instantly transform a stationary and priapic Hrun into a Hrun moving sideways at eighty miles an hour with no ill-effects whatsoever, except for a few wasted

mouthfuls of wine. Another effect was to cause Liessa to scream with rage and summon her dragon. As the gold beast materialised in front of her she leapt astride it, still naked, and snatched a crossbow from one of the guards. Then she was airborne, while the other dragonriders swarmed towards their own beasts.

The Loremaster, watching from the pillar he had prudently slid behind in the mad scramble happened at that moment to catch the cross dimensional echoes of a theory being at the same instant hatched in the mind of an early psychiatrist in an adjacent universe, possibly because the dimension-leak was flowing both ways, and for a moment the psychiatrist saw the girl on the dragon. The loremaster smiled.

"Want to bet that she won't catch him?" said Greicha, in a voice of worms and sepulchres, right by his ear.

The loremaster shut his eyes and swallowed hard.

"I thought that my Lord would now be residing fully in the Dread Land," he managed.

"I am a wizard," said Greicha. "Death Himself must claim a wizard. And, aha, He doesn't appear to be in the neighbourhood..."

SHAL WE GO? asked Death.

He was on a white horse, a horse of flesh and blood but red of eye and fiery of nostril, and He stretched out a bony hand and took Greicha's soul out of the air and rolled it up until it was a point of painful light, and then He swallowed it.

Then He clapped spurs to his steed and it sprang into the air, sparks corruscating from its hooves.

"Lord Greicha!" whispered the old Loremaster, as the universe flickered around him.

"That was a mean trick," came the wizard's voice, a mere speck of sound disappearing into the infinite black dimensions.

"My Lord... what is Death like?" called the old man tremulously.

"When I have investigated it fully, I will let you know," came the faintest of modulations on the breeze.

"Yes," murmured the loremaster. A thought struck him. "During daylight, please," he added.

"You clowns," screamed Hrun, from his perch on Ninereed's

foreclaws.

"What did he say?" roared Rincewind, as the dragon ripped its way through the air in the race for the heights.

"Didn't hear." bellowed Twoflower, his voice torn away by the gale. As the dragon banked slightly he looked down at the little toy spinning top that was the mighty Wyrnberg and saw the swarm of creatures rising in pursuit. Ninereed's wings pounded and flicked the air away contemptuously. Thinner air, too. Twoflower's ear popped for the third time.

Ahead of the swarm, he noticed, was a golden dragon. Someone on it, too.

"Hey, are you all right?" said Rincewind urgently.

He had to drink in several lungfuls of the strangely distilled air in order to get the words out.

"I could have been a lord, and you clowns had to go and-" Hrun gasped. as the chill thin air drew the life even out of his mighty chest

"Wass happnin to the air?" muttered Rincewind. Blue lights appeared in front of his eyes.

"Unk," said Twoflower, and passed out.

The dragon vanished.

For a few seconds the three men continued upwards. Twoflower and the wizard presenting an odd picture as they sat one in front of the other with their legs astride something that wasn't there, Then what passed for gravity on the Disc recovered from the surprise, and claimed them.

At that moment Liessa's dragon flashed by, and Hrun landed heavily across its neck. Liassa leaned over and kissed him.

This detail was lost to Rincewind as he dropped away, with his arms still clasped around Twoflower's waist. The disc was a little round map pinned against the sky. It didn't appear to be moving, but Rincewind knew that it was. The whole world was coming towards him like a giant custard pie.

"Wake up!" he shouted, above the roar of the wind. "Dragons! Think of dragons!"

There was a flurry of wings as they plummeted through the host of pursuing creatures, which fell away and up. Dragons screamed and wheeled across the sky.

No answer came from Twoflower. Rincewind's robe whipped

around him, but he did not wake. Dragons, thought Rincewind in a panic. He tried to concentrate his mind, tried to envisage a really lifelike dragon. If he can do it, he thought, then so can I. But nothing happened.

The disc was bigger now, a cloud-swirled circle rising gently underneath them.

Rincewind tried again, screwing up his eyes and straining every nerve in his body. A dragon. His imagination, a somewhat battered and over-used organ, reached out for a dragon... any dragon.

IT WON'T WORK, laughed a voice like the dull tolling of a funereal bell, YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN THEM.

Rincewind looked at the terrible mounted apparition grinning at him, and his mind bolted in terror.

There was a brilliant flash.

There was utter darkness.

There was a soft floor under Rincewind's feet, a pink light around him, and the sudden shocked cries of many people.

He looked around wildly. He was standing in some kind of tunnel, which was mostly filled with seats in which outlandishly-dressed people had been strapped. They were all shouting at him.

"Wake up," he hissed. "Help me!"

Dragging the still-unconscious tourist with him he backed away from the mob until his free hand found an oddly-shaped door handle. He twisted it and ducked through, then slammed it hard. He stared around the new room in which he found himself and met the terrified gaze of a young woman who dropped the tray she was holding and screamed.

It sounded like the sort of scream that brings muscular help. Rincewind, awash with fear-distilled adrenalin, turned and barged past her. There were more seats here, and the people in them ducked as he dragged Twoflower urgently along the central gangway. Beyond the rows of seats were little windows. Beyond the windows, against a background of fleecy clouds, was a dragon's wing. It was silver.

I've been eaten by a dragon, he thought. That's ridiculous, he replied, you can't see out of dragons. Then his shoulder hit the door at the far end of the tunnel, and he followed it through into a cone-shaped room that was even stranger than the tunnel.

It was full of tiny glittering lights. Among the lights, in contoured chairs, were four men who were now staring at him open-mouthed. As he stared back he saw their gazes dart sideways. Rincewind turned slowly. Beside him was a fifth man - youngish, bearded, as swarthy as the nomad folk of the Great Nef.

"Where am I?" said the wizard. "in the belly of a dragon?"

The young man crouched back and shoved a small black box in the wizard's face. The men in the chairs ducked down.

"What is it?" said Rincewind. "A picture box?" He reached out and took it, a movement which appeared to surprise the swarthy man, who shouted and tried to snatch it back. There was another shout, this time from one of the men in the chairs. Only now he wasn't sitting. He was standing up, pointing something small and metallic at the young man.

It had an amazing effect. The man crouched back with his hands in the air.

"Please give me the bomb, sir," said the man with the metallic thing. "Carefully, please."

"This thing?" said Rincewind.

"You have it-"

"I don't want it!"

The man took it very carefully and put it on the floor. The seated men relaxed, and one of them started speaking urgently to the wall. The wizard watched him in amazement.

"Don't move." snapped the man with the metal- an amulet, Rincewind decided, it must be an amulet. The swarthy man backed into the corner.

"That was a very brave thing you did," said Amulet-holder to Rincewind. "You know that?"

"What?"

"What's the matter with your friend?"

"Friend?"

Rincewind looked down at Twoflower, who was still slumbering peacefully. That was no surprise. What was really surprising was that Twoflower was wearing new clothes. Strange clothes. His britches now ended just above his knees. Above that he wore some sort of vest of brightly-striped material. On his head was a ridiculous little straw hat. With a feather in it.

An awkward feeling around the leg regions made Rincewind look down. His clothes had changed too. Instead of the comfortable old robe, so marvellously well-adapted for speed into action in all possible contingencies, his legs were encased in cloth tubes. He was wearing a jacket of the same grey material...

Until now he'd never heard the language the man with the amulet was using. It was uncouth and vaguely Hublandish - so why could he understand every word?

Let's see, they'd suddenly appeared in this dragon after, they'd materialised in this drag, they'd sudd, they'd, they'd - they had struck up a conversation in the airport so naturally they had chosen to sit together on the plane, and he'd promised to show Jack Zweiblumen around when they got back to the States. Yes, that was it. And then Jack had been taken ill and he'd panicked and come through here and surprised this hijacker. Of course. What on earth was "Hublandish"? Dr Rjinswand rubbed his forehead. What he could do with was a drink.

Ripples of paradox spread out across the sea of causality.

Possibly the most important point that would have to be borne in mind by anyone outside the sum totality of the multiverse was that although the wizard and the tourist had indeed only recently appeared in an aircraft in mid-air, they had also at one and the same time been riding on that aeroplane in the normal course of things. That is to say: "while it was true that they had just appeared in this particular set of dimensions, it was also true that they had been living in them all along. It is at this point that normal language gives up, and goes and has a drink.

The point is that several quintillion atoms had just materialized (however, they had not. See below) in a universe where they should not strictly have been. The usual upshot of this sort of thing is a vast explosion but, since universes are fairly resilient things, this particular universe had saved itself by instantaneously unravelling its spacetime continuum back to a point where the surplus atoms could safely be accommodated and then rapidly rewinding back to that circle of firelight which for want of a better term its inhabitants were wont to call The Present. This had of course changed history - there had been a few less wars, a few extra dinosaurs and so on - but on the whole the episode passed remarkably quietly.

Outside of this particular universe, however, the repercussions of the sudden double-take bounced to and fro across the face of The Sum of Things, bending whole dimensions and sinking galaxies without a trace.

All this was however totally lost on Dr Rjinswand, 33, a bachelor, born in Sweden, raised in New Jersey, and a specialist in the breakaway oxidation phenomena of certain nuclear reactors. Anyway, he probably would not have believed any of it.

Zweiblumen still seemed to be unconscious. The stewardess, who had helped Rjinswand to his seat to the applause of the rest of the passengers, was bering over him anxiously.

"I radioed ahead," she told Rjinswand "there'll be an ambulance waiting when we land Uh, it says on the passenger list that you're a doctor"

"I don't know what's wrong with him," said Rincewind hurriedly, it might be a different matter if he was a Magnox reactor of course.

"Is it shock of some kind?"

"I've never -"

Her sentence terminated in a tremendous crash from the rear of the plane. Several passengers screamed. A sudden gale of air swept every loose magazine and newspaper into a screaming whirlwind that twisted madly down the aisle.

Something else was coming up the aisle.

Something big and oblong and wooden and brassbound. It had hundreds of legs. If it was what it seemed - a walking chest of the kind that appeared in pirate stories brim full of ill-gotten gold and jewels - then what would have been its lid suddenly gaped open.

There were no jewels. But there were lots of big square teeth, white as sycamore, and a pulsating tongue, red as mahogany.

An ancient suitcase was coming to eat him.

Rjinswand clutched at the unconscious Zweiblumen for what little comfort there was there, and gibbered. He wished fervently that he was somewhere else...

There was a sudden darkness.

There was a brilliant flash.

The sudden departure of several quintillion atoms from a universe that they had no right to be in anyway caused a wild imbalance in the harmony of the Sum Totality which it tried frantically to retrieve,

wiping out a number of subrealities in the process. Huge surges of raw magic boiled uncontrolled around the very foundations of the multiverse itself, welling up through every crevice into hitherto peaceful dimensions and causing novas, supernovas, stellar collisions, wild flights of geese and drowning of imaginary continents. Worlds as far away as the other end of time experienced brilliant sunsets of corruscating octarine as highly-charged magical particles roared through the atmosphere. In the cometary halo around the fabled Ice System of Zeret a noble comet died as a prince flamed across the sky.

All this was however lost on Rincewind as, clutching the inert Twoflower around the waist, he plunged towards the Disc's sea several hundred feet below. Not even the convulsions of all the dimensions could break the iron Law of the Conservation of Energy, and Rjinswand's brief journey in the plane had sufficed to carry him several hundred miles horizontally and seven thousand feet vertically.

The word "plane" flamed and died in Rincewind's mind.

Was that a ship down there?

The cold waters of the Circle Sea roared up at him and sucked him down into their green, suffocating embrace. A moment later there was another splash as the luggage, still bearing a label carrying the powerful travelling rune TWA, also hit the sea.

Later on, they used it as a raft.

## **Close to the Edge**

It had been a long time in the making. Now it was almost completed, and the slaves hacked away at the last clay remnants of the mantle.

Where other slaves were industriously rubbing its metal flanks with silver sand it was already beginning to gleam in the sun with the silken organic sheen of young bronze. It was still warm even after a week of cooling in the casting pit. The Arch-astronomer of Krull motioned lightly with his hand and his bearers set the throne down in the shadow of the hull.

Like a fish, he thought. A great flying fish. And of what seas?

"It is indeed magnificent," he whispered. "A work of true art."

"Craft," said the thickset man by his side. The Arch-astronomer turned slowly and looked up at the man's impassive face. It isn't particularly hard for a face to look impassive-when there are two golden spheres where the eyes should be. They glowed disconcertingly.

"Craft, indeed," said the astronomer, and smiled

"I would imagine that there is no greater craftsman on the entire disc than you, Goldeneyes. Would I be right?"

The craftsman paused, his naked body - naked at least, were it not for a toolbelt, a wrist abacus and a deep tan - tensing as he considered the implications of this last remark. The golden eyes appeared to be looking into some other world.

"The answer is both yes and no," he said at last. Some of the lesser astronomers behind the throne gasped at this lack of etiquette, but the Arch astronomer appeared not to have noticed it.

"Continue," he said.

"There are some essential skills that I lack. Yet I am Goldeneyes Silverhand Dactylos," said the craftsman. "I made the Metal Warriors that guard the Tomb of Pitchiu, I designed the Light Dams of the Great Nef, I built the Palace of the Seven Deserts. And yet-" he reached up and tapped one of his eyes, which rang faintly, "when I built the golem army for Pitchiu he loaded me down with gold and then, so that I would create no other work to rival my work for him, he had my eyes put out."

"Wise but cruel," said the Arch-astronomer sympathetically.

"Yah. So I learned to hear the temper of metals and to see with my fingers. I learned how to distinguish ores by taste and smell. I made these eyes, but I cannot make them see.

"Next I was summoned to build the Palace of the Seven Deserts, as a result of which the Emir showered me with silver and then, not entirely to my surprise, had my right hand cut off."

"A grave hindrance in your line of business," nodded the Arch-astronomer.

"I used some of the silver to make myself this new hand, putting to use my unrivalled knowledge of levers and fulcrums. It suffices. After I created the first great Light Dam, which had a capacity of 50,000 daylight hours, the tribal councils of the Nef loaded me down

with fine silks and then hamstring me so that I could not escape. As a result I was put to some inconvenience to use the silk and some bamboo to build a flying machine from which I could launch myself from the top-most turret of my prison."

"Bringing you, by various diversions, to Krull," said the Arch-astronomer. "And one cannot help feeling that some alternative occupation - lettuce farming, say - would offer somewhat less of a risk of being put to death by instalments. Why do you continue in it? Goldeneyes Dactylos shrugged.

"I'm good at it," he said.

The Arch-astronomer looked up again bronze fish, shining now like a gong in the noontime sun.

"Such beauty," he murmured. "And unique. Come, Dactylos. Recall to me what it was that I promised should be your reward?"

"You asked me to design a fish that would swim through the seas of space that lie between the worlds," intoned the master craftsman. "In return for which - in return-"

"Yes? My memory is not what it used to be," purred the Arch-astronomer, stroking the warm bronze.

"In return," continued Dactylos, without much apparent hope, "you would set me free, and refrain from chopping off any appendages. I require no treasure."

"Ah, yes. I recall now." The old man raised a blueveined hand, and added, "I lied."

There was the merest whisper of sound, and the goldeneyed man rocked on his feet. Then he looked down at the arrowhead protruding from his chest, and nodded wearily. A speck of blood bloomed on his lips.

There was no sound in the entire square (save for the buzzing of a few expectant flies) as his silver hand came up, very slowly, and fingered the arrowhead.

Dactylos grunted.

"Sloppy workmanship," he said, and toppled backwards.

The Arch-astronomer prodded the body with his toe, and sighed.

"There will be a short period of mourning, as befits a master craftsman," he said. He watched a bluebottle alight on one golden eye and fly away puzzled... "That would seem to be long enough," said the Arch-astronomer, and beckoned a couple of slaves to carry

the corpse away.

"Are the chelonauts ready?" he asked.

The master launchcontroller hustled forward.

"Indeed, your prominence," he said.

"The correct prayers are being intoned?"

"Quite so, your prominence."

"How long to the doorway?"

"The launch window," corrected the master launchcontroller carefully. "Three days, your prominence. Great A'Tuin's tail will be in an unmatched position."

"Then all that remains," concluded the Arch-astronomer, "is to find the appropriate sacrifice."

The master launchcontroller bowed.

"The ocean shall provide," he said.

The old man smiled. "It always does," he said.

"If only you could navigate"

"If only you could steer-"

A wave washed over the deck. Rincewind and Twoflower looked at each other. "Keep bailing!" they screamed in unison, and reached for the buckets.

After a while Twoflower's peevish voice filtered up from the waterlogged cabin.

"I don't see how it's my fault," he said. He handed up another bucket, which the wizard tipped over the side.

"You were supposed to be on watch," snapped Rincewind.

"I saved us from the slavers, remember," said Twoflower.

"I'd rather be a slave than a corpse," replied the wizard. He straightened up and looked out to sea. He appeared puzzled.

He was a somewhat different Rincewind from the one that escaped the fire of Ankh-Morpork six months before. More scarred, for one thing. And much more travelled. He had visited the Hublands, discovered the curious folkways of many colourful peoples - invariably obtaining more scars in the process - and had even, for a never-to-be-forgotten few days, sailed on the legendary Dehydrated Ocean at the heart of the incredibly dry desert known as the Great Nef. On a colder and wetter sea he had seen floating mountains of

ice. He had ridden on an imaginary dragon. He had very nearly said the most powerful spell on the disc. He had-

-there was definitely less horizon than there ought to be.

"Hmm" Said Rincewind.

"I said nothing's worse than slavery," said Twoflower. His mouth opened as the wizard flung his bucket far out to sea and sat down heavily on the waterlogged deck, his face a grey mask.

"Look, I'm sorry I steered us into the reef, but this boat doesn't seem to want to sink and we're bound to strike land sooner or later," said Twoflower comfortingly. "This current must go somewhere."

"Look at the horizon," Said Rincewind, in a monotone.

Twoflower squinted.

"It looks all right," he said after a while.

"Admittedly, there seems to be less than there usually is, but-"

"That's because of the Rimfall," said Rincewind.

"We're being carried over the edge of the world."

There was a long silence, broken only by the lapping of the waves as the foundering ship spun slowly in the current. It was already quite strong.

"That's probably why we hit that reef," Rincewind added. "we got pulled off course during the night."

"Would you like something to eat?" asked Twoflower. He began to rummage through the bundle that he had tied to the rail, out of the damp.

"Don't you understand?" snarled Rincewind. "We are going over the Edge, godsdammit!"

"Can't we do anything about it?"

"No!"

"Then I can't see the sense in panicking," said Twoflower calmly.

"I knew we shouldn't have come this far Edgewise," complained Rincewind to the skye "I wish-"

"I wish I had my picture-box," said Twoflower, "but it's back on that slaver ship with the rest of the Luggage and-"

"You won't need luggage where we're going," said Rincewind. He sagged, and stared moodily at a distant whale that had carelessly strayed into the rimward current and was now struggling against it.

There was a line of white on the foreshortened horizon, and the wizard fancied he could hear a distant roaring.

"What happens after a ship goes over the Rimfall?" said Twoflower.

"Who knows?"

"Well, in that case perhaps we'll just sail on through space and land on another world." A faraway look came into the little man's eyes. "I'd like that," he said.

Rincewind snorted.

The sun rose in the sky, looking noticeably bigger this close to the Edge. They stood with their backs against the mast, busy with their own thoughts. Every so often one or other would pick up a bucket and do a bit of desultory bailing, for no very intelligent reason.

The sea around them seemed to be getting crowded. Rincewind noticed several tree trunks keeping station with them, and just below the surface the water was alive with fish of all sorts. The current must be teeming with food washed from the continents near the Hub. He wondered what kind of life it would be, having to keep swimming all the time to stay exactly in the same place. Pretty similar to his own, he decided. He spotted a small green frog which was paddling desperately in the grip of the inexorable current. To Twoflower's amazement he found a paddle and carefully extended it towards the little amphibian, which scrambled onto it gratefully. A moment later a pair of jaws broke the water and snapped impotently at the spot where it had been swimming.

The frog looked up at Rincewind from the cradle of his hands, and then bit him thoughtfully on the thumb. Twoflower giggled. Rincewind tucked the frog away in a pocket, and pretended he hadn't heard.

"All very humanitarian, but why?" said Twoflower. "It'll all be the same in an hour."

"Because," said Rincewind vaguely, and did a bit of bailing. Spray was being thrown up now and the current was so strong that waves were forming and breaking all around them. It all seemed unnaturally warm. There was a hot golden haze on the sea.

The roaring was louder now. A squid bigger than anything Rincewind had seen before broke the surface a few hundred yards away and thrashed madly with its tentacles before sinking away. Something else that was large and fortunately unidentifiable howled in the mist. A whole squadron of flying fish tumbled up in a cloud of

rainbow-edged droplets and managed to gain a few yards before dropping back and being swept in an eddy.

They were running out of world. Rincewind dropped his bucket and snatched at the mast as the roaring, final end of everything raced towards them.

"I must see this" said Twoflower, half falling and half diving towards the prow.

Something hard and unyielding smacked into the hull, which spun ninety degrees and came side on to the invisible obstacle. Then it stopped suddenly and a wash of cold sea foam cascaded over the deck, so that for a few seconds Rincewind was under several feet of boiling green water. He began to scream and then the underwater world became the deep clanging purple colour of fading consciousness, because it was at about this point that Rincewind started to drown.

He awoke with his mouth full of burning liquid and, when he swallowed, the searing pain in his throat jerked him into full consciousness. The boards of a boat pressed into his back and Twoflower was looking down at him with an expression of deep concern. Rincewind groaned and sat up.

This turned out to be a mistake. The edge of the world was a few feet away.

Beyond it, at a level just below that of the lip of the endless Rimfall, was something altogether magical.

Some seventy miles away, and well beyond the tug of the rim current, a scow with the red sails typical of a freelance slaver drifted aimlessly through the velvety twilight. The crew - such as remained were clustered on the foredeck, surrounding the men working feverishly on the raft.

The captain, a thickset man who wore the elbowturbans typical of a Great Nef tribesman, was much travelled and had seen many strange peoples and curious things, many of which he had subsequently enslaved or stolen. He had begun his career as a sailor on the Dehydrated Ocean in the heart of the disc's driest desert. (Water on the disc has an uncommon fourth state, caused by intense magic combined with the strange desiccating effects of octarine light)

it dehydrates, leaving a silvery mildew like free-flowing sand through which a well-designed hull can glide with ease. The Dehydrated Ocean is a strange place, but not so strange as its fish.) The captain had never before been really frightened. Now he was terrified.

"I can't hear anything," he muttered to the first mate. The mate peered into the gloom.

"Perhaps it fell overboard?" he suggested hopefully. As if in answer there came a furious pounding from the oar deck below their feet, and the sound of splintering wood. The crewmen drew together fearfully, brandishing axes and torches.

They probably wouldn't dare to use them, even if the Monster came rushing towards them. Before its terrible nature had been truly understood several men had attacked it with axes, whereupon it had turned aside from its single-minded searching of the ship and had either chased them overboard or had - eaten them? The captain was not quite certain. The Thing looked like an ordinary wooden sea chest. A bit larger than usual, maybe, but not suspiciously so. But while it sometimes seemed to contain things like old socks and miscellaneous luggage, at other times - and he shuddered - it seemed to be, seemed to have... He tried not to think about it. It was just that the men who had been drowned overboard had probably been more fortunate than those it had caught. He tried not to think about it. There had been teeth, teeth like white wooden gravestones, and a tongue red as mahogany...

He tried not to think about it. It didn't work. But he thought bitterly about one thing. This was going to be the last time he rescued ungrateful drowning men in mysterious circumstances. Slavery was better than sharks, wasn't it? And then they had escaped and when his sailors had investigated their big chest - how had they appeared in the middle of an untroubled ocean sitting on a big chest, anyway? - and it had bitt... He tried not to think about it again, but he found himself wondering what would happen when the damned thing realized that its owner wasn't on board any longer...

"Raft's ready, lord," said the first mate.

"Into the water with it," shouted the captain, and "Get aboard!" and "Fire the ship!"

After all, another ship wouldn't be too hard to come by, he philosophised, but a man might have to wait a long time in that

Paradise the mullahs advertised before he was granted another life. Let the magical box eat lobsters.

Some pirates achieved immortality by great deeds of cruelty or derring-do. Some achieved immortality by amassing great wealth. But the captain had long ago decided that he would, on the whole, prefer to achieve immortality by not dying.

"What the hell is that?" demanded Rincewind.

"It's beautiful," said Twoflower beatifically.

"I'll decide about that when I know what it is," said the wizard.

"It is the Rimbow," said a voice immediately behind his left ear, "And you are fortunate indeed to be looking at it. From above, at any rate." and the voice was accompanied by a gust of cold and fishy breath, Rincewind sat quite still.

"Twoflower?" he said.

"Yes?"

"If I turn around, what will I see?"

"His name is Tethis. He says he's a sea troll. This is his boat. He rescued us," explained Twoflower

"Will you look around now?"

"Not just at the moment, thank you. So why aren't we going over the Edge, then?" asked Rincewind with glassy calmness.

"Because your boat hit the Circumfence," said the voice behind him (in tones that made Rincewind imagine submarine chasms and lurking Things in coral reefs).

"The Circumfence?" he repeated.

"Yes. It runs along the edge of the world," said the unseen troll. Above the roar of the waterfall Rincewind thought he could make out the splash of oars. He hoped they were oars.

"Ah. You mean the circumference," said Rincewind. "The circumference makes the edge of things."

"So does the Circumfence," said the troll.

"He means this," said Twoflower, pointing down Rincewind's eyes followed the finger, dreading what they might see...

Hubwards of the boat was a rope suspended a few feet above the surface of the white water. The boat was attached to it, moored yet mobile, by a complicated arrangement of pulleys and little wooden

wheels. They ran along the rope as the unseen rower propelled the craft along the very lip of the Rimfall. That explained one mystery - but what supported the rope?

Rincewind peered along its length and saw a stout wooden post sticking up out of the water a few yards ahead. As he watched the boat neared it and then passed it, the little wheels clacking neatly around it in a groove obviously cut for the purpose. Rincewind also noticed that smaller ropes hung down from the main rope at intervals of a yard or so.

He turned back to Twoflower.

"I can see what it is," he said, "But what is it?"

Twoflower shrugged. Behind Rincewind the sea troll said, "Up ahead is my house. We will talk more when we are there. Now I must row."

Rincewind found that looking ahead meant that he would have to turn and find out what a sea troll actually looked like, and he wasn't sure he wanted to do that yet. He looked at the Rimbow instead. It hung in the mists a few lengths beyond the edge of the world, appearing only at morning and evening when the light of the Disc's little orbiting sun shone past the massive bulk of Great A'tuin the World Turtle and struck the Disc's magical field at exactly the right angle.

A double rainbow corruscated into being. Close into the lip of the Rimfall were the seven lesser colours, sparkling and dancing in the spray of the dying seas.

But they were pale in comparison to the wider band that floated beyond them, not deigning to share the same spectrum. It was the King Colour, of which all the lesser colours are merely partial and wishy-washy reflections. It was octarine, the colour of magic. It was alive and glowing and vibrant and it was the undisputed pigment of the imagination, because wherever it appeared it was a sign that mere matter was a servant of the powers of the magical mind. It was enchantment itself. But Rincewind always thought it looked a sort of greenish-purple.

After a while a small speck on the rim of the world resolved itself into a eyot or crag, so perilously perched that the waters of the fall swirled around it at the start of their long drop. A driftwood shanty had been built on it, and Rincewind saw that the top rope of the

Circumfence climbed over the rocky island on a number of iron stakes and actually passed through the shack by a small round window. He learned later that this was so that the troll could be alerted to the arrival of any salvage on his stretch of the Circumfence by means of a series of small bronze bells, balanced delicately on on the rope.

A floating stockade had been built out of rough timber on the hubward side of the island. It contained one or two hulks and quite a large amount of floating wood in the form of planks, baulks and even whole natural tree trunks, some still sporting green leaves. This close to the Edge the disc's magical field was so intense that a hazy corona flickered across everything as raw illusion spontaneously discharged itself.

With a last few squeaky jerks the boat slid up against a small driftwood jetty. As it grounded itself and formed a circuit Rincewind felt all the familiar sensations of a huge occult aura - oily, bluish-tasting, and smelling of tin. All around them pure, unfocused magic was sleeting soundlessly into the world.

The wizard and Twoflower scrambled onto the planking and for the first time Rincewind saw the troll.

It wasn't half so dreadful as he had imagined. Umm, said his imagination after a while.

It wasn't that the troll was horrifying. Instead of the rotting, betentacled monstrosity he had been expecting Rincewind found himself looking at a rather squat but not particularly ugly old man who would quite easily have passed for normal on any city street, always provided that other people on the street were used to seeing old men who were apparently composed of water and very little else. It was as if the ocean had decided to create life without going through all that tedious business of evolution, and had simply formed a part of itself into a biped and sent it walking squishily up the beach. The troll was a pleasant translucent blue colour. As Rincewind stared a small shoal of silver fish flashed across its chest.

"It's rude to stare," said the troll. Its mouth opened with a little crest of foam, and shut again in exactly the same way that water closes over a stone."

"Is it? Why?" asked Rincewind. How does he hold himself together, his mind screamed at him. Why doesn't he spill?

"If you will follow me to my house I will find you food and a change of clothing," said the troll solemnly. He set off over the rocks without turning to see if they would follow him. After all, where else could they go? It was getting dark, and a chilly damp breeze was blowing over the edge of the world. Already the transient Rimbow had faded and the mists above the waterfall were beginning to thin.

"Come on," said Rincewind, grabbing Twoflower's elbow. But the tourist didn't appear to want to move.

"Come on," the wizard repeated.

"When it gets really dark, do you think we'll be able to look down and see Great A'tuin the World Turtle?" asked Twoflower, staring at the rolling clouds.

"I hope not," said Rincewind, "I really do. Now let's go, shall we?"

Twoflower followed him reluctantly into the shack. The troll had lit a couple of lamps and was sitting comfortably in a rocking chair. He got to his feet as they entered and poured two cups of a green liquid from a tall pitcher. In the dim light he appeared to phosphoresce, in the manner of warm seas on velvety summer nights. Just to add a baroque gloss to Rincewind's dull terror he seemed to be several inches taller, too.

Most of the furniture in the room appeared to be boxes.

"Uh. Really great place you've got here," said Rincewind. "Ethnic."

He reached for a cup and looked at the green pool shimmering inside it. It'd better be drinkable, he thought. Because I'm going to drink it. He swallowed.

It was the same stuff Twoflower had given him in the rowing boat but, at the time, his mind had ignored it because there were more pressing matters. Now it had the leisure to savour the taste.

Rincewind's mouth twisted. He whimpered a little. One of his legs came up convulsively and caught him painfully in the chest.

Twoflower swirled his own drink thoughtfully while he considered the flavour.

"Ghlen Livid," he said. "The fermented vul nut drink they freeze-distil in my home country. A certain smokey quality... Piquant. From the western plantations in, ah, Rehigreed Province, yes? Next year's harvest, I fancy, from the colour. May I ask how you came by it?"

(Plants on the disc, while including the categories known commonly as annuals, which were sown this year to come up later

this year, re-annuals, sown this year to grow next year, and perennials, sown this year to grow until further notice, also included a few rare re-annuals which, because of an unusual four-dimensional twist in their genes, could be planted this year to come up last year. The Vul nut vine was particularly exceptional in that it could flourish as many as eight years prior to its seed actually being sown. Vul nut wine was reputed to give certain drinkers an insight into the future which was, from the nut's point of view, the past. Strange but true.)

"All things drift into the Circumfence in time," said the troll, gnomically, gently rocking in his chair. "My job is to recover the flotsam. Timber, of course, and ships. Barrels of wine. Bales of cloth. You."

Light dawned inside Rincewind's head.

"It's a net, isn't it? You've got a net right on the edge of the Sea!"

"The Circumfence," nodded the troll. Ripples radiating across his chest.

Rincewind looked out into the phosphorescent darkness that surrounded the island, and grinned inanely.

"Of course," he said. "Amazing! You could sink piles and attach it to reefs and - good grief! The net would have to be very strong."

"It is," said Tethis.

"It could be extended for a couple of miles, if you found enough rocks and things," said the wizard.

"Ten thousands of miles. I just patrol this length."

"That's a third of the way around the disc!"

Tethis sloshed a little as he nodded again. While the two men helped themselves to some more of the green wine, he told them about the Circumfence, the great effort that had been made to build it, and the ancient and wise Kingdom of Krull which had constructed it several centuries before, and the seven navies that patrolled it constantly to keep it in repair and bring its salvage back to Krull, and the manner in which Krull had become a land of leisure ruled by the most learned seekers after knowledge, and the way in which they sought constantly to understand in every possible particular the wondrous complexity of the universe, and the way in which sailors marooned on the Circumfence were turned into slaves, and usually had their tongues cut out. After some interjections at this point he spoke, in a friendly way, on the futility of force, the impossibility of

escaping from the island except by boat to one of the other three hundred and eighty isles that lay between the island and Krull itself, or by leaping over the Edge and the high merit of muteness in comparison to for example, death.

There was a pause. The muted night-roar of the Rimfall only served to give the silence a heavier texture.

The rocking chair started to creak again. Tethis seemed to have grown alarmingly during the monologue.

"There is nothing personal in all this," he added. "I, too, am a slave. If you try to overpower me I shall have to kill you, of course, but I won't take any particular pleasure in it."

Rincewind looked at the shimmering fists that rested lightly in the troll's lap. He suspected they could strike with all the force of a tsunami.

"I don't think you understand," explained Twoflower. "I am a citizen of the Golden Empire. I'm sure Krull would not wish to incur the displeasure of the Emperor."

"How will the emperor know?" asked the troll.

"Do you think you're the first person from the Empire who has ended up on the Circumfence?"

"I won't be a slave," shouted Rincewind. "I'd - I'd jump over the Edge first!" He was amazed at the sound in his own voice.

"Would you, though?" asked the troll. The rocking chair flicked back against the wall and one blue arm caught the wizard around the waist. A moment later the troll was striding out of the shack with Rincewind gripped carelessly in one fist.

He did not stop until he came to the Rimward edge of the island. Rincewind squealed.

"Stop that or I really will throw you over the edge," snapped the troll. "I'm holding you, aren't I? Look."

Rincewind looked.

In front of him was a soft black night whose mist-muted stars glowed peacefully. But his eyes turned downwards, drawn by some irresistible fascination.

It was midnight on the Disc and so, therefore, the sun was far, far below, swinging slowly under Great A'Tuin's vast and frosty plastron. Rincewind tried a last attempt to fix his gaze on the tips of his boots, which were protruding over the rim of the rock, but the sheer drop

wrenched it away.

On either side of him two glittering curtains of water hurtled towards infinity as the sea swept around the island on its way to the long fall. A hundred yards below the wizard the largest sea salmon he had ever seen flicked itself out of the foam in a wild, jerky and ultimately hopeless leap. Then it fell back, over and over, in the golden underworld light.

Huge shadows grew out of that light like pillars supporting the roof of the universe. Hundreds of miles below him the wizard made out the shape of something, the edge of something-

Like those curious little pictures where the silhouette of an ornate glass suddenly becomes the outline of two faces, the scene beneath him flipped into a whole, new, terrifying perspective. Because down there was the head of an elephant as big as a reasonably-sized continent. One mighty tusk cut like a mountain against the golden light, trailing a widening shadow towards the stars. The head was slightly tilted, and a huge ruby eye might almost have been a red super-giant that had managed to shine at noonday.

Below the elephant-Rincewind swallowed and tried not to think- Below the elephant there was nothing but the distant, painful disc of the sun. And, sweeping slowly past it, was something that for all its city-sized scales, its crater-pocks, its lunar cragginess, was indubitably a flipper.

"Shall I let go?" suggested the troll

"Gnah," said Rincewind, straining backwards.

"I have lived here on the Edge for five years and I have not had the courage," boomed Tethis. "Nor have you, if I'm any judge." He stepped back, allowing Rincewind to fling himself onto the ground.

Twoflower strolled up to the rim and peered over.

"Fantastic," he said. "If only I had my picture box."

"What else is down there? I mean, if you fell off, what would you see?"

Tethis sat down on an outcrop. High over the disc the moon came out from behind a cloud, giving him the appearance of ice.

"My home is down there, perhaps," he said slowly. "Beyond your silly elephants and that ridiculous turtle. A real world. Sometimes I come out here and look, but somehow I can never bring myself to take that extra step... A real world, with real people. I have wives

and little ones, somewhere down there..." He stopped, and blew his nose. "You soon learn what you're made of, here on the Edge."

"Stop saying that. Please," moaned Rincewind. He turned over and saw Twoflower standing unconcernedly at the very lip of the rock. "Gnah," he said, and tried to burrow into the stone.

"There's another world down there?" said Twoflower, peering over. "Where, exactly?"

The troll waved an arm vaguely. "Somewhere," he said. "That's all I know. It was quite a small world. Mostly blue."

"So why are you here?" said Twoflower.

"Isn't it obvious?" snapped the troll. "I fell off the edge!"

He told them of the world of Bathys, somewhere among the Stars, where the seafolk had built a number of thriving civilisations in the three large oceans that sprawled across its disc. He had been a meatman, one of the caste which earned a perilous living in large, sail-powered land yachts that ventured far out to land and hunted the shoals of deer and buffalo that abounded in the stormhaunted continents. His particular yacht had been blown into uncharted lands by a freak gale. The rest of the crew had taken the yacht's little rowing trolley and had struck out for a distant lake, but Tethis, as master, had elected to remain with his Vessel. The storm had carried it right over the rocky rim of the world, smashing it to matchwood in the process.

"At first I fell," said Tethis, "but falling isn't so bad, you know. It's only the landing that hurts, and there was nothing below me. As I fell I saw the world spin off into space until it was lost against the stars."

"What happened next?" said Twoflower breathlessly, glancing towards the misty universe.

"I froze solid," said Tethis simply. "Fortunately it is something my race can survive. But I thawed out occasionally when I passed near other worlds. There was one, I think it was the one with what, I thought was this strange ring of mountains around it that turned out to be the biggest dragon you could ever imagine, covered in snow and glaciers and holding its tail in its mouth - well, I came within a few leagues of that, I shot over the landscape like a comet, in fact, and then I was off again. Then there was a time I woke up and there was your world coming at me like a custard pie thrown by the Creator and, well, I landed in the sea not far from the Circumfence

widdershins of Krull. All sorts of creatures get washed up against the Fence, and at the time they were looking for slaves to man the way stations, and I ended up here." He stopped and stared intently at Rincewind. "every night I come out here and look down." he finished "and I never jump. Courage is hard to come by, here on the Edge."

Rincewind began to crawl determinedly towards the shack. He gave a little scream as the troll picked him up, not unkindly, and set him on his feet.

"Amazing," said Twoflower, and leaned further out over the Edge. "There are lots of other worlds out there?"

"Quite a number, I imagine," said the troll.

"I suppose one could contrive some sort of, I don't know, some sort of a thing that could preserve one against the cold," said the little man thoughtfully. "Some sort of a ship that one could sail over the Edge and sail to far-off worlds, too. I wonder..."

"Don't even think about it!" moaned Rincewind.

"Stop talking like that, do you hear?"

"They all talk like that in Krull," said Tethis. "Those with tongues, of course," he added.

"Are you awake?"

Twoflower snored on. Rincewind jabbed him viciously in the ribs.

"I said, are you awake?" he snarled.

"Scrdfngh..."

"We've got to get out of here before this salvage fleet comes!"

The dishwater light of dawn oozed through the shack's one window, slopping across the piles of salvaged boxes and bundles that were strewn around the interior. Twoflower grunted again and tried to burrow into the pile of furs and blankets that Tethis had given them.

"Look, there's all kinds of weapons and stuff in here," said Rincewind. "He's gone out somewhere. When he comes back we could overpower him and- and- well, then we can think of something. How about it?"

"That doesn't sound like a very good idea," said Twoflower. "Anyhow, it's a bit ungracious isn't it?"

"Tough buns," snapped Rincewind. "This is a rough universe."

He rummaged through the piles around the walls and selected a heavy, wavy-bladed scimitar that had probably been some pirate's pride and joy. It looked the sort of weapon that relied as much on its weight as its edge to cause damage. He raised it awkwardly.

"Would he leave that sort of thing around if it could hurt him?" Twoflower wondered aloud.

Rincewind ignored him and took up a position beside the door. When it opened some ten minutes later he moved unhesitatingly, swinging it across the opening at what he judged was the troll's head height. It swished harmlessly through nothing at all and struck the doorpost, jerking him off his feet and on to the floor.

There was a sigh above him. He looked up into Tethis' face, which was shaking sadly from side to side.

"It wouldn't have harmed me," said the troll, "but nevertheless, I am hurt. Deeply hurt." He reached over the wizard and jerked the sword out of the wood. With no apparent effort he bent its blade into a circle and sent it bowling away over the rocks until it hit a stone and sprang, still spinning, in a silver arc that ended in the mists forming over the Rimfall.

"Very deeply hurt," he concluded. He reached down beside the door and tossed a sack towards Twoflower.

"It's the carcass of a deer that is just about how you humans like it, and a few lobsters, and a sea salmon. The Circumfence provides," he said casually.

He looked hard at the tourist, and then down again at Rincewind.

"What are you staring at?" he said.

"It's just that-" said Twoflower.

"-compared to last night-" said Rincewind.

"You're so small," finished Twoflower.

"I see, said the troll carefully."Personal remarks now." He drew himself up to his full height, which was currently about four feet. "Just because I'm made of water doesn't mean I'm made of wood, you know."

"I'm sorry," said Twoflower, climbing hastily out of the furs.

"You're made of dirt," said the troll,"but I didn't pass comments about things you can't help, did I? Oh, no. We can't help the way the Creator made us, that's my view, but if you must know, your moon here is rather more powerful than the ones around my own world."

"The moon?" said Twoflower. "I don't under-"

"If I've got to spell it out," said the troll. testily, "I'm suffering from chronic tides."

A bell jangled in the darkness of the shack. Tethis strode across the creaking floor to the complicated devices of levers, strings and bells that was mounted on the Circumfence's topmost strand where it passed through the hut.

The bell rang again, and then started to clang away in an odd jerky rhythm for several minutes. The troll stood with his ear pressed close to it.

When it stopped he turned slowly and looked at them with a worried frown.

"You're more important than I thought," he said.

"You're not to wait for the salvage fleet. You're to be collected by a flyer. That's what they say in Krull." He shrugged. "And I hadn't even sent a message that you're here, yet. Someone's been drinking vul nut wine again."

He picked up a large mallet that hung on a pillar beside the bell and used it to tap out a brief carillon.

"That'll be passed from lengthman to lengthman all the way back to Krull," he said. "Marvellous really, isn't it?"

It came speeding across the sea, floating a man-length above it, but still leaving a foaming wake as whatever power that held it up smacked brutally into the water. Rincewind knew what power held it up. He was, he would be the first to admit, a coward, an incompetent, and not even very good at being a failure; but he was still a wizard of sorts, he knew one of the Eight Great Spells, he would be claimed by Death himself when he died and he recognized really finely honed magic when he saw it.

The lens skimming towards the island was perhaps twenty feet across, and totally transparent. Sitting around its circumference were a large number of black-robed men, each one strapped securely to the disc by a leather harness and each one staring down at the waves with an expression so tormented, so agonising, that the transparent disc seemed to be ringed with gargoyles.

Rincewind sighed with relief. This was such an unusual sound that

it made Twoflower take his eyes off the approaching disc and turn them on him.

"We're important, no lie," explained Rincewind.

"They wouldn't be wasting all that magic on a couple of potential slaves." He grinned.

"What is it?" said Twoflower.

"Well, the disc itself would have been created by Fresnel's Wonderful Concentrator," said Rincewind, authoritatively. "That calls for many rare and unstable ingredients, such as demon's breath and so forth, and it takes at least eight fourthgrade wizards a week to envision. Then there's those wizards on it, who must all be gifted hydrophobes-

"You mean they hate water?" said Twoflower.

"No, that wouldn't work," said Rincewind. "Hate is an attracting force, just like love. They really loathe it, the very idea of it revolts them. A really good hydrophobe has to be trained on dehydrated water from birth. I mean, that costs a fortune in magic alone. But they make great weather magicians. Rain clouds just give up and go away."

"It sounds terrible," said the water troll behind them.

"And they all die young," said Rincewind, ignoring him. "They just can't live with themselves."

"Sometimes I think a man could wander across the disc all his life and not see everything there is to see," said Twoflower. "And now it seems there are lots of other worlds as well. When I think I might die without seeing a hundredth of all there is to see it makes me feel," he paused, then added, "well, humble, I suppose. And very angry, of course."

The flyer halted a few yards hubward of the island, throwing up a sheet of spray. It hung there, spinning slowly. A hooded figure standing by the stubby pillar at the exact centre of the lens beckoned to them.

"You'd better wade out," said the troll. "It doesn't do to keep them waiting. It has been nice to make your acquaintance." He shook them both, wetly, by the hand. As he waded out a little way with them the two nearest loathers on the lens shied away with expressions of extreme disgust.

The hooded figure reached down with one hand and released a

rope ladder. In its other hand it held a silver rod, which had about it the unmistakable air of something designed for killing people. Rincewind's first impression was reinforced when the figure raised the stick and waved it carelessly towards the shore. A section of rock vanished, leaving a small grey haze of nothingness.

"That's so you don't think I'm afraid to use it," said the figure.

"Don't think you're afraid?" said Rincewind. The hooded figure snorted.

"We know all about you, Rincewind the magician. You are a man of great cunning and artifice. You laugh in the face of Death. Your affected air of craven cowardice does not fool me."

It fooled Rincewind. "I-" he began, and paled as the nothingness-stick was turned towards him. "I see you know all about me," he finished weakly, and sat down heavily on the slippery surface. He and Twoflower, under instructions from the hooded commander, strapped themselves down to rings set in the transparent disc.

"If you make the merest suggestion of weaving a spell," said the darkness under the hood, "you die. Third quadrant reconcile, ninth quadrant redouble, forward all!"

A wall of water shot into the air behind Rincewind and the disc jerked suddenly. The dreadful presence of the sea troll had probably concentrated the hydrophobes' minds wonderfully, because it then rose at a very steep angle and didn't begin level flight until it was a dozen fathoms above the waves. Rincewind glanced down through the transparent surface and wished he hadn't.

"Well, off again then," said Twoflower cheerfully. He turned and waved at the troll, now no more than a speck on the edge of the world.

Rincewind glared at him. "Doesn't anything ever worry you?" he asked.

"We're still alive, aren't we?" asked Twoflower. "And you yourself said they wouldn't be going to all this trouble if we were just going to be slaves. I expect Tethis was exaggerating. I expect it's all a misunderstanding. I expect we'll be sent home. After we've seen Krull, of course. And I must say it all sounds fascinating."

"Oh yes," said Rincewind, in a hollow voice. "Fascinating." He was thinking: I've seen excitement, and I've seen boredom. And boredom was best.

Had either of them happened to look down at that moment they would have noticed a strange v-shaped wave surging through the water far below them, its apex pointing directly at Tethis' island. But they weren't looking. The twenty-four hydrophobic magicians were looking, but to them it was just another piece of dreadfulness, not really any different from the liquid horror around it. They were probably right.

Sometime before all this the blazing pirate ship had hissed under the waves and started the long slow slide towards the distant ooze. It was more distant than average, because directly under the stricken keel was the Gorunna Trench - a chasm in the Disc's surface that was so black, so deep and so reputedly evil that even the krakens went there fearfully, and in pairs. In less reputedly evil chasms the fish went about with natural lights on their heads and on the whole managed quite well. In Gorunna they left them unlit and, insofar as it is possible for something without legs to creep, they crept; they tended to bump into things, too. Horrible things.

The water around the ship turned from green to purple, from purple to black, from black to a darkness so complete that blackness itself seemed merely grey by comparison. Most of its timbers had already been crushed into splinters under the intense pressure.

It spiralled past groves of nightmare polyps and drifting forests of seaweed which glowed with faint, diseased colours. Things brushed it briefly with soft, cold tentacles as they darted away into the freezing silence.

Something rose up from the murk and ate it in one mouthful.

Some time later the islanders on a little rimward atoll were amazed to find, washed into their little local lagoon, the wave-rocked corpse of a hideous sea monster, all beaks, eyes and tentacles. They were further astonished at its size, since it was rather larger than their village. But their surprise was tiny compared to the huge, stricken expression on the face of the dead monster, which appeared to have been trampled to death.

Somewhat further rimward of the atoll a couple of little boats, trolling a net for the ferocious free-swimming oysters which abounded in those seas, caught something that dragged both vessels

for several miles before one captain had the presence of mind to sever the lines.

But even his bewilderment was as nothing compared to that of the islanders on the last atoll in the archipelago. During the following night they were awakened by a terrific crashing and splintering noise coming from their minute jungle; when some of the bolder spirits went to investigate in the morning they found that the trees had been smashed in a broad swathe that started on the hubmost shore of the atoll and made a line of total destruction pointing precisely Edgewise, littered with broken lianas, crushed bushes and a few bewildered and angry oysters.

They were high enough now to see the wide curve of the Rim sweeping away from them, lapped by the fluffy clouds that mercifully hid the waterfall for most of the time. From up here the sea, a deep blue dappled with cloud-shadows, looked almost inviting. Rincewind shuddered.

"Excuse me," he said. The hooded figure turned from its contemplation of the distant haze and raised its wand threateningly.

"I don't want to use this," it said.

"You don't?" said Rincewind.

"What is it, anyway?" said Twoflower.

"Ajandurah's Wand of Utter Negativity," said Rincewind. "And I wish you'd stop waving it about. It might go off," he added, nodding at the wand's glittering point. "I mean, it's all very flattering, all this magic being used just for our benefit, but there's no need to go quite that far. And-"

"Shut up." The figure reached up and pulled back its hood, revealing itself to be a most unusually tinted young woman. Her skin was black. Not the dark brown of Urabewe, or the polished blue-black of monsoon-haunted Klatch, but the deep black of midnight at the bottom of a cave. Her hair and eyebrows were the colour of moonlight. There was the same pale sheen around her lips. She looked about fifteen, and very frightened.

Rincewind couldn't help noticing that the hand holding the wand was shaking, this was because a piece of sudden death, wobbling uncertainly a-mere five feet from your nose, is very hard to miss. It

dawned on him - very slowly, because it was a completely new sensation - that someone in the world was frightened of him. The complete reverse was so often the case that he had come to think of it as a kind of natural law.

"What is your name?" he said, as reassuringly as he could manage. She might be frightened, but she did have the wand. If I had a wand like that, he thought, I wouldn't be frightened of anything. So what in Creation can she imagine I could do?

"My name is immaterial," she said.

"That's a pretty name," said Rincewind. "Where are you taking us, and why? I can't see any harm in your telling us."

"You are being brought to Krull," said the girl. "And don't mock me, hublander. Else I'll use the wand. I must bring you in alive, but no-one said anything about bringing you in whole. My name is Marchesa, and I am a wizard of the fifth level. Do you understand?"

"Well, since you know all about me then you know that I never even made it to Neophyte," said Rincewind. "I'm not even a wizard, really." He caught Twoflower's astonished expression, and added hastily, "Just a wizard of sorts."

"You can't do magic because one of the Eight Great Spells is indelibly lodged in your mind," said Marchesa, shifting her balance gracefully as the great lens described a wide arc over the sea. "That's why you were thrown out of Unseen University. We know."

"But you said just now that he was a magician of great cunning and artifice," protested Twoflower.

"Yes, because anyone who survives all that he has survived - most of which was brought on himself by his tendency to think of himself as a wizard - well, he must be some kind of a magician," said Marchesa. "I warn you, Rincewind. If you give me the merest suspicion that you are intoning the Great Spell I really will kill you." She scowled at him nervously.

"Seems to me your best course would be to just, you know, drop us off somewhere," said Rincewind.

"I mean, thanks for rescuing us and everything, so , if you'd just let us get on with leading our lives I'm sure we'd all-"

"I hope you're not proposing to enslave us," said Twoflower."

Marchesa looked genuinely shocked. "Certainly not! Whatever could have given you that idea? Your lives in Krull will be rich, full

and comfortable-"

"Oh, good," said Rincewind.

"-just not very long."

Krull turned out to be a large island, quite mountainous and heavily wooded, with pleasant white buildings visible here and there among the trees. The land sloped gradually up towards the rim, so that the highest point in Krull in fact slightly overhung the Edge. Here the Krullians had built their major city, also called Krull, and since so much of their building material had been salvaged from the Circumfence the houses of Krull had a decidedly nautical persuasion.

To put it bluntly, entire ships had been mortic artfully together and converted into buildings. Triremes, chows and caravels protruded at strange angles from the general wooden chaos. Painted figureheads and hublandish dragonprows reminded the citizens of Krull that their good fortune stemmed from the sea; barquentines and carracks lent a distinctive shape to the larger buildings. And so the city rose tier on tier between the blue-green ocean of the Disc and the soft cloud sea of the Edge, the eight colours of the Rimbow reflected in every window and in the many telescope lenses of the city's multitude of astronomers.

"It's absolutely awful," said Rincewind gloomily.

The lens was approaching now along the very lip of the rimfall. The island not only got higher as it neared the Edge. It got narrower too, so that the lens was able to remain over water until it was very near the city. The parapet along the edgewise cliff was dotted with gantries projecting into nothingness. The lens glided smoothly towards one of them and docked with it as smoothly as a boat might glide up to a quay. Four guards, with the same moonlight hair and nightblack faces as Marchesa, were waiting. They did not appear to be armed, but as Twoflower and Rincewind stumbled on to the parapet they were each grabbed by the arms and held quite firmly enough for any thought of escape to be instantly dismissed.

Then Marchesa and the watching hydrophobic wizards were quickly left behind and the guards and their prisoners set off briskly along a lane that wound between the ship-houses. Soon it lead downwards, into what turned out to be a palace of some sort, half-

hewn out of the rock of the cliff itself. Rincewind was vaguely aware of brightly-lit tunnels, and courtyards open to the distant sky. A few elderly men, their robes covered in mysterious occult symbols, stood aside and watched with interest as the sextet passed. Several times Rincewind noticed hydrophobes - their ingrained expressions of self-revulsion at their own body-fluids was distinctive- and here and there trudging men who could only be slaves. He didn't have much time to reflect on all this before a door was opened ahead of them and they were pushed, gently but firmly, into a room. Then the door slammed behind them.

Rincewind and Twoflower regained their balance and stared around the room in which they now found themselves.

"Gosh," said Twoflower ineffectually, after a pause during which he had tried unsuccessfully to find a better word.

"This is a prison cell?" wondered Rincewind aloud.

"All that gold and silk and stuff," Twoflower added. "I've never seen anything like it!"

In the centre of the richly decorated room, on a carpet that was so deep and furry that Rincewind trod on it gingerly lest it be some kind of shaggy, floor-loving beast, was a long gleaming table laden with food. Most were fish dishes, including the biggest and most ornately-prepared lobster Rincewind had ever seen, but there were also plenty of bowls and platters piled with strange creations that he had never seen before. He reached out cautiously and picked up some sort of purple fruit crusted with green crystals.

"Candied sea urchin," said a cracked, cheerful voice behind him. "A great delicacy."

He dropped it quickly and turned around. An old man had stepped out from behind the heavy curtains. He was tall, thin and looked almost benign compared to some of the faces Rincewind had seen recently.

"The puree of sea cucumbers is very good too," said the face, conversationally. "Those little green bits are baby starfish."

"Thank you for telling me," said Rincewind weakly.

"Actually, they're rather good," said Twoflower, his mouth full. "I thought you liked seafood?"

"Yes, I thought I did," said Rincewind. "What's this wine - crushed octopus eyeballs?"

"Sea grape," said the old man.

"Great," said Rincewind, and swallowed a glassful. "Not bad. A bit salty, maybe."

"Sea grape is a kind of small jellyfish," explained the stranger. "And now I really think I should introduce myself. Why has your friend gone that strange colour?"

"Culture shock, I imagine," said Twoflower. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. It's Garhartra. I'm the Guestmaster, you see. It is my pleasant task to make sure that your stay here is as delightful as possible." He bowed. "If there is anything you want you have only to say."

Twoflower sat down on an ornate mother-of-pearl chair with a glass of oily wine in one hand and a crystallised squid in the other. He frowned.

"I think I've missed something along the way," he said. "First we were told we were going to be slaves-"

"A base canard!" interrupted Garhartra.

"What's a canard?" said Twoflower.

"I think it's a kind of duck," said Rincewind from the far end of the long table. "Are these biscuits made of something really nauseating, do you suppose?"

"-and then we were rescued at great magical expense-"

"They're made of pressed seaweed," snapped the Guestmaster.

"-but then we're threatened, also at a vast expenditure of magic-"

"Yes, I thought it would be something like seaweed," agreed Rincewind. "They certainly taste like seaweed would taste if anyone was masochistic enough to eat seaweed."

"-and then we're manhandled by guards and thrown in here-"

"Pushed gently," corrected Garhartra.

"-which turned out to be this amazingly rich room and there's all this food and a man saying he's devoting his life to making us happy," Twoflower concluded. "What I'm getting at is this sort of lack of consistency."

"Yar," said Rincewind. "What he means is, are you about to start being generally unpleasant again? Is this just a break for lunch?"

Garhartra held up his hands reassuringly.

"Please, please," he protested. "It was just necessary to get you

here as soon as possible. We certainly do not want to enslave you. Please be reassured on that score."

"Well, fine," said Rincewind.

"Yes, you will in fact be sacrificed," Garhartra continued placidly.

"Sacrificed? You're going to kill us?" shouted the wizard.

"Kill? Yes, of course. Certainly! It would hardly be a sacrifice if we didn't, would it? But don't worry - it'll be comparatively painless."

"Comparatively? Compared to what?" said Rincewind. He picked up a tall green bottle that was full of sea grape jellyfish wine and hurled it hard at the Guestmaster, who flung up a hand as if to protect himself.

There was a crackle of octarine flame from his fingers and the air suddenly took on the thick, greasy feel that indicated a powerful magical discharge. The flung bottle slowed and then stopped in mid-air, rotating gently.

At the same time an invisible force picked Rincewind up and hurled him down the length of the room, pinning him awkwardly halfway up the far wall with no breath left in his body. He hung there with his mouth open in rage and astonishment.

Garhartra lowered his hand and brushed it slowly on his robe.

"I didn't enjoy doing that, you know," he said.

"I could tell," muttered Rincewind.

"But what do you want to sacrifice us for?" asked Twoflower. "You hardly know us!"

"That's rather the point, isn't it? It's not very good manners to sacrifice a friend. Besides, you were, um, specified. I don't know a lot about the god in question, but He was quite clear on that point. Look, I must be running along now. So much to organise, you know how it is," the Guestmaster opened the door, and then peered back around it. "Please make yourselves comfortable, and don't worry."

"But you haven't actually told us anything!" wailed Twoflower.

"It's not really worth it, is it? What with you being sacrificed in the morning," said Garhartra. "It's hardly worth the bother of knowing, really. Sleep well. Comparatively well, anyway."

He shut the door. A brief octarine flicker of balefire around it suggested that it had now been sealed beyond the skills of any earthly locksmith.

*Gling, clang, tang* went the bells along the Circumfence in the moonlit, rimfall-roaring night.

Terton, lengthman of the 45th Length, hadn't heard such a clashing since the night a giant kraken had been swept into the Fence five years ago. He leaned out of his hut, which for the lack of any convenient eyot on this Length had been built on wooden piles driven into the sea bed, and stared into the darkness. Once or twice he thought he could see movement, far off. Strictly speaking, he should row out to see what was causing the din. But here in the clammy darkness it didn't seem like an astoundingly good idea, so he slammed the door, wrapped some sacking around the madly jangling bells, and tried to get back to sleep.

That didn't work, because even the top strand of the Fence was thrumming now, as if something big and heavy was bouncing on it. After staring at the ceiling for a few minutes, and trying hard not to think of great long tentacles and pond-sized eyes, Terton blew out the lantern and opened the door a crack.

Something was coming along the Fence, in giant loping bounds that covered metres at a time. It loomed up at him and for a moment Terton saw something rectangular, multi-legged, shaggy with seaweed and - although it had absolutely no features from which he could have deduced this - it was also very angry indeed.

The hut was smashed to fragments as the monster charged through it, although Terton survived by clinging to the Circumfence; some weeks later he was picked up by a returning salvage fleet, subsequently escaped from Krull on a hijacked lens (having developed hydrophobia to an astonishing degree) and after a number of adventures eventually found his way to the Great Nef, an area of the Disc so dry that it actually has negative rainfall, which he nevertheless considered uncomfortably damp.

"Have you tried the door?"

"Yes," said Twoflower. "And it isn't any less locked than it was last time you asked. There's the window, though."

"A great way of escape," muttered Rincewind, from his perch halfway up the wall. "You said it looks out over the Edge. Just step

out, eh, and plunge through space and maybe freeze solid or hit some other world at incredible speeds or plunge wildly into the burning heart of a sun?"

"Worth a try," said Twoflower. "Want a seaweed biscuit?"

"No!"

"When are you coming down?"

Rincewind snarled. This was partly in embarrassment. Garhartra's spell had been the little-used and hard-to-master Atavarr's Personal Gravitational Upset, the practical result of which was that until it wore off Rincewind's body was convinced that "down" lay at ninety degrees to that direction normally accepted as of a downward persuasion by the majority of the Disc's inhabitants. He was in fact standing on the wall.

Meanwhile the flung bottle hung supportless in the air a few yards away. In its case time had well, not actually been stopped, but had been slowed by several orders of magnitude, and its trajectory had so far occupied several hours and a couple of inches as far as Twoflower and Rincewind were concerned. The glass gleamed in the moonlight. Rincewind sighed and tried to make himself comfortable on the wall.

"Why don't you ever worry?" he demanded petulantly. "Here we are, going to be sacrificed to some god or other in the morning, and you just sit there eating barnacle canapes."

"I expect something will turn up," said Twoflower.

"I mean, it's not as if we know why we're going to be killed," the wizard went on.

*You'd like to, would you?*

"Did you say that?" asked Rincewind.

"Say what?"

Twoflower gave him a worried look.

"I'm Twoflower," he said. "surely you remember?"

Rincewind put his head in his hands.

"It's happened at last," he moaned. "I'm going out of my mind."

*Good idea* said the voice. *It's getting pretty crowded in here.*

The spell pinning Rincewind to the wall vanished with a faint "pop." He fell forward and landed in a heap on the floor.

*Careful- you nearly squashed me.*

Rincewind struggled to his elbows and reached into the pocket of

his robe. When he withdrew his hand the green frog was sitting on it, its eyes oddly luminous in the half-light.

"Yes?" said Rincewind.

*Put me down on the floor and stand back.*

The frog blinked.

The wizard did so, and dragged a bewildered Twoflower out of the way.

The room darkened. There was a windy, roaring sound. Streamers of green, purple and octarine cloud appeared out of nowhere and began to spiral rapidly towards the recumbent amphibian, shedding small bolts of lightning as they whirled. Soon the frog was lost in a golden haze which began to elongate upwards, filling the room with a warm yellow light. Within it was a darker, indistinct shape, which wavered and changed even as they watched. And all the time there was the high, brain-curdling whine of a huge magical field...

As suddenly as it had appeared, the magical tornado vanished. And there, occupying the space where the frog had been, was a frog.

"Fantastic," said Rincewind.

The frog gazed at him reproachfully.

"Really amazing," said Rincewind sourly. "A frog magically transformed into a frog. Wondrous."

"Turn around," said a voice behind them. It was a soft, feminine voice, almost an inviting voice, the sort of voice you could have a few drinks with, but it was coming from a spot where there oughtn't to be a voice at all. They managed to turn without really moving, like a couple of statues revolving on plinths.

There was a woman standing in the pre-dawn light. She looked - she was - she had a - in point of actual fact she...

Later Rincewind and Twoflower couldn't quite agree on any single fact about her, except that she had appeared to be beautiful (precisely what physical features made her beautiful they could not, definitively, state) and that she had green eyes. Not the pale green of ordinary eyes, either these were the green of fresh emeralds and as iridescent as a dragonfly. And one of the few genuinely magical facts that Rincewind knew was that no god or goddess, contrary and volatile as they might be in all other respects, could change the colour or nature of their eyes...

"L-"he began. She raised a hand.

"You know that if you say my name I must depart," she hissed. "surely you recall that I am the one goddess who comes only when not invoked?"

"Uh. Yes, I suppose I do," croaked the wizard, trying not to look at the eyes. "You're the one they call the Lady?"

"Yes."

"Are you a goddess then?" said Twoflower excitedly. "I've always wanted to meet one."

Rincewind tensed, waiting for the explosion of rage. Instead, the Lady merely smiled.

"Your friend the wizard should introduce us," she said.

Rincewind coughed. "Uh, yar," he said. "This is Twoflower, Lady, he's a tourist-"

"-I have attended him on a number of occasions-"

"And, Twoflower, this is the Lady. Just the Lady, right? Nothing else. Don't try and give her any other name, okay?" he went on desperately, his eyes darting meaningful glances that were totally lost on the little man.

Rincewind shivered. He was not, of course, an atheist; on the Disc the gods dealt severely with atheists. On the few occasions when he had some spare change he had always made a point of dropping a few coppers into a temple coffer somewhere, on the principle that a man needed all the friends he could get. But usually he didn't bother the Gods, and he hoped the Gods wouldn't bother him. Life was quite complicated enough.

There were two gods, however, who were really terrifying. The rest of the gods were usually only sort of large-scale humans, fond of wine and war and whoring. But Fate and the Lady were chilling.

In the Gods' Quarter, in Ankh-Morpork, Fate had a small, heavy, leaden temple, where hollow-eyed and gaunt worshippers met on dark nights for their predestined-and fairly pointless rites. There were no temples at all to the Lady, although she was arguably the most powerful goddess in the entire history of Creation. A few of the more daring members of the Gamblers' Guild had once experimented with a form of worship, in the deepest cellars of Guild headquarters, and had all died of penury, murder or just Death within the week. She was the Goddess Who Must Not Be Named; those who sought her never found her, yet she was known to come to the aid of those in

greatest need. And, then again, sometimes she didn't. She was like that. She didn't like the clicking of rosaries, but was attracted to the sound of dice. No man knew what She looked like, although there were many times when a man who was gambling his life on the turn of the cards would pick up the hand he had been dealt and stare Her full in the face. Of course, sometimes he didn't. Among all the gods she was at one and the same time the most courted and the most cursed.

"We don't have gods where I come from," said Twoflower.

"You do, you know," said the Lady. "Everyone has gods. You just don't think they're gods."

Rincewind shook himself mentally.

"Look," he said. "I don't want to sound impatient, but in a few minutes some people are going to come through that door and take us away and kill us."

"Yes," said the Lady.

"I suppose you wouldn't tell us why?" said Twoflower.

"Yes," said the Lady. "The Krullians intend to launch a bronze vessel over the edge of the Disc. Their prime purpose is to learn the sex of A'tuin the World Turtle."

"Seems rather pointless," said Rincewind.

"No. Consider. One day Great A'tuin may encounter another member of the species *chelys galactica*, somewhere in the vast night in which we move. Will they fight? Will they mate? A little imagination will show you that the sex of Great A'tuin could be very important to us. At least, so the Krullians say."

Rincewind tried not to think of World Turtles mating. It wasn't completely easy.

"So," continued the goddess, "they intend to launch this ship of space, with two voyagers aboard. It will be the culmination of decades of research. It will also be very dangerous for the travellers. And so, in an attempt to reduce the risks, the Arch-astronomer of Krull has bargained with Fate to sacrifice two men at the moment of launch. Fate, in His turn, has agreed to smile on the space ship. A neat barter, is it not?"

"And we're the sacrifices," said Rincewind.

"Yes."

"I thought Fate didn't go in for that sort of bargaining. I thought

Fate was implacable," said Rincewind.

"Normally, yes. But you two have been thorns in his side for some time. He specified that the sacrifices should be you. He allowed you to escape from the pirates. He allowed you to drift into the Circumfence. Fate can be one mean god at times."

There was a pause. The frog sighed and wandered off under the table.

"But you can help us?" prompted Twoflower.

"You amuse me," said the Lady. "I have a sentimental streak. You'd know that, if you were gamblers. So for a little while I rode in a frog's mind and you kindly rescued me, for, as we all know, no-one likes to see pathetic and helpless creatures swept to their death."

"Thank you," said Rincewind.

"The whole mind of Fate is bent against you," said the Lady. "But all I can do is give you one chance. Just one, small chance. The rest is up to you."

She vanished.

"Gosh," said Twoflower, after a while. "That's the first time I've ever seen a goddess."

The door swung open. Garhartra entered, holding a wand in front of him. Behind him were two guards, armed more conventionally with swords.

"Ah," he said conversationally. "You are ready, I see."

*Ready*, said a voice inside Rincewind's head.

The bottle that the wizard had flung some eight hours earlier had been hanging in the air, imprisoned by magic in its own personal time-field. But during all those hours the original mana of the spell had been slowly leaking away until the total magical energy was no longer sufficient to hold it against the Universe's own powerful normality field, and when that happened Reality snapped back in a matter of microseconds. The visible sign of this was that the bottle suddenly completed the last part of its parabola and burst against the side of the Guestmaster's head, showering the guards with glass and jellyfish wine.

Rincewind grabbed Twoflower's arm, kicked the nearest guard in the groin, and dragged the startled tourist into the corridor. Before the stunned Garhartra had sunk to the floor his two guests were already pounding across distant flagstones.

Rincewind skidded around a corner and found himself on a balcony that ran around the four sides of a courtyard. Below them, most of the floor of the yard was taken up by an ornamental pond in which a few terrapins sunbathed among the lily leaves.

And ahead of Rincewind were a couple of very surprised wizards wearing the distinctive dark blue and black robes of trained hydrophobes. One of them, quicker on the uptake than his companion, raised a hand and began the first words of a spell.

There was a short sharp noise by Rincewind's side. Twoflower had spat. The hydrophobe screamed and dropped his hand as though it had been stung.

The other didn't have time to move before Rincewind was on him, fists swinging wildly. One stiff punch with the weight of terror behind it sent the man tumbling over the balcony rail and into the pond, which did a very strange thing; the water smacked aside as though a large invisible balloon had been dropped into it, and the hydrophobe hung screaming in his own revulsion field.

Twoflower watched him in amazement until Rincewind snatched at his shoulder and indicated a likely looking passage. They hurried down it, leaving the remaining hydrophobe writhing on the floor and snatching at his damp hand. For a while there was some shouting behind them, but they scuttled along a cross corridor and another courtyard and soon left the sounds of pursuit behind. Finally Rincewind picked a safe looking door, peered around it, found the room beyond to be unoccupied, dragged Twoflower inside, and slammed it behind him. Then he leaned against it, wheezing horribly.

"We're totally lost in a palace on an island we haven't a hope of leaving," he panted. "And what's more we- hey!" he finished, as the sight of the contents of the room filtered up his deranged optic nerves.

Twoflower was already staring at the walls.

Because what was so odd about the room was, it contained the whole Universe.

Death sat in His garden, running a whetstone along the edge of His scythe. It was already so sharp that any passing breeze that blew across it was sliced smoothly into two puzzled zephyrs, although

breezes were rare indeed in Death's silent garden. It lay on a sheltered plateau overlooking the Disc world's complex dimensions, and behind it loomed the cold, still, immensely high and brooding mountains of Eternity.

Swish! went the stone. Death hummed a dirge, and tapped one bony foot on the frosty flagstones.

Someone approached through the dim orchard where the nightapples grew, and there came the sickly sweet smell of crushed lilies. Death looked up angrily, and found Himself staring into eyes that were black as the inside of a cat and full of distant stars that had no counterpart among the familiar constellations of the Realtime universe.

Death and Fate looked at each other. Death grinned - He had no alternative, of course, being made of implacable bone. The whetstone sang rhythmically along the blade as He continued His task.

"I have a task for you," said Fate. His words drifted across death's scythe and split tidily into two ribbons of consonants and vowels.

I HAVE TASKS ENOUGH THIS DAY, said Death in a voice as heavy as neutronium, THE WHITE PLAGUE ABIDES EVEN NOW IN PSEUDOPOLIS AND I AM BOUND THERE TO RESCUE MANY OF ITS CITIZENS FROM HIS GRASP. SUCH A ONE HAS NOT BEEN SEEN THESE HUNDRED YEARS. I AM EXPECTED TO STALK THE STREETS, AS IS MY DUTY.

"I refer to the matter of the little wanderer and the rogue wizard," said Fate softly, seating himself beside Death's black-robed form and staring down at the, distant, multifaceted jewel which was the Disc universe as seen from this extra-dimensional vantage point.

The scythe ceased its song.

"They die in a few hours," said Fate. "It is fated."

Death stirred, and the stone began to move again.

"I thought you would be pleased," said Fate.

Death shrugged, a particularly expressive gesture for someone whose visible shape was that of a skeleton.

I DID INDEED CHASE THEM MIGHTILY. ONCE, he said, BUT AT LAST THE THOUGHT CAME TO ME THAT SOONER OR LATER ALL MEN MUST DIE. EVERYTHING DIES IN THE END. I CAN BE ROBBED BUT NEVER DENIED, I TOLD MYSELF. WHY WORRY?

"I too cannot be cheated," snapped Fate.

SO I HAVE HEARD, said Death, still grinning.

"Enough!" shouted Fate, jumping to his feet. "They will die!" He vanished in a sheet of blue fire.

Death nodded to Himself and continued at His work. After some minutes the edge of the blade seemed to be finished to His satisfaction. He stood up and levelled the scythe at the fat and noisome candle that burned on the edge of the bench and then, with two deft sweeps, cut the flame into three bright slivers. Death grinned.

A short while later he was saddling his white stallion, which lived in a stable at the back of Death's cottage. The beast snuffled at him in a friendly fashion; though it was crimson-eyed and had flanks like oiled silk, it was nevertheless a real flesh-and-blood horse and, indeed, was in all probability better treated than most beasts of burden on the Disc. Death was not an unkind master. He weighed very little and, although He often rode back with His saddlebags bulging, they weighed nothing whatsoever.

"All those worlds!" said Twoflower. "It's fantastic!"

Rincewind grunted, and continued to prowl warily around the star-filled room. Twoflower turned to a complicated astrolabe, in the centre of which was the entire Great A'Tuin-Elephant-Disc system wrought in brass and picked out with tiny jewels. Around it stars and planets wheeled on fine silver wires.

"Fantastic!" he said again. On the walls around him constellations made of tiny phosphorescent seed pearls had been picked out on vast tapestries made of jet-black velvet, giving the room's occupants the impression of floating in the interstellar gulf. Various easels held huge sketches of Great A'Tuin as viewed from various parts of the Circumfence, with every mighty scale and cratered pock-mark meticulously marked in. Twoflower stared about him with a faraway look in his eyes.

Rincewind was deeply troubled. What troubled him most of all were the two suits that hung from supports in the centre of the room. He circled them uneasily.

They appeared to be made of fine white leather, hung about with

straps and brass nozzles and other highly unfamiliar and suspicious contrivances. The leggings ended in high, thick-soled boots, and the arms were shoved into big supple gauntlets. Strangest of all were the big copper helmets that were obviously supposed to fit on heavy collars around the neck of the suits. The helmets were almost certainly useless for protection a light sword would have no difficulty in splitting them, even if it didn't hit the ridiculous little glass windows in the front. Each helmet had a crest of white feathers on top, which went absolutely no way at all towards improving their overall appearance.

Rincewind was beginning to have the glimmerings of a suspicion about those suits.

In front of them was a table covered with celestial charts and scraps of parchment covered with figures. Whoever would be wearing those suits, Rincewind decided, was expecting to boldly go where no man - other than the occasional luckless sailor, who didn't really count - had boldly gone before, and he was now beginning to get not just a suspicion but a horrible premonition.

He turned round and found Twoflower looking at him with a speculative expression.

"No- began Rincewind, urgently. Twoflower ignored him.

"The goddess said two men were going to be sent over the Edge," he said, his eyes gleaming, "and you remember Tethis the troll saying you'd need some kind of protection? The Krullians have got over that. These are suits of space armour."

"They don't look very roomy to me," said Rincewind hurriedly, and grabbed the tourist by the arm, "so if you'd just come on, no sense in staying here-"

"Why must you always panic?" asked Twoflower petulantly.

"Because the whole of my future life just flashed in front of my eyes, and it didn't take very long, and if you don't move now I'm going to leave without you because any second now you're going to suggest that we put on-"

The door opened.

Two husky young men stepped into the room. All they were wearing was a pair of woollen pants apiece. One of them was still towelling himself briskly. They both nodded at the two escapees with no apparent surprise.

The taller of the two men sat down on one of the benches in front of the seats. He beckoned to Rincewind, and said:

"?Tyo yur atl ho sooten gatrunen?"

And this was awkward, because although Rincewind considered himself an expert in most of the tongues of the western segments of the Disc it was the first time that he had ever been addressed in Krullian, and he did not understand one word of it. Neither did Twoflower, but that did not stop him stepping forward and taking a breath.

The speed of light through a magical aura such as the one that surrounded the Disc was quite slow, being not much faster than the speed of sound in less highly-tuned universes. But it was still the fastest thing around with the exception, in moments like this, of Rincewind's mind.

In an instant he became aware that the tourist was about to try his own peculiar brand of linguistics, which meant that he would speak loudly and slowly in his own language.

Rincewind's elbow shot back, knocking the breath from Twoflower's body. When the little man looked up in pain and astonishment Rincewind caught his eye and pulled an imaginary tongue out of his mouth and cut it with an imaginary pair of scissors.

The second chelonaut- for such was the profession of the men whose fate it would shortly be to voyage to Great A'Tuin - looked up from the chart table and watched this in puzzlement. His big heroic brow wrinkled with the effort of speech.

"?Hor yu latruin nor u?" he said.

Rincewind smiled and nodded and pushed Twoflower in his general direction. With an inward sigh of relief he saw the tourist pay sudden attention to a big brass telescope that lay on the table.

"! Sooten u!" commanded the seated chelonaut. Rincewind nodded and smiled and took one of the big copper helmets from the rack and brought it down on the man's head as hard as he possibly could. The chelonaut fell forward with a soft grunt.

The other man took one startled step before Twoflower hit him amateurishly but effectively with the telescope. He crumpled on top of his colleague.

Rincewind and Twoflower looked at each other over the carnage.

"All right!" snapped Rincewind, aware that he had lost some kind

of contest but not entirely certain what it was. "Don't bother to say it. Someone out there is expecting these two guys to come out in the suits in a minute. I suppose they thought we were slaves. Help me hide these behind the drapes and then, and then-"

"-e'd better suit up," said Twoflower, picking up the second helmet.

"Yes," said Rincewind. "You know, as soon as I saw the suits I just knew I'd end up wearing one. Don't ask me how I knew - I suppose it was because it was just about the worst possible thing that was likely to happen."

"Well, you said yourself we have no way of escaping," said Twoflower, his voice muffled as he pulled the top half of a suit over his head. "Anything's better than being sacrificed."

"As soon as we get a chance we run for it," said Rincewind. "Don't get any ideas."

He thrust an arm savagely into his suit and banged his head on the helmet. He reflected briefly that someone up there was watching over him.

"Thanks a lot," he said bitterly.

At the very edge of the city and country of Krull was a large semicircular amphitheatre, with seating for several tens of thousands of people. The arena was only semi-circular for the very elegant reason that it overlooked the cloud sea that boiled up from the Rimfall, far below, and now every seat was occupied. And the crowd was growing restive. It had come to see a double sacrifice and also the launching of the great bronze space ship. Neither event had yet materialised.

The Arch-astronomer beckoned the Master Launchcontroller to him.

"Well?" he said, filling a mere four letters with a full lexicon of anger and menace. The Master Launchcontroller went pale.

"No news, lord," said the Launchcontroller, and added with a brittle brightness, "except that your prominence will be pleased to hear that Garhartra has recovered."

"That is a fact he may come to regret," said the Arch-astronomer.

"Yes, lord."

"How much longer do we have?"

The Launchcontroller glanced at the rapidly-climbing sun.

"Thirty minutes, your prominence. After that Krull will have revolved away from Great A'Tuin's tail and the Potent Voyager will be doomed to spin away into the interterrapene gulf. I have already set the automatic controls, so-

"All right, all right," the Arch-astronomer said, waving him away. "The launch must go ahead. Maintain the watch on the harbour, of course. When the wretched pair are caught I will personally take a great deal of pleasure in executing them myself."

"Yes, lord. Er-

The Arch-astronomer frowned. "What else have you got to say, man?"

The Launchcontroller swallowed. All this was very unfair on him, he was a practical magician rather than a diplomat, and that was why some wiser brains had seen to it that he would be the one to pass on the news.

"A monster has come out of the sea and it's attacking the ships in the harbour," he said. "A runner just arrived from there."

"A big monster?" said the Arch-astronomer.

"Not particularly, although it is said to be exceptionally fierce, lord."

The ruler of Krull and the Circumfence considered this for a moment, then shrugged.

"The sea is full of monsters," he said. "It is one of its prime attributes. Have it dealt with. And-Master Launchcontroller?"

"Lord?"

"If I am further vexed, you will recall that two people are due to be sacrificed. I may feel generous and increase the number."

"Yes, lord. The Master Launchcontroller scuttled away, relieved to be out of the autocrat's sight.

The Potent Voyager, no longer the blank bronze shell that had been smashed from the mould a few days earlier, rested in its cradle on top of a wooden tower in the centre of the arena. In front of it a railway ran down towards the Edge, where for the space of a few yards it turned suddenly upwards.

The late Dactylos Goldeneyes, who had designed the launching pad as well as the Potent Voyager itself, had claimed that this last

touch was merely to ensure that the ship would not snag on any rocks as it began its long plunge. Maybe it was merely coincidental that it would also, because of that little twitch in the track, leap like a salmon and shine theatrically in the sunlight before disappearing into the cloud sea.

There was a fanfare of trumpets at the edge of the arena. The chelonauts' honour guard appeared, to much cheering from the crowd. Then the whitesuited explorers themselves stepped out into the light.

It immediately dawned on the Arch-astronomer that something was wrong. Heroes always walked in a certain way, for example. They certainly didn't waddle, and one of the chelonauts was definitely waddling.

The roar of the assembled people of Krull was deafening. As the chelonauts and their guards crossed the great arena, passing between the many altars that had been set up for the various wizards and priests of Krull's many sects to ensure the success of the launch, the Arch-astronomer frowned. By the time the party was halfway across the floor his mind had reached a conclusion. By the time the chelonauts were standing at the foot of the ladder that led to the ship- and was there more than a hint of reluctance about them? - the Arch-astronomer was on his feet, his words lost in the noise of the crowd. One of his arms shot out and back fingers spread dramatically in the traditional spell-casting position, and any passing lip-reader who was also familiar with the standard texts on magic would have recognized the opening words of Vestcake's Floating Curse, and would then have prudently run away.

Its final words remained unsaid, however. The Arch-astronomer turned in astonishment as a commotion broke out around the big arched entrance to the arena. Guards were running out into the daylight, throwing down their weapons as they scuttled among the altars or vaulted the parapet into the stands.

Something emerged behind them, and the crowd around the entrance ceased its raucous cheering and began a silent, determined scramble to get out of the way.

The something was a low dome of seaweed, moving slowly but with a sinister sense of purpose. One guard overcame his horror sufficiently to stand in its path and hurl his spear, which landed

squarely among the weeds. The crowd cheered then went deathly silent as the dome surged forward and engulfed the man completely.

The Arch-astronomer dismissed the half-formed shape of Vestcake's famous Curse with a sharp wave of his hand, and quickly spoke the words of one of the most powerful spells in his repertoire: the Infernal Combustion Enigma.

Octarine fire spiralled around and between his fingers as he shaped the complex rune of the spell in mid-air and sent it, screaming and trailing blue smoke, towards the shape.

There was a satisfying explosion and a gout of flame shot up into the clear morning sky, shedding flakes of burning seaweed on the way. A cloud of smoke and steam concealed the monster for several minutes, and when it cleared the dome had completely disappeared.

There was a large charred circle on the flagstones, however, in which a few clumps of kelp and bladderwrack still smouldered.

And in the centre of the circle was a perfectly ordinary, if somewhat large, wooden chest. It was not even scorched. Someone on the far side of the arena started to laugh, but the sound was broken off abruptly as the chest rose up on dozens of what could only be legs and turned to face the Arch-astronomer. A perfectly ordinary if somewhat large wooden chest does not, of course, have a face with which to face, but this one was quite definitely facing. In precisely the same way as he understood that, the Arch-astronomer was also horribly aware that this perfectly normal box was in some indescribable way narrowing its eyes.

It began to move resolutely towards him. He shuddered.

"Magicians!" he screamed. "Where are my magicians?"

Around the arena pale-faced men peeped out from behind altars and under benches. One of the bolder ones, seeing the expression on the Arch-astronomer's face, raised an arm tremulously and essayed a hasty thunderbolt. It hissed towards the chest and struck it squarely in a shower of white sparks.

That was the signal for every magician, enchanter and thaumaturgist in Krull to leap up eagerly and, under the terrified eyes of their master, unleash the first spell that came to each desperate mind. Charms curved and whistled through the air.

Soon the chest was lost to view again in an expanding cloud of magical particles, which billowed out and wreathed it in twisting,

disquieting shapes. Spell after spell screamed into the melee. Flame and lightning bolts of all eight colours stabbed out brightly from the seething thing that now occupied the space where the box had been.

Not since the Mage Wars had so much magic been concentrated on one small area. The air itself wavered and glittered. Spell ricocheted off spell, creating short-lived wild spells whose brief half-life was both weird and uncontrolled. The stones under the heaving mass began to buckle and split. One of them in fact turned into something best left undescribed and slunk off into some dismal dimension. Other strange side-effects began to manifest themselves. A shower of small lead cubes bounced out of the storm and rolled across the heaving floor, and eldritch shapes gibbered and beckoned obscenely; four-sided triangles and double-ended circles existed momentarily before merging again into the booming, screaming tower of runaway raw magic that boiled up from the molten flagstones and spread out over Krull. It no longer mattered that most of the magicians had ceased their spell casting and fled - the thing was now feeding on the stream of octarine particles that were always at their thickest near the Edge of the Disc. Throughout the island of Krull every magical activity failed as all the available mana in the area was sucked into the cloud, which was already a quarter of a mile high and streaming out into mind-curdling shapes; hydrophobes on their seaskimming lenses crashed screaming into the waves, magic potions turned to mere impure water in their phials, magic swords melted and dripped from their scabbards.

But none of this in any way prevented the thing at the base of the cloud, now gleaming mirrorbright in the intensity of the power storm around it, from moving at a steady walking pace towards the Arch-astronomer.

Rincewind and Twoflower watched in awe from the shelter of Potent Voyager's launch tower. The honour party had long since vanished, leaving their weapons scattered behind them.

"Well," sighed Twoflower at last, "there goes the Luggage." He sighed.

"Don't you believe it," said Rincewind. "sapient pearwood is totally impervious to all known forms of magic. It's been constructed to follow you anywhere. I mean, when you die, if you go to Heaven, you'll at least have a clean pair of socks in the afterlife. But I don't

want to die yet, so let's just get going, shall we?"

"Where?" said Twoflower.

Rincewind picked up a crossbow and a handful of quarrels. "Anywhere that isn't here," he said.

"What about the Luggage?"

"Don't worry. When the storm has used up all the free magic in the vicinity it'll just die out."

In fact that was already beginning to happen. The billowing cloud was still flowing up from the area but now it had a tenuous, harmless look about it. Even as Twoflower stared, it began to flicker uncertainly.

Soon it was a pale ghost. The luggage was now visible as a squat shape among the almost invisible flames. Around it the rapidly cooling stones began to crack and buckle.

Twoflower called softly to his luggage. It stopped its stolid progression across the tortured flags and appeared to be listening intently; then, moving its dozens of feet in an intricate pattern, it turned on its length and headed towards the Potent Voyager. Rincewind watched it sourly. The Luggage had an elemental nature, absolutely no brain, a homicidal attitude towards anything that threatened its master, and he wasn't quite sure that its inside occupied the same space-time framework as its outside.

"Not a mark on it," said Twoflower cheerfully, as the box settled down in front of him. He pushed open the lid.

"This is a fine time to change your underwear," snarled Rincewind. "In a minute all those guards and priests are going to come back, and they're going to be upset, man!"

"Water," murmured Twoflower. "The whole box is full of water!"

Rincewind peered over his shoulder. There was no sign of clothes, moneybags, or any other of the tourist's belongings. The whole box was full of water.

A wave sprang up from nowhere and lapped over the edge. It hit the flagstones but, instead of spreading out, began to take the shape of-a foot. Another foot and the bottom half of a pair of legs followed as more water streamed down as if filling an invisible mould. A moment later Tethis the sea troll was standing in front of them, blinking.

"I see," he said at last. "You two. I suppose I shouldn't be

surprised."

He looked around, ignoring their astonished expressions.

"I was just sitting outside my hut, watching the sun set, when this thing came roaring up out of the water and swallowed me," he said. "I thought it was rather strange. Where is this place?"

"Krull," said Rincewind. He stared hard at the now closed luggage, which was managing to project a smug expression. Swallowing people was something it did quite frequently, but always when the lid was next opened there was nothing inside but Twoflower's laundry. Savagely he wrenched the lid up. There was nothing inside but Twoflower's laundry. It was perfectly dry.

"Well, well," said Tethis. He looked up.

"Hey!" he said. "Isn't this the ship they're going to send over the Edge? Isn't it? It must be!"

An arrow zipped through his chest, leaving a faint ripple. He didn't appear to notice. Rincewind did. Soldiers were beginning to appear at the edge of the arena, and a number of them were peering around the entrances.

Another arrow bounced off the tower behind Twoflower. At this range the bolts did not have a lot of force, but it would only be a matter of time...

"Quick!" said Twoflower. "Into the ship! They won't dare fire at that!"

"I knew you were going to suggest that," groaned Rincewind. "I just knew it!"

He aimed a kick at the Luggage. It backed off a few inches, and opened its lid threateningly.

A spear arced out of the sky and trembled to a halt in the woodwork by the wizard's ear. He screamed briefly and scrambled up the ladder after the others.

Arrows whistled around them as they came out on to the narrow catwalk that led along the spine of the Potent Voyager. Twoflower led the way, jogging along with what Rincewind considered to be too much suppressed excitement.

Atop the centre of the ship was a large round bronze hatch with hasps around it. The troll and the tourist knelt down and started to work on them.

In the heart of the Potent Voyager fine sand had been trickling into a carefully designed cup for several hours. Now the cup was filled by exactly the right amount to dip down and upset a carefully-balanced weight. The weight swung away, pulling a pin from an intricate little mechanism. A chain began to move. There was a clonk...

"What was that?" said Rincewind urgently. He looked down.

The hail of arrows had stopped. The crowd of priests and soldiers were standing motionless, staring intently at the ship. A small worried man elbowed his way through them and started to shout something.

"What was what?" said Twoflower, busy with a wing-nut.

"I thought I heard something," said Rincewind.

"Look," he said, "we'll threaten to damage the thing if they don't let us go, right? That's all we're going to do, right?"

"Yah," said Twoflower vaguely. He sat back on his heels. "That's it," he said. "It ought to lift off now."

Several muscular men were swarming up the ladder to the ship. Rincewind recognized the two chelonauts among them. They were carrying swords.

"I-" he began.

The ship lurched. Then, with infinite slowness, it began to move along the rails.

In that moment of black horror Rincewind saw that Twoflower and the troll had managed to pull the hatch up. A metal ladder inside led into the cabin below. The troll disappeared.

"We've got to get off," whispered Rincewind.

Twoflower looked at him, a strange mad smile on his face. "Stars," said the tourist. "Worlds. The whole damn sky full of worlds. Places no-one will ever see. Except me." He stepped through the hatchway.

"You're totally mad," said Rincewind hoarsely, trying to keep his balance as the ship began to speed up. He turned as one of the chelonauts tried to leap the gap between the Voyager and the tower, landed on the curving flank of the ship, scabbled for an instant for purchase, failed to find any, and dropped away with a shriek.

The Voyager was travelling quite fast now. Rincewind could see past Twoflower's head to the sunlit cloud sea and the impossible

Rimbow, floating tantalisingly beyond it, beckoning fools to venture too far...

He also saw a gang of men climbing desperately over the lower slopes of the launching ramp and manhandling a large baulk of timber on to the track, in a frantic attempt to derail the ship before it vanished over the Edge. The wheels slammed into it, but the only effect was to make the ship rock, Twoflower to lose his grip on the ladder and fall into the cabin, and the hatch to slam down with the horrible sound of a dozen fiddly little catches snapping into place. Rincewind dived forward and scrabbled at them, whimpering.

The cloud sea was much nearer now. The Edge itself, a rocky perimeter to the arena, was startlingly close.

Rincewind stood up. There was only one thing to do now, and he did it. He panicked blindly, just as the ship's bogeys hit the little upgrade and flung it sparkling like a salmon, into the sky and over the Edge.

A few seconds later there was a thunder of little feet and the Luggage cleared the rim of the world, legs still pumping determinedly, and plunged down into the Universe.

## **THE END**

Rincewind woke up and shivered. He was freezing cold.

So this is it, he thought. When you die you go to a cold, damp, misty freezing place. Hades, where the mournful spirits of the Dead troop forever across the sorrowful marshes, corpse-lights flickering fitfully in the encircling-hang on a minute...

Surely Hades wasn't this uncomfortable? And he was very uncomfortable indeed. His back ached where a branch was pressing into it, his legs and arms hurt where the twigs had lacerated them and, judging by the way his head was feeling, something hard had recently hit it. If this was Hades it sure was hell-hang on a minute...

Tree. He concentrated on the word that floated up from his mind, although the buzzing in his ears and the flashing lights in front of his eyes made this an unexpected achievement. Tree. Wooden thing. That was it. Branches and twigs and things. And Rincewind, lying in it. Tree. Dripping wet. Cold white cloud all around. Underneath, too. Now that was odd.

He was alive and lying covered in bruises in a small thorn tree that was growing in a crevice in a rock that projected out of the foaming white wall that was the Rimfall. The realization hit him in much the same way as an icy hammer. He shuddered. The tree gave a warning creak.

Something blue and blurred shot past him, dipped briefly into the thundering waters, and whirred back and settled on a branch near Rincewind's head. It was a small bird with a tuft of blue and green feathers. It swallowed the little silver fish that it had snatched from the Fall and eyed him curiously.

Rincewind became aware that there were lots of similar birds around.

They hovered, darted and swooped easily across the face of the water, and every so often one would raise an extra plume of spray as it stole another doomed morsel from the waterfall. Several of them were perching in the tree. They were as iridescent as jewels. Rincewind was entranced.

He was in fact the first man ever to see the rimfishers, the tiny creatures who had long ago evolved a lifestyle quite unique even for the Disc. long before the Krullians had built the Circumfence the rimfishers had devised their own efficient method of policing the edge of the world for a living.

They didn't seem bothered about Rincewind. He had a brief but chilling vision of himself living the rest of his life out in this tree, subsisting on raw birds and such fish as he could snatch as they plummeted past.

The tree moved distinctly. Rincewind gave a whimper as he found himself sliding backwards, but managed to grab a branch. Only, sooner or later, he would fall asleep...

There was a subtle change of scene, a slight purplish tint to the sky. A tall, black-cloaked figure was standing on the air next to the tree. It had a scythe in one hand. Its face was hidden in the shadows of the hood.

I HAVE COME FOR THEE, said the invisible mouth, in tones as heavy as a whale's heartbeat.

The trunk of the tree gave another protesting creak, and a pebble bounced off Rincewind's helmet as one root tore loose from the rock.

Death Himself always came in person to harvest the souls of

wizards.

"What am I going to die of?" said Rincewind.

The tall figure hesitated.

PARDON? it said.

"Well, I haven't broken anything, and I haven't drowned, so what am I about to die of? You can't just be killed by Death; there has to be a reason," said Rincewind.

To his utter amazement he didn't feel terrified any more. For about the first time in his life he wasn't frightened. Pity the experience didn't look like lasting for long.

Death appeared to reach a conclusion.

YOU COULD DIE OF TERROR, the hood intoned. The voice still had its graveyard ring, but there was a slight tremor of uncertainty.

"Won't work," said Rincewind smugly.

THERE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A REASON, said Death, I CAN JUST KILL YOU.

"Hey, you can't do that! It'd be murder!"

The cowed figure sighed and pulled back its hood. Instead of the grinning death's head that Rincewind had been expecting he found himself looking up into the pale and slightly transparent face of a rather worried demon, of sorts.

"I'm making rather a mess of this, aren't I?" it said wearily.

"You're not Death! Who are you?" cried Rincewind.

"Scrofula."

"Scrofula?"

"Death couldn't come," said the demon wretchedly. "There's a big plague on in Pseudopolis. He had to go and stalk the streets. So he sent me."

"No-one dies of scrofula! I've got rights. I'm a wizard!"

"All right, all right. This was going to be my big chance," said Scrofula, "but look at it this way - if I hit you with this scythe you'll be just as dead as you would be if Death had done it. Who'd know?"

"I'd know!" snapped Rincewind.

"You wouldn't. You'd be dead," said Scrofula logically.

"Piss off," said Rincewind.

"That's all very well," said the demon, hefting the scythe, "but why not try to see things from my point of view? This means a lot to me, and you've got to admit that your life isn't all that wonderful.

Reincarnation can only be an improvement- uh."

His hand flew to his mouth but Rincewind was already pointing a trembling finger at him.

"Reincarnation!" he said excitedly. "So it is true what the mystics say!"

"I'm admitting nothing," said Scrofula testily. "It was a slip of the tongue. Now-are you going to die willingly or not?"

"No," said Rincewind.

"Please yourself," replied the demon. He raised the scythe. It whistled down in quite a professional way, but Rincewind wasn't there. He was in fact several metres below, and the distance was increasing all the time, because the branch had chosen that moment to snap and send him on his interrupted journey towards the interstellar gulf.

"Come back!" screamed the demon.

Rincewind didn't answer. He was lying belly down in the rushing air, staring down into the clouds that even now were thinning.

They vanished.

Below, the whole Universe twinkled at Rincewind. There was Great A'Tuin, huge and ponderous and pocked with craters. There was the little Disc moon. There was a distant gleam that could only be the Potent Voyager. And there were all the stars, looking remarkably like powdered diamonds spilled on black velvet, the stars that lured and ultimately called the boldest towards them...

The whole of Creation was waiting for Rincewind to drop in. He did so. There didn't seem to be any alternative.