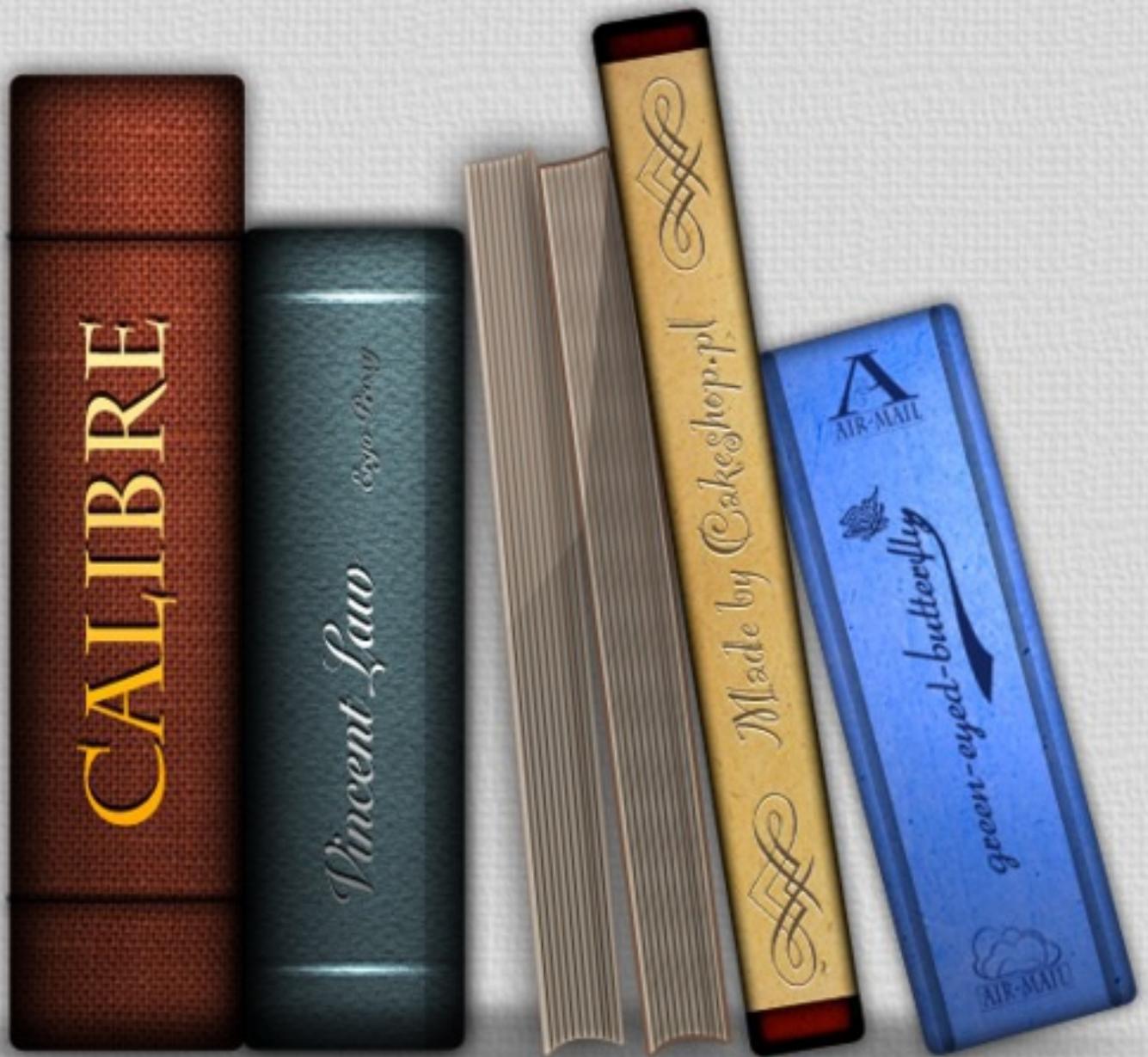


TMB Part 13

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Mordecai entered the dim, dust-drifting common bar of Toller's inn by the garden door, it took his eyes a moment or two to adjust. The rain, having perhaps achieved its objective, had stopped, and the sun was trying hard to pierce the enveloping cloud cover and producing a uniform glare across the whole sky that made one squint even though there was nothing definite to squint at. Dim shapes occupied two or three of the tables, and someone who was presumably the innkeeper, or else a customer with a fixation for cleanliness, was washing mugs and glasses behind the bar.

At last he identified Varnak's silhouette, sprawled in a chair beside a corner table with his long legs sticking out, and made his way towards the prince.

"What news of the engine?" Varnak inquired.

Mordecai sat down, and rather dubiously eyed the brimming tankard that had evidently been put there to await him.

"I can find nothing wrong," he said. "The stored magic is rather more depleted than it usually is, from what I can gather, but there seems no reason why that should be, or why—" Someone brushed past on their way to the bar, and Mordecai paused. "Or why," he went on, "there should be a reduction in speed. These engines are precisely calibrated and tested every three months, by lesser mages attached to the Boatmaster's Guild." He nodded at the tankard. "Am I supposed to drink this or bathe in it?"

"It's beer, Mordecai," Varnak said. "Clerks drink it all the time."

"I would prefer not to," Mordecai said.

"Don't tell me you're a snob," Varnak said in mock incredulity.

"You know perfectly well I am a snob," Mordecai retorted. "You tell me so twice a day. I am famous for being a snob. Visitors to Tamshold have me pointed out to them by their friends. 'There goes Mordecai del Aguila, the Court Snob.' More to the point, highness, I am disinclined to take part in the jolly scene you have doubtless been envisaging, wherein you persuade me to try the stuff, and I tell you it is terrible, and then eight—pints, is it?—eight pints later I am discovered stark naked on top of the town hall singing Sinjari folk songs and embracing a sheep. I would rather omit that scene altogether. You drink it."

“Well, it’s your loss,” Varnak said, emptying his own tankard and appropriating Mordecai’s. “Beer is the drink of the common people, and the common people generally know what they’re about.”

“These eccentric ideas of yours,” Mordecai muttered.

“But of course you’ve been spoiled living in Tamland,” Varnak went on, “where Tam’s spells mean that water bubbles up from the ground so clean you could wash in it. Round here the natural state of water is...not transparent. So beer’s what people drink.”

“Well, I will happily purify water for myself, thank you.”

“Till your magic runs out,” Varnak reminded him, and Mordecai flushed.

“You had to remind me,” he said.

“I haven’t forgotten,” Varnak said gently.

“Highness, what are we doing here?” Mordecai demanded.

“Well, for one thing, not being on the boat. I wanted to stretch my legs, and since we’re here till tomorrow morning, we have time. Incidentally, Boatmaster Flood told me that as an apology for the delay, if anyone wants to spend the night here rather than on the boat, he’ll cover the price. I looked at a couple of the rooms. They’re not bad at all. I might take him up on the offer.”

Mordecai forbore to comment. “What about these two new passengers? Will they complicate matters?”

“I would imagine they will,” Varnak said, “especially this Gudge fellow. Trouble is, I can’t see what we can do about it. We can’t bar them from the boat, especially if the lady is from the royal court.”

“Have you met them?”

Varnak shook his head and drained his second beer. “Not yet. I’m sure that happy moment is not far off, though.”

As if on cue, a figure descended the stairs from the upper level. It was tall and rangy and dressed in a neat, form-fitting black tunic, breeches and boots of the same colour, and its iron-grey hair was cropped short, and it was only from a subtle hint in the shape and the stride that Mordecai recognised it as the figure of a woman.

“Good day to you,” the stranger said, approaching them. “Would you mind if I join you?”

Varnak nodded carelessly, and the stranger pulled a chair over from another table and sat down.

“You’d be off the boat, I imagine,” she said.

“That is right, Madonna,” Mordecai said, and was rewarded by seeing Varnak do a quick double-take and look more closely at the newcomer.

“A Tamlander and a Sinjaro travelling together,” the woman said. “Interesting. Not something you see very often.”

Varnak introduced himself as Lord Ildras of Clenth, travelling incognito, and Mordecai as Alonso, his clerk. “And you, madam?” he said.

The woman produced a gold medallion from her pouch and laid it on the table.

“Master, actually,” she said. “Master Churidang, Exalted Order of the Penetrating Light. And you would be Crown Prince Varnak of Tamland and Mordecai del Aguila, travelling not very incognito at all really. Good rule of thumb. You can’t lie to a Penny, so don’t try.”

Again Mordecai had a moment of rather meaningless satisfaction as Varnak gaped.

“Oh, you probably fooled that bunch of bumpkins and butterbrains on the boat,” said Master Churidang comfortably, “but when we say ‘Penetrating Light’ we aren’t just making idle chit-chat. I know all about you, why you’re here, why you, Master Magician, would rather be somewhere else, and what you’re going to do when you get where you’re going. I also know that, as ranking Tamland noble on the boat, you’re investigating the murder of my good friend and colleague whom you briefly knew as Dardash Parrunz. Am I right so far?”

Mordecai and Varnak nodded in unison.

“Good.” Master Churidang sat back. “In that case I only have one question for you. Are you completely wandering in your wits, or is this just a temporary aberration?”

“What?” Mordecai said, after what felt like about an hour.

“You’ve got a murder investigation in hand,” the woman said, signalling to the innkeeper. “Your suspects are all on the boat with you, the boat puts in at a village, and you let them all just amble off? I repeat: is there insanity in the royal line of Tamland, or did you just forget to put your brain on when you were getting dressed this morning?”

Varnak went very red.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” he muttered, as the innkeeper hastily brought three more tankards of beer, in spite of Mordecai’s frantic hand signals.

“You just thought they’d all amble back again, dragging their tails behind them, and carry on being questioned. Well, maybe they will, and then you’ll know they’re all innocent. Not that that will help much, since Parrunz will still be dead.” Master Churidang took a long swallow of her beer, and then took pity. “Well, you’re new to all this, so it’s only to be expected. Fortunately, I’m here now, and if you’ll consent to allow it, I can take over and perhaps salvage something from the wreckage. What do you say?”

“That’s a very generous offer, Master Churidang,” Varnak said slowly. “As I understand it, you want us to yield to your jurisdiction in the matter of a crime committed on Tamlandish...er...wood, and in return you will...what?”

“Gods above, man, it’s not as if *you’re* going to solve it, is it?”

Varnak was stung. “Maybe not,” he said. “But I think, on the whole, I would prefer to muddle along in my own way, find the murderer if possible and bring him or her to the justice of Tamland, rather than surrendering him or her to King Valbogast’s torturers. I have heard they take altogether too much pleasure in their work.”

A shadow passed over Churidang’s face, and she visibly gave ground. “Well, at least let me offer assistance then,” she said. “I do have some knowledge of criminal investigation, and I’ll put it all at your service. And I’m travelling as far as Freeport.”

“Why would you do this?” Mordecai asked.

“Because—Dardash Parrunz—was a friend, and if I can’t catch the wretch who killed him, I can at least help.”

Varnak’s frown cleared. “Now that I *can* believe in,” he said. “Thank you, Master Churidang. We will be glad of your assistance.”

“What do you know so far?”

Varnak and Mordecai ran through the list of passengers, and then the events surrounding the death of Parrunz and the disappearance of Hudge. When they mentioned him, Churidang smiled grimly.

“I thought he would be involved somehow. His shadow was waiting to board the boat here, till I scared him off.”

“He did not give the impression of being involved,” Mordecai said.

“That’s when he’s deepest in. Oh, yes, I know Master Hudge very well, and Master

Gudge too. The problem with having a legal system like ours, all convolutions and decorations and twiddly bits put on for show, is that you get all kinds of odd little barnacles clinging in the crannies. They're one. I'd say two, but you never see one without the other. Almost never, anyway," she corrected herself with a smile.

"Do you think he is dead?" Mordecai asked.

"Not he. He'll be in hiding somewhere. Amazing how such a big man can fit into such tiny spaces. He once hid in a dresser drawer for two hours. Fact. A bottom drawer, of course." Churidang considered, tapping her teeth with a fingernail. "I'm intrigued by the passengers you haven't seen. The troupe of musicians who never play a note and the tramontane family with first-stage zerb. Do you know any more than that about them?"

"Where their rooms are," Varnak said, "that's all. The boatmaster would have a record of their names, but since they never come out I didn't think—"

"Of course not." Churidang studied Varnak, almost kindly. "You don't take much part in palace politics, I imagine."

"We do not generally have palace politics in Tamland, Mado—Master," Mordecai said. "We have the Tomes instead. Although my prince will keep trying to start a revolution."

"Not keen on taking over the family business? Don't blame you. Prince Findelbork has been waiting fifty years for Valbogast to get off the throne. He's well over seventy himself now, and his own sons have given the whole thing up as a bad job and made their own lives. One's a lawyer, one's an architect, and it's very likely when Valbogast does actually pop off the crown will pass straight to Princess Rundelwhit, who's tending to sick horses in Dagnish Province." Churidang shook her head. "And there are at least eight factions among the various orders and colleges and confraternities poised to swoop down and be her new best friend ever, about five seconds after they pull the sheet over great-grandpa's head. No palace politics? Gods above, I wish." She drained her beer and signalled for more. Mordecai desperately offered his still-full mug to Varnak, who was having trouble finishing his own. "Still, that does explain your staggering naivete. I don't suppose anyone's ever seriously lied to you in your life."

"Mordecai lies to me all the time," Varnak protested.

"It is true," Mordecai said.

"Seriously, I said. Oh, never mind. Shame to destroy such perfect innocence. You'll learn all too soon. Well, with your permission, your highness, I'll be visiting the silent songsters and the ailing tramontanes. You should probably carry on questioning

whoever actually comes back. Who knows, you might find out something useful.” Churidang started to get up, then changed her mind. “Oh, one more thing. Call it an earnest of my good will. Parrunz contacted me a few days ago from Tamshold. He’d noticed a person of his acquaintance negotiating with a customer, and he had reason to suspect the transaction in progress was slightly on the dodgy side. Do you happen to know of a trader who goes by the name of Rylome?”

Both Mordecai and Varnak tried and failed to conceal their sudden interest.

Churidang smiled faintly. “I see you do. Well, my friend didn’t know the customer, but he gave me a good description. Tall, thin, female, dressed in black with widow’s veils, and very highly coloured auburn hair.” She shrugged. “Could have been a wig, of course...such things do exist...but if that’s of any help to you, in any other little matter that might be troubling you, there you have it for what it’s worth. And now I must excuse myself, your highness, master magician. I’ll doubtless see you on board, and we’ll compare notes, yes?”

“Er, yes,” Varnak said, collecting his thoughts hurriedly as Churidang rose to her feet. He rose likewise, almost colliding with the innkeeper who was bringing three more beers. The man looked questioningly at Churidang.

“Oh, that’s all right, Rovak, put ’em on my tab,” Churidang said. “I’m sure these fine fellows can dispose of them for you.” And she turned and stalked off towards the garden, and the boat moored beyond. Rovak deposited the three tankards, removed Churidang’s empty one and left Varnak and Mordecai staring gloomily at a seeming forest of beer.

“We could just leave them and go,” Mordecai suggested.

“I hate waste,” Varnak complained. “But I can’t drink four more. Are you sure you can’t manage a couple?”

“Losing your sympathy for the common people?”

“There are more of them than there is of me.”

A sudden noise caused them to turn. Four figures, arguing vociferously, had just entered from the garden.

“I could almost thank the gods,” Varnak said quietly. He raised his voice. “Gentlemen. We’ve been expecting you. Come and join us.”

Mordecai picked up a tankard. “We have beer,” he said.

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“A good day,” Zivano said. “Wouldn’t you agree, Gisel?”

“If you say so, Magus,” Gisel said, and her tone made the man smile.

“I shall return to my apartments,” he said, “in the palace. You will be wanting to report my doings to the king, of course.” He fastened his cloak and leaned closer. “You will find a full account of every consultation on my desk, in the notebook with the green cover. Unless of course you prefer to employ your imagination and fabricate an account of dastardly plots and stratagems. Your audience would doubtless find that more pleasing.”

“I shall of course maintain full client confidentiality, Magus,” Gisel said stiffly.

“Fabrication it is, then.” Zivano shrugged and went to the outer door. “Do remember what I told you, though, Gisel. It might be of some importance.”

“You may trust me to remember everything you say, Magus,” Gisel said, “and everything you do.”

Zivano, his hand on the door handle, regarded her enigmatically.

“I wonder,” he said softly, and was gone.

A light drizzle was falling half an hour later when Gisel met King Bran in the kitchen garden. By mutual consent, they adjourned to the palace library, where a servant brought wine, bread and cheese.

“That’s a damnably good question,” Bran said. “Somebody told me about it, obviously. Could have been the Adviser for Trade...” He shook his head. “No, it wasn’t, though, because I told him. Stupid of me. Nobody in the Court knew about it. Who was it, who was it whowasit whowasit...” His voice died away into a mumble. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. “I know who it was,” he said triumphantly. “Eymon Ralitz. You remember, that merchant who kicked up such a fuss about the Steel Wolf, and then went so very quiet when it turned out to be his good friend...well, you know who. He said he’d heard about the stuff when he was down at Freeport organising the purchase of a warehouse there. The hoops they make you jump through, he said, it’s a wonder they can call it Freeport without bursting out laughing. Now who did he say told him?”

“Never mind, your majesty,” Gisel said. “Do you know where he is now?”

“Dead, poor fellow,” Bran said. “They found him at his desk not two days after we talked. The healer said his heart had given out, overwork, too much strain, that sort of thing. He always was over-ambitious, trying to be all things to all men, or at least to all customers. He once told me he wanted his shop to be the size of this palace and sell absolutely everything. I swear I half expected him to make me an offer for the

place.”

“Does it not seem a little suspicious to you,” Gisel said carefully, “that the man met his death within days of giving you this sensitive information?”

“Well,” Bran said, a little helplessly, “well, no, actually. The healer found no signs of foul play, and Mordecai—no, I’m wrong, Willibald it was, Mordecai was busy that day—assured me there was no magic involved. Tam’s lights, Gisel, we have to trust somebody in this world.”

“That we do, your majesty,” Gisel said. “It would just help if we knew who. This Ralitz was married, I presume?”

“What?” Bran started, roused from a sombre reverie. “Oh yes, yes, yes. Were you thinking you might call on his widow? Splendid idea. She might know something. I’ll nip up to the office and find you her address. Very striking woman, from what I saw of her. Got a rather magnificent head of hair, sort of coppery chestnutty sort of colour, can’t think of the word—”

“Auburn,” Gisel said, as the entrance to the secret passage closed on the king.

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“Zenej, you say?” Prince Chaz stroked his chin. “You have done well, Zorn. You almost convince me to abandon my plan to fashion an abstract sculpture from your bones, illustrating the concept of the Futility of Advancement Beyond One’s Capacity. So, she is no servant girl. Zenej is even more infested with unreason than T’mland. There the women pretend to rule.”

“Perhaps she is a spy, my prince,” Zorn suggested, “sent to T’mland to worm her way into the royal palace and find out their secrets.”

“A doomed endeavour, my dear Zorn, given that T’mland has no secrets.” Chaz was positively jaunty, and Zorn, greatly daring, ventured a witticism of his own.

“Well,” he said, “they had one, sire.”

Both men laughed.

“How does the woman fare?” Chaz said.

“Her will crumbles, sire,” Zorn said. “She almost asked for the dreams today. Tomorrow she will, and then she will be ours.”

“And within days she will die unless she gets the spores,” Chaz mused, “and within weeks of that she will die anyway. Let us hope that we can conclude our business before then.”

“We shall, sire,” Zorn said confidently. “And with a blend of the spores and the milk of

the *tagulya* she will seem in full health when they see her. By the time that dose wears off and she begins to burn again we shall be long gone, and the paper promises, the *k'ntrakat*, as they call it, will be signed and sealed."

Chaz nodded. "I still dislike this plan, Zorn," he said. "Make no mistake on that score. I still think that it would have been better to deal honestly with these people."

"But the stranger said—" Zorn began.

"I know what the stranger said!" Chaz snapped. "The people of T'mland will not wish to deal openly in such things. Make the *k'n-trakat* for the *úllama*, make sure the stranger is named as the preferred dealer, and the rest follows. Take the apprentice in case the prince balks at the deal, or offers too low a price. Of course, the stranger did not know what we now know, that the apprentice is no apprentice at all but a mere woman of Zenej. The plan is reasonable, as far as that goes, but it sets an inconvenient precedent. Should it go wrong, we will have difficulty dealing anywhere else on the mainland."

"It will not go wrong, my prince," Zorn said, "and you will return to your father in triumph. J'tahn will become a power in the world equal to any of these larger kingdoms. For all the world will crave what we alone can supply."

"I hope you are right, Zorn," Chaz said sombrely. He sniffed, and wrinkled his nose. "The air in here is stale. I would go out and breathe."

"That will not be possible yet, my prince," Zorn said quickly. "If you will wait till dark, then perhaps—"

Chaz turned away with a disgusted hiss. "Sometimes I think I am as much a prisoner as that woman in there."

"We are all prisoners, sire," Zorn said evenly, "for the moment. Soon enough you and I shall be free."

"Not soon enough for me," Chaz growled. "Leave me now, Zorn. Let me have at least the air in this room to myself."

"Of course, my prince."

Zorn left the royal presence and stood in the tiny corridor between the two rooms.

And when all the world burns for that which we alone can supply, he thought, then we shall drive out all the foulness of magic and the mummery of religion and bring the light of reason to all the world. Throw down the temples, burn the books of spells, and institute proper government in these lawless lands where women have held sway for far too long. And the men shall...shall greet us as liberators.

He went into the other room, humming to himself.

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