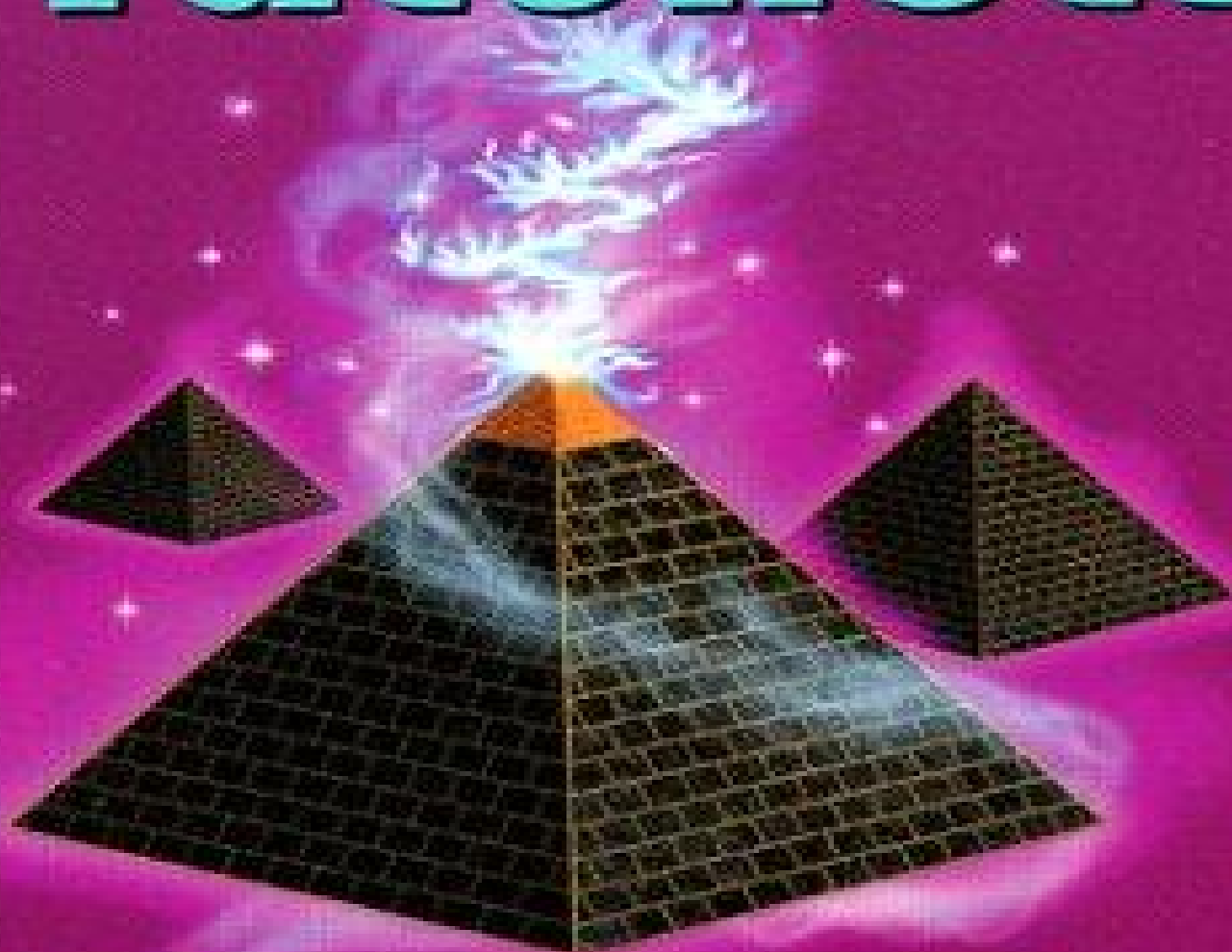


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Pyramids

Sometimes being a god is no fun at all . . .

TERRY PRATCHETT - PYRAMIDS (A Discworld Novel)

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BOOK I

The Book of Going Forth

Nothing but stars, scattered across the blackness as though the Creator had smashed the windscreen 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 civilisation.

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, 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 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* (* Such as being buried in the sand and having eggs laid in 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 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 tlingo's 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.

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.

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*. (* Breathing, for a start.)

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?

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 tantalisingly 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.

“”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 thief sign 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 Bookkeepers,” 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-Cultists-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 Tinlid Alley.

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

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