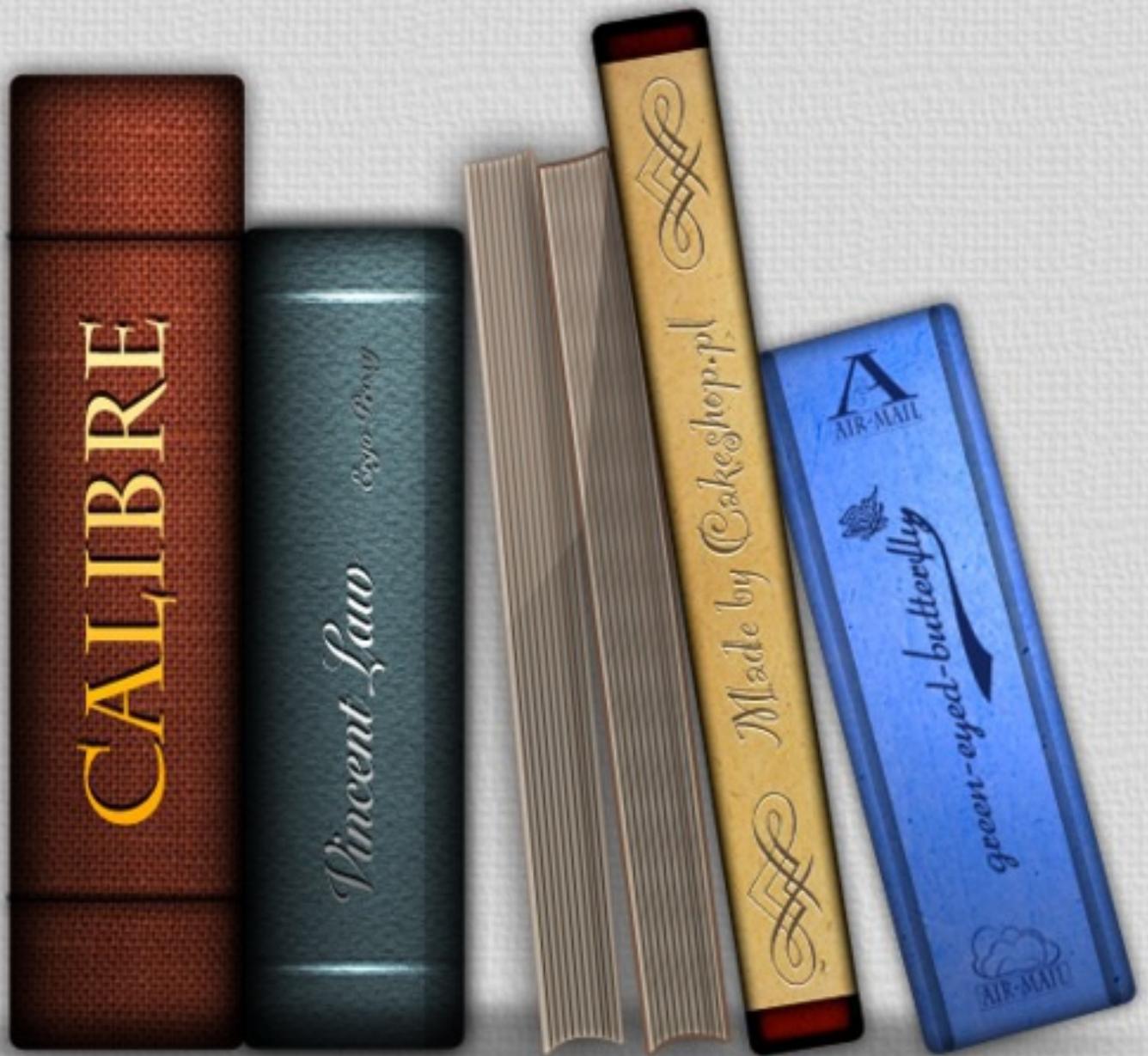


TMB Part 15

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The timid knock on the door roused Mordecai from an uneasy doze. He had been forced, in the interests of conviviality, to drink a pint of beer, and it had not agreed with him. That, and the generally inconclusive outcome of Varnak's very informal interrogation of the four boys, had sent him back to his room on the boat feeling thoroughly out of sorts, and completely unprepared to risk an astral expedition even had he had any specific goal in mind.

Checking blearily that he was in fact still dressed, he mumbled something prevaricatory and got up. A brief glance in the mirror showed him something that might just recently have risen from a distinctly lower-class tomb. No help for it. He shoved both hands through his still-much-too-short hair, took a deep breath, tried to look sentient, and went to open the door.

Something blurred past him. He blinked, looked out into the empty passageway, saw nobody, shrugged and closed the door.

"Are you the merchant Humpoletz?" said a voice behind him.

Mordecai's back hit the door with a *thud*, one hand groping for a weapon, the other instinctively readying a paralysing spell. Only then did the words penetrate his fogged brain, as did the sight of the small, skinny person from whom the soft query had issued.

"Who?" he said. "I mean, er, yes. We are. I am. That is to say, I am not, but I am. His clerk, I mean. I am his clerk. Yes. Who are you?"

"Where is the merchant?" the little man said.

"Um..." Mordecai stopped himself saying "who?" again just in time. He took a firm grip on himself. "The merchant Humpoletz," he said distinctly, "is sleeping in the inn tonight. However, since I am his confidential clerk, you may speak as freely to me as you would to him. And I suggest you do so quickly, starting by answering my previous question. Who are you?"

The little man giggled softly. "My name," he said, "is Gudge."

There was something slightly off about that giggle. Looking more closely and bringing several of his other senses belatedly to bear, Mordecai could tell that Gudge was in

fact in a state of severe shock, controlling himself by force of will alone. Turning aside a moment, he muttered a spell, a younger sister to the one he had used on Driskil. It hurt like hell, and he felt his precious store of power dwindle, but his head cleared and the fuzziness vanished from his eyes.

“Master Gudge,” he said, “please sit down. My name is Alonso del Cazargua, and I am clerk to the man you know as Humpoletz the merchant. I know of you from your associate Master Hudge, with whom I had some conversation not long ago. How may I help you?”

Gudge’s face had twisted up at the mention of his associate, and now he sank into a chair, staring at a spot on the carpet.

“I don’t know,” he said miserably. “Hudge is dead.”

Mordecai checked himself again. “How do you know?” would be a singularly crass question in the circumstances; obviously Gudge did know. “Tell me what happened,” he said.

“I came on board to speak to Hudge,” said Gudge in a low monotone. “He had been in concealment, because he thought he had been recognised. And we were just talking, and suddenly he—he hit his neck, and then he fell into the water.”

“Where was this?” Mordecai said. “And when?”

“Just a few minutes ago. At the back end of the boat. I could show you.”

“Are you all right?” Mordecai asked.

“I—I don’t know,” Gudge said again. “A little confused, I think.” He stood up. He was not actually as skinny as he seemed, Mordecai saw; there was solid muscle there. “Come on.”

They made their way to the stern of the boat and peered out into the night. The surface of the water, dimly lit by the lanterns at either end of the jetty, was undisturbed.

“If he were dead,” Mordecai said uncertainly, “would he not be floating somewhere?”

“The current would probably have taken him downstream,” Gudge said. “It was like—like something bit him. Bit him and killed him. What could do that?”

“Nothing in this country,” Mordecai said definitely, “if you mean an insect. Most things that bite round here leave visible teeth marks. Master Gudge, I must know everything. About the commission on which you and Master Hudge were engaged,

about who you think might have recognised Master Hudge, and why that would be a bad thing...everything. Please come back to my room.”

“I—” Gudge looked round fearfully, then nodded quickly. “I will tell you everything I can,” he said, and set off back towards the stairs. Mordecai followed.

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“And what is that?” Prince Chaz demanded, surveying with a disdainful eye the sodden mass on the floor of the narrow passage.

“A spy, my prince,” Zorn said. “He was about to reveal our presence. I was forced to use the *k’leshma* to silence him.”

“And why is he here?” Chaz nudged the torpid form with his foot. “As if this prison were not cramped enough, do we need another occupant?”

“My prince, if you wish him dead, you must command me,” Zorn said with dignity. “I dare not take such a responsibility on my own.”

Chaz glowered at the inert form of Hudge. “This mission grows more irksomely complicated every day,” he grumbled. “Very well, keep him alive, but do not allow him to recover consciousness. Put him in with the woman. She will hardly care.”

“At once, my prince,” Zorn said, and went to summon help. Shortly he returned with two burly J’tahni, who lifted the unconscious man and carried him into the prisoner’s room.

“He might,” Zorn ventured, “he might have information that could be of use to us, my prince.”

Chaz’s brow darkened still further. “I am sick of trying to obtain information from these mud-skinned morons,” he snapped. “They fail to grasp the most elementary principles of reason. How such bumbling idiots managed to gain control of this much land escapes me.”

“It was there, sire,” Zorn said, “and we were on J’tahn. They have superiority of numbers, and—”

“And what, Zorn?” Chaz stared keenly at his counsellor, as the silent servitors emerged from the room and edged past them, heads lowered. “What else?”

“Nothing, sire,” Zorn said. “Merely numbers. And the illusions of gods and magic to keep the people cowed and submissive.”

Chaz relaxed a little. “Indeed, Zorn,” he said. “But belief is a pervasive thing. Remain

armoured against it, and you shall not weaken.”

“Assuredly, sire,” Zorn said, bowing.

“I am going out,” the prince announced. “It is still dark, yes? I shall not be seen?”

“If you are careful, my prince,” Zorn said, adding hastily, “which of course you always are.”

Chaz raked him with a scornful glance, smiled grimly, and went to the stairs.

Zorn went into the prisoner’s room. She was still wandering in the bright gardens of spore-dream; he could tell that merely by looking. The big man had been dumped casually against one wall, and slumped there in a spreading pool of river water, breathing noisily. Perhaps he would catch eresh and die of it. That would relieve Zorn of the responsibility for his death.

There was nothing more to be done here till the k’leshma venom wore off. Zorn left the room.

After a full minute had passed, the woman in the chair cautiously opened one eye.

*

“I cannot tell you very much,” said Gudge the Implicator, sitting awkwardly on the edge of a stool in Mordecai’s room. “Not because I don’t want to. No. But you see, Hudge only—it was Master Hudge’s habit to brief me fully only after his part of the commission had been executed. To avoid inconvenient answers,” he added, with a shy little grin. His shock seemed to have abated, or at least to be under control.

“Inconvenient questions, surely,” Mordecai said absently.

“Oh no, you—you can’t avoid those,” Gudge explained quickly. “But if you can avoid having the answers, then sooner or later they ask someone else instead. That was Master Hudge’s idea, anyway,” he went on, a dismal expression coming over his round face.

“Your accent is strange,” Mordecai said. “I cannot place it.”

“Thank you.” Again the shy grin.

“Where are you from?”

“Tsenesh, originally,” Gudge said. “I escaped. They don’t care too much about men escaping. They don’t make a secret of—of what they do to us. But I—I just couldn’t stand it any more. So I crossed the river into Briom. I—I made my own boat. It almost got me all the way.” Gudge looked down at his feet. “I can’t swim.”

"I have never understood why every man in Tsenesh does not do that," Mordecai declared. "Why do they stay?"

"Well, you know, most of us are gelded very early," Gudge said, "which removes the inclination...and they do care for us. In their way. Besides, what use would we be to anyone else? We're only men. We can't do magic, or grow food or make things. Most of us would be lost without a woman to take care of us."

"Men do all those things in Briom," Mordecai pointed out. "You yourself have a job."

"Master Hudge is kind enough to allow me to assist him," Gudge said with dignity. "I don't know how other men do it, I—I really don't."

"Anyway." Mordecai took a firm grip and steered the conversation away from these shoals. "Your commission."

"Very well," Gudge said. "All I can tell you is that it concerned an individual who was involved in something...questionable, who was afraid that it might cause him some inconvenience in the course of his profession. Master Hudge had already destroyed the evidence at his home and his place of work—not an easy task, I gather—and was to meet him on this boat to complete his portion of the commission, and to notify me of the intended target for mine." He looked up at Mordecai. "You know what—what we do, I take it?"

"Hudge Extricates, you Implicate," Mordecai said. "He destroys evidence of a person's wrongdoing, and you plant it on some other poor innocent."

"But my dear sir," Gudge said, spreading his hands, and unconsciously mimicking Hudge's orotund manner, "who in this wide world is truly innocent?"

"Of all sins? Nobody," Mordecai admitted. "Of specific crimes? Many people. I confess, Master Gudge, I do not approve of your profession."

"That," said Gudge, "is your right. Some people do not approve of butchers. Followers of the cult of Sasama do not approve of healers. Many people do not approve of soldiers. Yet somehow--" He shrugged. "The world still finds a place for us. What can you do?"

Mordecai considered. "You said 'his profession,'" he said. "That argues that the client is a man."

"I did?" Gudge was positively alarmed. "I'm sure I did not mean to imply—"

"There are—were--only three men on this boat who had a profession," Mordecai said. "Hudge himself, the teacher Stychel, and Dardash Parrunz. We may assume Hudge was not acting on his own behalf. Can you tell me any more about the client? What he was involved in, where he lived?"

"I have told you too much already," Gudge said, standing up. "I will now go to Master Hudge's room and see if I can find any clue that will allow me to complete the commission. Probably not—Hudge was always very scrupulous—but it does no harm to look. Thank you, Master Clerk. You have been a great help to me, and also very informative."

"I have?"

At the door, Gudge smiled. "Four men with professions," he said. "You left out Humpoletz the merchant."

And he was gone.

*

The next morning, Gisel knocked furiously at the door of the inner office of the magery.

"Come," Zivano called from inside.

Gisel hefted her burden, opened the door and half-dragged it inside.

"Where's my print of Klaggen Gorge?" she demanded.

"Good morning, Gisel," Zivano said, looking up from his desk. "I trust you slept well."

"Not at all, thank you," Gisel said. "Where is it?"

"Over there," Zivano said, indicating a frame propped against the wall, back outwards. "I felt it was out of place in the outer office. All those jagged rocks and tumbling clouds...so disharmonious. Could set up harmful vibrations. So I came in early and replaced it with the picture I see you are carrying."

"And what's that supposed to be?" Gisel said. "It's just a jumble."

"It is a non-representational design," Zivano said smoothly. "A little something of my own. I imagine you did not know I had taken to painting. How little we know of each other." He sighed.

"Well, you can just take it away again," Gisel said flatly.

"Are you sure?" Zivano said. "Have you actually looked at it? Do, please. I'm sure you'll change your mind."

Gisel glanced down at the painting. It was, she admitted, not actually unattractive. There was something calming about the way the design folded in on itself, curving back and forth in endless loops and whorls that somehow caught the eye and—

“No,” she said, resolutely forcing her gaze away. “Out it goes.”

Zivano’s voice hardened just a little. “Who is Court Magus here, Gisel?”

“You are,” Gisel conceded, “for the moment.”

“Then—”

“But,” Gisel continued, fighting the urge to look back at the painting, “if you consult the deeds in the palace library, you will find that this building and the land on which it stands actually belong to me.”

Zivano blinked.

“Mordecai is technically my lodger,” Gisel went on, “though for the sake of his vanity we don’t talk about it. The house is mine, the furnishings are either Mordecai’s or mine, that print of Klaggen Gorge is mine, and it goes back where I put it. And as for this—” She lifted the heavy painting and brought it down on Zivano’s head, which burst through the canvas and gaped at her in sheer astonishment, surrounded by the wooden frame.

“We have another rule,” Gisel said. “The Magus does not practice magic on his assistant. Now I will compensate you for the damage to your painting, at a more than reasonable rate, with a bonus as reparation for the assault I have just committed. You may choose to dismiss me as your assistant, but in that case you would have to find another place from which to do your business, and I can make that very, very difficult for you, Zivano. If you choose not to do so, you make that choice on the assumption that there will be no further attempts to alter or remove any of the fixtures and fittings in this house, and no further attempts to ensorcel me or anyone else except in the course of your duly authorised business as Court Magus. Am I understood?”

Zivano recovered his power of speech, if not his dignity. He removed the frame from his head and regarded it ruefully.

“It would seem so,” he said. “I take it that this...settlement...will obviate any further action on your part?”

“I won’t tell the king,” Gisel said, “unless you try any further funny business.”

“Then we have an agreement,” Zivano said, propping the wrecked painting against his desk as Gisel picked up the despised print. “You can hardly blame me for trying, though,” he said as she made for the door.

“Oh, you would be very surprised, Magus,” was Gisel’s parting shot.

*

Mordecai found Varnak enjoying a late breakfast in Toller's. A break in the clouds had allowed a little early sunshine through, but more rain was clearly on the way. There had been no sign of Gudge at breakfast on the boat, but all the other passengers had, despite Master Churidang's dark hints, returned last night and were in evidence.

Mordecai gave Varnak a short account of his night's doings.

"Really?" Varnak said. "So he was actually in a sort of sling under the water the whole time we were looking for him? Cunning old devil. Of course, if he killed Parrunz, we'll never know now."

"I am sorry, Highness," Mordecai said. "If I had been in any condition to go out on the astral last night..."

"No, no, that was my fault. All that bedamned beer. Never again, Mordecai." Varnak put his knife and fork down neatly parallel and leaned forward. "So, what do we know?"

"We know that Hudge, who was missing but not dead, is dead now. We know that Gudge, his partner, is on the boat and intends to implicate somebody in a crime. We know that the four students can drink incredible amounts of beer when their teacher is not around. And we know that the two lower rooms at the rear of the boat are quite empty."

"We only know that because high and mighty Master I'm-so-professional Churidang told us so," Varnak pointed out.

"Then, if you have finished eating, Highness, let us go and see for ourselves," Mordecai said.

They walked down through the wet garden to the mooring. Mordecai waited while Varnak consulted the boatmaster in his office and learned that departure would be in ten minutes. He also obtained the keys to the two rooms in question.

"I don't know what do be goin' on, my lord, I swear I don't," Hurnig Flood said, handing them over. "Booked right fair and proper they were, Zallimek's Musical Funglewights, and the family...oh, wait now..." He reached for his book and flipped over a page. "Family name of..." He squinted. "Roh-Bin-Sern. What kind of name is that now? 'T ain't Tamlandish, nor Briom, nor Tseneshi, nor any kind I know."

"Tramontanes," Varnak said with a shrug. "They're funny people. But how could you not notice when nobody turned up?"

"I were called away, my lord," the boatmaster admitted. "Widow lady, wantin' to book passage for her husband's remains. I told her as we was fully booked up and she

flew into a passion. Took me half an hour to calm her down. When I got back, I asked was we all ready, everybody aboard, and the lad said yes. You two—savin' your presence, my lord—was the last to arrive."

"We will have to talk to this lad," Mordecai said. "In fact..." He looked at Flood. "Do you enjoy your job, Master Flood?"

"Well, er..." The man was startled. "Well, yes, I do, actually. It's not so much a job, though, Master Alonso, it's more sort of like yours really, a..."

"A profession," Mordecai said. "I thought as much. Well, we still have Master Stychel to question, and then we shall have to turn our attention to yourself and your crew. Purely to get as much information as we can, you understand," he added.

"Well, all right, my lord," Flood said, "long's it don't interfere with the runnin' of the boat. Don't see as we can tell you much more'n we already told that there Master Churidang, though," he added as an afterthought.

"What!"

"Oh, yes, my lord. She had us all in the salon. My, but she's a terror, that one. Put us all through the mangle good an' proper. My Ollamy, that's my daughter, she was in such a takin', poor soul. An' Old Nalleck, him as does the cookin', I thought he were goin' to have an 'appy plectics then and there."

"A happy what?" Mordecai murmured.

"But we knew it were all right, 'cause she said as she was workin' with you, my lord."

"Did she now?" Varnak said, in a carefully non-committal tone.

"Well," said Flood, the scrupulously accurate, "rightly speakin', she said as *you* was workin' with *her*." He smiled. "But it do come to the same thing in the end, don't it, my lord?"

"We are all working together," Mordecai said, and added hastily, "er, as the twigs of righteousness, bound together with the cords of duty, form the faggot of, erm—"

Flood snapped his fingers. "There now," he said, looking at the clock on his office wall.

"I been so busy talkin' we're almost late settin' off. If you'll excuse me, my lord, master clerk, I must tend to the engine. We do have the Jags to get through, and then as far as Brokenbowes, please the gods."

"Of course," Varnak said. "Oh...just one more thing," he added, turning back at the door. Mordecai had a sudden vision of the prince in a scruffy old waterproof coat, and shook his head to dispel it.

“My lord?” Flood was clearly eager to be about his profession.

“The widow lady you mentioned. What did she look like?”

Flood scratched his head. “Well, I can’t rightly say, my lord. Black dress, veils, couldn’t see her face...” He brightened. “She had very bright hair, my lord. Sort of that reddy-goldy colour, almost cherry red in some light. Does that help?”

“Oh yes,” Varnak said. “At least, I think it will.”