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NOTHING BUT STARS, SCATTERED across the blackness as though the Creator had smashed the wind-screen of his car and hadn't bothered to stop to sweep up the pieces.

This is the gulf between universes, the chill deeps of space that contain nothing but the occasional random molecule, a few lost comets and . . .

. . . but a circle of blackness shifts slightly, the eye reconsiders perspective, and what was apparently the awesome distance of interstellar wosname becomes a world under darkness, its stars the lights of what will charitably be called civilization.

For, as the world tumbles lazily, it is revealed as the Discworld – flat, circular, and carried through space on the back of four elephants who stand on the back of Great A'tuin, the only turtle ever to feature on the Hertzsprung-Russell Diagram, a turtle ten thousand miles long, dusted with the frost of dead comets, meteor-pocked, albedo-eyed. No one knows the reason for all this, but it is probably quantum.

Much that is weird could happen on a world on the back of a turtle like that.

It's happening already.

The stars below are campfires, out in the desert,

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and the lights of remote villages high in the forested mountains. Towns are smeared nebulae, cities are vast constellations; the great sprawling city of Ankh-Morpork, for example, glows like a couple of colliding galaxies.

But here, away from the great centres of population, where the Circle Sea meets the desert, there is a line of cold blue fire. Flames as chilly as the slopes of Hell roar towards the sky. Ghostly light flickers across the desert.

The pyramids in the ancient valley of the Djel are flaring their power into the night.

The energy streaming up from their paracosmic peaks may, in chapters to come, illuminate many mysteries: why tortoises hate philosophy, why too much religion is bad for goats, and what it is that handmaidens actually *do*.

It will certainly show what our ancestors would be thinking if they were alive today. People have often speculated about this. Would they approve of modern society, they ask, would they marvel at present-day achievements? And of course this misses a fundamental point. What our ancestors would really be thinking, if they were alive today, is: ‘Why is it so dark in here?’

In the cool of the river valley dawn the high priest Dios opened his eyes. He didn’t sleep these days. He couldn’t remember when he last slept. Sleep was too close to the other thing and, anyway, he didn’t seem to need it. Just lying down was enough – at least, just

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lying down *here*. The fatigue poisons dwindled away, like everything else. For a while.

Long enough, anyway.

He swung his legs off the slab in the little chamber. With barely a conscious prompting from his brain his right hand grasped the snake-entwined staff of office. He paused to make another mark on the wall, pulled his robe around him and stepped smartly down the sloping passage and out into the sunlight, the words of the Invocation of the New Sun already lining up in his mind. The night was forgotten, the day was ahead. There was much careful advice and guidance to be given, and Dios existed only to serve.

Dios didn't have the oddest bedroom in the world. It was just the oddest bedroom anyone has ever walked out of.

And the sun toiled across the sky.

Many people have wondered why. Some people think a giant dung beetle pushes it. As explanations go it lacks a certain technical edge, and has the added drawback that, as certain circumstances may reveal, it is possibly correct.

It reached sundown without anything particularly unpleasant happening to it\*, and its dying rays chanced to shine in through a window in the city of Ankh-Morpork and gleam off a mirror.

It was a full-length mirror. All assassins had a full-length mirror in their rooms, because it would be a

\* Such as being buried in the sand and having eyes laid in it.

terrible insult to anyone to kill them when you were badly dressed.

Teppic examined himself critically. The outfit had cost him his last penny, and was heavy on the black silk. It whispered as he moved. It was pretty good.

At least the headache was going. It had nearly crippled him all day; he'd been in dread of having to start the run with purple spots in front of his eyes.

He sighed and opened the black box and took out his rings and slipped them on. Another box held a set of knives of Klatchian steel, their blades darkened with lamp black. Various cunning and intricate devices were taken from velvet bags and dropped into pockets. A couple of long-bladed throwing *tingas* were slipped into their sheaths inside his boots. A thin silk line and folding grapnel were wound around his waist, over the chain-mail shirt. A blowpipe was attached to its leather thong and dropped down his back under his cloak; Teppic pocketed a slim tin container with an assortment of darts, their tips corked and their stems braille-coded for ease of selection in the dark.

He winced, checked the blade of his rapier and slung the baldric over his right shoulder, to balance the bag of lead slingshot ammunition. As an afterthought he opened his sock drawer and took a pistol crossbow, a flask of oil, a roll of lockpicks and, after some consideration, a punch dagger, a bag of assorted caltraps and a set of brass knuckles.

Teppic picked up his hat and checked its lining for the coil of cheesewire. He placed it on his head at a

jaunty angle, took a last satisfied look at himself in the mirror, turned on his heel and, very slowly, fell over.

It was high summer in Ankh-Morpork. In fact it was more than high. It was stinking.

The great river was reduced to a lava-like ooze between Ankh, the city with the better address, and Morpork on the opposite bank. Morpork was not a good address. Morpork was twinned with a tar pit. There was not a lot that could be done to make Morpork a worse place. A direct hit by a meteorite, for example, would count as gentrification.

Most of the river bed was a honeycomb crust of cracked mud. Currently the sun appeared to be a big copper gong nailed to the sky. The heat that had dried up the river fried the city by day and baked it by night, curling ancient timbers, turning the traditional slurry of the streets into a drifting, choking ochre dust.

It wasn't Ankh-Morpork's proper weather. It was by inclination a city of mists and drips, of slithers and chills. It sat panting on the crisping plains like a toad on a firebrick. And even now, around midnight, the heat was stifling, wrapping the streets like scorched velvet, searing the air and squeezing all the breath out of it.

High in the north face of the Assassins' Guildhouse there was a click as a window was pushed open.

Teppic, who had with considerable reluctance divested himself of some of the heavier of his weapons, took a deep draught of the hot, dead air.

This was *it*. **Copyrighted Material**

This was the *night*.

They said you had one chance in two unless you drew old Mericet as examiner, in which case you might as well cut your throat right at the start.

Teppic had Mericet for Strategy and Poison Theory every Thursday afternoon, and didn't get along with him. The dormitories buzzed with rumours about Mericet, the number of kills, the astonishing technique . . . He'd broken all the records in his time. They said he'd even killed the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork. Not the present one, that is. One of the dead ones.

Maybe it would be Nivor, who was fat and jolly and liked his food and did Traps and Deadfalls on Tuesdays. Teppic was good at traps, and got on well with the master. Or it could be the Kompt de Yoyo, who did Modern Languages and Music. Teppic was gifted at neither, but the Kompt was a keen edificeer and liked boys who shared his love of dangling by one hand high above the city streets.

He stuck one leg over the sill and unhitched his line and grapnel. He hooked the gutter two floors up and slipped out of the window.

No assassin ever used the stairs.

In order to establish continuity with later events, this may be the time to point out that the greatest mathematician in the history of the Discworld was lying down and peacefully eating his supper.

It is interesting to note that, owing to this mathematician's particular species, what he was eating for his supper was his lunch.

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Gongs around the Ankh-Morpork sprawl were announcing midnight when Teppic crept along the ornate parapet four storeys above Filigree Street, his heart pounding.

There was a figure outlined against the afterglow of the sunset. Teppic paused alongside a particularly repulsive gargoyle to consider his options.

Fairly solid classroom rumour said that if he inhumed his examiner before the test, that was an automatic pass. He slipped a Number Three throwing knife from its thigh sheath and hefted it thoughtfully. Of course, any attempt, any overt move which missed would attract immediate failure and loss of privileges\*.

The silhouette was absolutely still. Teppic's eyes swivelled to the maze of chimneys, gargoyles, ventilator shafts, bridges and ladders that made up the rooftop scenery of the city.

Right, he thought. That's some sort of dummy. I'm supposed to attack it and that means he's watching me from somewhere else.

Will I be able to spot him? No.

On the other hand, maybe I'm *meant* to think it's a dummy. Unless he's thought of that as well . . .

He found himself drumming his fingers on the gargoyle, and hastily pulled himself together. What is the sensible course of action at this point?

\* Breathing, for a start.



A party of revellers staggered through a pool of light in the street far below.

Teppic sheathed the knife and stood up.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘I am here.’

A dry voice by his ear said, rather indistinctly, ‘Very well.’

Teppic stared straight ahead. Mericet appeared in front of him, wiping grey dust off his bony face. He took a length of pipe out of his mouth and tossed it aside, then pulled a clipboard out of his coat. He was bundled up even in this heat. Mericet was the kind of person who could freeze in a volcano.

‘Ah,’ he said, his voice broadcasting disapproval, ‘Mr Teppic. Well, well.’

‘A fine night, sir,’ said Teppic. The examiner gave him a chilly look, suggesting that observations about the weather acquired an automatic black mark, and made a note on his clipboard.

‘We’ll take a few questions first,’ he said.

‘As you wish, sir.’

‘What is the maximum permitted length of a throwing knife?’ snapped Mericet.

Teppic closed his eyes. He’d spent the last week reading nothing but *The Cordat*; he could see the page now, floating tantalizingly just inside his eyelids – they never ask you lengths and weights, students had said knowingly, they expect you to bone up on the weights and lengths and throwing distances but they never—

Naked terror hotwired his brain and kicked his memory into gear. The page sprang into focus.

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“Maximum length of a throwing knife may be ten finger widths, or twelve in wet weather,” he recited. “Throwing distance is—”

‘Name three poisons acknowledged for administration by ear.’

A breeze sprang up, but it did nothing to cool the air; it just shifted the heat about.

‘Sir, wasp agaric, Achorion purple and Mustick, sir,’ said Teppic promptly.

‘Why not spime?’ snapped Mericet, fast as a snake.

Teppic’s jaw dropped open. He floundered for a while, trying to avoid the gimlet gaze a few feet away from him.

‘S-sir, spime isn’t a poison, sir,’ he managed. ‘It is an extremely rare antidote to certain snake venoms, and is obtained—’ He settled down a bit, more certain of himself: all those hours idly looking through the old dictionaries had paid off— ‘is obtained from the liver of the inflatable mongoose, which—’

‘What is the meaning of this sign?’ said Mericet.

‘—is found only in the . . .’ Teppic’s voice trailed off. He squinted down at the complex rune on the card in Mericet’s hand, and then stared straight past the examiner’s ear again.

‘I haven’t the faintest idea, sir,’ he said. Out of the corner of his ear he thought he heard the faintest intake of breath, the tiniest seed of a satisfied grunt.

‘But if it were the other way up, sir,’ he went on, ‘it would be thiefsign for “Noisy dogs in this house”.’

There was absolute silence for a moment. Then, right by his shoulder, the old assassin’s voice

said, 'Is the killing rope permitted to all categories?'

'Sir, the rules call for three questions, sir,' Teppic protested.

'Ah. And that is your answer, is it?'

'Sir, no, sir. It was an observation, sir. Sir, the answer you are looking for is that all categories may bear the killing rope, but only assassins of the third grade may use it as one of the three options, sir.'

'You are sure of that, are you?'

'Sir.'

'You wouldn't like to reconsider?' You could have used the examiner's voice to grease a wagon.

'Sir, no, sir.'

'Very well.' Teppic relaxed. The back of his tunic was sticking to him, chilly with sweat.

'Now, I want you to proceed at your own pace towards the Street of Book-keepers,' said Mericet evenly, 'obeying all signs and so forth. I will meet you in the room under the gong tower at the junction with Audit alley. And – take this, if you please.'

He handed Teppic a small envelope.

Teppic handed over a receipt. Then Mericet stepped into the pool of shade beside a chimney pot, and disappeared.

So much for the ceremony.

Teppic took a few deep breaths and tipped the envelope's contents into his hand. It was a Guild bond for ten thousand Ankh-Morpork dollars, made out to 'Bearer'. It was an impressive document, surmounted with the Guild seal of the double-cross and the cloaked dagger.

Well, no going back now. He'd taken the money. Either he'd survive, in which case of course he'd traditionally donate the money to the Guild's widows and orphans fund, or it would be retrieved from his dead body. The bond looked a bit dog-eared, but he couldn't see any bloodstains on it.

He checked his knives, adjusted his swordbelt, glanced behind him, and set off at a gentle trot.

At least this was a bit of luck. The student lore said there were only half a dozen routes used during the test, and on summer nights they were alive with students tackling the roofs, towers, eaves and colls of the city. Edificing was a keen inter-house sport in its own right; it was one of the few things Teppic was sure he was good at – he'd been captain of the team that beat Scorpion House in the Wallgame finals. And this was one of the easier courses.

He dropped lightly over the edge of the roof, landed on a ridge, ran easily across the sleeping building, jumped a narrow gap on to the tiled roof of the Young Men's Reformed-Cultist-of-the-Ichor-God-Bel-Shamharoth Association gym, jogged gently over the grey slope, swarmed up a twelve foot wall without slowing down, and vaulted on to the wide flat roof of the Temple of Blind Io.

A full, orange moon hung on the horizon. There was a real breeze up here, not much, but as refreshing as a cold shower after the stifling heat of the streets. He speeded up, enjoying the coolness on his face, and leapt accurately off the end of the roof on to the narrow plank bridge that led across Tinalid Alley.

And which someone, in defiance of all probability, had removed.

At times like this one's past life flashes before one's eyes . . .

His aunt had wept, rather theatrically, Teppic had thought, since the old lady was as tough as a hippo's instep. His father had looked stern and dignified, whenever he could remember to, and tried to keep his mind free of beguiling images of cliffs and fish. The servants had been lined up along the hall from the foot of the main stairway, handmaidens on one side, eunuchs and butlers on the other. The women bobbed a curtsy as he walked by, creating a rather nice sine wave effect which the greatest mathematician on the Disc, had he not at this moment been occupied by being hit with a stick and shouted at by a small man wearing what appeared to be a nightshirt, might well have appreciated.

'But,' Teppic's aunt blew her nose, 'it's *trade*, after all.'

His father patted her hand. 'Nonsense, flower of the desert,' he said, 'it is a profession, at the very least.'

'What is the difference?' she sobbed.

The old man sighed. 'The money, I understand. It will do him good to go out into the world and make friends and have a few corners knocked off, and it will keep him occupied and prevent him from getting into mischief.'

'But . . . *assassination* . . . he's so young, and he's

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never shown the least inclination . . .' She dabbed at her eyes. 'It's not from our side of the family,' she added accusingly. 'That brother-in-law of yours—'

'Uncle Vyr't,' said his father.

'Going all over the world killing people!'

'I don't believe they use that word,' said his father. 'I think they prefer words like conclude, or annul. Or inhume, I understand.'

'Inhume?'

'I think it's like exhume, O flooding of the waters, only it's *before* they bury you.'

'I think it's terrible.' She sniffed. 'But I heard from Lady Noonie that only one boy in fifteen actually passes the final exam. Perhaps we'd just better let him get it out of his system.'

King Teppicymon XXVII nodded gloomily, and went by himself to wave goodbye to his son. He was less certain than his sister about the unpleasantness of assassination; he'd been reluctantly in politics for a long time, and felt that while assassination was probably worse than debate it was certainly better than war, which some people tended to think of as the same thing only louder. And there was no doubt that young Vyr't always had plenty of money, and used to turn up at the palace with expensive gifts, exotic sun-tans and thrilling tales of the interesting people he'd met in foreign parts, in most cases quite briefly.

He wished Vyr't was around to advise. His majesty had also heard that only one student in fifteen actually became an assassin. He wasn't entirely certain what happened to the other fourteen, but he was

pretty sure that if you were a poor student in a school for assassins they did a bit more than throw the chalk at you, and that the school dinners had an extra dimension of uncertainty.

But everyone agreed that the assassins' school offered the best all-round education in the world. A qualified assassin should be at home in any company, and able to play at least one musical instrument. Anyone inhumed by a graduate of the Guild school could go to his rest satisfied that he had been annulled by someone of taste and discretion.

And, after all, what was there for him at home? A kingdom two miles wide and one hundred and fifty miles long, which was almost entirely under water during the flood season, and threatened on either side by stronger neighbours who tolerated its existence only because they'd be constantly at war if it wasn't there.

Oh Djelibeybi\* had been great once, when upstarts like Tsort and Ephebe were just a bunch of nomads with their towels on their heads. All that remained of those great days was the ruinously-expensive palace, a few dusty ruins in the desert and – the pharaoh sighed – the pyramids. Always the pyramids.

His ancestors had been keen on pyramids. The pharaoh wasn't. Pyramids had bankrupted the country, drained it drier than ever the river did. The only curse they could afford to put on a tomb these days was 'Bugger Off'.

The only pyramids he felt comfortable about were

\* Lit. 'Child of the Djel'

the very small ones at the bottom of the garden, built every time one of the cats died.

He'd promised the boy's mother.

He missed Artela. There'd been a terrible row about taking a wife from outside the Kingdom, and some of her foreign ways had puzzled and fascinated even him. Maybe it was from her he'd got the strange dislike of pyramids; in Djelibeybi that was like disliking breathing. But he'd promised that Pteppic could go to school outside the kingdom. She'd been insistent about that. 'People never learn anything in this place,' she'd said. 'They only remember things.'

If only she'd remembered about not swimming in the river . . .

He watched two of the servants load Teppic's trunk on to the back of the coach, and for the first time either of them could remember laid a paternal hand on his son's shoulder.

In fact he was at a loss for something to say. We've never really had time to get to know one another, he thought. There's so much I could have given him. A few bloody good hidings wouldn't have come amiss.

'Um,' he said. 'Well, my boy.'

'Yes, father?'

'This is, er, the first time you've been away from home by yourself—'

'No, father. I spent last summer with Lord Fhempta-hem, you remember.'

'Oh, did you?' The pharaoh recalled the palace had seemed quieter at the time. He'd put it down to the new tapestries. **Copyrighted Material**



‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘you’re a young man, nearly thirteen—’

‘Twelve, father,’ said Teppic patiently.

‘Are you sure?’

‘It was my birthday last month, father. You bought me a warming pan.’

‘Did I? How singular. Did I say why?’

‘No, father.’ Teppic looked up at his father’s mild puzzled features. ‘It was a very *good* warming pan,’ he added reassuringly. ‘I like it a lot.’

‘Oh. Good. Er.’ His majesty patted his son’s shoulder again, in a vague way, like a man drumming his fingers on his desk while trying to think. An idea appeared to occur to him.

The servants had finished strapping the trunk on to the roof of the coach and the driver was patiently holding open the door.

‘When a young man sets out in the world,’ said his majesty uncertainly, ‘there are, well, it’s very important that he remembers . . . The point is, that it is a very big world after all, with all sorts . . . And of course, especially so in the city, where there are many additional . . .’ He paused, waving one hand vaguely in the air.

Teppic took it gently.

‘It’s quite all right, father,’ he said. ‘Dios the high priest explained to me about taking regular baths, and not going blind.’

His father blinked at him.

‘You’re not going blind?’ he said.

‘Apparently not, father.’

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‘Oh. Well. Jolly good,’ said the king. ‘Jolly, jolly good. That *is* good news.’

‘I think I had better be going, father. Otherwise I shall miss the tide.’

His majesty nodded, and patted his pockets.

‘There was something . . .’ he muttered, and then tracked it down, and slipped a small leather bag into Teppic’s pocket. He tried the shoulder routine again.

‘A little something,’ he murmured. ‘Don’t tell your aunt. Oh, you can’t, anyway. She’s gone for a lie-down. It’s all been rather too much for her.’

All that remained then was for Teppic to go and sacrifice a chicken at the statue of Khuft, the founder of Djelibeybi, so that his ancestor’s guiding hand would steer his footsteps in the world. It was only a small chicken, though, and when Khuft had finished with it the king had it for lunch.

Djelibeybi really was a small, self-centred kingdom. Even its plagues were half-hearted. All self-respecting river kingdoms have vast supernatural plagues, but the best the Old Kingdom had been able to achieve in the last hundred years was the Plague of Frog\*.

That evening, when they were well outside the delta of the Djel and heading across the Circle Sea to Ankh-Morpork, Teppic remembered the bag and examined its contents. With love, but also with his normal

\* It was quite a big frog, however, and got into the air ducts and kept everyone awake for weeks.

approach to things, his father had presented him with a cork, half a tin of saddlesoap, a small bronze coin of uncertain denomination, and an extremely elderly sardine.

It is a well-known fact that when one is about to die the senses immediately become excruciatingly sharp and it has always been believed that this is to enable their owner to detect any possible exit from his predicament other than the obvious one.

This is not true. The phenomenon is a classical example of displacement activity. The senses are desperately concentrating on anything apart from the immediate problem – which in Teppic's case consisted of a broad expanse of cobblestones some eighty feet away and closing – in the hope that it will go away.

The trouble is that it soon will.

Whatever the reason, Teppic was suddenly acutely aware of things around him. The way the moonlight glowed on the rooftops. The smell of fresh bread wafting from a nearby bakery. The whirring of a cockchafer as it barrelled past his ear, upwards. The sound of a baby crying, in the distance, and the bark of a dog. The gentle rush of the air, with particular reference to its thinness and lack of handholds . . .

There had been more than seventy of them enrolling that year. The Assassins didn't have a very strenuous entrance examination; the school was easy to get into, easy to get out of (the trick was to get out *upright*). The courtyard in the centre of the Guild buildings

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was thronged with boys who all had two things in common – overlarge trunks, which they were sitting on, and clothes that had been selected for them to grow into, and which they were more or less sitting *in*. Some optimists had brought weapons with them, which were confiscated and sent home over the next few weeks.

Teppic watched them carefully. There were distinct advantages to being the only child of parents too pre-occupied with their own affairs to worry much about him, or indeed register his existence for days at a time.

His mother, as far as he could remember, had been a pleasant woman and as self-centred as a gyroscope. She'd liked cats. She didn't just venerate them – everyone in the kingdom did *that* – but she actually liked them, too. Teppic knew that it was traditional in river kingdoms to approve of cats, but he suspected that usually the animals in question were graceful, stately creatures; his mother's cats were small, spitting, flat-headed, yellow-eyed maniacs.

His father spent a lot of time worrying about the kingdom and occasionally declaring that he was a seagull, although this was probably from general forgetfulness. Teppic had occasionally speculated about his own conception, since his parents were rarely in the same frame of reference, let alone the same state of mind.

But it had apparently happened and he was left to bring himself up on a trial and error basis, mildly hindered and occasionally enlivened by a succession of tutors. The ones hired by his father were best,

especially on those days when he was flying as high as he could, and for one glorious winter Teppic had as his tutor an elderly ibis poacher who had in fact wandered into the royal gardens in search of a stray arrow.

That had been a time of wild chases with soldiers, moonlight rambles in the dead streets of the necropolis and, best of all, the introduction to the puntbow, a fearsomely complicated invention which at considerable risk to its operators could turn a slough full of innocent waterfowl into so much floating pâté.

He'd also had the run of the library, including the locked shelves – the poacher had several other skills to ensure gainful employment in inclement weather – which had given him many hours of quiet study; he was particularly attached to *The Shattered Palace*, Translated from the Khalian by A Gentleman, with Hand-Coloured Plates for the Connoisseur in A Strictly Limited Edition. It was confusing but instructive and, when a rather fey young tutor engaged by the priests tried to introduce him to certain athletic techniques favoured by the classical Pseudopolitans, Teppic considered the suggestion for some time and then floored the youth with a hatstand.

Teppic hadn't been educated. Education had just settled on him, like dandruff.

It started to rain, in the world outside his head. Another new experience. He'd heard about it, of course, how water came down out of the sky in small

bits. He just hadn't expected there to be so much of it. It never rained in Djelibeybi.

Masters moved among the boys like damp and slightly scruffy blackbirds, but he was eyeing a group of older students lolling near the pillared entrance to the school. They also wore black – different colours of black.

That was his first introduction to the tertiary colours, the colours on the far side of blackness, the colours that you get if you split blackness with an eight-sided prism. They are also almost impossible to describe in a non-magical environment, but if someone were to try they'd probably start by telling you to smoke something illegal and take a good look at a starling's wing.

The seniors were critically inspecting the new arrivals.

Teppic stared at them. Apart from the colours, their clothes were cut off the edge of the latest fashion, which was currently inclining towards wide hats, padded shoulders, narrow waists and pointed shoes and gave its followers the appearance of being very well-dressed nails.

I'm going to be like them, he told himself.

Although probably better dressed, he added.

He recalled Uncle Vyr, sitting out on the steps overlooking the Djel on one of his brief, mysterious visits. 'Satin and leather are no good. Or jewellery of any kind. You can't have anything that will shine or squeak or clink. Stick to rough silk or velvet. The important thing is not how many people you inhume, it's how many fail to inhume *you*.'

\* \* \*

He'd been moving at an unwise pace, which might assist now. As he arced over the emptiness of the alley he twisted in the air, thrust out his arms desperately, and felt his fingertips brush a ledge on the building opposite. It was enough to pivot him; he swung around, hit the crumbling brickwork with sufficient force to knock what remained of his breath out of him, and slid down the sheer wall . . .

'Boy!'

Teppic looked up. There was a senior assassin standing beside him, with a purple teaching sash over his robes. It was the first assassin he'd seen, apart from Vyr't. The man was pleasant enough. You could imagine him making sausages.

'Are you talking to me?' he said.

'You will stand up when you address a master,' said the rosy face.

'I will?' Teppic was fascinated. He wondered how this could be achieved. Discipline had not hitherto been a major feature in his life. Most of his tutors had been sufficiently unnerved by the sight of the king occasionally perched on top of a door that they raced through such lessons as they had and then locked themselves in their rooms.

'I will *sir*,' said the teacher. He consulted the list in his hand.

'What is your name, boy?' he continued.

'Prince Pteppic of the Old Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Sun,' said Teppic easily. 'I appreciate you are

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ignorant of the etiquette, but you should not call me sir, and you should touch the ground with your forehead when you address me.'

'Pateppic, is it?' said the master.

'No. *Pteppic*.'

'Ah. *Teppic*,' said the master, and ticked off a name on his lists. He gave *Teppic* a generous smile.

'Well, now, your majesty,' he said, 'I am *Grunworth Nivor*, your housemaster. You are in *Viper House*. To my certain knowledge there are at least eleven Kingdoms of the Sun on the Disc and, before the end of the week, you will present me with a short essay detailing their geographical location, political complexion, capital city or principal seat of government, and a suggested route into the bedchamber of the head of state of your choice. However, in all the world there is only one *Viper House*. Good morning to you, boy.'

He turned away and homed in on another cowering pupil.

'He's not a bad sort,' said a voice behind *Teppic*. 'Anyway, all the stuff's in the library. I'll show you if you like. I'm *Chidder*.'

*Teppic* turned. He was being addressed by a boy of about his own age and height, whose black suit – plain black, for First Years – looked as though it had been nailed on to him in bits. The youth was holding out a hand. *Teppic* gave it a polite glance.

'Yes?' he said.

'What's your name, kiddo?'

*Teppic* drew himself up. He was getting fed up with



this treatment. 'Kiddo? I'll have you know the blood of pharaohs runs in my veins!'

The other boy looked at him unabashed, with his head on one side and a faint smile on his face.

'Would you like it to stay there?' he said.

The baker was just along the alley, and a handful of the staff had stepped out into the comparative cool of the pre-dawn air for a quick smoke and a break from the desert heat of the ovens. Their chattering spiralled up to Teppic, high in the shadows, gripping a fortuitous window sill while his feet scabbled for a purchase among the bricks.

It's not that bad, he told himself. You've tackled worse. The hubward face of the Patrician's palace last winter, for example, when all the gutters had overflowed and the walls were solid ice. This isn't much more than a 3, maybe a 3.2. You and old Chiddy used to go up walls like this rather than stroll down the street, it's just a matter of perspective.

Perspective. He glanced down, at seventy feet of infinity. Splat City, man, get a grip on yourself. On the *wall*. His right foot found a worn section of mortar, into which his toes planted with barely a conscious instruction from a brain now feeling too fragile to take more than a distant interest in the proceedings.

He took a breath, tensed, and then dropped one hand to his belt, seized a dagger, and thrust it between the bricks beside him before gravity worked out what was happening. He paused, panting, waiting for gravity to lose interest in him again, and then swung

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his body sideways and tried the same thing a second time.

Down below one of the bakers told a suggestive joke, and brushed a speck of mortar from his ear. As his colleagues laughed Teppic stood up in the moonlight, balancing on two slivers of Klatchian steel, and gently walked his palms up the wall to the window whose sill had been his brief salvation.

It was wedged shut. A good blow would surely open it, but only at about the same moment as it sent him reeling back into empty air. Teppic sighed and, moving with the delicacy of a watchmaker, drew his diamond compasses from their pouch and dragged a slow, gentle circle on the dusty glass . . .

‘You carry it yourself,’ said Chidder. ‘That’s the rule around here.’

Teppic looked at the trunk. It was an intriguing notion.

‘At home we’ve people who do that,’ he said. ‘Eunuchs and so on.’

‘You should of brought one with you.’

‘They don’t travel well,’ said Teppic. In fact he’d adamantly refused all suggestions that a small retinue should accompany him, and Dios had sulked for days. That was not how a member of the royal blood should go forth into the world, he said. Teppic had remained firm. He was pretty certain that assassins weren’t expected to go about their business accompanied by handmaidens and buglers. Now, however, the idea seemed to have some merit. He gave the

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trunk an experimental heave, and managed to get it across his shoulders.

‘Your people are pretty rich, then?’ said Chidder, ambling along beside him.

Teppic thought about this. ‘No, not really,’ he said. ‘They mainly grow melons and garlic and that kind of thing. And stand in the streets and shout “hurrah”.’

‘This is your parents you’re talking about?’ said Chidder, puzzled.

‘Oh, them? No, my father’s a pharaoh. My mother was a concubine, I think.’

‘I thought that was some sort of vegetable.’

‘I don’t think so. We’ve never really discussed it. Anyway, she died when I was young.’

‘How dreadful,’ said Chidder cheerfully.

‘She went for a moonlight swim in what turned out to be a crocodile.’ Teppic tried politely not to be hurt by the boy’s reaction.

‘My father’s in commerce,’ said Chidder, as they passed through the archway.

‘That’s fascinating,’ said Teppic dutifully. He felt quite broken by all these new experiences, and added, ‘I’ve never been to Commerce, but I understand they’re very fine people.’

Over the next hour or two Chidder, who ambled gently through life as though he’d already worked it all out, introduced Teppic to the various mysteries of the dormitories, the classrooms and the plumbing. He left the plumbing until last, for all sorts of reasons.

‘Not *any*?’ he said.

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‘There’s buckets and things,’ said Teppic vaguely, ‘and lots of servants.’

‘Bit old fashioned, this kingdom of yours?’

Teppic nodded. ‘It’s the pyramids,’ he said. ‘They take all the money.’

‘Expensive things, I should imagine.’

‘Not particularly. They’re just made of stone.’ Teppic sighed. ‘We’ve got lots of stone,’ he said, ‘and sand. Stone and sand. We’re really big on them. If you ever need any stone and sand, we’re the people for you. It’s fitting out the insides that is really expensive. We’re still avoiding paying for grandfather’s and that wasn’t very big. Just three chambers.’ Teppic turned and looked out of the window; they were back in the dormitory at this point.

‘The whole kingdom’s in debt,’ he said, quietly. ‘I mean even our *debts* are in debt. That’s why I’m here, really. Someone in our house needs to earn some money. A royal prince can’t hang around looking ornamental any more. He’s got to get out and do something useful in the community.’

Chidder leaned on the window sill.

‘Couldn’t you take some of the stuff out of the pyramids, then?’ he said.

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Sorry.’

Teppic gloomily watched the figures below.

‘There’s a lot of people here,’ he said, to change the subject. ‘I didn’t realize it would be so big.’ He shivered. ‘Or so cold,’ he added.

‘People drop out all the time,’ said Chidder. ‘Can’t

stand the course. The important thing is to know what's what and who's who. See that fellow over there?

Teppic followed his pointing finger to a group of older students, who were lounging against the pillars by the entrance.

'The big one? Face like the end of your boot?'

'That's Fliemoe. Watch out for him. If he invites you for toast in his study, *don't go*.'

'And who's the little kid with the curls?' said Teppic. He pointed to a small lad receiving the attentions of a washed-out looking lady. She was licking her handkerchief and dabbing apparent smudges off his face. When she stopped that, she straightened his tie.

Chidder craned to see. 'Oh, just some new kid,' he said. 'Arthur someone. Still hanging on to his mummy, I see. He won't last long.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Teppic. 'We do, too, and we've lasted for thousands of years.'

A disc of glass dropped into the silent building and tinkled on the floor. There was no other sound for several minutes. Then there was the faint clonk-clonk of an oil can. A shadow that had been lying naturally on the window sill, a morgue for blue-bottles, turned out to be an arm which was moving with vegetable slowness towards the window's catch.

There was a scrape of metal, and then the whole window swung out in tribological silence.

Teppic dropped over the sill and vanished into the shadow below it.

For a minute or two the dusty space was filled with

the intense absence of noise caused by someone moving with extreme care. Once again there was the squirting of oil, and then a metallic whisper as the bolt of a trapdoor leading on to the roof moved gently aside.

Teppic waited for his breath to catch up with him, and in that moment heard the sound. It was down among the white noise at the edge of hearing, but there was no doubt about it. Someone was waiting just above the trapdoor, and they'd just put their hand on a piece of paper to stop it rattling in the breeze.

His own hand dropped from the bolt. He eased his way with exquisite care back across the greasy floor and felt his way along the rough wooden wall until he came to the door. This time he took no chances, but uncorked his oil can and let a silent drop fall on to the hinges.

A moment later he was through. A rat, idly patrolling the draughty passage beyond, had to stop itself from swallowing its own tongue as he floated past.

There was another doorway at the end, and a maze of musty storerooms until he found a stairway. He judged himself to be about thirty yards from the trapdoor. There hadn't been any flues that he could see. There ought to be a clear shot across the roof.

He hunkered down and pulled out his knife roll, its velvet blackness making a darker oblong in the shadows. He selected a Number Five, not everyone's throwing knife, but worthwhile if you had the trick of it.

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