

# MORT

A discworld novel

Terry Pratchett

This is the bright candlelit room where the life-timers are stored – shelf upon shelf of them, squat hourglasses, one for every living person, pouring their fine sand from the future into the past. The accumulated hiss of the falling grains makes the room roar like the sea.

This is the owner of the room, stalking through it with a preoccupied air. His name is Death.

But not any Death. This is the Death whose particular sphere of operations is, well, not a sphere at all, but the Discworld, which is flat and rides on the back of four giant elephants who stand on the shell of the enormous star turtle Great A'Tuin, and which is bounded by a waterfall that cascades endlessly into space.

Scientists have calculated that the chance of anything so patently absurd actually existing are millions to one.

But magicians have calculated that million-to-one chances crop up nine times out of ten.

Death clicks across the black and white tiled floor on toes of bone, muttering inside his cowl as his skeletal fingers count along the rows of busy hourglasses.

Finally he finds one that seems to satisfy him, lifts it carefully from its shelf and carries it across to the nearest candle. He holds it so that the light glints off it, and stares at the little point of reflected brilliance.

The steady gaze from those twinkling eye-sockets encompasses the world turtle, sculling through the deeps of space, carapace scarred by comets and pitted by meteors. One day even Great A'Tuin will die, Death knows; now, that *would* be a challenge.

But the focus of his gaze dives onwards towards the blue-green magnificence of the Disc itself, turning slowly under its tiny orbiting sun.

Now it curves away towards the great mountain range called the Ramtops. The Ramtops are full of deep valleys and unexpected crags and considerably more geography than they know what to do with. They have their own peculiar weather, full of shrapnel rain and whiplash winds and permanent thunder-storms. Some people say it's all because the Ramtops are the home of old, wild magic. Mind you, some people will say anything.

Death blinks, adjusts for depth of vision. Now he sees the grassy country on the turnwise slopes of the mountains.

Now he sees a particular hillside.

Now he sees a field.

Now he sees a boy, running.

Now he watches.

Now, in a voice like lead slabs being dropped on granite, he says: YES.

There was no doubt that there was something magical in the soil of that hilly, broken area which – because of the strange tint that it gave to the local flora – was known as the octarine grass country. For example, it was one of the few places on the Disc where plants produced reannual varieties.

Reannuals are plants that grow backwards in time. You sow the seed this year and they grow last year.

Mort's family specialized in distilling the wine from reannual grapes. These were very powerful and much sought after by fortune-tellers, since of course they enabled them to see the future. The only snag was that you got the hangover the morning *before*, and had to drink a lot to get over it.

Reannual growers tended to be big, serious men, much given to introspection and close examination of the calendar. A farmer who neglects to sow ordinary seeds only loses the crop, whereas anyone who forgets to sow seeds of a crop that has already been harvested twelve months before risks disturbing the entire fabric of causality, not to mention acute embarrassment.

It was also acutely embarrassing to Mort's family that the youngest son was not at all serious and had about the same talent for horticulture that you would find in a dead starfish. It wasn't that he was unhelpful, but he had the land of vague, cheerful helpfulness that serious men soon learn to dread. There was something infectious, possibly even fatal, about it. He was tall, red-haired and freckled, with the sort of body that seems to be only marginally under its owner's control; it appeared to have been built out of knees.

On this particular day it was hurtling across the high fields, waving its hands and yelling.

Mort's father and uncle watched it disconsolately from the stone wall.

'What I don't understand,' said father Lezek, 'is that the birds don't even fly away. I'd fly away, if I saw it coining towards me.'

'Ah. The human body's a wonderful thing. I mean, his legs go all over the place but there's a fair turn of speed there.'

Mort reached the end of a furrow. An overfull woodpigeon lurched slowly out of his way.

'His heart's in the right place, mind,' said Lezek, carefully.

'Ah. 'Course, 'tis the rest of him that isn't.'

'He's clean about the house. Doesn't eat much,' said Lezek.

'No, I can see that.'

Lezek looked sideways at his brother, who was staring fixedly at the sky.

'I did hear you'd got a place going up at your farm, Hamesh,' he said.

'Ah. Got an apprentice in, didn't I?'

'Ah,' said Lezek gloomily, 'when was that, then?'

'Yesterday,' said his brother, lying with rattlesnake speed. 'All signed and sealed. Sorry. Look, I got nothing against young Mort, see, he's as nice a boy as you could wish to meet, it's just that —'

'I know, I know,' said Lezek. 'He couldn't find his arse with both hands.'

They stared at the distant figure. It had fallen over. Some pigeons had waddled over to inspect it.

'He's not stupid, mind,' said Hamesh. 'Not what you'd call stupid.'

'There's a brain there all right,' Lezek conceded. 'Sometimes he starts thinking so hard you has to hit him round the head to get his attention. His granny taught him to read, see. I reckon it overheated his mind.'

Mort had got up and tripped over his robe.

'You ought to set him to a trade,' said Hamesh, reflectively. 'The priesthood, maybe. Or wizardry. They do a lot of reading, wizards.'

They looked at each other. Into both their minds stole an inkling of what Mort might be capable of if he got his well-meaning hands on a book of magic.

'All right,' said Hamesh hurriedly. 'Something else, then. There must be lots of things he could turn his hand to.'

'He starts thinking too much, that's the trouble,' said Lezek. 'Look at him now. You don't think about how to scare birds, you just does it. A normal boy, I mean.'

Hamesh scratched his chin thoughtfully.

'It could be someone else's problem,' he said.

Lezek's expression did not alter, but there was a subtle change around his eyes.

'How do you mean?' he said.

'There's the hiring fair at Sheepridge next week. You set him as a 'prentice, see, and his new master'll have the job of knocking him into shape. 'Tis the law. Get him indentured, and 'tis binding.'

Lezek looked across the field at his son, who was examining a rock.

'I wouldn't want anything to happen to him, mind,' he said doubtfully. 'We're quite fond of him, his mother and me. You get used to people.'

'It'd be for his own good, you'll see. Make a man of him.'

'Ah. Well. There's certainly plenty of raw material,' sighed Lezek.

Mort was getting interested in the rock. It had curly shells in it, relics of the early days of the world when the Creator had made creatures out of stone, no-one knew why.

Mort was interested in lots of things. Why people's teeth fitted together so neatly, for example. He'd given that one a lot of thought. Then there was the puzzle of why the sun came out during the day, instead of at night when the light would come in useful. He knew the standard explanation, which somehow didn't seem satisfying.

In short, Mort was one of those people who are more dangerous than a bag full of rattlesnakes. He was determined to discover the underlying logic behind the universe.

Which was going to be hard, because there wasn't one. The Creator had a lot of remarkably good ideas when he put the world together, but making it understandable hadn't been one of them.

Tragic heroes always moan when the gods take an interest in them, but it's the people the gods ignore who get the really tough deals.

His father was yelling at him, as usual. Mort threw the rock at a pigeon, which was almost too full to lurch out of the way, and wandered back across the field.

And that was why Mort and his father walked down through the mountains into Sheepridge on Hogswatch Eve, with Mort's rather sparse possessions in a sack on the back of a donkey. The town wasn't much more than four sides to a cobbled square, lined with shops that provided all the service industry of the farming community.

After five minutes Mort came out of the tailors wearing a loose fitting brown garment of imprecise function, which had been understandably unclaimed by a previous owner and had plenty of room for him to grow, on the assumption that he would grow into a nineteen-legged elephant.

His father regarded him critically.

'Very nice,' he said, 'for the money.'

'It itches,' said Mort. 'I think there's *things* in here with me.'

There's thousands of lads in the world'd be very thankful for a nice warm —' Lezek paused, and gave up — 'garment like that, my lad.'

'I could share it with them?' Mort said hopefully.

'You've got to look smart,' said Lezek severely. 'You've got to make an impression, stand out in the crowd.'

There was no doubt about it. He would. They set out among the throng crowding the square, each listening to his own thoughts. Usually Mort enjoyed visiting the town, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere and strange dialects from villages as far away as five, even ten miles, but this time he felt unpleasantly apprehensive, as if he could remember something that hadn't happened yet.

The fair seemed to work like this: men looking for work stood in ragged lines in the centre of the square. Many of them sported little symbols in their hats to tell the world the kind of work they were trained in — shepherds wore a wisp of wool, carters a hank of horsehair, interior decorators a strip of rather interesting hessian wallcovering, and so on.

The boys seeking apprenticeships were clustered on the Hub side of the square.

'You just go and stand there, and someone comes and offers you an apprenticeship,' said Lezek, his voice trimmed with uncertainty. 'If they like the look of you, that is.'

'How do they do that?' said Mort.

'Well,' said Lezek, and paused. Hamesh hadn't explained about this bit. He drew on his limited knowledge of the marketplace, which was restricted to livestock sales, and ventured, 'I suppose they count your teeth and that. And make sure you don't wheeze and your feet are all right. I shouldn't let on about the reading, it unsettles people.'

'And then what?' said Mort.

'Then you go and learn a trade,' said Lezek.

'What trade in particular?'

'Well . . . carpentry is a good one,' Lezek hazarded. 'Or thievery. Someone's got to do it.'

Mort looked at his feet. He was a dutiful son, when he remembered, and if being an apprentice was what was expected of him then he was determined to be a good one. Carpentry didn't sound very promising, though – wood had a stubborn life of its own, and a tendency to split. And official thieves were rare in the Ramtops, where people weren't rich enough to afford them.

'All right,' he said eventually, 'I'll go and give it a try. But what happens if I don't get prenticed?'

Lezek scratched his head.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I expect you just wait until the end of the fair. At midnight. I suppose.'

And now midnight approached.

A light frost began to crisp the cobblestones. In the ornamental clock tower that overlooked the square a couple of delicately-carved little automatons whirred out of trapdoors in the clockface and struck the quarter hour.

Fifteen minutes to midnight. Mort shivered, but the crimson fires of shame and stubbornness flared up inside him, hotter than the slopes of Hell. He blew on his fingers for something to do and stared up at the freezing sky, trying to avoid the stares of the few stragglers among what remained of the fair.

Most of the stall keepers had packed up and gone. Even the hot meat pie man had stopped crying his wares and, with no regard for personal safety, was eating one.

The last of Mort's fellow hopefuls had vanished hours ago. He was a wall-eyed young man with a stoop and a running nose, and Sheepridge's one licensed beggar had pronounced him to be ideal material. The lad on the other side of Mort had gone off to be a toy maker. One by one they had trooped off – the masons, the farriers, the assassins, the mercers, coopers, hoodwinkers and ploughmen. In a few minutes it would be the new year and a hundred boys would be starting out hopefully on their careers, new worthwhile lives of useful service rolling out in front of them.

Mort wondered miserably why he hadn't been picked. He'd tried to look respectable, and had looked all prospective masters squarely in the eye to impress them with his excellent nature and extremely likeable qualities. This didn't seem to have the right effect.

'Would you like a hot meat pie?' said his father.

'No.'

'He's selling them cheap.'

'No. Thank you.'

'Oh.'

Lezek hesitated.

'I could ask the man if he wants an apprentice,' he said, helpfully. 'Very reliable, the catering trade.'

'I don't think he does,' said Mort.

'No, probably not,' said Lezek. 'Bit of a one-man business, I expect. He's gone now, anyway. Tell you what, I'll save you a bit of mine.'

'I don't actually feel very hungry, dad.'

'There's hardly any gristle.'

'No. But thanks all the same.'

'Oh.' Lezek deflated a little. He danced about a bit to stamp some life back into his feet, and whistled a few tuneless bars between his teeth. He felt he ought to say something, to offer some kind of advice, to point out that life had its ups and downs, to put his arm around his son's shoulder and talk expansively about the problems of growing up, to indicate – in short – that the world is a funny old lace where one should never, metaphorically speaking, be so proud as to turn down the offer of a perfectly good hot meat pie.

They were alone now. The frost, the last one of the year, tightened its grip on the stones.

High in the tower above them a cogged wheel went *clonk*, tripped a lever, released a ratchet and let a heavy lead weight drop down. There was a dreadful metallic wheezing noise and the trapdoors in the clock face slid open, releasing the clockwork men. Swinging their hammers jerkily, as if they were afflicted with robotic arthritis, they began to ring in the new day.

'Well, that's it,' said Lezek, hopefully. They'd have to find somewhere to sleep – Hogswatch-night was no time to be walking in the mountains. Perhaps there was a stable somewhere. . . .

'It's not midnight until the last stroke,' said Mort, distantly.

Lezek shrugged. The sheer strength of Mort's obstinacy was defeating him.

'All right,' he said. 'We'll wait, then.'

And then they heard the clip-clop of hooves, which boomed rather more loudly around the chilly square than common acoustics should really allow. In fact clip-clop was an astonishingly inaccurate word for the kind of noise which rattled around Mort's head; clip-clop suggested a rather jolly little pony, quite possibly wearing a straw hat with holes cut out for its ears. An edge to *this* sound made it very clear that straw hats weren't an option.

The horse entered the square by the Hub road, steam curling off its huge damp white flanks and sparks striking up from the cobbles beneath it. It trotted proudly, like a war charger. It was definitely not wearing a straw hat.

The tall figure on its back was wrapped up against the cold. When the horse reached the centre of the square the rider dismounted, slowly, and fumbled with something behind the saddle. Eventually he – or she – produced a nosebag, fastened it over the horse's ears, and gave it a friendly pat on the neck.

The air took on a thick, greasy feel, and the deep shadows around Mort became edged with blue and purple rainbows. The rider strode towards him, black cloak billowing and feet making little clicking sounds on the cobbles. They were the only noises – silence clamped down on the square like great drifts of cotton wool.

The impressive effect was rather spoilt by a patch of ice.

*OH, BUGGER.*

It wasn't exactly a voice. The words were there all right, but they arrived in Mort's head without bothering to pass through his ears.

He rushed forward to help the fallen figure, and found himself grabbing hold of a hand that was nothing more than polished bone, smooth and rather yellowed like an old billiard ball. The figure's hood fell back, and a naked skull turned its empty eyesockets towards him.

Not quite empty, though. Deep within them, as though they were windows looking across the gulfs of space, were two tiny blue stars.

It occurred to Mort that he ought to feel horrified, so he was slightly shocked to find that he wasn't. It was a skeleton sitting in front of him, rubbing its knees and grumbling, but it was a live one, curiously impressive but not, for some strange reason, very frightening.

*THANK YOU, BOY*, said the skull. *WHAT IS YOUR NAME?*

'Uh,' said Mort, 'Mortimer . . . sir. They call me Mort.'

*WHAT A COINCIDENCE*, said the skull. *HELP ME UP, PLEASE.*

The figure rose unsteadily, brushing itself down. Now Mort could see there was a heavy belt around its waist, from which was slung a white-handled sword.

'I hope you are not hurt, sir,' he said politely.

The skull grinned. Of course, Mort thought, it hasn't much of a choice.

*NO HARM DONE, I AM SURE.* The skull looked around and seemed to see Lezek, who appeared to be frozen to the spot, for the first time. Mort thought an explanation was called for.

'My father,' he said, trying to move protectively in front of Exhibit A without causing any offence. 'Excuse me, sir, but are you Death?'

*CORRECT. FULL MARKS FOR OBSERVATION, THAT BOY.*

Mort swallowed.

'My father is a good man,' he said. He thought for a while, and added, 'Quite good. I'd rather you left him alone, if it's all the same to you. I don't know what you have done to him, but I'd like you to stop it. No offence meant.'

Death stepped back, his skull on one side.

*I HAVE MERELY PUT US OUTSIDE TIME FOR A MOMENT, he said. HE WILL SEE AND HEAR NOTHING THAT DISTURBS HIM. NO, BOY, IT WAS YOU I CAME FOR.*

'Me?'

*YOU ARE HERE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT?*

Light dawned on Mort. 'You are looking for an *apprentice*?' he said.

The eyesockets turned towards him, their actinic pinpoints flaring.

*OF COURSE.*

Death waved a bony hand. There was a wash of purple light, a sort of visible 'pop', and Lezek unfroze. Above his head the clockwork automatons got on with the job of proclaiming midnight, as Time was allowed to come creeping back.

Lezek blinked.

'Didn't see you there for a minute,' he said. 'Sorry – mind must have been elsewhere.'

*I WAS OFFERING YOUR BOY A POSITION, said Death. I TRUST THAT MEETS WITH YOUR APPROVAL?*

'What was your job again?' said Lezek, talking to a black-robed skeleton without showing even a flicker of surprise.

*I USHER SOULS INTO THE NEXT WORLD, said Death.*

'Ah,' said Lezek, 'of course, sorry, should have guessed from the clothes. Very necessary work, very steady. Established business?'

*I HAVE BEEN GOING FOR SOME TIME, YES, said Death.*

'Good. Good. Never really thought of it as a job for Mort, you know, but it's good work, good work, always very reliable. What's your name?'

*DEATH.*

'Dad —' said Mort urgently.

'Can't say I recognize the firm,' said Lezek. 'Where are you based exactly?'

*FROM THE UTTERMOST DEPTHS OF THE SEA TO THE HEIGHTS WHERE EVEN THE EAGLE MAY NOT GO, said Death.*

'That's fair enough,' nodded Lezek. 'Well, I —'

'Dad —' said Mort, pulling at his father's coat.

Death laid a hand on Mort's shoulder.

*WHAT YOUR FATHER SEES AND HEARS IS NOT WHAT YOU SEE AND HEAR, he said. DO NOT WORRY HIM. DO YOU THINK HE WOULD WANT TO SEE ME – IN THE FLESH, AS IT WERE?*

'But you're Death,' said Mort. 'You go around killing people!'

*I? KILL? said Death, obviously offended. CERTAINLY NOT. PEOPLE GET KILLED, BUT THAT'S THEIR BUSINESS. I JUST TAKE OVER FROM THEN ON. AFTER ALL, IT'D BE A BLOODY STUPID WORLD IF PEOPLE GOT KILLED WITHOUT DYING, WOULDN'T IT?*

'Well, yes —' said Mort, doubtfully.

Mort had never heard the word 'intrigued'. It was not in regular use in the family vocabulary. But a spark in his soul told him that here was something weird and fascinating and not entirely horrible, and that if he let this moment go he'd spend the rest of his life regretting it. And he remembered the humiliations of the day, and the long walk back home. . . .

'Er,' he began, 'I don't have to die to get the job, do I?'

*BEING DEAD IS NOT COMPULSORY.*

'And . . . the bones . . .?'

*NOT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO.*

Mort breathed out again. It had been starting to prey on his mind.

'If father says it's all right,' he said.

They looked at Lezek, who was scratching his beard.

'How do you feel about this, Mort?' he said, with the brittle brightness of a fever victim.

'It's not everyone's idea of an occupation. It's not what I had in mind, I admit. But they do say that undertaking is an honoured profession. It's your choice.'

'Undertaking?' said Mort. Death nodded, and raised his finger to his lips in a conspiratorial gesture.

'It's interesting,' said Mort slowly. 'I think I'd like to try it.'

'Where did you say your business was?' said Lezek. 'Is it far?'

*NO FURTHER THAN THE THICKNESS OF A SHADOW,* said Death. *WHERE THE FIRST PRIMAL CELL WAS, THERE WAS I ALSO. WHERE MAN IS, THERE AM I. WHEN THE LAST LIFE CRAWLS UNDER FREEZING STARS, THERE WILL I BE.*

'Ah,' said Lezek, 'you get about a bit, then.' He looked puzzled, like a man struggling to remember something important, and then obviously gave up.

Death patted him on the shoulder in a friendly fashion and turned to Mort.

*HAVE YOU ANY POSSESSIONS, BOY?*

'Yes,' said Mort, and then remembered. 'Only I think I left them in the shop. Dad, we left the sack in the clothes shop!'

'It'll be shut,' said Lezek. 'Shops don't open on Hogswatch Day. You'll have to go back the day after tomorrow – well, tomorrow now.'

*IT IS OF LITTLE ACCOUNT,* said Death. *WE WILL LEAVE NOW. NO DOUBT I WILL HAVE BUSINESS HERE SOON ENOUGH.*

'I hope you'll be able to drop in and see us soon,' said Lezek. He seemed to be struggling with his thoughts.

'I'm not sure that will be a good idea,' said Mort.

'Well, goodbye, lad,' said Lezek. 'You're to do what you're told, you understand? And – excuse me, sir, do you have a son?'

Death looked rather taken aback.

*NO,* he said, *I HAVE NO SONS.*

'I'll just have a last word with my boy, if you've no objection.'

*THEN I WILL GO AND SEE TO THE HORSE,* said Death, with more than normal tact.

Lezek put his arm around his son's shoulders, with some difficulty in view of their difference in height, and gently propelled him across the square.

'Mort, you know your uncle Hemesh told me about this prenticing business?' he whispered.

'Yes?'

'Well, he told me something else,' the old man confided. 'He said it's not unknown for an apprentice to inherit his master's business. What do you think of that, then?'

'Uh. I'm not sure,' said Mort.

'It's worth thinking about,' said Lezek.

'I *am* thinking about it, father.'

'Many a young lad has started out that way, Hemesh said. He makes himself useful, earns his master's confidence, and, well, if there's any daughters in the house . . . did Mr, er, Mr say anything about daughters?'

'Mr who?' said Mort.

'Mr . . . your new master.'

'Oh. Him. No. No, I don't think so,' said Mort slowly. 'I don't think he's the marrying type.'

'Many a keen young man owes his advancement to his nuptials,' said Lezek.

'He does?'

'Mort, I don't think you're really listening.'

'What?'

Lezek came to a halt on the frosty cobbles and spun the boy around to face him.

'You're really going to have to do better than this,' he said. 'Don't you understand, boy? If you're going to amount to anything in this world then you've got to *listen*. I'm your father telling you these things.'

Mort looked down at his father's face. He wanted to say a lot of things: he wanted to say how much he loved him, how worried he was; he wanted to ask what his father really thought he'd just seen and heard. He wanted to say that he felt as though he stepped on a molehill and found that it was really a volcano. He wanted to ask what 'nuptials' meant.

What he actually said was, 'Yes. Thank you. I'd better be going. I'll try and write you a letter.'

'There's bound to be someone passing who can read it to us,' said Lezek. 'Goodbye, Mort.' He blew his nose.

'Goodbye, dad. I'll come back to visit,' said Mort. Death coughed tactfully, although it sounded like the pistol-crack of an ancient beam full of death-watch beetle.

*WE HAD BETTER BE GOING, he said. HOP UP, MORT.*

As Mort scrambled behind the ornate silver saddle Death leaned down and shook Lezek's hand.

*THANK YOU, he said.*

'He's a good lad at heart,' said Lezek. 'A bit dreamy, that's all. I suppose we were all young once.'

Death considered this.

No, he said, *I DON'T THINK SO.*

He gathered up the reins and turned the horse towards the Rim road. From his perch behind the black-robed figure Mort waved desperately.

Lezek waved back. Then, as the horse and its two riders disappeared from view, he lowered his hand and looked at it. The handshake . . . it had felt strange. But, somehow, he couldn't remember exactly why.

Mort listened to the clatter of stone under the horse's hooves. Then there was the soft thud of packed earth as they reached the road, and then there was nothing at all.

He looked down and saw the landscape spread out below him, the night etched with moonlight silver. If he fell off, the only thing he'd hit was air.

He redoubled his grip on the saddle.

Then Death said, *ARE YOU HUNGRY, BOY?*

'Yes, sir.' The words came straight from his stomach without the intervention of his brain.

Death nodded, and reined in the horse. It stood on the air, the great circular panorama of the Disc glittering below it. Here and there a city was an orange glow; in the warm seas nearer the Rim there was a hint of phosphorescence. In some of the deep valleys the trapped daylight of the Disc, which is slow and slightly heavy<sup>[1]</sup> was evaporating like silver steam.

But it was outshone by the glow that rose towards the stars from the Rim itself. Vast streamers of light shimmered and glittered across the night. Great golden walls surrounded the world.

'It's beautiful,' said Mort softly. 'What is it?'

*THE SUN is UNDER THE DISK, said Death.*

'Is it like this every night?'

*EVERY NIGHT, said Death. NATURE'S LIKE THAT.*

'Doesn't anyone know?'

*ME. You. THE GODS. GOOD, IS IT?*

'Gosh!'

Death leaned over the saddle and looked down at the kingdoms of the world.

*I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU*, he said, *BUT I COULD MURDER A CURRY*.

Although it was well after midnight the twin city of Ankh-Morpork was roaring with life. Mort had thought Sheepridge looked busy, but compared to the turmoil of the street around him the town was, well, a morgue.

Poets have tried to describe Ankh-Morpork. They have failed. Perhaps it's the sheer zestful vitality of the place, or maybe it's just that a city with a million inhabitants and no sewers is rather robust for poets, who prefer daffodils and no wonder. So let's just say that Ankh-Morpork is as full of life as an old cheese on a hot day, as loud as a curse in a cathedral, as bright as an oil slick, as colourful as a bruise and as full of activity, industry, bustle and sheer exuberant busyness as a dead dog on a termite mound.

There were temples, their doors wide open, filling the streets with the sounds of gongs, cymbals and, in the case of some of the more conservative fundamentalist religions, the brief screams of the victims. There were shops whose strange wares spilled out on to the pavement. There seemed to be rather a lot of friendly young ladies who couldn't afford many clothes. There were flares, and jugglers, and assorted sellers of instant transcendence.

And Death stalked through it all. Mort had half expected him to pass through the crowds like smoke, but it wasn't like that at all. The simple truth was that wherever Death walked, people just drifted out of the way.

It didn't work like that for Mort. The crowds that gently parted for his new master closed again just in time to get in his way. His toes got trodden on, his ribs were bruised, people kept trying to sell him unpleasant spices and suggestively-shaped vegetables, and a rather elderly lady said, against all the evidence, that he looked a well set-up young lad who would like a nice tune.

He thanked her very much, and said that he hoped he was having a nice tune already.

Death reached the street corner, the light from the flares raising brilliant highlights on the polished dome of his skull, and sniffed the air. A drunk staggered up, and without quite realizing why made a slight detour in his erratic passage for no visible reason. *THIS IS THE CITY, BOY*, said Death. *WHAT DO YOU THINK?*

'It's very big,' said Mort, uncertainly. 'I mean, why does everyone want to live all squeezed together like this?'

Death shrugged.

*I LIKE IT*, he said. *IT'S FULL OF LIFE*.

'Sir?'

*YES?*

'What's a curry?'

The blue fires flared deep in the eyes of Death.

*HAVE YOU EVER BITTEN A RED-HOT ICE CUBE?*

'No, sir,' said Mort.

*CURRY'S LIKE THAT*.

'Sir?'

*YES?*

Mort swallowed hard. 'Excuse me, sir, but my dad said, if I don't understand, I was to ask questions, sir?'

*VERY COMMENDABLE*, said Death. He set off down a side street, the crowds parting in front of him like random molecules.

'Well, sir, I can't help noticing, the point is, well, the plain fact of it, sir, is —'

*OUT WITH IT, BOY*.

'How can you eat things, sir?'

Death pulled up short, so that Mort walked into him. When the boy started to speak he waved him into silence. He appeared to be listening to something.

*THERE ARE TIMES, YOU KNOW*, he said, half to himself, *WHEN I GET REALLY*