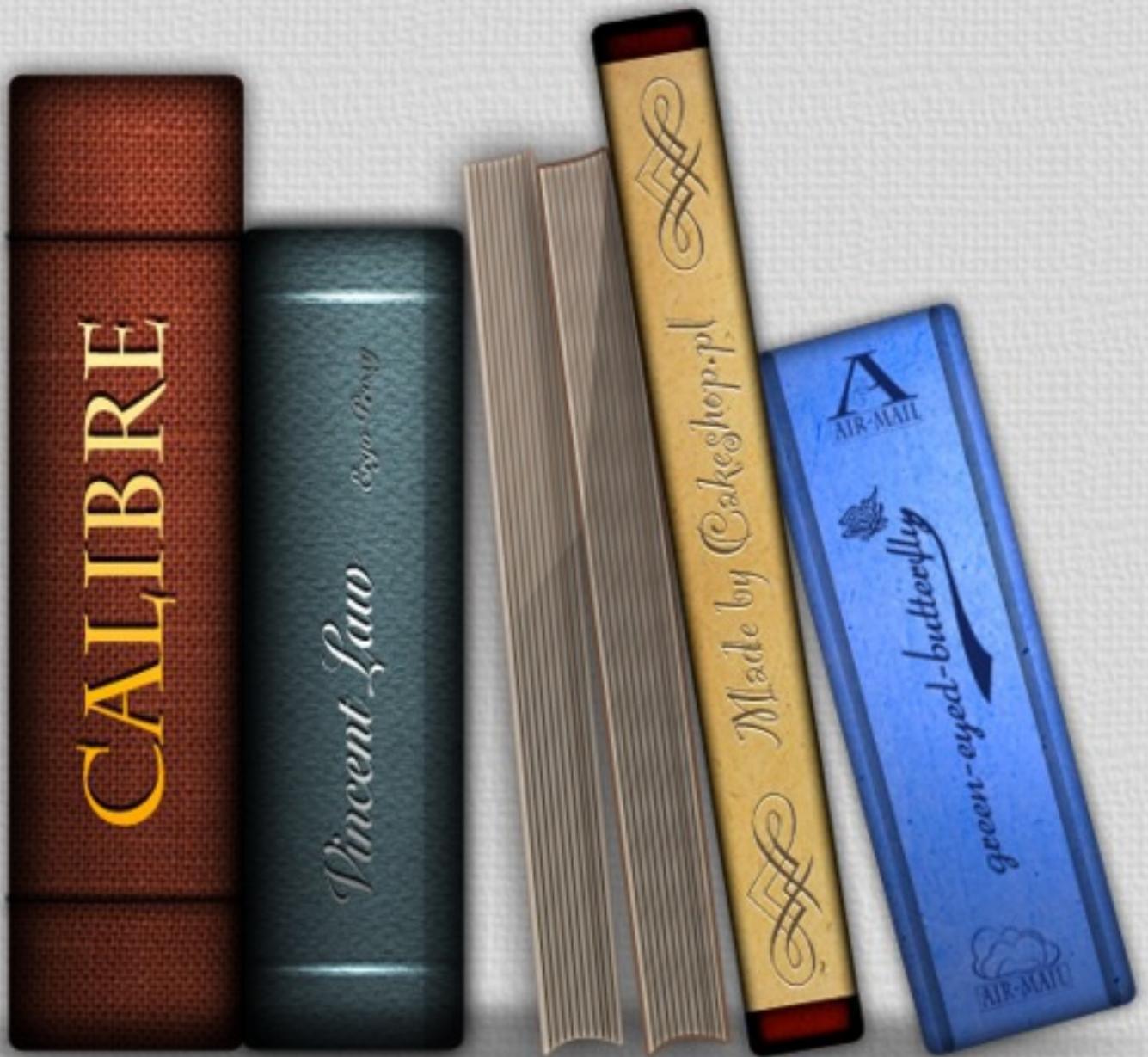


# TMB Part 10

Jonathan Waite



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## CHAPTER TEN

Once again, all the passengers were gathered in the dining salon. The evening meal had been concluded in grim silence and the two stewards had cleared away, with some difficulty since, at Varnak's request, everyone had remained in their seats. Still there was no sign of Master Hudge. Outside, rain splattered angrily against the windows. The weather had come down.

Varnak, looking pale but determined, got to his feet.

"As if this matter were not serious enough," he said, addressing them all, "we now have a disappearance as well as a death. It has now become imperative that I ask for your full co-operation."

"Why?" It was, predictably, the student Driskil who spoke. "It's obvious what happened. Hudge killed Parrunz and then jumped over the side. He'll be miles away by now. So you can stop playing the mighty lord of Tamland and let us all get back to our business."

"Be quiet, Driskil," the teacher said.

"No, Master Stychel," Varnak said, "if this young man has evidence to support his accusation, then that will be very useful."

Driskil flushed. "Stands to reason," he muttered.

"Beggin' your pardon, masters," the boatmaster said, and everyone turned to him in surprise, "but he wouldn't have jumped off just now. Not 'less he'd gone cracked he wouldn't."

"What makes you say that?" Varnak asked.

"River's main deep hereabouts," the man answered readily, "and current be main strong. And there be gorgals in the deep pockets."

"What in the king's name is a gorgal?" Varnak demanded.

Mordecai knew this one. "A carnivorous aquatic reptile," he said, "not as common as in former days due to the fact that some of the nobility of Briom used to think it great sport to hunt them. They grow to about eight feet long and can bite through a man's body. They do not frequent the waters nearer Tamland." *Because of the old magics controlled by the Panergodyne. And how long will they last if I cannot get back?*

"And Master Hudge would have known that?" Varnak turned back to the boatmaster.

"Certain sure, my lord. He was a regular traveller, was Master Hudge. He knew the

river well as any.”

“If you will permit—” Mordecai surreptitiously consulted his notebook. “If you will permit the cawing of the crow of humility to interrupt the song of the nightingale of truth, my lord—er—” He had forgotten what he was going to say now. Oh yes, that was it. “Is Master Driskil acquainted with Master Hudge?” he asked, trying to make it sound innocent.

“Why d’you say that?” the boy demanded at once.

“You use his name with some familiarity,” Mordecai pointed out.

Driskil looked at his feet. “My people knew him,” he mumbled.

“In the way of business?”

“It’s none of yours,” Driskil blurted hotly, meeting Mordecai’s gaze with a depth of hostility that startled Mordecai.

“I should point out,” said Aldro Stychel dryly, “that most people in Briom would be unwilling to admit to acquaintance with someone of Master Hudge’s profession. He was—”

“I know what he was,” Varnak interrupted, “and I quite understand. In fact I’m rather relieved to hear it. But all this will have to be gone into, you know.”

“Why?” the Tseneshi woman, Elouyne, suddenly said. “Why should this farce be prolonged? The boy has given you a perfectly satisfactory story. The man killed the other man, and then, in fear of discovery, jumped overboard, preferring a quick death from the gorgals to the ignominy of being subjected to Tamland’s footling laws. I must say I agree with him. Take your story back to Tamland and I am sure it will be sufficient to allay any concerns King Bran may have.”

“Yes,” Varnak admitted, “but the thing is, we don’t know that it’s true.”

“Truth!” Elouyne snorted. “What have men to do with truth? There is only one truth that matters, and that is that there are two men fewer on this boat. Nothing can bring them back, and I for one rejoice at it.”

“Thank you, Mistress Elouyne,” Varnak said. “You have made your views on the importance of men in general absolutely clear. Nevertheless, unless you wish me to direct the good boatmaster to turn round and convey you all back to Tamshold—a necessity I would regret—you must allow me to conduct the investigation in my own way.”

“Well, then, do as you will,” grumbled the lady, “but get on with it.”

Mordecai glanced casually at the ap Gavrus sisters, who were sitting in a line as usual

watching avidly. Maranni caught his eye and gave him a little wave.

“Very well,” Varnak said, bowing to the lady. “I have asked the boatmaster to allow me to use his office for the purpose of interviewing everyone individually.”

Idyla ap Gavrus bridled. “I trust that will not be necessary in our case, my lord,” she said.

“In everyone’s case, I fear, my lady,” Varnak said. “I need to ask everyone for anything they might have seen or heard that may bear on these incidents, and I think it will be better if I do it privately.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” said Idyla severely. “You may not have noticed, my lord, but my sisters and I are never apart. What one sees, all see; what one hears, all hear. You may interview us together or not at all.”

The other two at once set up an outcry.

“Indeed, Idyla, you are nothing but a grump,” Maranni declared. “If Lord Am—I mean, if Lord Ildras wishes to interview us separately, then I for one have no objection in the world.” And she favoured Varnak with a roguish smile.

“Nor I,” Lonira added. “Idyla, you shall not hinder the noble lord in his enquiries. I should be delighted to assist in any way.” This last was accompanied by a languorous fluttering of her very long eyelashes.

“For myself,” Aldro Stychel put in, “and my students, we will be happy to co-operate.”

“Thank you, Master Stychel,” Varnak said, somewhat relieved at the breaking of the mood. Idyla humphed and subsided. “And you, Mistress Elouyne?” he said, turning to the lady in black.

“If we must, we must,” Elouyne responded. “In fact, I would be obliged if you would ‘interview’ me first. The less of my time I have to waste on this pointless charade, the happier I shall be.”

“You are very much occupied at the moment, madonna?” Mordecai inquired.

“A woman is always too busy for men’s games,” Elouyne snapped.

“Indeed,” Mordecai agreed, “there must be many calls on the time of a loyal servant of the Witchring.”

“Which, as you well know, *Alonso del Cazargua*,” she laid ironic stress on the name, “I am no longer.”

“I know that you wear no hair-frame,” Mordecai said. “I can only imagine what losing such a precious and irreplaceable part of yourself might feel like. Or perhaps it is merely waiting for you to replace a rivet?”

“Replace a—?” Elouyne turned to Varnak. “What is he babbling about now?”

“I’m sure Master Alonso has his reasons,” Varnak said smoothly. “Very well then, Mistress Elouyne, if you will come with me...Master Alonso, I’ll need you to take notes.”

“My compliance shall be the counterpoint to the melody of your command, my lord.” Mordecai had had that one ready.

“What shall we do in the meantime, my lord?” Lonira ap Gavrus asked.

“Er...” Varnak hesitated. “Stay here. I’ll send for you when I’m ready.”

“We shall be retiring in...” Idyla consulted a large pocket watch attached to her reticule by a slender chain. “One hour.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. Um, boatmaster...I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name...”

“No reason for you to know it, m’lord,” the boatmaster said cheerfully. “I’m not from Tamland. Name’s Hurnig Flood, an’t please you, m’lord.”

“When’s our next stop?”

“Tomorrow noon, m’lord. Mattockhay, on the Briom bank. Should have been mid-morning, but we’re running a touch slow at the moment.” He frowned, but added, “I ’spect to make up the time once we’re past Brokenbowes.”

“Good man,” Varnak said. “All right, then. Any of you who need to retire may do so, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

He drew Aldro Stychel aside and spoke to him, in so low a tone that Mordecai could not catch the words, but he could guess the meaning. The teacher nodded. “Rely on me, my lord.”

“I am,” Varnak said. “And now, Mistress Elouyne...”

The woman had not troubled to conceal her impatience at these delays. Now she snorted audibly and turned to precede Varnak and Mordecai out of the salon. Driskil muttered something to one of his fellows and sniggered; Elouyne’s back became, if possible, even straighter, and she hurried ahead, followed by Mordecai and Varnak.

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“Shut up, Driskil,” Burlox whispered, as the witch flounced out, followed by the noble or merchant or whatever he was and his sinister clerk. Gorol couldn’t help it; he didn’t like the man.

“I’ll say what I like,” Driskil hissed. Old Stick had wandered off and was talking to the

three girls in the fancy dress.

“Be quiet, both of you,” Thavaar said. “Gentlemen, we must plot.”

Gorol, Driskil and Burlox leaned closer.

“I,” Thavaar said, “am on the verge of utter physical collapse. I have had no beer—none—for nearly a full day. The prospect of this enforced abstinence being prolonged till noon on the morrow frankly appals me. Observe the cold perspiration upon my brow.” There was none, of course. Thavaar looked as cool and unruffled as ever.

“Therefore, to forestall my complete decline into inanition, one of you stout fellows must make a foray to the kitchens—there must be something alcoholic down there—purloin the necessary and secrete it in our room. Be it the humblest Sinjaro cooking wine, it shall suffice.” He glanced around their faces. “Burlox, it had better be you.”

“I’ll do it,” Driskil said eagerly.

Thavaar shook his head sadly. “I fear, Driskil,” he said, “that you lack the finesse required for so delicate an operation. Besides, you would undoubtedly guzzle the lot on your way back. No, it must be Burlox.”

Driskil grinned proudly at what he clearly took to be some kind of tribute, and Burlox, always glad to be trusted with anything, got up very quietly and sidled round the group and out through the doors. Old Stick was still deep in converse with the girls; this tendency of his to become totally immersed in whatever he was doing had served his students well on many occasions.

“What do you suppose happened to old Hudge?” Gorol asked.

Driskil made to spit on the floor, then glanced round guiltily. “Good riddance,” he said. “I think he killed the Penny and jumped over the side, like I said.”

Gorol was shocked. “Parrunz was a Penny?” he said. “How do you know?”

Driskil swivelled round to glare at him. “Why should I tell you?” he snarled. “Of course you wouldn’t know. Goody-goody Gorol. Nobody ever investigated the Felk family. Nobody ever—” He clamped his mouth shut and looked away.

“I think, Gorol,” Thavaar said, “you may take it that if friend Driskil says it is so, it is so. But I see our esteemed pedagogue returning.”

“Hullo,” said Old Stick, “where’s Burlox got to?”

“A call of nature, sir,” Thavaar said blandly. “I doubt not he will return in due course.”

Old Stick looked sharply at Thavaar, who met his gaze with utter insouciance.

“Well, one of you can perhaps pass this on when he gets back,” he said. “I’ve been speaking to the ladies over there. They seem to be under the impression that this terrible business is some sort of entertainment staged for their benefit, and, ah, Lord Ildras has asked me to ensure that none of you should, either accidentally or on purpose, disabuse them of that impression.”

“Why not, sir?” Gorol demanded, while Thavaar quirked an eyebrow and Driskil emitted one of his explosive sniggers.

“I don’t know,” Old Stick admitted. “But those are his lordship’s wishes, and we are under his authority, so I’m going to ask you to do as he says. He also asked that we all keep our eyes and ears open for anything that seems out of the ordinary.”

“Is it then the noble lord’s wish, sir,” Thavaar said blandly, “that we spy upon our fellow passengers?”

“Certainly not, Thavaar,” Old Stick said severely. “Merely maintain an ordinary awareness of what is going on around you—Driskil, your sense of humour continues to elude my understanding. And now I suggest you all return to your room and try to get some sleep. His lordship will be interviewing us all tomorrow. Tell Burlox when you see him. Oh, and Thavaar?” he added. “Don’t drink it all at once. You needn’t think I’m not aware of what you’ve been doing, but I’m under contract to return you to your families more or less alive and with all your bits still working, and that includes your liver. Remember that.”

Thavaar’s mood, as they descended the stairs to their communal quarters, was pensive. “Do you know,” he remarked to Gorol, “I find myself somewhat put about by the recent revelation regarding our esteemed pedagogue’s perceptivity. I was rather pluming myself on having put one over on the old gorgal. However, duty is duty. I trust Burlox has been successful in obtaining the goods.”

Burlox had. On the small table by the door, when they entered, Gorol saw half a dozen squat brown bottles. Burlox himself was sitting on his bed, seemingly lost in thought, but as the other three entered he jumped up, put a finger to his lips and closed the door. Driskil, ever eager to be first in whatever was afoot, grabbed a bottle at once and began working on the cork with a huge pocket knife, but Burlox took knife and bottle away from him without apparent effort and turned to the others.

“Listen,” he hissed. “I’ve just seen something.”

“Give me back my knife!” Driskil shouted.

“Shut up!!” Burlox rounded on him, still speaking in an agonised whisper, but there was that in his face which penetrated even Driskil’s consciousness. “Wait till I’ve told

you.”

“Told us what, good Burlox?” Thavaar inquired smoothly. “You may omit the preamble. We are agog, dear fellow, agog.”

“I went down to the kitchen like you said,” Burlox began, “and pinched the bottles without any trouble. But it was what I saw as I was leaving.”

“What was it?” Driskil whined. “I’m thirsty.”

“It was the cook,” Burlox said in hushed tones.

“Hardly an incongruous object to find in a kitchen,” Thavaar remarked.

“No, you ass, it was what he was doing,” Burlox said. “He had a pile of packages, all wrapped in oilcloth, and he was pushing them out of the window. And the one in his hands when I saw him,” he continued, lowering his voice, “looked like a human head.”

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Zorn turned as the prisoner stirred and moaned in her bonds. She had slept long under sporedream; in his haste he had delivered a heavy dose. Not that he regretted it—the woman was nothing to him. But she would now need to eat and drink if she were to be brought alive to their destination.

He loosened the gag and allowed it to fall round her neck as her bleary eyes opened.

“Oh...” she said, in a voice without substance. “Mornin’, cully.”

“It is late night,” Zorn said. “My prince is asleep. You should know, though, that he will no longer be cozened by your foul magics.”

The woman coughed. “Think I’d waste good spells on you?” she croaked. “He were easy. Just talked to him, me.” She frowned. “Feel different. Like I want summat...don’t ken what.”

“You are burning for the *torashya* spores,” Zorn told her. “There is a limit to the number of times a soul may wander in sporedream before the call becomes too hard to resist. You forced me to dose you beyond that limit. Soon you will beg to serve my prince or myself in whatever capacity we think most suitable, simply so that you may taste the spores again.”

The woman cocked an eyebrow at him. “Think so, cully?” she said, and her voice sounded stronger. “Mebbe, mebbe not. Us’ll see, shall us?”

“No man can resist the lure of sporedream,” Zorn told her loftily.

“I be no man,” the woman pointed out. “Anyroad, I could do with a bite and a sup.”

“You shall have both,” Zorn said, refastening the gag. “But you will not speak while you eat and drink, and when you have finished you will be gagged and left alone. I do not care whether you used magic or some other woman’s trick to seduce my prince, but you shall have no further opportunities. We shall see how long it takes you, left alone with your thoughts and the burning, to begin to yearn for the bright visions, the soothing contentment...”

“All right,” the woman said, and Zorn was pleased to note the sharp edge in her voice. She was not as confident as she tried to seem. “As tha says, cully, we’ll see. Now where’s yon grub tha mentioned?”

Zorn went out to the galley in high good humour.

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The interview with Mistress Elouyne, late of the Witchring of Tsenesh, meanwhile, was not going nearly so smoothly. The atmosphere in the boatmaster’s tiny office was compounded of weariness and tension, and given point and rhythm by the rain pounding on the flat roof.

“You say you have never met anybody by the name of Rylome?” Varnak said.

“I have said so,” Elouyne said, “several times.”

“And that you know nothing about the death of Master Parrunz, nor the disappearance of Master Hudge?”

“I neither know nor care.” Elouyne’s mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “You men always think the world revolves around you. Your trained Sinjaro monkey there imagines that I hate him and desire revenge upon him. You matter to me no more than spittle.” She spat, suddenly, on the desk between them. “Take revenge on that if you can.”

“What about Tsenesh itself?” Mordecai said, as Varnak scrubbed at the leather surface with his sleeve. “It is the Witchring’s fondest desire to conquer Tamland.”

Elouyne threw back her head and laughed. “And burden ourselves with yet more hapless males who think themselves gods and the gods like themselves? Are we fools

in Tsenesh?” She leaned closer. “Your wealth, that you squander like water, your rich soil, your clear water, your untainted air, aye, Master Magician, those we covet...but not enough to wage a war over.”

“You were ready to wage a war over a supposed insult to your Princess last year.” Varnak spoke mildly, but his eyes were hard.

Elouyne sat back and surveyed him, still smiling.

“I am glad you thought so,” she said at last. “Listen, ‘Prince’ Varnak. The language of men is the language of lies and vaunts and empty threats and promises. We of the Witchring learn to speak it, but it does not bind our thoughts as it does yours. I speak to you now in the language of women, the language of facts.

“My land is poor. We trade for that which we need to live, for our soil and our water will not provide it. We trade the products of our skill and knowledge. We gouge raw materials from the rock and shape them to our will, and we sell them to your traders and the traders of Briom for food and cloth and medicines we cannot make ourselves. Our magic is strong in many ways, but it does not work on the land and water as Tam’s magic did for your people.

“Yes, we hate you, and can you wonder at it? You flaunt your luxuries in our faces and mock us because we have become hard like our home. You are as decadent and pampered as any fat courtesan of Briom and you scorn us because we work. But this is nothing to us.

“Yes, I lied when I threatened Tamland with war. We have nothing to spare that we would waste on a war, a fact that would have been obvious to any woman...but your father’s court is composed entirely of men, and they think with their blood and not their brains. And that is why men are of no significance to us...not our own, nor anyone else’s.

“No, I did not kill Parrunz, nor do I care who did. I have no room to care about such things. I have no time to care about your laws. And I have nothing to say, now or ever,” her gaze raked Mordecai as if it had nails, “to that one.”

“What about my apprentice?” Mordecai blurted suddenly. “What about him?”

Elouyne stopped in the act of rising from her chair.

“Your...apprentice?” she said softly. Varnak made a warning gesture, but Mordecai was past caring.

“The trader Rylome informed us that a veiled woman in black paid him well to abduct my apprentice,” he said. “We have been seeking the boy ever since. You are a veiled woman in black...at least, when you are wearing your veil you are. Do you deny that it was either you, or another Tseneshi witch known to you, who arranged this crime?”

Elouyne went to the door, and turned back.

“Indeed I do deny it,” she said, smiling. “And I tell you this, Mordecai del Aguila, since your male mind will never get there unaided. The very last thing my sisters or I would wish to do is to remove...your apprentice...from your care. But should you lose...him...to another power,” she went on, her smile hardening, “you would not face a mere war. You and your soft land, and your idle king and his court, would quite simply be torn to shreds and scattered to the winds, and not a single living soul would remember that somewhere once lay a place called Tamland. Remember that, magician...and seek harder.” She inclined her head. “Good night to you both.”