Terry Pratchett

Mort

His searching hands reached up to his cropped hair, and down to sheets of some smooth slippery material. It was much finer than the wool he was used to at home, which was coarse and always smelled of sheep; it felt like warm, dry ice.

He swung out of the bed hastily and stared around the room.

First of all it was large, larger than the entire house back home, and dry, dry as old tombs under ancient deserts. The air tasted as though it had been cooked for hours and then allowed to cool. The carpet under his feet was deep enough to hide a tribe of pygmies and crackled electrically as he padded through it. And everything had been designed in shades of purple and black.

He looked down at his own body, which was wearing a long white nightshirt. His clothes had been neatly folded on a chair by the bed; the chair, he couldn't help noticing, was delicately carved with a skull-and-bones motif.

Mort sat down on the edge of the bed and began to dress, his mind racing.

He eased open the heavy oak door, and felt oddly disappointed when it failed to creak ominously.

There was a bare wooden corridor outside, with big yellow candles set in holders on the far wall. Mort crept out and sidled along the boards until he reached a staircase. He negotiated that successfully without anything ghastly happening, arriving in what looked like an entrance hall full of doors. There were a lot of funereal drapes here, and a grandfather clock with a tick like the heartbeat of a mountain. There was an umbrella stand beside it.

It had a scythe in it.

Mort looked around at the doors. They looked important. Their arches were carved in the now-familiar bones motif. He went to try the nearest one, and a voice behind him said:

'You mustn't go in there, boy.'

It took him a moment to realise that this wasn't a voice in his head, but real human words that had been formed by a mouth and transferred to his ears by a convenient system of air compression, as nature intended. Nature had gone to a lot of trouble for six words with a slightly petulant tone to them.

He turned around. There was a girl there, about his own height and perhaps a few years older than him. She had silver hair, and eyes with a pearly sheen to them, and the kind of interesting but impractical long dress that tends to be worn by tragic heroines who clasp single roses to their bosom while gazing soulfully at the moon. Mort had never heard the phrase 'Pre-Raphaelite', which was a pity because it would have been almost the right description. However, such girls tend to be on the translucent, consumptive side, whereas this one had a slight suggestion of too many chocolates.

She stared at him with her head on one side, and one foot tapping irritably on the floor. Then she reached out quickly and pinched him sharply on the arm.

'Ow!'

'Hmm. So you're really real,' she said. 'What's your name, boy?'

'Mortimer. They call me Mort,' he said, rubbing his elbow. 'What did you do that for?'

'I shall call you Boy,' she said. 'And I don't really have to explain myself, you understand, but if you must know I thought you were dead. You look dead.'

Mort said nothing.

'Lost your tongue?'

Mort was, in fact, counting to ten.

'I'm not dead,' he said eventually. 'At least, I don't think so. It's a little hard to tell. Who are you?'

'You may call me Miss Ysabell,' she said haughtily. 'Father told me you must have something to eat. Follow me.'

She swept away towards one of the other doors. Mort trailed behind her at just the right distance to have it swing back and hit his other elbow.

There was a kitchen on the other side of the door – long, low and warm, with copper pans hanging from the ceiling and a vast black iron stove occupying the whole of one long wall. An old man was standing in front of it, frying eggs and bacon and whistling between his teeth.

The smell attracted Mort's taste buds from across the room, hinting that if they got together they could really enjoy themselves. He found himself moving forward without even consulting his legs.

'Albert,' snapped Ysabell, 'another one for breakfast.'

The man turned his head slowly, and nodded at her without saying a word. She turned back to Mort.

'I must say,' she said, 'that with the whole Disc to choose from, I should think Father could have done rather better than you. I suppose you'll just have to do.'

She swept out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

'Have to do what?' said Mort, to no-one in particular.

The room was silent, except for the sizzle of the frying pan and the crumbling of coals in the molten heart of the stove. Mort saw that it had the words 'The Little Moloch (Ptntd)' embossed on its oven door.

The cook didn't seem to notice him, so Mort pulled up a chair and sat down at the white scrubbed table.

'Mushrooms?' said the old man, without looking around.

'Hmm? What?'

'I said, do you want mushrooms?'

'Oh. Sorry. No, thank you,' said Mort.

'Right you are, young sir.'

He turned around and set out for the table.

Even after he got used to it, Mort always held his breath when he watched Albert walking. Death's manservant was one of those stick-thin, raw-nosed old men who always look as though they are wearing gloves with the fingers cut out – even when they're not – and his walking involved a complicated sequence of movements. Albert leaned forward and his left arm started to swing, slowly at first but soon evolving into a wild jerking movement that finally and suddenly, at about the time when a watcher would have expected the arm to fly off at the elbow, transferred itself down the length of his body to his legs and propelled him forward like a high-speed stilt walker. The frying pan followed a series of intricate curves in the air and was brought to a halt just over Mort's plate.

Albert did indeed have exactly the right type of half-moon spectacles to peer over the top of.

'There could be some porridge to follow,' he said, and winked, apparently to include Mort in the world porridge conspiracy.

'Excuse me', said Mort, 'but where am I, exactly?'

'Don't you know? This is the house of Death, lad. He brought you here last night.'

'I – sort of remember. Only. . . .

'Hmm?'

'Well. The bacon and eggs,' said Mort, vaguely. 'It doesn't seem, well, appropriate.'

'I've got some black pudding somewhere,' said Albert.

'No, I mean . . .' Mort hesitated. 'It's just that I can't see him sitting down to a couple of rashers and a fried slice.'

Albert grinned. 'Oh, he doesn't, lad. Not as a regular thing, no. Very easy to cater for, the master. I just cook for me and —' he paused – 'the young lady, of course.'

Mort nodded. 'Your daughter,' he said.

'Mine? Ha,' said Albert. 'You're wrong there. She's his.'

Mort stared down at his fried eggs. They stared back from their lake of fat. Albert had heard of nutritional values, and didn't hold with them.

'Are we talking about the same person?' he said at last. Tall, wears black, he's a bit . . . skinny.

'Adopted,' said Albert, kindly. 'It's rather a long story —'

A bell jangled by his head.

'— which will have to wait. He wants to see you in his study. I should run along if I were you. He doesn't like to be kept waiting. Understandable, really. Up the steps and first on the left. You can't miss it —'

'It's got skulls and bones around the door?' said Mort, pushing back his chair.

They all have, most of them,' sighed Albert. 'It's only his fancy. He doesn't mean anything by it.'

Leaving his breakfast to congeal, Mort hurried up the steps, along the corridor and paused in front of the first door. He raised his hand to knock.

ENTER.

The handle turned of its own accord. The door swung inward.

Death was seated behind a desk, peering intently into a vast leather book almost bigger than the desk itself. He looked up as Mort came in, keeping one calcareous finger marking his place, and grinned. There wasn't much of an alternative.

AH, he said, and then paused. Then he scratched his chin, with a noise like a fingernail being pulled across a comb.

WHO ARE YOU, BOY?

'Mort, sir,' said Mort. 'Your apprentice. You remember?'

Death stared at him for some time. Then the pinpoint blue eyes turned back at the book.

OH YES, he said, MORT. WELL, BOY, DO YOU SINCERELY WISH TO LEARN THE UTTERMOST SECRETS OF TIME AND SPACE?

'Yes, sir. I think so, sir.'

GOOD. THE STABLES ARE AROUND THE BACK. THE SHOVEL HANGS JUST INSIDE THE DOOR.

He looked down. He looked up. Mort hadn't moved.

IS IT BY ANY CHANCE POSSIBLE THAT YOU FAIL TO UNDERSTAND ME?

'Not fully, sir,' said Mort.

DUNG, BOY. DUNG. ALBERT HAS A COMPOST HEAP IN THE GARDEN. I IMAGINE THERE'S A WHEELBARROW SOMEWHERE ON THE PREMISES. GET ON WITH IT.

Mort nodded mournfully. 'Yes, sir. I see, sir. Sir?'

YES?

'Sir, I don't see what this has to do with the secrets of time and space.'

Death did not look up from his book.

THAT, he said, is BECAUSE YOU ARE HERE TO LEARN.

It is a fact that although the Death of the Discworld is, in his own words, an ANTHROPOMORPHIC PERSONIFICATION, he long ago gave up using the traditional skeletal horses, because of the bother of having to stop all the time to wire bits back on. Now his horses were always flesh-and-blood beasts, from the finest stock.

And, Mort learned, very well fed.

Some jobs offer increments. This one offered – well, quite the reverse, but at least it was in the warm and fairly easy to get the hang of. After a while he got into the rhythm of it, and started playing the private little quantity-surveying game that everyone plays in these circumstances. Let's see, he thought, I've done nearly a quarter, let's call it a third, so when I've done that corner by the hayrack it'll be more than half, call it five-eighths, which means three more wheelbarrow loads. . . . It doesn't prove anything very much except that the awesome splendour of the universe is much easier to deal with if you think of it as a series of small chunks.

The horse watched him from its stall, occasionally trying to eat his hair in a friendly sort of way.

After a while he became aware that someone else was watching him. The girl Ysabell was lean-big on the half-door, her chin in her hands.

'Are you a servant?' she said.

Mort straightened up.

'No,' he said, 'I'm an apprentice.'

That's silly. Albert said you can't be an apprentice.'

Mort concentrated on hefting a shovelful into the wheelbarrow. Two more shovelfuls, call it three if it's well pressed down, and that means four more barrows, all right, call it five, before I've done halfway to the . . .

'He says,' said Ysabell in a louder voice, 'that apprentices become masters, and you can't have more than one Death. So you're just a servant and you have to do what I say.'

. . . and then eight more barrows means it's all done all the way to the door, which is nearly two-thirds of the whole thing, which means. . . .

'Did you hear what I said, boy?'

Mort nodded. And then it'll be fourteen more barrows, only call it fifteen because I haven't swept up properly in the corner, and. . . .

'Have you lost your tongue?'

'Mort,' said Mort mildly.

She looked at him furiously. 'What?'

'My name is Mort,' said Mort. 'Or Mortimer. Most people call me Mort. Did you want to talk to me about something?'

She was speechless for a moment, staring from his face to the shovel and back again.

'Only I've been told to get on with this,' said Mort.

She exploded.

'Why are you here? Why did Father bring you here?'

'He hired me at the hiring fair,' said Mort. 'All the boys got hired. And me.'

'And you wanted to be hired?' she snapped. 'He's Death, you know. The Grim Reaper. He's very important. He's not something you become, he's something you are.'

Mort gestured vaguely at the wheelbarrow.

'I expect it'll turn out for the best,' he said. 'My father always says things generally do.'

He picked up the shovel and turned away, and grinned at the horse's backside as he heard Ysabell snort and walk away.

Mort worked steadily through the sixteenths, eighths, quarters and thirds, wheeling the barrow out through the yard to the heap by the apple tree.

Death's garden was big, neat and well-tended. It was also very, very black. The grass was black. The flowers were black. Black apples gleamed among the black leaves of a black apple tree. Even the air looked inky.

Alter a while Mort thought he could see – no, he couldn't possibly imagine he could see . . . different colours of black.

That's to say, not simply very dark tones of red and green and whatever, but real shades of black. A whole spectrum of colours, all different and all – well, black. He tipped out the last load, put the barrow away, and went back to the house.

ENTER.

Death was standing behind a lectern, poring over a map. He looked at Mort as if he wasn't entirely there.

YOU HAVEN'T HEARD OF THE BAY OF MANTE, HAVE YOU? he said.

'No, sir,' said Mort. FAMOUS SHIPWRECK THERE.

'Was there?'

THERE WILL BE, said Death, IF I CAN FIND THE DAMN PLACE.

Mort walked around the lectern and peered at the map.

'You're going to sink the ship?' he said.

Death looked horrified.

CERTAINLY NOT. THERE WILL BE A COMBINATION OF BAD SEAMANSHIP, SHALLOW WATER AND A CONTRARY WIND.

'That's horrible,' said Mort. 'Will there be many drowned?'

THAT'S UP TO FATE, said Death, turning to the bookcase behind him and pulling out a heavy gazetteer. THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT. WHAT Is THAT SMELL?

'Me,' said Mort, simply.

AH. THE STABLES. Death paused, his hand on the spine of the book. AND WHY DO YOU THINK I DIRECTED YOU TO THE STABLES? THINK CAREFULLY, NOW.

Mort hesitated. He had been thinking carefully, in between counting wheelbarrows. He'd wondered if it had been to coordinate his hand and eye, or teach him the habit of obedience, or bring home to him the importance, on the human scale, of small tasks, or make him realise that even great men must start at the bottom. None of these explanations seemed exactly right.

'I think . . .' he began.

YES?

'Well, I think it was because you were up to your knees in horseshit, to tell you the truth.'

Death looked at him for a long time. Mort shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

ABSOLUTELY CORRECT, snapped Death. CLARITY OF THOUGHT. REALISTIC APPROACH. VERY IMPORTANT IN A JOB LIKE OURS.

'Yes, sir. Sir?'

HMM? Death was struggling with the index.

'People die all the time, sir, don't they? Millions. You must be very busy. But —'

Death gave Mort the look he was coming to be familiar with. It started off as blank surprise, flickered briefly towards annoyance, called in for a drink at recognition and settled finally on vague forbearance.

BUT?

'I'd have thought you'd have been, well, out and about a bit more. You know. Stalking the streets. My granny's almanack's got a picture of you with a scythe and stuff.'

I SEE. I AM AFRAID IT IS HARD TO EXPLAIN UNLESS YOU KNOW ABOUT POINT INCARNATION AND NODE FOCUSING. I DON'T EXPECT YOU DO?

'I don't think so.'

GENERALLY I'M ONLY EXPECTED TO MAKE AN ACTUAL APPEARANCE ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS.

'Like a king, I suppose,' said Mort. 'I mean, a king is reigning even when he's doing something else or asleep, even. Is that it, sir?'

IT'LL DO, said Death, rolling up the maps. AND NOW, BOY, IF YOU'VE FINISHED THE STABLE YOU CAN GO AND SEE IF ALBERT HAS ANY JOBS HE WANTS DOING. IF YOU LIKE, YOU CAN COME OUT ON THE ROUND WITH ME THIS EVENING.

Mort nodded. Death went back to his big leather book, took up a pen, stared at it for a moment, and then looked up at Mort with his skull on one side.

HAVE YOU MET MY DAUGHTER? he said.

'Er. Yes, sir,' said Mort, his hand on the doorknob.

SHE IS A VERY PLEASANT GIRL, said Death, BUT I THINK SHE QUITE LIKES HAVING SOMEONE OF HER OWN AGE AROUND TO TALK TO.

'Sir?'

AND, OF COURSE, ONE DAY ALL THIS WILL BELONG TO HER.

Something like a small blue supernova flared for a moment in the depths of his eyesockets. It dawned on Mort that, with some embarrassment and complete lack of expertise, Death was trying to wink.

In a landscape that owed nothing to time and space, which appeared on no map, which existed only in those far reaches of the multiplexed cosmos known to the few astrophysicists who have taken really bad acid, Mort spent the afternoon helping Albert plant out broccoli. It was black, tinted with purple.

'He tries, see,' said Albert, flourishing the dibber. 'It's just that when it comes to colour, he hasn't got much imagination.'

'I'm not sure I understand all this,' said Mort. 'Did you say he made all this?'

Beyond the garden wall the ground dropped towards a deep valley and then rose into dark moorland that marched all the way to distant mountains, jagged as cats' teeth.

'Yeah,' said Albert. 'Mind what you're doing with that watering can.'

'What was here before?'

'I dunno,' said Albert, starting a fresh row. 'Firmament, I suppose. That's the fancy name for raw nothing. It's not a very good job of work, to tell the truth. I mean, the garden's okay, but the mountains are downright shoddy. They're all fuzzy when you get up close. I went and had a look once.'

Mort squinted hard at the trees nearest him. They seemed commendably solid.

'What'd he do it all for?' he said.

Albert grunted. 'Do you know what happens to lads who ask too many questions?'

Mort thought for a moment.

'No,' he said eventually, 'what?'

There was silence.

Then Albert straightened up and said, 'Damned if I know. Probably they get answers, and serve 'em right.'

'He said I could go out with him tonight,' said Mort.

'You're a lucky boy then, aren't you,' said Albert vaguely, heading back for the cottage.

'Did he really make all this?' said Mort, tagging along after him.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I suppose he wanted somewhere where he could feel at home.'

'Are you dead, Albert?'

'Me? Do I look dead?' The old man snorted when Mort started to give him a slow, critical look, 'and you can stop that. I'm as alive as you are. Probably more.'

'Sorry.'

'Right.' Albert pushed open the back door, and turned to regard Mort as kindly as he could manage.

'It's best not to ask all these questions,' he said, 'it upsets people. Now, how about a nice fry-up?'

The bell rang while they were playing dominoes. Mort sat to attention.

'He'll want the horse made ready,' said Albert. 'Come on.'

They went out to the stable in the gathering dusk, and Mort watched the old man saddle up Death's horse.

'His name's Binky,' said Albert, fastening the girth. 'It just goes to show, you never can tell.'

Bulky tried to eat his scarf in an affectionate way.

Mort remembered the woodcut in his grandmother's almanack, between the page on planting times and the phases of the moon section, showing Dethe thee Great Levyller Comes To Alle Menne. He'd stared at it hundreds of times when learning his letters. It wouldn't have been half so impressive if it had been generally known that the flame-breathing horse the spectre rode was called Binky.

'I would have thought something like Fang or Sabre or Ebony,' Albert continued, 'but the master will have his little fancies, you know. Looking forward to it, are you?'

'I think so,' said Mort uncertainly. 'I've never seen Death actually at work.'

'Not many have,' said Albert. 'Not twice, at any rate.'

Mort took a deep breath.

'About this daughter of his —' he began.

AH. GOOD EVENING, ALBERT, BOY.

'Mort,' said Mort automatically.

Death strode into the stable, stooping a little to clear the ceiling. Albert nodded, not in any subservient way, Mort noticed, but simply out of form. Mort had met one or two servants, on the rare occasions he'd been taken into town, and Albert wasn't like any of them. He seemed to act as though the house really belonged to him and its owner was just a passing guest, something to be tolerated like peeling paintwork or spiders in the lavatory. Death put up with it too, as though he and Albert had said everything that needed to be said a long time ago and were simply content, now, to get on with their jobs with the minimum of inconvenience all round. To Mort it was rather like going for a walk after a really bad thunderstorm – everything was quite fresh, nothing was particularly unpleasant, but there was the sense of vast energies just expended.

Finding out about Albert tagged itself on to the end of his list of things to do.

HOLD THIS, said Death, and pushed a scythe into his hand while he swung himself up on to Binky. The scythe looked normal enough, except for the blade: it was so thin that Mort could see through it, a pale blue shimmer in the air that could slice flame and chop sound. He held it very carefully.

RIGHT, BOY, said Death. COME ON UP. ALBERT. DON'T WAIT UP.

The horse trotted out of the courtyard and into the sky.

There should have been a flash or rush of stars. The air should have spiralled and turned into speeding sparks such as normally happens in the common, everyday trans-dimensional hyper-jumps. But this was Death, who has mastered the art of going everywhere without ostentation and could slide between dimensions as easily as he could slip through a locked door, and they moved at an easy gallop through cloud canyons, past great billowing mountains of cumulus, until the wisps parted in front of them and the Disc lay below, basking in sunlight.

THAT'S BECAUSE TIME IS ADJUSTABLE, said Death, hen Mort pointed this out. IT'S NOT REALLY IMPORTANT.

'I always thought it was.'

PEOPLE THINK IT'S IMPORTANT ONLY BECAUSE THEY INVENTED IT, said Death sombrely. Mort considered this rather trite, but decided not to argue.

'What are we going to do now?' he said.  
  
THERE'S A PROMISING WAR IN KLATCHISTAN, said Death. SEVERAL PLAGUE OUTBREAKS. ONE RATHER IMPORTANT ASSASSINATION, IF YOU'D PREFER.  
  
'What, a murder?'  
  
AYE, A KING.  
  
'Oh, kings,' said Mort dismissively. He knew about kings. Once a year a band of strolling players, or at any rate ambling ones, came to Sheepridge and the plays they performed were invariably about kings. Kings were always killing one another, or being killed. The plots were quite complicated, involving mistaken identity, poisons, battles, long-lost sons, ghosts, witches and, usually, lots of daggers. Since it was clear that being a king was no picnic it was amazing that half the cast were apparently trying to become one. Mort's idea of palace life was a little hazy, but he imagined that no-one got much sleep.  
  
'I'd quite like to see a real king,' he said. 'They wear crowns all the time, my granny said. Even when they go to the lavatory.'  
  
Death considered this carefully.

THERE'S NO TECHNICAL REASON WHY NOT, he conceded. IN MY EXPERIENCE, HOWEVER, IT IS GENERALLY NOT THE CASE.

The horse wheeled, and the vast flat checkerboard of the Sto plain sped underneath them at lightning speed. This was rich country, full of silt and rolling cabbage fields and neat little kingdoms whose boundaries wriggled like snakes as small, formal wars, marriage pacts, complex alliances and the occasional bit of sloppy cartography changed the political shape of the land.

'This king,' said Mort, as a forest zipped beneath them, 'is he good or bad?'

I NEVER CONCERN MYSELF WITH SUCH THINGS, said Death. HE'S NO WORSE THAN ANY OTHER KING, I IMAGINE.

'Does he have people put to death?' said Mort, and remembering who he was talking to added, 'Saving y'honour's presence, of course.'

SOMETIMES. THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU HAVE TO DO, WHEN YOU'RE A KING.

A city slid below them, clustered around a castle built on a rock outcrop that poked up out of the plain like a geological pimple. It was one huge rock from the distant Ramtops, Death said, left there by the retreating ice in the legendary days when the Ice Giants waged war on the gods and rode their glaciers across the land in an attempt to freeze the whole world. They'd given up in the end, however, and driven their great glittering flocks back to their hidden lands among the razor-backed mountains near the Hub. No-one on the plains knew why they had done this; it was generally considered by the younger generation in the city of Sto Lat, the city around the rock, that it was because the place was dead boring.

Binky trotted down over nothingness and touched down on the flagstones of the castle's topmost tower. Death dismounted and told Mort to sort out the nosebag.

'Won't people notice there's a horse up here?' he said, as they strolled to a stairwell.

Death shook his head.

WOULD YOU BELIEVE THERE COULD BE A HORSE AT THE TOP OF THIS TOWER? he Said.

'No. You couldn't get one up these stairs,' said Mort.

WELL, THEN?

'Oh. I see. People don't want to see what can't possibly exist.'

WELL DONE.

Now they were walking along a wide corridor hung with tapestries. Death reached into his robe and pulled out an hourglass, peering closely at it in the dim light.

It was a particularly fine one, its glass cut into intricate facets and imprisoned in an ornate framework of wood and brass. The words 'King Olerve the Bastard' were engraved deeply into it.

The sand inside sparkled oddly. There wasn't a lot left.

Death hummed to himself and stowed the glass away in whatever mysterious recess it had occupied.

They turned a corner and hit a wall of sound. There was a hall full of people there, under a cloud of smoke and chatter that rose all the way up into the banner-haunted shadows in the roof. Up in a gallery a trio of minstrels were doing their best to be heard and not succeeding.

The appearance of Death didn't cause much of a stir. A footman by the door turned to him, opened his mouth and then frowned in a distracted way and thought of something else. A few courtiers glanced in their direction, their eyes instantly unfocusing as common sense overruled the other five.

WE'VE GOT A FEW MINUTES, said Death, taking a drink from a passing tray, LET'S MINGLE.

'They can't see me either!' said Mort. 'But I'm real!'

REALITY is NOT ALWAYS WHAT IT SEEMS, said Death. ANYWAY, IF THEY DON'T WANT TO SEE ME, THEY CERTAINLY DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU. THESE ARE ARISTOCRATS, BOY. THEY'RE GOOD AT NOT SEEING THINGS. WHY IS THERE A CHERRY ON A STICK IN THIS DRINK?

'Mort,' said Mort automatically.

IT'S NOT AS IF IT DOES ANYTHING FOR THE FLAVOUR. WHY DOES ANYONE TAKE A PERFECTLY GOOD DRINK AND THEN PUT IN A CHERRY ON A POLE?

'What's going to happen next?' said Mort. An elderly earl bumped into his elbow, looked everywhere but directly at him, shrugged and walked away.

TAKE THESE THINGS, NOW, said Death, fingering a passing canape. I MEAN, MUSHROOMS YES, CHICKEN YES, CREAM YES, I'VE NOTHING AGAINST ANY OF THEM, BUT WHY IN THE NAME OF SANITY MINCE THEM ALL UP AND PUT THEM IN LITTLE PASTRY CASES?

'Pardon?' said Mort.

THAT'S MORTALS FOR YOU, Death continued. THEY'VE ONLY GOT A FEW YEARS IN THIS WORLD AND THEY SPEND THEM ALL IN MAKING THINGS COMPLICATED FOR THEMSELVES. FASCINATING. HAVE A GHERKIN.

'Where's the king?' said Mort, craning to look over the heads of the court.

CHAP WITH THE GOLDEN BEARD, said Death. He tapped a flunky on the shoulder, and as the man turned and looked around in puzzlement deftly piloted another drink from his tray.

Mort cast around until he saw the figure standing in a little group in the centre of the crowd, leaning over slightly the better to hear what a rather short courtier was saying to him. He was a tall, heavily-built man with the kind of stolid, patient face that one would confidently buy a used horse from.

'He doesn't look a bad king,' said Mort. 'Why would anyone want to kill him?'

SEE THE MAN NEXT TO HIM? WITH THE LITTLE MOUSTACHE AND THE GRIN LIKE A LIZARD? Death ointed with his scythe. 'Yes?' HIS COUSIN, THE DUKE OF STO HELIT. NOT THE NICEST OF PEOPLE, said Death. A HANDY MAN WITH A BOTTLE OF POISON. FIFTH IN LINE TO THE THRONE LAST YEAR, NOW SECOND IN LINE. BIT OF A SOCIAL CLIMBER, YOU MIGHT SAY. He fumbled inside his robe and produced an hourglass in which black sand coursed between a spiked iron latticework. He gave it an experimental shake. AND DUE TO LIVE ANOTHER THIRTY, THIRTY-FIVE YEARS, he said, with a sigh.

'And he goes around killing people?' said Mort. He shook his head. There's no justice.'

Death sighed. No, he said, handing his drink to a page who was surprised to find he was suddenly holding an empty glass, THERE'S JUST ME.

He drew his sword, which had the same ice blue, shadow-thin blade as the scythe of office, and stepped forward.

'I thought you used the scythe,' whispered Mort.

KINGS GET THE SWORD, said Death. IT'S A ROYAL WHATSNAME, PREROGATIVE.

His free hand thrust its bony digits beneath his robe again and brought out King Olerve's glass. In the top half the last few grains of sand were huddling together.

PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION, said Death, YOU MAY BE ASKED QUESTIONS AFTERWARDS.

'Wait,' said Mort, wretchedly. 'It's not fair. Can't you stop it?'

FAIR? said Death. WHO SAID ANYTHING ABOUT FAIR?

'Well, if the other man is such a —'

LISTEN, said Death, FAIR DOESN'T COME INTO IT.

YOU CANT TAKE SIDES. GOOD GRIEF. WHEN IT'S TIME, IT'S TIME. THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT, BOY.

'Mort,' moaned Mort, staring at the crowd.

And then he saw her. A random movement in the people opened up a channel between Mort and a slim, red-haired girl seated among a group of older women behind the king. She wasn't exactly beautiful, being over-endowed in the freckle department and, frankly, rather on the skinny side. But the sight of her caused a shock that hot-wired Mort's hindbrain and drove it all the way to the pit of his stomach, laughing nastily.

IT'S TIME, said Death, giving Mort a nudge with a sharp elbow. FOLLOW ME.

Death walked toward the king, weighing his sword in his hand. Mort blinked, and started to follow. The girl's eyes met his for a second and immediately looked away – then swivelled back, dragging her head around, her mouth starting to open in an 'o' of horror.

Mort's backbone melted. He started to run towards the king.

'Look out!' he screamed. 'You're in great danger!'

And the world turned into treacle. It began to fill up with blue and purple shadows, like a heatstroke dream, and sound faded away until the roar of the court became distant and scritchy, like the music in someone else's headphones. Mort saw Death standing companionably by the king, his eyes turned up towards —

— the minstrel gallery.

Mort saw the bowman, saw the bow, saw the bolt now winging through the air at the speed of a sick snail. Slow as it was, he couldn't outrun it. It seemed like hours before he could bring his leaden legs under control, but finally he managed to get both feet to touch the floor at the same time and kicked away with all the apparent acceleration of continental drift.

As he twisted slowly through the air Death said, without rancour, IT WON'T WORK, YOU KNOW. IT'S ONLY NATURAL THAT YOU SHOULD WANT TO TRY, BUT IT WON'T WORK.

Dream-like, Mort drifted through a silent world. . . .

The bolt struck. Death brought his sword around in a double-handed swing that passed gently through the king's neck without leaving a mark. To Mort, spiralling gently through the twilight world, it looked as though a ghostly shape had dropped away.

It couldn't be the king, because he was manifestly still standing there, looking directly at Death with an expression of extreme surprise. There was a shadowy something around his feet, and a long way away people were reacting with shouts and screams.

A GOOD CLEAN JOB, said Death. ROYALTY ARE ALWAYS A PROBLEM. THEY TEND TO WANT TO HANG ON. YOUR AVERAGE PEASANT, NOW, HE CAN'T WAIT.

'Who the hell are you?' said the king. 'What are you doing here? Eh? Guards! I deman —' The insistent message from his eyes finally battered through to his brain. Mort was impressed. King Olerve had held on to his throne for many years and, even when dead, knew how to behave. 'Oh,' he said, 'I see. I didn't expect to see you so oon.'

YOUR MAJESTY, said Death, bowing, FEW DO.

The king looked around. It was quiet and dim in this shadow world, but outside there seemed to be a lot of excitement.

'That's me down there, is it?'

I AM AFRAID SO, SIRE.

'Clean job. Crossbow, was it?'

YES. AND NOW, SIRE, IF YOU WOULD —

'Who did it?' said the king. Death hesitated.

A HIRED ASSASSIN FROM ANKH-MORPORK, he said.

'Hmm. Clever. I congratulate Sto Helit. And here's me filling myself with antidotes. No antidote to cold steel, eh? Eh?'

INDEED NOT, SIRE.

'The old rope ladder and fast horse by the drawbridge trick, eh?'

SO IT WOULD APPEAR, SIRE, said Death, taking the king's shade gently by the arm. IF IT'S ANY CONSOLATION, THOUGH, THE HORSE NEEDS TO BE FAST.

'Eh?'

Death allowed his fixed grin to widen a little.

I HAVE AN APPOINTMENT WITH ITS RIDER TOMORROW IN ANKH, said Death. YOU SEE, HE ALLOWED THE DUKE TO PROVIDE HIM WITH A PACKED LUNCH.

The king, whose eminent suitability for his job meant that he was not automatically quick on the uptake, considered this for a moment and then gave a short laugh. He noticed Mort for the first time.

'Who's this?' he said, 'He dead too?'

MY APPRENTICE, said Death. WHO WILL BE GETTING A GOOD TALKING-TO BEFORE HE'S MUCH OLDER, THE SCALLYWAG.

'Mort,' said Mort automatically. The sound of their talking washed around him, but he couldn't take his eyes off the scene around them. He felt real. Death looked solid. The king looked surprisingly fit and well for someone who was dead. But the rest of the world was a mass of sliding shadows. Figures were bent over the slumped body, moving through Mort as if they were no more substantial than a mist.