

TERRY PRATCHETT

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A DISCWORLD[®] NOVEL

Terry Pratchett



CORGI BOOKS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Pratchett is the acclaimed creator of the Discworld series, started in 1983 with *The Colour of Magic*, and which has now reached 38 novels. Worldwide sales of his books are now 60 million, and they have been translated into 37 languages. Terry Pratchett was knighted for services to literature in 2009.

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Dedication

They may be called the Palace Guard, the City Guard, or the Patrol. Whatever the name, their purpose in any work of heroic fantasy is identical: it is, round about Chapter Three (or ten minutes into the film) to rush into the room, attack the hero one at a time, and be slaughtered. No one ever asks them what they wanted to.

This book is dedicated to those fine men.

And also to Mike Harrison, Mary Gentle, Neil Gaiman and all the others who assisted with and laughed at the idea of L-space; too bad we never used Schrödinger's Paperback . . .

GUARDS! GUARDS!

They lie . . .

Not dead, not asleep. Not waiting, because waiting implies expectation. Possibly the word we're looking for here is . . .

. . . dormant.

And although the space they occupy isn't like normal space, nevertheless they are packed tightly. Not a cubic inch there but is filled by a claw, a talon, a scale, the tip of a tail, so the effect is like one of those trick drawings and your eyeballs eventually realize that the space between each dragon is, in fact, another dragon.

They could put you in mind of a can of sardines, if you thought sardines were huge and scaly and proud and arrogant.

And presumably, somewhere, there's the key.

In another space entirely, it was early morning in Ankh-Morpork, oldest and greatest and grubbiest of cities. A thin drizzle dripped from the grey sky and punctuated the river mist that coiled among the streets. Rats of various species went about their nocturnal occasions. Under night's damp cloak assassins assassinated, thieves thieved, hussies hustled. And so on.

And drunken Captain Vimes of the Night Watch staggered slowly down the street, folded gently into the gutter outside the Watch House and lay there while, above him, strange letters made of light sizzled in the damp and changed colour . . .

The city wasa, wasa, wasa wosname. Thing. *Woman*. Thass what it was. *Woman*. Roaring ancient, centuries old. Strung you along, let you fall in thingy, love, with her, then kicked you inninna, thingy. Thingy, in your mouth. Tongue. Tonsils. *Teeth*. That's what it, she, did. She wasa . . . thing, you know, lady dog. Puppy. Hen. *Bitch*. And then you hated her and, and just when you thought you'd got her, it, out of your, your, whatever, then she opened her great booming rotten heart to you caught you off bal, bal, bal, thing. *Ance*. Yeah. Thassit. Never knew where where you stood. Lay. Only thing you were sure of, you couldn't let her go. Because, because she was yours, all you had, even her gutters . . .

Damp darkness shrouded the venerable buildings of Unseen University, premier college of wizardry. The only light was a faint octarine flicker from the tiny windows of the new High Energy Magic building, where keen-edged minds were probing the very fabric of the universe, whether it liked it or not.

And there was light, of course, in the Library.

The Library was the greatest assemblage of magical texts anywhere in the multiverse. Thousands of volumes of occult lore weighted its shelves.

It was said that, since vast amounts of magic can seriously distort the mundane world, the Library did not obey the normal rules of space and time. It was said that it went on *forever*. It was said that you could wander for days among the distant shelves, that there were lost tribes of research students somewhere in there, that strange things lurked in forgotten alcoves and were preyed on by other things that were even stranger.¹

Wise students in search of more distant volumes took care to leave chalk marks on the shelves as they roamed deeper into the fusty darkness, and told friends to come looking for them if they weren't

back by supper.

And, because magic can only loosely be bound, the Library books themselves were more than mere pulped wood and paper.

Raw magic crackled from their spines, earthing itself harmlessly in the copper rails nailed to every shelf for that very purpose. Faint tracers of blue fire crawled across the bookcases and there was sound, a papery whispering, such as might come from a colony of roosting starlings. In the silence of the night the books talked to one another.

There was also the sound of someone snoring.

The light from the shelves didn't so much illuminate as highlight the darkness, but by its violent flicker a watcher might just have identified an ancient and battered desk right under the central dome.

The snoring was coming from underneath it, where a piece of tattered blanket barely covered what looked like a heap of sandbags but was in fact an adult male orangutan.

It was the Librarian.

Not many people these days remarked upon the fact that he was an ape. The change had been brought about by a magical accident, always a possibility where so many powerful books are kept together, and he was considered to have got off lightly. After all, he was still basically the same shape. And he had been allowed to keep his job, which he was rather good at, although 'allowed' is not really the right word. It was the way he could roll his upper lip back to reveal more incredibly yellow teeth than any other mouth the University Council had ever seen before that somehow made sure the matter was never really raised.

But now there was another sound, the alien sound of a door creaking open. Footsteps padded across the floor and disappeared amongst the clustering shelves. The books rustled indignantly, and some of the larger grimoires rattled their chains.

The Librarian slept on, lulled by the whispering of the rain.

In the embrace of his gutter, half a mile away, Captain Vimes of the Night Watch opened his mouth and started to sing.

Now a black-robed figure scurried through the midnight streets, ducking from doorway to doorway and reached a grim and forbidding portal. No mere doorway got that grim without effort, one felt. It looked as though the architect had been called in and given specific instructions. We want something eldritch in dark oak, he'd been told. So put an unpleasant gargoyle thing over the archway, give it a slam like the footfall of a giant and make it clear to everyone, in fact, that this isn't the kind of door that goes 'ding-dong' when you press the bell.

The figure rapped a complex code on the dark woodwork. A tiny barred hatch opened and one suspicious eye peered out.

"The significant owl hoots in the night," said the visitor, trying to wring the rainwater out of his robe.

"Yet many grey lords go sadly to the masterless men," intoned a voice on the other side of the grille.

"Hooray, hooray for the spinster's sister's daughter," countered the dripping figure.

"To the axeman, all supplicants are the same height."

"Yet verily, the rose is within the thorn."

“The good mother makes bean soup for the errant boy,” said the voice behind the door.

There was a pause, broken only by the sound of the rain. Then the visitor said, ‘What?’

“The good mother makes bean soup for the errant boy.”

There was another, longer pause. Then the damp figure said, ‘Are you sure the ill-built tower doesn’t tremble mightily at a butterfly’s passage?’

‘Nope. Bean soup it is. I’m sorry.’

The rain hissed down relentlessly in the embarrassed silence.

‘What about the caged whale?’ said the soaking visitor, trying to squeeze into what little shelter the dread portal offered.

‘What about it?’

‘It should know nothing of the mighty deeps, if you must know.’

‘Oh, the caged whale. You want the *Elucidated* Brethren of the Ebon Night. Three doors down.’

‘Who’re you, then?’

‘We’re the Illuminated and Ancient Brethren of Ee.’

‘I thought you met over in Treacle Street,’ said the damp man, after a while.

‘Yeah, well. You know how it is. The fretwork club have the room Tuesdays. There was a bit of mix-up.’

‘Oh? Well, thanks anyway.’

‘My pleasure.’ The little door slammed shut.

The robed figure glared at it for a moment, and then splashed further down the street. There was indeed another portal there. The builder hadn’t bothered to change the design much.

He knocked. The little barred hatch shot back.

‘Yes?’

‘Look, “The significant owl hoots in the night”, all right?’

“Yet many grey lords go sadly to the masterless men.”

“Hooray, hooray for the spinster’s sister’s daughter”, OK?’

“To the axeman, all supplicants are the same height.”

“Yet verily, the rose is within the thorn.” It’s pissing down out here. You do *know* that, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said the voice, in the tones of one who indeed does know it, and is not the one standing in it.

The visitor sighed.

“The caged whale knows nothing of the mighty deeps,” he said. ‘If it makes you any happier.’

“The ill-built tower trembles mightily at a butterfly’s passage.”

The supplicant grabbed the bars of the window, pulled himself up to it, and hissed: ‘Now let us in. I’m soaked.’

There was another damp pause.

‘These deeps . . . did you say mighty or nightly?’

‘Mighty, I said. *Mighty* deeps. On account of being, you know, deep. It’s me, Brother Fingers.’

‘It sounded like nightly to me,’ said the invisible doorkeeper cautiously.

‘Look, do you want the bloody book or not? I don’t have to do this. I could be at home in bed.’

‘You *sure* it was mighty?’

‘Listen, I know how deep the bloody deeps are all right,’ said Brother Fingers urgently. ‘I knew how mighty they were when you were a perishing neophyte. Now will you open this door?’

‘Well . . . all right.’

There was the sound of bolts sliding back. Then the voice said, ‘Would you mind giving it a push? The Door of Knowledge Through Which the Untutored May Not Pass sticks something wicked in the damp.’

Brother Fingers put his shoulder to it, forced his way through, gave Brother Doorkeeper a dirty look, and hurried within.

The others were waiting for him in the Inner Sanctum, standing around with the sheepish air of people not normally accustomed to wearing sinister hooded black robes. The Supreme Grand Master nodded at him.

‘Brother Fingers, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Supreme Grand Master.’

‘Do you have that which you were sent to get?’

Brother Fingers pulled a package from under his robe.

‘Just where I said it would be,’ he said. ‘No problem.’

‘Well done, Brother Fingers.’

‘Thank you, Supreme Grand Master.’

The Supreme Grand Master rapped his gavel for attention. The room shuffled into some sort of circle.

‘I call the Unique and Supreme Lodge of the Elucidated Brethren to order,’ he intoned. ‘Is the Door of Knowledge sealed fast against heretics and knowlessmen?’

‘Stuck solid,’ said Brother Doorkeeper. ‘It’s the damp. I’ll bring my plane in next week, soon have it—’

‘All right, all *right*,’ said the Supreme Grand Master testily. ‘Just a yes would have done. Is the triple circle well and truly traced? Art all here who Art Here? And it be well for an knowlessman that he should not be here, for he would be taken from this place and his gaskin slit, his moules shown to the four winds, his welchet torn asunder with many hooks and his figgin placed upon a spike *yes what is it?*’

‘Sorry, did you say *Elucidated* Brethren?’

The Supreme Grand Master glared at the solitary figure with its hand up.

‘Yea, the Elucidated Brethren, guardian of the sacred knowledge since a time no man may wot of—’

‘Last February,’ said Brother Doorkeeper helpfully. The Supreme Grand Master felt that Brother Doorkeeper had never really got the hang of things.

‘Sorry. Sorry. Sorry,’ said the worried figure. ‘Wrong society, I’m afraid. Must have taken wrong turning. I’ll just be going, if you’ll excuse me . . .’

‘And his figgin placed upon a spike,’ repeated the Supreme Grand Master pointedly, against a background of damp wooden noises as Brother Doorkeeper tried to get the dread portal open. ‘Are you quite finished? Any more knowlessmen happened to drop in on their way somewhere else?’ he added with bitter sarcasm. ‘Right. Fine. So glad. I suppose it’s too much to ask if the Four Watchtowers are secured? Oh, good. And the Trouser of Sanctity, has anyone bothered to shrive it? Oh, you did. Properly? I’ll check, you know . . . all right. And have the windows been fastened with the Red Cord of Intellect, in accordance with ancient prescription? Good. Now perhaps we can get on with it.’

With the slightly miffed air of one who has run their finger along a daughter-in-law’s top shelf and found against all expectation that it is sparkling clean, the Grand Master got on with it.

What a shower, he told himself. A bunch of incompetents no other secret society would touch with a ten-foot Sceptre of Authority. The sort to dislocate their fingers with even the simplest secret handshake.

But incompetents with possibilities, nevertheless. Let the other societies take the skilled, the hopefuls, the ambitious, the self-confident. He’d take the whining resentful ones, the ones with a bellyful of spite and bile, the ones who knew they could make it big if only they’d been given the chance. Give him the ones in which the floods of venom and vindictiveness were dammed up behind thin walls of ineptitude and lowgrade paranoia.

And stupidity, too. They’ve all sworn the oath, he thought, but not a man jack of ’em has even asked what a figgin is.

‘Brethren,’ he said. ‘Tonight we have matters of profound importance to discuss. The good governance, nay, the very future of Ankh-Morpork lies in our hands.’

They leaned closer. The Supreme Grand Master felt the beginnings of the old thrill of power. They were hanging on his words. This was a feeling worth dressing up in bloody silly robes for.

‘Do we not well know that the city is in thrall to corrupt men, who wax fat on their ill-gotten gains while better men are held back and forced into virtual servitude?’

‘We certainly do!’ said Brother Doorkeeper vehemently, when they’d had time to translate that mentally. ‘Only last week, down at the Bakers’ Guild, I tried to point out to Master Critchley that—’

It wasn’t eye contact, because the Supreme Grand Master had made sure the Brethren’s hoods shrouded their faces in mystic darkness, but nevertheless he managed to silence Brother Doorkeeper by dint of sheer outraged silence.

‘Yet it was not always thus,’ the Supreme Grand Master continued. ‘There was once a golden age when those worthy of command and respect were justly rewarded. An age when Ankh-Morpork wasn’t simply a big city but a great one. An age of chivalry. An age when – yes, Brother Watchtower?’

A bulky robed figure lowered its hand. ‘Are you talking about when we had kings?’

‘Well done, Brother,’ said the Supreme Grand Master, slightly annoyed at this unusual evidence of intelligence. ‘And—’

‘But that was all sorted out hundreds of years ago,’ said Brother Watchtower. ‘Wasn’t there this great battle, or something? And since then we’ve just had the ruling lords, like the Patrician.’

‘Yes, very good, Brother Watchtower.’

‘There aren’t any more kings, is the point I’m trying to make,’ said Brother Watchtower helpfully.

‘As Brother Watchtower says, the line of—’

‘It was you talking about chivalry that give me the clue,’ said Brother Watchtower.

‘Quite so, and—’

‘You get that with kings, chivalry,’ said Brother Watchtower happily. ‘And knights. And they used to have these—’

‘*However*,’ said the Supreme Grand Master sharply, ‘it may well be that the line of the kings of Ankh is not as defunct as hitherto imagined, and that progeny of the line exist even now. Thus my researches among the ancient scrolls do indicate.’

He stood back expectantly. There didn’t seem to be the effect he’d expected, however. Probably they can manage ‘defunct’, he thought, but I ought to have drawn the line at ‘progeny’.

Brother Watchtower had his hand up again.

‘Yes?’

‘You saying there’s some sort of heir to the throne hanging around somewhere?’ said Brother Watchtower.

‘This may be the case, yes.’

‘Yeah. They do that, you know,’ said Brother Watchtower knowledgeably. ‘Happens all the time. You read about it. Skions, they’re called. They go lurking around in the distant wildernesses for ages, handing down the secret sword and birthmark and so forth from generation to generation. Then just when the old kingdom needs them, they turn up and turf out any usurpers that happen to be around. And then there’s general rejoicing.’

The Supreme Grand Master felt his own mouth drop open. He hadn’t expected it to be as easy as this.

‘Yes, all right,’ said a figure the Supreme Grand Master knew to be Brother Plasterer. ‘But so what? Let’s say a skion turns up, walks up to the Patrician, says “What ho, I’m king, here’s the birthmark as per spec, now bugger off”. What’s he got then? Life expectancy of maybe two minutes, that’s what.’

‘You don’t *listen*,’ said Brother Watchtower. ‘The thing is, the skion has to arrive when the kingdom is threatened, doesn’t he? Then everyone can see, right? Then he gets carried off to the palace, cures a few people, announces a half-holiday, hands round a bit of treasure, and Bob’s your uncle.’

‘He has to marry a princess, too,’ said Brother Doorkeeper. ‘On account of him being a swineherd.’

They looked at him.

‘Who said anything about him being a swineherd?’ said Brother Watchtower. ‘I never said he was a swineherd. What’s this about swineherds?’

‘He’s got a point, though,’ said Brother Plasterer. ‘He’s generally a swineherd or a forester or something similar, your basic skion. It’s to do with being in wosname. Cognito. They’ve got to appear to be of, you know, humble origins.’

‘Nothing special about humble origins,’ said a very small Brother, who seemed to consist entirely of a little perambulatory black robe with halitosis. ‘I’ve got lots of humble origins. In my family we thought swineherding was a posh job.’

‘But your family doesn’t have the blood of kings, Brother Dunnykin,’ said Brother Plasterer.

‘We might of,’ said Brother Dunnykin sulkily.

‘Right, then,’ said Brother Watchtower grudgingly. ‘Fair enough. But at the essential moment, see your genuine kings throw back their cloak and say “Lo!” and their essential kingnessness shine through.’

‘How, exactly?’ said Brother Doorkeeper.

‘—*might of got the blood of kings,*’ muttered Brother Dunnykin. ‘*Got no right saying I might not have got the blood of—*’

‘Look, it just does, OK? You just know it when you see it.’

‘But before that they’ve got to save the kingdom,’ said Brother Plasterer.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Brother Watchtower heavily. ‘That’s the main thing, is that.’

‘What from, then?’

‘—*got as much right as anyone to might have the blood of kings—*’

‘The Patrician?’ said Brother Doorkeeper.

Brother Watchtower, as the sudden authority on the ways of royalty, shook his head.

‘I dunno that the Patrician is a threat, exactly,’ he said. ‘He’s not your actual tyrant, as such. Not as bad as some we’ve had. I mean, he doesn’t actually *oppress*.’

‘I get oppressed all the time,’ said Brother Doorkeeper. ‘Master Critchley, where I work, he oppresses me morning, noon and night, shouting at me and everything. And the woman in the vegetable shop, she oppresses me all the time.’

‘That’s right,’ said Brother Plasterer. ‘My landlord oppresses me something wicked. Banging on the door and going on and on about all the rent I allegedly owe, which is a total lie. And the people next door oppress me all night long. I tell them, I work all day, a man’s got to have some time to learn to play the tuba. That’s oppression, that is. If I’m not under the heel of the oppressor, I don’t know who is.’

‘Put like that—’ said Brother Watchtower slowly – ‘I reckon my brother-in-law is oppressing me all the time with having this new horse and buggy he’s been and bought. *I* haven’t got one. I mean, where’s the justice in that? I bet a king wouldn’t let that sort of oppression go on, people’s wives oppressing ’em with why haven’t they got a new coach like our Rodney and that.’

The Supreme Grand Master listened to this with a slightly light-headed feeling. It was as if he had known that there were such things as avalanches, but had never dreamed when he dropped the little snowball on top of the mountain that it could lead to such astonishing results. He was hardly having any egg them on at all.

‘I bet a king’d have something to say about landlords,’ said Brother Plasterer.

‘And he’d outlaw people with showy coaches,’ said Brother Watchtower. ‘Probably bought with stolen money, too, I reckon.’

‘I think,’ said the Supreme Grand Master, tweaking things a little, ‘that a wise king would only, if it were, outlaw showy coaches for the *undeserving*.’

There was a thoughtful pause in the conversation as the assembled Brethren mentally divided the universe into the deserving and the undeserving, and put themselves on the appropriate side.

‘It’d be only fair,’ said Brother Watchtower slowly. ‘But Brother Plasterer was right, really. I can see a skion manifesting his destiny just because Brother Doorkeeper thinks the woman in the

vegetable shop keeps giving him funny looks. No offence.'

'And bloody short weight,' said Brother Doorkeeper. 'And she—'

'Yes, yes, yes,' said the Supreme Grand Master. 'Truly the right-thinking folk of Ankh-Morpor are beneath the heel of the oppressors. However, a king generally reveals himself in rather more dramatic circumstances. Like a war, for example.'

Things were going well. Surely, for all their self-centred stupidity, one of them would be bright enough to make the suggestion?

'There used to be some old prophecy or something,' said Brother Plasterer. 'My grandad told me. His eyes glazed with the effort of dramatic recall. "'Yea, the king will come bringing Law and Justice and know nothing but the Truth, and Protect and Serve the People with his Sword.'" You don't all have to look at me like that, I didn't make it up.'

'Oh, we *all* know *that* one. And a fat lot of good that'd be,' said Brother Watchtower. 'I mean, what does he do, ride in with Law and Truth and so on like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse? Hallo everyone,' he squeaked, 'I'm the king, and that's Truth over there, watering his horse. Not very practical, is it? Nah. You can't trust old legends.'

'Why not?' said Brother Dunnykin, in a peeved voice.

' 'Cos they're legendary. That's how you can tell,' said Brother Watchtower.

'Sleeping princesses is a good one,' said Brother Plasterer. 'Only a king can wake 'em up.'

'Don't be daft,' said Brother Watchtower severely. 'We haven't got a king, so we can't have princesses. Stands to reason.'

'Of course, in the *old* days it was easy,' said Brother Doorkeeper happily.

'Why?'

'He just had to kill a dragon.'

The Supreme Grand Master clapped his hands together and offered a silent prayer to any god who happened to be listening. He'd been right about these people. Sooner or later their rambling little minds took them where you wanted them to go.

'What an interesting idea,' he trilled.

'Wouldn't work,' said Brother Watchtower dourly. 'There ain't no big dragons now.'

'There could be.'

The Supreme Grand Master cracked his knuckles.

'Come again?' said Brother Watchtower.

'I said there could be.'

There was a nervous laugh from the depths of Brother Watchtower's cowl.

'What, the real thing? Great big scales and wings?'

'Yes.'

'Breath like a blast furnace?'

'Yes.'

'Them big claw things on its feet?'

'Talons? Oh, yes. As many as you want.'

‘What do you mean, as many as I want?’

‘I would hope it’s self-explanatory, Brother Watchtower. If you want dragons, you can have dragons. *You* can bring a dragon here. Now. Into the city.’

‘Me?’

‘All of you. I mean us,’ said the Supreme Grand Master.

Brother Watchtower hesitated. ‘Well, I don’t know if that’s a very good—’

‘And it would obey your every command.’

That stopped them. That pulled them up. That dropped in front of their weaselly little minds like a lump of meat in a dog pound.

‘Can you just repeat that?’ said Brother Plasterer slowly.

‘You can control it. You can make it do whatever you want.’

‘What? A real dragon?’

The Supreme Grand Master’s eyes rolled in the privacy of his hood.

‘Yes, a real one. Not a little pet swamp dragon. The genuine article.’

‘But I thought they were, you know . . . miffs.’

The Supreme Grand Master leaned forward.

‘They were myths and they were real,’ he said loudly. ‘Both a wave and a particle.’

‘You’ve lost me there,’ said Brother Plasterer.

‘I will demonstrate, then. The book please, Brother Fingers. Thank you. Brethren, I must tell you that when I was undergoing my tuition by the Secret Masters—’

‘The what, Supreme Grand Master?’ said Brother Plasterer.

‘Why don’t you listen? You never *listen*. He said the Secret Masters!’ said Brother Watchtower. ‘You know, the venerable sages what live on some mountain and secretly run everything and taught him all this lore and that, and can walk on fires and that. He told us last week. He’s going to teach us, aren’t you, Supreme Grand Master,’ he finished obsequiously.

‘Oh, the *Secret* Masters,’ said Brother Plasterer. ‘Sorry. It’s these mystic hoods. Sorry. Secret. I’ll remember.’

But when I rule the city, the Supreme Grand Master said to himself, there is going to be none of this. I shall form a new secret society of keen-minded and intelligent men, although not too intelligent of course, not *too* intelligent. And we will overthrow the cold tyrant and we will usher in a new age of enlightenment and fraternity and humanism and Ankh-Morpork will become a Utopia and people like Brother Plasterer will be roasted over slow fires if I have any say in the matter, which I will. *And here we figgin.*²

‘When I was, as I said, undergoing my tuition by the Secret Masters—’ he continued.

‘That was where they told you you had to walk on ricepaper, wasn’t it,’ said Brother Watchtower conversationally. ‘I always thought that was a good bit. I’ve been saving it off the bottom of my macaroons ever since. Amazing, really. I can walk on it no trouble. Shows what being in a proper secret society does for you, does that.’

When he is on the griddle, the Supreme Grand Master thought, Brother Plasterer will not be lonely.

‘Your footfalls on the road of enlightenment are an example to us all, Brother Watchtower,’ he said. ‘If I may continue, however – among the many secrets—’

‘—from the Heart of Being—’ said Brother Watchtower approvingly.

‘—from the Heart, as Brother Watchtower says, of Being, was the current location of the noble dragons. The belief that they died out is quite wrong. They simply found a new evolutionary niche. And they can be summoned from it. This book—’ he flourished it – ‘gives specific instructions.’

‘It’s just in a book?’ said Brother Plasterer.

‘No ordinary book. This is the only copy. It has taken me years to track it down,’ said the Supreme Grand Master. ‘It’s in the handwriting of Tubal de Malachite, a great student of dragon lore. He wrote the actual handwriting. He summoned dragons of all sizes. And so can you.’

There was another long, awkward silence.

‘Um,’ said Brother Doorkeeper.

‘Sounds a bit like, you know . . . *magic* to me,’ said Brother Watchtower, in the nervous tone of the man who has spotted which cup the pea is hidden under but doesn’t like to say. ‘I mean, not wishing to question your supreme wisdomship and that but . . . well . . . you know . . . magic . . .’

His voice trailed off.

‘Yeah,’ said Brother Plasterer uncomfortably.

‘It’s, er, the wizards, see,’ said Brother Fingers. ‘You prob’ly dint know this, when you was banged up with them venerable herberts on their mountain, but the wizards round here come down on you like a ton of bricks if they catches you doin’ anything like that.’

‘Demarcation, they call it,’ said Brother Plasterer. ‘Like, I don’t go around fiddling with their mystic interleaved wosnames of causality, and they don’t do any plastering.’

‘I fail to see the problem,’ said the Supreme Grand Master. In fact, he saw it all too clearly. This was the last hurdle. Help their tiny little minds over this, and he held the world in the palm of his hand. Their stupefyingly unintelligent self-interest hadn’t let him down so far, surely it couldn’t fail him now . . .

The Brethren shuffled uneasily. Then Brother Dunnykin spoke.

‘Huh. *Wizards*. What do they know about a day’s work?’

The Supreme Grand Master breathed deeply. *Ah . . .*

The air of mean-minded resentment thickened noticeably.

‘Nothing, and that’s a fact,’ said Brother Fingers. ‘Goin’ around with their noses in the air, too good for the likes a’us. I used to see ’em when I worked up the University. Backsides a mile wide, I’m telling you. Catch ’em doing a job of honest toil?’

‘Like thieving, you mean?’ said Brother Watchtower, who had never liked Brother Fingers much.

‘O’course, they *tell* you,’ Brother Fingers went on, pointedly ignoring the comment, ‘that you shouldn’t go round doin’ magic on account of only them knowin’ about not disturbin’ the universal harmony and whatnot. Load of rubbish, in my opinion.’

‘We-ell,’ said Brother Plasterer, ‘I dunno, really. I mean, you get the mix wrong, you just got a load of damp plaster round your ankles. But you get a bit of magic wrong, and they say ghastly things. It comes out the woodwork and stitches you *right* up.’

‘Yeah, but it’s the wizards that say that,’ said Brother Watchtower thoughtfully. ‘Never could stand them myself, to tell you the truth. ~~Could be they’re on to a good thing and don’t want the rest of us to find out. It’s only waving your arms and chanting, when all’s said and done.~~’

The Brethren considered this. It sounded plausible. If *they* were on to a good thing, *they* certainly wouldn’t want anyone else muscling in.

The Supreme Grand Master decided that the time was ripe.

‘Then we are agreed, Brethren? You are prepared to practise magic?’

‘Oh, *practise*,’ said Brother Plasterer, relieved. ‘I don’t mind *practising*. So long as we don’t have to do it for real—’

The Supreme Grand Master thumped the book.

‘I mean carry out real spells! Put the city back on the right lines! Summon a dragon!’ he shouted.

They took a step back. Then Brother Doorkeeper said, ‘And then, if we get this dragon, the right king’ll turn up, just like that?’

‘Yes!’ said the Supreme Grand Master.

‘I can see that,’ said Brother Watchtower supportively. ‘Stands to reason. Because of destiny and the gnomonic workings of fate.’

There was a moment’s hesitation, and then a general nodding of cowls. Only Brother Plasterer looked vaguely unhappy.

‘We-ell,’ he said. ‘It won’t get out of hand, will it?’

‘I assure you, Brother Plasterer, that you can give it up any time you like,’ said the Supreme Grand Master smoothly.

‘Well . . . all right,’ said the reluctant Brother. ‘Just for a bit, then. Could we get it to stay here long enough to burn down, for example, any oppressive vegetable shops?’

Ah . . .

He’d won. There’d be dragons again. And a king again. Not like the old kings. A king who would do what he was told.

‘That,’ said the Supreme Grand Master, ‘depends on how much help you can be. We shall need, initially, any items of magic you can bring . . .’

It might not be a good idea to let them see that the last half of de Malachite’s book was a charred lump. The man was clearly not up to it.

He could do a lot better. And absolutely no-one would be able to stop him.

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