THROUGH THE SHREDDED black clouds a fire moved like a dying star, falling back to earth—

—the earth, that is, of the Discworld—

—but unlike any star had ever done before, it sometimes managed to steer its fall, sometimes rising, sometimes twisting, but inevitably heading down.

Snow glowed briefly on the mountain slopes when it crackled overhead.

Under it, the land itself started to fall away. The fire was reflected off walls of blue ice as the light dropped into the beginnings of a canyon and thundered now through its twists and turns.

The light snapped off. Something still glided down the moonlit ribbon between the rocks.

It shot out of the canyon at the top of a cliff, where meltwater from a glacier plunged down into a distant pool.

Against all reason there was a valley here, or a network of valleys, clinging to the edge of the mountains before the long fall to the plains. A small lake gleamed in the warmer air. There were forests. There were tiny fields, like a patchwork quilt thrown across the rocks.

The wind had died. The air was warmer.

The shadow began to circle.

Far below, unheeded and unheeding, something else was entering this little handful of valleys. It was hard to see exactly what it was; furze rippled, heather rustled, as if a very large army made of very small creatures was moving with one purpose.

The shadow reached a flat rock that offered a magnificent view of the fields and wood below, and *there* the army came out from among the roots. It was made up of very small blue men, some wearing pointy blue caps but most of them with their red hair uncovered. They carried swords. None of them was more than six inches high.

They lined up and looked down into the new place and then, weapons waving, raised a battle cry. It would have been more impressive if they'd agreed on one before, but as it was it sounded as though every single small warrior had a battle cry of his very own and would fight anyone who tried to take it away from him.

'Nac mac Feegle!'

'Ach, stickit yer trakkans!'

'Gie you sich a kickin'!'

'Bigjobs!'

'Dere c'n onlie be whin t'ousand!'

'Nac mac Feegle wha hae!'

'Wha hae yersel, ya boggin!'

The little cup of valleys, glowing in the last shreds of evening sunlight, was the kingdom of Lancre. From its highest points, people said, you could see all the way to the rim of the world.

It was also said, although not by the people who lived in Lancre, that *below* the rim, where the seas

thundered continuously over the edge, their home went through space on the back of four huge elephants that in turn stood on the shell of a turtle that was as big as the world.

The people of Lancre had heard of this. They thought it sounded about right. The world was obviously flat, although in Lancre itself the only truly flat places were tables and the top of some people's heads, and certainly turtles could shift a fair load. Elephants, by all accounts, were pretty strong too. There didn't seem any major gaps in the thesis, so Lancrastians left it at that.

It wasn't that they didn't take an interest in the world around them. On the contrary, they had a deep, personal and passionate involvement in it, but instead of asking, 'Why are we here?' they asked, 'Is it going to rain before the harvest?'

A philosopher might have deplored this lack of mental ambition, but only if he was *really certain* about where his next meal was coming from.

In fact Lancre's position and climate bred a hard-headed and straightforward people who often excelled in the world down below. It had supplied the plains with many of their greatest wizards and witches and, once again, the philosopher might have marvelled that such a four-square people could give the world so many successful magical practitioners, being quite unaware that only those with their feet on rock can build castles in the air.

And so the sons and daughters of Lancre went off into the world, carved out careers, climbed the various ladders of achievement, and always

remembered to send money home.

Apart from noting the return addresses on the envelope, those who stayed didn't think much about the world outside.

The world outside thought about them, though.

The big flat-topped rock was deserted now, but on the moor below, the heather trembled in a v-shape heading towards the lowlands.

'Gin's a haddie!'

'Nac mac Feegle!'

There are many kinds of vampires. Indeed, it is said that there are as many kinds of vampires as there are types of disease.* And they're not just human (if vampires are human). All along the Ramtops may be found the belief that any apparently innocent tool, be it hammer or saw, will seek blood if left unused for more than three years. In Ghat they believe in vampire watermelons, although folklore is silent about *what* they believe about vampire watermelons. Possibly they suck back.

Two things have traditionally puzzled vampire researchers. One is: why do vampires have so much *power*? Vampires're so easy to kill, they point out. There are *dozens* of ways to despatch them, quite apart from the stake through the heart, which also works on normal people so if you have any stakes left over you don't have to waste them. Classically, they spent the day in some coffin somewhere, with no

*Which presumably means that some are virulent and deadly, and others just make you walk in a funny way and avoid fruit.

guard other than an elderly hunchback who doesn't look all that spry, and should succumb to quite a small mob. Yet just one can keep a whole community in a state of sullen obedience . . .

The other puzzle is: why are vampires always so stupid? As if wearing evening dress all day wasn't an undead giveaway, why do they choose to live in old castles which offer so much in the way of ways to defeat a vampire, like easily torn curtains and wall decorations that can readily be twisted into a religious symbol? Do they *really* think that spelling their name backwards fools anyone?

A coach rattled across the moorlands, many miles away from Lancre. From the way it bounced over the ruts, it was travelling light. But darkness came with it.

The horses were black, and so was the coach, except for the coat of arms on the doors. Each horse had a black plume between its ears; there was a black plume at each corner of the coach as well. Perhaps these caused the coach's strange effect of travelling shadow. It seemed to be dragging the night behind it.

On the top of the moor, where a few trees grew out of the rubble of a ruined building, it creaked to a halt.

The horses stood still, occasionally stamping a hoof or tossing their heads. The coachman sat hunched over the reins, waiting.

Four figures flew just above the clouds, in the silvery moonlight. By the sound of their conversation someone was annoyed, although the sharp unpleasant tone to the voice suggested that a better word might be 'vexed'.

'You let it get *away*!' This voice had a whine to it, the voice of a chronic complainer.

'It *was* wounded, Lacci.' *This* voice sounded conciliatory, parental, but with just a hint of a repressed desire to give the first voice a thick ear.

'I really *hate* those things. They're so . . . soppy!'

'Yes, dear. A symbol of a credulous past.'

'If *I* could burn like that I wouldn't skulk around just looking pretty. Why do they do it?'

'It must have been of use to them at one time, I suppose.'

'Then they're . . . what did you call them?'

'An evolutionary cul-de-sac, Lacci. A marooned survivor on the seas of progress.'

'Then I'm doing them a favour by killing them?'

'Yes, that is a point. Now, shall—'

'After all, chickens don't burn,' said the voice called Lacci. 'Not easily, anyway.'

'We heard you experiment. Killing them first might have been a good idea.' This was a third voice – young, male, and also somewhat weary with the female. It had 'older brother' harmonics on every syllable.

'What's the point in that?'

'Well, dear, it would have been quieter.'

'Listen to your father, dear.' And this, the fourth voice, could only be a mother's voice. It'd love the other voices whatever they did.

'You're *so* unfair!'

'We did let you drop rocks on the pixies, dear. Life can't be all fun.'

The coachman stirred as the voices descended through the clouds. And then four figures were standing a little way off. He clambered down and, with difficulty, opened the coach door as they approached.

'Most of the wretched things got away, though,' said Mother.

'Never mind, my dear,' said Father.

'I really hate them. Are they a dead end too?' said Daughter.

'Not quite dead enough as yet, despite your valiant efforts. Igor! On to Lancre.'

The coachman turned.

'Yeth, marthter.'

'Oh, for the last time, man . . . is that any way to talk?'

'It'th the only way I know, marthter,' said Igor.

'And I told you to take the plumes off the coach, you idiot.'

The coachman shifted uneasily.

'Gotta have black plumeth, marthter. It'th *tradithional*.'

'Remove them at once!' Mother commanded. 'What *will* people think?'

'Yeth, mithtreth.'

The one addressed as Igor slammed the door and lurched back around to the horse. He removed the plumes reverentially and placed them under his seat.

Inside the coach the vexed voice said, 'Is Igor an evolutionary dead end too, Father?'

'We can but hope, dear.'

'Thod,' said Igor to himself, as he picked up the reins.

The wording began:

'*You are cordially invited . . .*'

. . . and was in that posh runny writing that was hard to read but ever so official.

Nanny Ogg grinned and tucked the card back on the mantelpiece. She liked the idea of 'cordially'. It had a rich, a thick and above all an *alcoholic* sound.

She was ironing her best petticoat. That is to say, she was sitting in her chair by the fire while one of her daughters-in-law, whose name she couldn't remember just at this moment, was doing the actual work. Nanny was helping by pointing out the bits she'd missed.

It was a damn good invite, she thought. Especially the gold edging, which was as thick as syrup. Probably not real gold, but impressively glittery all the same.

'There's a bit there that could do with goin' over again, gel,' she said, topping up her beer.

'Yes, Nanny.'

Another daughter-in-law, whose name she'd certainly be able to recall after a few seconds' thought, was buffing up Nanny's red boots. A third was very carefully dabbing the lint off Nanny's best pointy hat, on its stand.

Nanny got up again and wandered over to open the back door. There was little light left in the sky now, and a few rags of cloud were scudding over the early stars. She sniffed the air. Winter hung on late up here in the mountains, but there was definitely a taste of spring on the wind.

A good time, she thought. Best time, really. Oh, she knew that the year started on Hogswatchnight, when the cold tide turned, but the *new* year started now, with green shoots boring upwards through the last of

the snow. Change was in the air, she could feel it in her bones.

Of course, her friend Granny Weatherwax always said you couldn't trust bones, but Granny Weatherwax said a lot of things like that all the time.

Nanny Ogg closed the door. In the trees at the end of her garden, leafless and scratchy against the sky, something rustled its wings and chattered as a veil of dark crossed the world.

In her own cottage a few miles away the witch Agnes Nitt was in two minds about her new pointy hat. Agnes was generally in two minds about anything.

As she tucked in her hair and observed herself critically in the mirror she sang a song. She sang in harmony. Not, of course, with her reflection in the glass, because *that* kind of heroine will sooner or later end up singing a duet with Mr Blue Bird and other forest creatures and then there's nothing for it but a flamethrower.

She simply sang in harmony with herself. Unless she concentrated it was happening more and more these days. Perdita had rather a reedy voice, but she insisted on joining in.

Those who are inclined to casual cruelty say that inside a fat girl is a thin girl and a lot of chocolate. Agnes's thin girl was Perdita.

She wasn't sure how she'd acquired the invisible passenger. Her mother had told her that when she was small she'd been in the habit of blaming accidents and mysteries, such as the disappearance of a bowl of cream or the breaking of a prized jug, on 'the other little girl'.

Only now did she realize that indulging this sort of

thing wasn't a good idea when, despite yourself, you've got a bit of natural witchcraft in your blood. The imaginary friend had simply grown up and had never gone away and had turned out to be a pain.

Agnes disliked Perdita, who was vain, selfish and vicious, and Perdita hated going around inside Agnes, whom she regarded as a fat, pathetic, weak-willed blob that people would walk all over were she not so steep.

Agnes told herself she'd simply invented the name Perdita as some convenient label for all those thoughts and desires she knew she shouldn't have, as a name for that troublesome little commentator that lives on everyone's shoulder and sneers. But sometimes she thought Perdita had created Agnes for something to pummel.

Agnes tended to obey rules. Perdita didn't. Perdita thought that not obeying rules was somehow *cool*. Agnes thought that rules like 'Don't fall into this huge pit of spikes' were there for a purpose. Perdita thought, to take an example at random, that things like table manners were a stupid and repressive idea. Agnes, on the other hand, was against being hit by flying bits of other people's cabbage.

Perdita thought a witch's hat was a powerful symbol of authority. Agnes thought that a dumpy girl should not wear a tall hat, especially with black. It made her look as though someone had dropped a liquorice-flavoured ice-cream cone.

The trouble was that although Agnes was right, so was Perdita. The pointy hat carried a lot of weight in the Ramtops. People talked to the hat, not to the

person wearing it. When people were in serious trouble they went to a witch.*

You had to wear black, too. *Perdita* liked black. Perdita thought black was cool. Agnes thought that black wasn't a good colour for the circumferentially challenged . . . oh, and that 'cool' was a dumb word used only by people whose brains wouldn't fill a spoon.

Magrat Garlick hadn't worn black and had probably never in her life said 'cool' except when commenting on the temperature.

Agnes stopped examining her pointiness in the mirror and looked around the cottage that had been Magrat's and was now hers, and sighed. Her gaze took in the expensive, gold-edged card on the mantelpiece.

Well, Magrat had certainly retired now, and had gone off to be Queen and if there was ever any doubt about that then there could be no doubt today. Agnes was puzzled at the way Nanny Ogg and Granny Weatherwax still talked about her, though. They were proud (more or less) that she'd married the King, and agreed that it was the right kind of life for her, but while they never actually articulated the thought it hung in the air over their heads in flashing mental colours: *Magrat had settled for second prize.*

Agnes had almost burst out laughing when she first realized this, but you wouldn't be able to argue with them. They wouldn't even see that there *could* be an argument.

Granny Weatherwax lived in a cottage with a thatch so old there was quite a sprightly young tree growing

*Sometimes, of course, to say, 'Please stop doing it.'

in it, and got up and went to bed alone, and washed in the rain barrel. And Nanny Ogg was the most *local* person Agnes had ever met. She'd gone off to foreign parts, yes, but she always carried Lancre with her, like a sort of invisible hat. But they took it for granted that they were top of every tree, and the rest of the world was there for them to tinker with.

Perdita thought that being a queen was just about the best thing you could be.

Agnes thought the best thing you could be was far away from Lancre, and good second best would be to be alone in your own head.

She adjusted the hat as best she could and left the cottage.

Witches never locked their doors. They never needed to.

As she stepped out into the moonlight, two magpies landed on the thatch.

The current activities of the witch Granny Weatherwax would have puzzled a hidden observer.

She peered at the flagstones just inside her back door and lifted the old rag rug in front of it with her toe.

Then she walked to the front door, which was never used, and did the same thing there. She also examined the cracks around the edges of the doors.

She went outside. There had been a sharp frost during the night, a spiteful little trick by the dying winter, and the drifts of leaves that hung on in the shadows were still crisp. In the harsh air she poked around in the flowerpots and bushes by the front door.

Then she went back inside.

She had a clock. Lancrastians liked clocks, although they didn't bother much about actual *time* in any length much shorter than an hour. If you needed to boil an egg, you sang fifteen verses of 'Where Has All The Custard Gone?' under your breath. But the tick was a comfort on long evenings.

Finally she sat down in her rocking chair and glared at the doorway.

Owls were hooting in the forest when someone came running up the path and hammered on the door.

Anyone who hadn't heard about Granny's iron self-control, which you could bend a horseshoe round, might just have thought they heard her give a tiny sigh of relief.

'Well, it's about time—' she began.

The excitement up at the castle was just a distant hum down in the mews. The hawks and falcons sat hunched on their perches, lost in some inner world of stoop and updraught. There was the occasional clink of a chain or flutter of a wing.

Hodgesaargh the falconer was getting ready in the tiny room next door when he felt the change in the air. He stepped out into a silent mews. The birds were all awake, alert, *expectant*. Even King Henry the eagle, whom Hodgesaargh would only go near at the moment when he was wearing full plate armour, was peering around.

You got something like this when there was a rat in the place, but Hodgesaargh couldn't see one. Perhaps it had gone.

For tonight's event he'd selected William the buzzard,

who could be depended upon. All Hodgesaargh's birds could be depended upon, but more often than not they could be depended upon to viciously attack him on sight. William, however, thought that she was a chicken, and she was usually safe in company.

But even William was paying a lot of attention to the world, which didn't often happen unless she'd seen some corn.

Odd, thought Hodgesaargh. And that was all.

The birds went on staring up, as though the roof simply was not there.

Granny Weatherwax lowered her gaze to a red, round and worried face.

'Here, you're not—' She pulled herself together. 'You're the Wattley boy from over in Slice, aren't you?'

'Y'g't . . .' The boy leaned against the doorjamb and fought for breath. 'You g't—'

'Just take deep breaths. You want a drink of water?'

'You g't t'—'

'Yes, yes, all right. Just *breathe* . . .'

The boy gulped air a few times.

'You got to come to Mrs Ivy and her baby missus!'

The words came out in one quick stream.

Granny grabbed her hat from its peg by the door and pulled her broomstick out of its lodging in the thatch.

'I thought old Mrs Patternoster was seeing to her,' she said, ramming her hatpins into place with the urgency of a warrior preparing for sudden battle.

'She says it's all gone wrong miss!'

Granny was already running down her garden path.

There was a small drop on the other side of the clearing, with a twenty-foot fall to a bend in the track. The broom hadn't fired by the time she reached it but she ran on, swinging a leg over the bristles as it plunged.

The magic caught halfway down and her boots dragged across the dead bracken as the broom soared up into the night.

The road wound over the mountains like a dropped ribbon. Up here there was always the sound of the wind.

The highwayman's horse was a big black stallion. It was also quite possibly the only horse with a ladder strapped behind the saddle.

This was because the highwayman's name was Casanunda, and he was a dwarf. Most people thought of dwarfs as reserved, cautious, law-abiding and very reticent on matters of the heart and other vaguely connected organs, and this was indeed true of almost all dwarfs. But genetics rolls strange dice on the green baize of life and somehow the dwarfs had produced Casanunda, who preferred fun to money and devoted to women all the passion that other dwarfs reserved for gold.

He also regarded laws as useful things and he obeyed them when it was convenient. Casanunda despised highwaymanning, but it got you out in the fresh air of the countryside, which was very good for you, especially when the nearby towns were lousy with husbands carrying a grudge and a big stick.

The trouble was that no one on the road took him seriously. He could stop the coaches all right, but people tended to say, 'What? I say, it's a lowwayman. What up? A bit short, are you? Hur, hur, hur,' and he would be forced to shoot them in the knee.

He blew on his hands to warm them, and looked up at the sound of an approaching coach.

He was about to ride out of his meagre hiding place in the thicket when he saw the *other* highwayman trot out from the wood opposite.

The coach came to a halt. Casanunda couldn't hear what transpired, but the highwayman rode around to one of the doors and leaned down to speak to the occupants . . .

. . . and a hand reached out and plucked him off his horse and into the coach.

It rocked on its springs for a while, and then the door burst open and the highwayman tumbled out and lay still on the road.

The coach moved on . . .

Casanunda waited a little while and then rode down to the body. His horse stood patiently while he untied the ladder and dismounted.

He could tell the highwayman was stone dead. Living people are expected to have some blood in them.

The coach stopped at the top of a rise a few miles further on, before the road began the long winding fall towards Lancre and the plains.

The four passengers got out and walked to the start of the drop.

The clouds were rolling in behind them but here

the air was frosty clear, and the view stretched all the way to the Rim under the moonlight. Down below, scooped out of the mountains, was the little kingdom.

'Gateway to the world,' said the Count de Magpyr.

'And entirely undefended,' said his son.

'On the contrary. Possessed of some extremely *effective* defences,' said the Count. He smiled in the night. 'At least . . . until now . . .'

'Witches should be on *our* side,' said the Countess.

'*She* will be soon, at any rate,' said the Count. 'A most . . . interesting woman. An interesting *family*. Uncle used to talk about her grandmother. The Weatherwax women have always had one foot in shadow. It's in the blood. And most of their power comes from denying it. However,' and his teeth shone as he grinned in the dark, 'she will soon find out on which side her bread is buttered.'

'Or her gingerbread is gilded,' said the Countess.

'Ah, yes. How nicely put. That's the penalty for being a Weatherwax woman, of course. When they get older they start to hear the clang of the big oven door.'

'I've heard she's pretty tough, though,' said the Count's son. 'A very sharp mind.'

'Let's kill her!' said the Count's daughter.

'Really, Lacci dear, you can't kill *everything*.'

'I don't see why not.'

'No. I rather like the idea of her being . . . useful. And she sees everything in black and white. That's always a trap for the powerful. Oh, *yes*. A mind like that is so easily . . . led. With a little help.'

There was a whirr of wings under the moonlight

and something bi-coloured landed on the Count's shoulder.

'And *this* . . .' said the Count, stroking the magpie and then letting it go. He pulled a square of white card from an inner pocket of his jacket. Its edge gleamed briefly. 'Can you believe it? Has this sort of thing ever happened before? A new world order indeed . . .'

'Do you have a handkerchief, sir?' said the Countess. 'Give it to me, please. You have a few specks . . .'

She dabbed at his chin and pushed the blood-stained handkerchief back into his pocket.

'There,' she said.

'There are other witches,' said the son, like someone turning over a mouthful that was proving rather tough to chew.

'Oh, yes. I hope we will meet them. They could be entertaining.'

They climbed back into the coach.

Back in the mountains, the man who had tried to rob the coach managed to get to his feet, which seemed for a moment to be caught in something. He rubbed his neck irritably and looked around for his horse, which he found standing behind some rocks a little way away.

When he tried to lay a hand on the bridle it passed straight through the leather and the horse's neck, like smoke. The creature reared up and galloped madly away.

It was not, the highwayman thought muzzily, going to be a good night. Well, he'd be damned if he'd lose a horse as well as some wages. Who the hell were those

people? He couldn't quite remember what had happened in the carriage, but it hadn't been enjoyable.

The highwayman was of that simple class of men who, having been hit by someone bigger than them, finds someone smaller than them for the purposes of retaliation. Someone else was going to suffer tonight, he vowed. He'd get another horse, at least.

And, on cue, he heard the sound of hoofbeats on the wind. He drew his sword and stepped out into the road.

'Stand and deliver!'

The approaching horse halted obediently a few feet away. This was not going to be such a bad night after all, he thought. It really was a magnificent creature, more of a warhorse than an everyday hack. It was so pale that it shone in the light of the occasional star and, by the look of it, there was silver on its harness.

The rider was heavily wrapped up against the cold.

'Your money or your life!' said the highwayman.

I'M SORRY?

'Your money,' said the highwayman, 'or your life. Which part of this don't you understand?'

OH, I SEE. WELL, I HAVE A SMALL AMOUNT OF MONEY.

A couple of coins landed on the frosty road. The highwayman scrabbled for them but could not pick them up, a fact that only added to his annoyance.

'It's your life, then!'

The mounted figure shook its head. I THINK NOT. I REALLY DO.

It pulled a long curved stick out of a holster. The highwayman had assumed it was a lance, but now a

curved blade sprang out and glittered blue along its edges.

I MUST SAY THAT YOU HAVE AN AMAZING PERSISTENCE OF VITALITY, said the horseman. It was not so much a voice, more an echo inside the head. IF NOT A PRESENCE OF MIND.

'Who *are* you?'

I'M DEATH, said Death. AND I REALLY AM NOT HERE TO TAKE YOUR MONEY. WHICH PART OF THIS DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?

Something fluttered weakly at the window of the castle mews. There was no glass in the frame, just thin wooden slats to allow some passage of air.

And there was a scrabbling, and then a faint pecking, and then silence.

The hawks watched.

Outside the window something went *whoomph*. Beams of brilliant light jerked across the far wall and, slowly, the bars began to char.

Nanny Ogg knew that while the actual party would be in the Great Hall all the fun would be outside, in the courtyard around the big fire. Inside it'd be all quails' eggs, goose-liver jam and little sandwiches that were four to the mouthful. Outside it'd be roasted potatoes floating in vats of butter and a whole stag on a spit. Later on, there'd be a command performance by that man who put weasels down his trousers, a form of entertainment that Nanny ranked higher than grand opera.

As a witch, of course, she'd be welcome anywhere

and it was always a good idea to remind the nobs of this, in case they forgot. It was a hard choice, but she decided to stay outside and have a good dinner of venison because, like many old ladies, Nanny Ogg was a bottomless pit for free food. Then she'd go inside and fill the gaps with the fiddly dishes. Besides, they probably had that expensive fizzy wine in there and Nanny had quite a taste for it, provided it was served in a big enough mug. But you needed a good depth of beer before you loaded up on the fancy stuff.

She picked up a tankard, ambled to the front of the queue at the beer barrel, gently nudged aside the head of a man who'd decided to spend the evening lying under the tap, and drew herself a pint.

As she turned back she saw the splay-footed figure of Agnes approaching, still slightly uneasy with the idea of wearing the new pointy hat in public.

'Wotcha, girl,' said Nanny. 'Try some of the venison, it's good stuff.'

Agnes looked doubtfully at the roasting meat. Lancre people looked after the calories and let the vitamins go hang.

'Do you think I could get a salad?' she ventured.

'Hope not,' said Nanny happily.

'Lot of people here,' said Agnes.

'*Everyone* got a invite,' said Nanny. 'Magrat was very gracious about that, I thought.'

Agnes craned her head. 'Can't see Granny around anywhere, though.'

'She'll be inside, tellin' people what to do.'

'I haven't seen her around much at all lately,' said Agnes. 'She's got something on her mind, I think.'

Nanny narrowed her eyes.

'You think so?' she said, adding to herself: you're getting *good*, miss.

'It's just that ever since we heard about the birth,' Agnes waved a plump hand to indicate the general high-cholesterol celebration around them, 'she's been so . . . stretched, sort of. Twanging.'

Nanny Ogg thumbed some tobacco into her pipe and struck a match on her boot.

'You certainly notice things, don't you?' she said, puffing away. 'Notice, notice, notice. We'll have to call you Miss Notice.'

'I certainly *notice* you always fiddle around with your pipe when you're thinking thoughts you don't much like,' said Agnes. 'It's displacement activity.'

Through a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke Nanny reflected that Agnes read books. All the witches who'd lived in her cottage were bookish types. They thought you could see life through books but you couldn't, the reason being that the words got in the way.

'She has been a bit quiet, that's true,' she said. 'Best to let her get on with it.'

'I thought perhaps she was sulking about the priest who'll be doing the Naming,' said Agnes.

'Oh, old Brother Perdore's all right,' said Nanny. 'Gabbles away in some ancient lingo, keeps it short and then you just give him sixpence for his trouble, fill him up with brandy and load him on his donkey and off he goes.'

'What? Didn't you hear?' said Agnes. 'He's laid up over in Skund. Broke his wrist and both legs falling off the donkey.'

Nanny Ogg took her pipe out of her mouth.

'Why wasn't I told?' she said.

'I don't know, Nanny. Mrs Weaver told me yesterday.'

'Oo, that woman! I passed her in the street this morning! She could've said!'

Nanny poked her pipe back in her mouth as though stabbing all uncommunicative gossips. 'How can you break both your legs falling off a donkey?'

'It was going up that little path on the side of Skund Gorge. He fell sixty feet.'

'Oh? Well . . . that's a tall donkey, right enough.'

'So the King sent down to the Omnian mission in Ohulan to send us up a priest, apparently,' said Agnes.

'He did *what*?' said Nanny.

A small grey tent was inexpertly pitched in a field just outside the town. The rising wind made it flap, and tore at the poster which had been pinned on to an easel outside.

It read: GOOD NEWS! Om Welcomes You!!!

In fact no one had turned up to the small introductory service that Mightily Oats had organized that afternoon, but since he had announced one he had gone ahead with it anyway, singing a few cheerful hymns to his own accompaniment on the small portable harmonium and then preaching a very short sermon to the wind and the sky.

Now the Quite Reverend Oats looked at himself in the mirror. He was a bit uneasy about the mirror, to

be honest. Mirrors had led to one of the Church's innumerable schisms, one side saying that since they encouraged vanity they were bad, and the other saying that since they reflected the goodness of Om they were holy. Oats had not quite formed his own opinion, being by nature someone who tries to see something in both sides of every question, but at least the mirrors helped him to get his complicated clerical collar on straight.

It was still very new. The Very Reverend Mekkle, who'd taken Pastoral Practice, had advised that the rules about starch were only really a guideline, but Oats hadn't wanted to put a foot wrong and his collar could have been used as a razor.

He carefully lowered his holy turtle pendant into place, noting its gleam with some satisfaction, and picked up his finely printed graduation copy of the *Book of Om*. Some of his fellow students had spent hours carefully ruffling the pages to give them that certain straight-and-narrow credibility, but Oats had refrained from this as well. Besides, he knew most of it by heart.

Feeling rather guilty, because there had been some admonitions at the college against using holy writ merely for fortune telling, he shut his eyes and let the book flop open at random.

Then he opened his eyes quickly and read the first passage they encountered.

It was somewhere in the middle of Brutha's Second Letter to the Omish, gently chiding them for not replying to the First Letter to the Omish.

'*. . . silence is an answer that begs three more*

questions. Seek and you will find, but first you should know what you seek . . .'

Oh, well. He shut the book.

What a place! What a *dump*. He'd had a short walk after the service and every path seemed to end in a cliff or a sheer drop. Never had he seen such a *vertical* country. Things had rustled at him in the bushes, and he'd got his shoes muddy. As for the people he'd met . . . well, simple ignorant country folk, salt of the earth, obviously, but they'd just stared at him carefully from a distance, as if they were waiting for something to happen to him and didn't care to be too close to him when it did.

But still, he mused, it *did* say in Brutha's Letter to the Simonites that if you wished the light to be seen you had to take it into dark places. And this was certainly a dark place.

He said a small prayer and stepped out into the muddy, windy darkness.

Granny flew high above the roaring treetops, under a half moon.

She distrusted a moon like that. A full moon could only wane, a new moon could only wax, but a half moon, balancing so precariously between light and dark . . . well, it could do anything.

Witches always lived on the edges of things. She felt the tingle in her hands. It was not just from the frosty air. There was an *edge* somewhere. Something was beginning.

On the other side of the sky the Hublights were burning around the mountains at the centre of the

world, bright enough even to fight the pale light of the moon. Green and gold flames danced in the air over the central mountains. It was rare to see them at this time of the year, and Granny wondered what that might signify.

Slice was perched along the sides of a cleft in the mountains that couldn't be dignified by the name of valley. In the moonlight she saw the pale upturned face waiting in the shadows of the garden as she came in to land.

'Evening, Mr Ivy,' she said, leaping off. 'Upstairs, is she?'

'In the barn,' said Ivy flatly. 'The cow kicked her . . . hard.'

Granny's expression stayed impassive.

'We shall see,' she said, 'what may be done.'

In the barn, one look at Mrs Patternoster's face told her how little that might now be. The woman wasn't a witch, but she knew all the practical midwifery that can be picked up in an isolated village, be it from cows, goats, horses or humans.

'It's bad,' she whispered, as Granny looked at the moaning figure on the straw. 'I reckon we'll lose both of them . . . or maybe just one . . .'

There was, if you were listening for it, just the suggestion of a question in that sentence. Granny focused her mind.

'It's a boy,' she said.

Mrs Patternoster didn't bother to wonder how Granny knew, but her expression indicated that a little more weight had been added to a burden.

'I'd better go and put it to John Ivy, then,' she said.

She'd barely moved before Granny Weatherwax's hand locked on her arm.

'He's no part in this,' she said.

'But after all, he *is* the—'

'He's no part in this.'

Mrs Patternoster looked into the blue stare and knew two things. One was that Mr Ivy had no part in this, and the other was that anything that happened in this barn was never, ever, going to be mentioned again.

'I think I can bring 'em to mind,' said Granny, letting go and rolling up her sleeves. 'Pleasant couple, as I recall. He's a good husband, by all accounts.' She poured warm water from its jug into the bowl that the midwife had set up on a manger.

Mrs Patternoster nodded.

'Of course, it's difficult for a man working these steep lands alone,' Granny went on, washing her hands. Mrs Patternoster nodded again, mournfully.

'Well, I reckon you should take him into the cottage, Mrs Patternoster, and make him a cup of tea,' Granny commanded. 'You can tell him I'm doing all I can.'

This time the midwife nodded gratefully.

When she had fled, Granny laid a hand on Mrs Ivy's damp forehead.

'Well now, Florence Ivy,' she said, 'let us see what might be done. But first of all . . . no pain . . .'

As she moved her head she caught sight of the moon through the unglazed window. Between the light and the dark . . . well, sometimes that's where you had to be.

INDEED.

Granny didn't bother to turn round.

'I thought you'd be here,' she said, as she knelt down in the straw.

WHERE ELSE? said Death.

'Do you know who you're here for?'

THAT IS NOT MY CHOICE. ON THE *VERY* EDGE YOU WILL ALWAYS FIND SOME UNCERTAINTY.

Granny felt the words in her head for several seconds, like little melting cubes of ice. On the very, very edge, then, there had to be . . . judgement.

'There's too much damage here,' she said, at last. 'Too much.'

A few minutes later she felt the life stream past her. Death had the decency to leave without a word.

When Mrs Patternoster tremulously knocked on the door and pushed it open, Granny was in the cow's stall. The midwife saw her stand up, holding a piece of thorn.

'Been in the beast's leg all day,' she said. 'No wonder it was fretful. Try and make sure he doesn't kill the cow, you understand? They'll need it.'

Mrs Patternoster glanced down at the rolled-up blanket in the straw. Granny had tactfully placed it out of sight of Mrs Ivy, who was sleeping now.

'I'll tell him,' said Granny, brushing off her dress. 'As for her, well, she's strong and young and you know what to do. You keep an eye on her, and me or Nanny Ogg will drop in when we can. If she's up to it, they may need a wet nurse up at the castle, and that may be good for everyone.'

It was doubtful that anyone in Slice would defy Granny Weatherwax, but Granny saw the faintest grey shadow of disapproval in the midwife's expression.

'You still reckon I should've asked Mr Ivy?' she said.

'That's what I would have done . . .' the woman mumbled.

'You don't like him? You think he's a bad man?' said Granny, adjusting her hatpins.

'No!'

'Then what's he ever done to *me*, that I should hurt him so?'

Agnes had to run to keep up. Nanny Ogg, when roused, could move as though powered by pistons.

'But we get a lot of priests up here, Nanny!'

'Not like the Omnians!' snapped Nanny. 'We had 'em up here last year. A couple of 'em *knocked* at my *door*!'

'Well, that *is* what a door is f—'

'*And* they shoved a leaflet under it saying "Repent!"' Nanny Ogg went on. 'Repent? Me? Cheek! I can't start repenting at my time of life. I'd never get any work done. Anyway,' she added, 'I ain't sorry for most of it.'

'You're getting a bit excited, I think—'

'They set fire to people!' said Nanny.

'I think I read somewhere that they used to, yes,' said Agnes, panting with the effort of keeping up. 'But that was a long time ago, Nanny! The ones I saw in Ankh-Morpork just handed out leaflets and preached in a big tent and sang rather dreary songs—'

'Hah! The leopard does not change his shorts, my girl!'

They ran along a corridor and out from behind a screen into the hubbub of the Great Hall.

'Knee-deep in nobs,' said Nanny, craning. 'Ah, there's our Shawn . . .'

Lancre's standing army was lurking by a pillar, probably in the hope that no one would see him in his footman's powdered wig, which had been made for a much bigger footman.

The kingdom didn't have much of an executive arm of government, and most of its actual hands belonged to Nanny Ogg's youngest son. Despite the earnest efforts of King Verence, who was quite a forward-looking ruler in a nervous kind of way, the people of Lancre could not be persuaded to accept a democracy at any price and the place had not, regrettably, attracted much in the way of government. A lot of the bits it couldn't avoid were done by Shawn. He emptied the palace privies, delivered its sparse mail, guarded the walls, operated the Royal Mint, balanced the budget, helped out the gardener in his spare time and, on those occasions these days when it was felt necessary to man the borders, and Verence felt that yellow and black striped poles *did* give a country such a *professional* look, he stamped passports, or at a pinch any other pieces of paper the visitor could produce, such as the back of an envelope, with a stamp he'd carved quite nicely out of half a potato. He took it all very seriously. At times like this, he buttled when Spriggins the butler was not on duty, or if an extra hand was needed he footed as well.

'Evening, our Shawn,' said Nanny Ogg. 'I see you've got that dead lamb on your head again.'

'Aoow, *Mum*,' said Shawn, trying to adjust the wig.

'Where's this priest that's doing the Naming?' said Nanny.

'What, Mum? Dunno, Mum. I stopped shouting out the names half an hour ago and got on to serving the bits of cheese on sticks – aoow, Mum, you shouldn't take that many, Mum!'*

Nanny Ogg sucked the cocktail goodies off four sticks in one easy movement, and looked speculatively at the throng.

'I'm going to have a word with young Verence,' said Nanny.

'He *is* the King, Nanny,' said Agnes.

'That's no reason for him to go around acting like he was royalty.'

'I think it is, actually.'

'None of that cheek. You just go and find this Omnian and keep an eye on him.'

'What should I look for?' said Agnes sourly. 'A column of smoke?'

'They all wear black,' said Nanny firmly. 'Hah! Typical!'

'Well? So do we.'

'Right! But ours is . . . ours is . . .' Nanny thumped her chest, causing considerable ripples, 'ours is the *right* black, right? Now, off you go and look inconspicuous,' added Nanny, a lady wearing a

*It struck people as odd that, while Lancre people refused point-blank to have any truck with democracy, on the basis that governing was what the King ought to do and they'd be sure to tell him if he went wrong, they didn't make very good servants. Oh, they could cook and dig and wash and footle and buttle and did it very well but could never quite get the hang of the serving mentality. King Verence was quite understanding about this, and put up with Shawn ushering guests into the dining room with a cry of 'Lovely grub, get it while it's hot!'

two-foot-tall pointed black hat. She stared around at the crowd again, and nudged her son.

'Shawn, you *did* deliver an invite to Esme Weatherwax, didn't you?'

He looked horrified. 'Of *course*, Mum.'

'Shove it under her door?'

'No, Mum. You know she gave me an earbashin' when the snails got at that postcard last year. I wedged it in the hinges, good and tight.'

'There's a good boy,' said Nanny.

Lancre people didn't bother much with letterboxes. Mail was infrequent but biting gales were not. Why have a slot in the door to let in unsolicited winds? So letters were left under large stones, wedged firmly in flowerpots or slipped under the door.

There were never very many.* Lancre operated on the feudal system, which was to say, everyone feuded all the time and handed on the fight to their descendants. The chips on some shoulders had been passed down for generations. Some had antique value. A bloody good grudge, Lancre reckoned, was like a fine old wine. You looked after it carefully and left it to your children.

You never *wrote* to anyone. If you had anything to say, you said it to their face. It kept everything nice and hot.

Agnes edged into the crowd, feeling stupid. She often did. Now she knew why Magrat Garlick had

*Apart from the ones containing small postal orders attached to letters which, generally, said pretty much the same thing: Dear Mum and Dad, I am doing pretty well in Ankh-Morpork and this week I earned a whole seven dollars . . .