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opening extract from

# Ptolemy's Gate

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# Alexandria
## 125 BC

The assassins dropped into the palace grounds at midnight, four fleet shadows dark against the wall. The fall was high, the ground was hard; they made no more sound on impact than the pattering of rain. Three seconds they crouched there, low and motionless, sniffing at the air. Then away they stole, through the dark gardens, among the tamarisks and date palms, towards the quarters where the boy lay at rest. A cheetah on a chain stirred in its sleep; far away in the desert, jackals cried.

They went on pointed toe-tips, leaving no trace in the long wet grass. Their robes flittered at their backs, fragmenting their shadows into wisps and traces. What could be seen? Nothing but leaves shifting in the breeze. What could be heard? Nothing but the wind sighing among the palm fronds. No sight, no noise. A crocodile djinni, standing sentry at the sacred pool, was undisturbed though they passed within a scale's breadth of his tail. For humans, it wasn't badly done.

The heat of the day was a memory; the air was chill. Above the palace a cold round moon shone down, slathering silver across the roofs and courtyards.[1]

Away beyond the wall, the great city murmured in the night: wheels on dirt roads, distant laughter from the pleasure district along the quay, the tide lapping at its stones. Lamplight shone in windows, embers glowed on roof hearths, and from the top of the tower beside the harbour gate the great watch fire burned its message out to sea. Its image danced like imp-light on the waves.

At their posts, the guards played games of chance. In the pillared halls, the servants slept on beds of rushes. The palace gates were locked by triple bolts, each thicker than a man. No eyes were turned to the western gardens, where death came calling, secret as a scorpion, on four pairs of silent feet.

The boy's window was on the first floor of the palace. Four black shadows hunched beneath the wall. The leader made a signal. One by one they pressed against the stonework; one by one they began to climb, suspended by their fingertips and the nails of their big toes.[2] In this manner they had scaled marble

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[1] This was one of the peculiarities of their sect: they acted only when the moon was full. It made their tasks more difficult, their challenge greater. And they had never failed. Aside from this, they wore only black, avoided meat, wine, women and the playing of wind instruments, and curiously ate no cheese save that made from the milk of goats bred on their distant desert mountain. Before each job they fasted for a day, meditated by staring unblinking at the ground, then ate small cakes of hashish and cumin seed, without water, until their throats glowed yellow. It's a wonder they ever killed anyone.

[2] All horrid and curved they were, filed sharp like eagles' talons. The assassins took good care of their feet, because of their importance in their work. They were washed frequently, rubbed with pumice and marinated in sesame oil until the skin was soft as eiderdown.

columns and waterfalls of ice from Massilia to Hadhramaut; the rough stone blocks were easy for them now. Up they went, like bats upon a cave wall. Moonlight glinted on bright things suspended in their mouths.

The first of the assassins reached the window ledge: he sprang tiger-like upon it and peered into the chamber.

Moonlight spilled across the room; the pallet was lit as if by day. The boy lay sleeping, motionless as one already dead. His dark hair fell loose upon the cushions, his pale lamb's throat shone against the silks.

The assassin took his dagger from between his teeth. With quiet deliberation, he surveyed the room, gauging its extent and the possibility of traps. It was large, shadowy, empty of ostentation. Three pillars supported the ceiling. In the distance stood a door of teak, barred on the inside. A chest, half filled with clothes, sat open against the wall. He saw a royal chair draped with a discarded cloak, sandals lying on the floor, an onyx basin filled with water. A faint trace of perfume hung on the air. The assassin, for whom such scents were decadent and corrupt, wrinkled his nose.[3]

His eyes narrowed; he reversed the dagger, holding it between finger and thumb by its shining, gleaming tip. It quivered once, twice. He was gauging the range here – he'd never missed a target yet, from Carthage to old Colchis. Every knife he'd thrown had found its throat.

His wrist flickered; the silver arc of the knife's flight cut the

[3] The sect avoided perfumes for practical reasons, preferring to coat themselves with scents appropriate to the conditions of each job: pollen in the gardens, incense in the temples, sand-dust in the deserts, dung and offal in the towns. They were dedicated fellows.

air in two. It landed with a soft noise, hilt-deep in the cushion, an inch from the child's neck.

The assassin paused in doubt, still crouched upon the sill. The back of his hands bore the crisscross scars that marked him as an adept of the dark academy. An adept never missed his target. The throw had been exact, precisely calibrated . . . Yet it had missed. Had the victim moved a crucial fraction? Impossible – the boy was fast asleep. From his person he pulled a second dagger.[4] Another careful aim (the assassin was conscious of his brothers behind and below him on the wall: he felt the grim weight of their impatience). A flick of the wrist, a momentary arc—

With a soft noise, the second dagger landed in the cushion, an inch to the *other* side of the prince's neck. As he slept, perhaps he dreamed – a smile twitched ghost-like at the corners of his mouth.

Behind the black gauze of the scarf that masked his face, the assassin frowned. From within his tunic he drew a strip of fabric, twined tightly into a cord. In seven years since the Hermit had ordered his first kill, his garrotte had never snapped, his hands had never failed him.[5] With leopard's stealth, he slid from the sill and stole across the moonlit floor.

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[4] I won't say *where* he pulled it from. Let's just say that the knife had hygiene issues as well as being quite sharp.

[5] The Hermit of the Mountain trained his followers in numerous methods of foolproof murder. They could use garrottes, swords, knives, batons, ropes, poisons, discs, bolas, pellets and arrows inimitably, as well as being pretty handy with the evil eye. Death by fingertip and toe-flex was also taught, and the furtive nip was a speciality. Stomach-threads and tapeworms were available for advanced students. And the best of it was that it was all guilt-free: each assassination was justified and condoned by a powerful religious disregard for the sanctity of other people's lives.

In his bed the boy murmured something. He stirred beneath his sheet. The assassin froze rigid, a black statue in the centre of the room.

Behind, at the window, two of his companions insinuated themselves upon the sill. They waited, watching.

The boy gave a little sigh and fell silent once more. He lay face up amongst his cushions, a dagger's hilt protruding on either side.

Seven seconds passed. The assassin moved again. He stole round behind the cushions, looping the ends of the cord around his hands. Now he was directly above the child; he bent swiftly, set the cord upon the sleeping throat—

The boy's eyes opened. He reached up a hand, grasped the assassin's left wrist and, without exertion, swung him head first into the nearest wall, snapping his neck like a reed stalk. He flung off his silken sheet and, with a bound, stood free, facing the window.

Up on the sill, silhouetted against the moon, two assassins hissed like rock-snakes. Their comrade's death was an affront to their collective pride. One plucked from his robe a pipe of bone; from a cavity between his teeth he sucked a pellet, egg-shell thin, filled with poison. He set the pipe to his lips, blew once: the pellet shot across the room, directed at the child's heart.

The boy gave a skip; the pellet shattered against a pillar, spattering it with liquid. A plume of green vapour drizzled through the air.

The two assassins leaped into the room; one this way, the other that. Each now held a scimitar in his hand; they spun them in complex flourishes about their heads, dark eyes scanning the room.

The boy was gone. The room was still. Green poison nibbled at the pillar; the stones fizzed with it.

Never once in seven years, from Antioch to Pergamum, had these assassins lost a victim.[6] Their arms stopped moving; they slowed their pace, listening intently, tasting the air for the taint of fear.

From behind a pillar in the centre of the room came the faintest scuffling, like a mouse flinching in its bed of straw. The assassins glanced at each other; they inched forwards, toe-tip by toe-tip, scimitars raised. One went to the right, past the crumpled body of his fellow. One went to the left, beside the golden chair, draped with the cloak of kings. They moved like ghosts around the margins of the room, circling in upon the pillar from both sides.

Behind the pillar, a furtive movement: a boy's shape hiding in the shadows. Both assassins saw it; both raised their scimitars and darted in, from left, from right. Both struck with mantis-speed.

A dual cry, gargling and ragged. From round the pillar came a stumbling, rolling mess of arms and legs: the two assassins, locked together in a tight embrace, each one skewered on the other's sword. They fell forwards into the pool of moonlight in the centre of the chamber, twitched gently and lay quiet.

Silence. The windowsill hung vacant, nothing in it but the moon. A cloud passed across the bright round disc, blacking

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[6] And they didn't intend to start now. The Hermit was known to be pretty sniffy about disciples who returned in failure. There was a wall of the institute layered with their skins – an ingenious display which encouraged vigour in his students, as well as nicely keeping out the draughts.

out the bodies on the floor. The signal fire in the harbour tower cast faint redness on the sky. All was still. The cloud drifted out to sea, the light returned. From behind the pillar walked the boy, bare feet soundless on the floor, his body stiff and wary, as if he sensed a pressure in the room. With careful steps, he neared the window. Slowly, slowly, closer, closer . . . He saw the shrouded mass of gardens, the trees and sentry towers. He noticed the texture of the sill, the way the moonlight caught its contours. Closer . . . Now his hands rested on the stone itself. He leaned forwards to look down into the courtyard at the bottom of the wall. His thin white throat extended out . . .

Nothing. The courtyard was empty. The wall below was sheer and smooth, its stones picked out by moonlight. The boy listened to the quietness. He tapped his fingers on the sill, shrugged and turned inside.

Then the fourth assassin, clinging like a thin black spider to the stones *above* the window, dropped down behind him. His feet made the noise of feathers falling into snow. The boy heard; he twisted, turned. A knife flashed, swiped, was deflected by a desperate hand – its edge clinked against stone. Iron fingers grappled at the boy's neck; his legs were knocked from under him. He fell, landing hard upon the floor. The assassin's weight was on him. His hands were pinioned. He could not move.

The knife descended. This time it met its mark.

So it had finished as it must. Crouching above the body of the boy, the assassin allowed himself a breath – his first since his colleagues had met their ends. He sat back on his sinewy haunches, loosed his grip upon the knife and let the boy's

wrist drop free. He inclined his head in the traditional mark of respect to the fallen victim.

At which point the boy reached up and plucked the knife from the centre of his chest. The assassin blinked in consternation.

'Not silver, you see,' the boy said. 'Mistake.' He raised his hand.

An explosion in the room. Green sparks cascaded from the window.

The boy rose to his feet and tossed the knife upon the pallet. He adjusted his kilt and blew some flakes of ash from off his arms. Then he coughed loudly.

The faintest of scrapings. Across the room the golden chair shifted. The cloak draped over it was nudged aside. Out from between its legs scrambled another boy, identical to the first, though flushed and tousled from many hours of hiding.

He stood over the bodies of the assassins, breathing hard. Then he stared up at the ceiling. On it was the blackened outline of a man. It had a kind of startled look.

The boy lowered his gaze to the impassive doppelgänger watching him across the moonlit room. I gave a mock salute.

Ptolemy brushed the dark hair from his eyes and bowed.

'Thank you, Rekhyt,' he said.