

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Master Driskil—” the teacher began.

“No, it’s a fair point, fair point.” Varnak was unruffled. Mordecai watched him sidelong, marvelling as always at the side of him that so rarely showed itself in daily life at home, the effortless confidence that rode easily over pitfalls that would daunt any other man. Mordecai had always put it down to Varnak being very stupid and very lucky, but these days he sometimes wondered if there were not more to it.

“I don’t have my patents of nobility here to show you, of course,” the prince was saying, “because they’re horrible great hairy things on badly cured parchment covered in wax and ribbons and enough gold leaf to choke a goat, but I wonder if a family resemblance might help to convince you? Master Alonso?”

After a moment Mordecai caught up. “Yes, my lord?”

“Ah, there you are. I thought you’d wandered off for a moment. Plunge the hand of your diligence into the purse of your frugality and give me a few of those little things you were showing me the other day, will you?”

Mordecai obeyed, and Varnak took the coins and glanced at them before tossing them to selected members of the audience. “There you are,” he said, turning his head to present his profile. “What do you think?”

Driskil made a great show of holding the coin up next to the head and comparing the two. “Well,” he said after a long moment, “you’re older, and you’ve got more jowls. Your eyes are smaller too. But yes, I can see it.” He paused, and deliberately pocketed the coin. “Doesn’t prove anything, though, does it? You could be an actor or something.”

Varnak, though nettled by the jowls reference, kept his calm. “Well, short of cutting myself and bleeding royal blood at you, I’m not sure what else I can do,” he said. “The question is, do you want to spend time in here arguing about who I may be, or do you want this murder solved?”

The student Driskil shrugged. “Don’t mind one way or the other. I just think we should all know the truth.” He assumed what he evidently thought a virtuous expression.

“Sir, why don’t you lead the investigation?” one of the other students said to their

teacher. The other two students immediately chimed in to support this suggestion. Driskil, having adopted his pose, stuck to it.

“Oh dear no,” the teacher said at once, taking refuge in a flurry of deprecatory gestures and twitches. “No no no, that would be most ill-advised and inappropriate, Master Felk, you know very well that as a humble pedagogue I have no aptitude nor experience in such weighty matters—”

“Can’t be worse than an *actor*, sir,” Driskil said with a sly smile.

“Master Driskil, that will do!” The steel had emerged from its woolly concealment so swiftly that Mordecai found he could not determine when it had actually happened. The thin man with the faded, receding hair was suddenly standing in front of Driskil, radiating suppressed fury. “You will sit down and be quiet, sir! If the laws of Tamland apply aboard this vessel, and the laws of Tamland state that Lord Ildras is qualified to deal with this terrible incident, then that is an end of it! My apologies, my lord,” the teacher went on, turning to Varnak. “It shall not happen again.”

“Murder does tend to make people suspicious,” Varnak observed. “Forgive me, sir, but I was trying to place your accent...what part of Briom are you from?”

The man bridled. “My lord, we are Hyrcassian.”

Mordecai had never been to Hyrcassos, but he knew of it; a small, mountainous border province of Briom, about five times the size of Tamland and directly adjacent to it, whose inhabitants paid their taxes promptly while stoutly maintaining that they had never been conquered at all. Correcting this misapprehension was one of the many things for which King Valbogast, rightly in Mordecai’s opinion, had decided he no longer had time. That at least explained the similarity in the students’ costume that had misled Mordecai before. Hyrcassian dress was more like Tamlandish than that of Briom.

“My apologies, Master...?” Varnak said.

“Stychel, Aldro Stychel,” the teacher said.

“My apologies, Master Stychel. Please forgive my ignorance.”

“The accents are quite similar, I believe.” Stychel was still a little stiff. “One needs to listen attentively to the dental fricatives.”

“Oh, ah,” Varnak said a little blankly. “Yes, I’ll watch out for those.”

“Anyway,” Stychel continued, moving a little closer, “I was going to say that we in Hyrcassos, Master Driskil notwithstanding, take a similarly grave view of murder.”

If there is anything we can do to assist you in this matter, rest assured that I and my students are at your disposal.”

“Thank you, Master Stychel.” Varnak took the teacher’s hand and pumped it vigorously. “I appreciate that very much.”

A little overwhelmed by the response, Stychel withdrew his hand. “Yes, well, that’s all right then,” he said, and Mordecai could see him gathering his fluffiness about him like an overtunic. “Well, now, if you’ll excuse me, I really ought to be getting back to my students.” He glanced over to where they sat, Driskil looking acutely disgruntled. “They’re good enough lads, take them all in all, a little wild, but then, weren’t we all?” He managed to convey in the last three words the vivid impression that he had spent the entire first two decades of his life sitting quietly on the floor with folded hands, breathing evenly through the nose and disturbing nothing.

“Thank you, my lord.”

With a bow he withdrew, and Mordecai took the opportunity to grip Varnak firmly by the elbow.

“I think we must have a little talk, *my lord*,” he said, propelling the startled prince towards the door.

Before they could reach it, however, Maranni ap Gavrus stepped up, eyes alight and trying to suppress a grin.

“You need not be concerned, my lord,” she said, her voice vibrant with ill-concealed excitement. “We shall keep your secret.”

\*

Gisel paused at the top of the stairs to get her breath and knocked at the door.

“Come in,” said Bran’s voice, and Gisel smoothed her hair reflexively and opened the door.

“You wanted to see me, your majesty?” she said, still a little breathless.

Bran was not sitting at his desk. He was standing by the window, and had evidently been looking out over the palace courtyard. “I did? Yes, yes, of course I did. Come in, my dear, and for Tam’s sake sit down and have some wine.”

“I’m sorry,” Gisel said, taking the only uncluttered armchair and plumping down into it. “Those stairs...”

“I should have come to you,” Bran said, pouring a cup of dark red Tamlandish wine and handing it to her, “but we both know how that would look. Appearances. I hate having to think about things like that.”

“I know.” Gisel was sympathetic, up to a point. “What did you want?”

“I had a rather disturbing idea,” Bran said. His workaday crown was hanging on the back of the chair behind his desk, and he picked it up and gazed at it. “Don’t like it. Thought maybe you could...er...”

“Talk you out of it?” Gisel smiled despite herself. She had grown up as close to Bran as anyone, though ten years his junior, and had comforted him when his sweet, silly queen had succumbed to the weakness of her heart within two years of his taking the throne. She knew his gigantic strengths as well as his ridiculous weaknesses, and loved him for both. “Tell me,” she invited, taking a sip of the wine.

“Well...” Bran began to toss the crown into the air and catch it. He had a good eye. “This lunatic ultimatum of Shurath’s—Tam take it, Zivano’s, why can’t I remember that?—simple enough, goodness knows, anyway. Suddenly occurred to me. Suppose he engineered the whole thing?”

Gisel considered the notion seriously, her eyes following the golden circlet up and down. “It’s possible,” she said. “Mechanically, I mean. He still has sympathisers, even here, and while he gave away most of his estates in Tamland after that business last year he’s not by any means poor. He could do...at least some of it. And he definitely hates Mordecai enough to want to do it.”

“That’s what I thought,” Bran said, bouncing the crown off his head and catching it again.

“Do you have to do that?” Gisel said, distracted.

“What?” Bran looked round, missed a catch. The crown ricocheted off his hand, went arcing toward the open window and would have sailed out into the courtyard had Bran not leapt, showing surprising agility for a man of his age and build, and snared it with the tip of his forefinger.

“It shows a lack of respect for the symbols of your state,” Gisel explained.

“Symbols of my state be damned,” Bran said succinctly. “For a sack of gold and a good horse I’d chuck the thing out of that window and the first idiot who picked it up could have the job.” He looked down at the circlet in his hand, weighed it musingly. “Never been anything but trouble to me. What were you saying?”

“Well,” Gisel said, “I was just wondering...are you thinking that he arranged for Willibald to be kidnapped, or are you wondering if the whole *úllama* thing is part of

it?”

“Who knows? I don’t.” Bran sighed. “No, he couldn’t,” he said, rousing himself. “He may still have money and powerful friends, but even he couldn’t conjure up a brand new substance out of thin air. He’d have to be a Nyronnd.”

They both laughed at the reference to the old nursery bogeyman.

“No, if he did scrobble Willibald it’s pure opportunism,” Bran went on. He was still holding the crown in his hand, and now he began to twirl it round his forefinger like a child’s hoop. Gisel put her cup down, got up and pointedly closed the window, and Bran started. “Sorry,” he said, putting the crown back on the chair back. “I tell you, though, Gisel, if it is him then that’s it. I’m having the beggar executed and I don’t care what anyone says. Enough is enough.”

“That would be your royal prerogative, sire,” Gisel said neutrally.

“But only if we can prove it,” Bran said. “Did Rylome tell us any more about this supposed Tseneshi witch who hired him?”

“Just that she was a woman in black who spoke with a Tseneshi accent,” Gisel said. “That narrows it down to almost anyone.”

“Except me,” Bran said with a humourless smile. “I was never any good at voices.” He went to her where she still stood at the window. “We’ll keep looking,” he said. “If Willibald is anywhere in this kingdom, we’ll find her.” They both smiled briefly at the familiar incongruity.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” Bran said with evident sincerity.

“Not at all,” Gisel said, in the same tone. “Anything you need?”

“I don’t suppose you’d let me abdicate in *your* favour?” The glint of humour was back in Bran’s eyes.

“Absolutely not,” Gisel said firmly. “I can run the entire kingdom *or* I can look after Mordecai. Not both.”

“Ah well,” the King said. “It was worth asking. Take it steady on the way down.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will,” Gisel promised. “And if I do ever get to be queen,” she went on at the door, “I shall put in a banister, all the way up, just so I can slide down it when nobody’s looking.”

For a moment the king brightened; then gloom overtook him again. “That’s the trouble with this job,” he mumbled. “Somebody’s *a/ways* looking. Thank you, Gisel.”

\*

“Master Driskil,” Old Stick said, when they were back in the schoolroom, “I am

thoroughly ashamed of you.”

Driskil emitted one of his inappropriate sniggers.

“Your parents engaged me,” Old Stick went on, addressing them all now, “to try and hammer into your thick heads some small appreciation of the culture of other nations past and present, and the gods know I’ve tried. But all you seem to care about is drinking and fighting and making sheep’s eyes at young women. And this latest outburst of oafishness, in front of a noble of Tamland no less, well, frankly I despair.”

Driskil muttered something.

“I didn’t catch that,” Old Stick said.

“M bored,” Driskil said more loudly. “Want to know when the fun’s going to start.”

“Fun?” Old Stick looked blank.

“That missing girl,” Burlox put in. “When do we rescue her?”

“When do we—” Old Stick looked confused now. “What in gods’ name leads you to believe that I have any intention—”

“Oh, sir.” Gorol could not restrain himself any more. “There’s no need to hide it, sir, we all know.”

“Indeed?” Old Stick said. “And what is it that ‘we all know,’ Master Felk?”

“My cousin told me all about it,” Gorol said. “How you caught that gang of kevelioc smugglers last year.”

“Pure accident,” Old Stick said.

“And my brother was with you when you unmasked the false Duke of Bannakush the year before,” Burlox added.

“I happened to be on the scene—”

“And my sister actually saw you duelling with the leader of the mountain bandits the year before that,” Driskil blurted. “She said he was eight feet tall but you fought like a demon. She said—”

Old Stick waved them to silence. “Am I to understand,” he said at last, “that the only reason you have embarked upon this educational tour with me is because you hope to be allowed to take part in some species of—of *rough-house*?”

The chorus of affirmation was so vehement that Old Stick had to step back. Even Thavaar seemed to have found some enthusiasm from somewhere.

“Well,” said Old Stick when it had died down, “I really don’t know what to say to you. If I tell you that those stories are all exaggeration and half-truth you will think

I'm just being modest. If I tell you that all I have in mind for this journey is looking at some examples of local art and culture while trying to impart a little general education you won't believe me. It's no wonder I've had no success in teaching you anything, though, is it, if you're all just waiting for me to transform into some sort of muscle-bound paladin. I can assure you that will not happen."

"But the girl, sir—"

"We can't just leave her—"

Again, Old Stick waited for the noise to die down. "This missing young woman could be absolutely anywhere. Back in Briom, Tsenesh, Sinjaran for all we know. She might have been rescued already and be sitting at home in Tamland. We have no way of knowing. One thing I can tell you as a fact is that I have no intention of making a fool of myself and bringing the good name of Hyrcassos into disrepute by thundering around the landscape pretending to be some kind of hero. And neither are you. Now. If you will open your copies of *Conversational Tseneshi* and turn to page eighty-three, we will try once again to make good use of what is left of the day."

Gorol obediently opened the book, but his mind was busy elsewhere. It was clear to him that Old Stick was determined to keep up the pretence till the last possible minute. He would have to be manoeuvred into a position where he couldn't refuse the quest.

Well, Gorol could be determined too. He would not let Old Stick down.

\*

"I beg your pardon?" Varnak said, taken off his guard.

"Your true identity," the girl whispered breathily. "You may trust us not to spoil the game."

"Spoil the—what?"

"Lonira was quite taken in," Maranni went on. "She is such a goose sometimes. But Idyla and I explained it all to her and now she is quite ready to participate. And while we fully understand the reason for your present masquerade, may we hope that when we reach Brokenbowes you will reveal yourself in truth?"

Varnak was plainly fogged. Mordecai decided it was time to take over.

"Madonnina," he said, "his lordship would wish me to remind you that the owl of discretion leaves the pellets of disclosure under the tree of silence. For now, he is Lord Ildras of Clenth, and that is all he must be."

"Oh, of course." Maranni mimed tying up her lips with a bow.

“We thank you, madonnina,” Mordecai said. “And now, since the jackal of time is baying at the heels of the zebra of, er, we must go.” He made an elaborate bow, and the lady curtsied and half-ran to join her sisters.

“What in Tam’s name—?”

Mordecai nearly pushed Varnak out of the door of the salon, past the forward stairs and up to the bow of the barge, where they could talk in reasonable privacy.

“No,” he said forcefully, as Varnak opened his mouth again, “you first. Why yet another masquerade? What do you hope to achieve?”

“My father’s wishes,” Varnak said simply. “And I cannot do that if I reveal my true identity. Mordecai, what—?”

“And who exactly is Lord Ildras of Clenth?” Mordecai persisted.

“I am,” Varnak said. “It’s one of my lesser titles. I have estates in Clenth, which I spend time on every year and therefore know quite well. I could talk your head off about the place. The question is, who in the kingdom does *she* think I am?”

Mordecai considered for a moment. “At a guess,” he said, “I would say she has identified you as Lord Ambril Vodantis, known to his foes as the Grey Ghost.”

Varnak looked bewildered.

“Lord Vodantis,” Mordecai continued, “is a master of disguise, and can change his appearance so completely as to deceive even close relatives of the person he is...er...impersonating. He is also a master of bow and blade, immensely strong, and completely under the thumb of his equally annoying friend, Lord Clatterack. This is actually because Lord Vodantis is, as far as I can make out, incredibly stupid. No offence, Highness.”

“None taken,” Varnak murmured automatically. “Lord Clatterack? Wait a moment, Mordecai. You’re not telling me they think I’m a character from a *book*, are you?”

“Not quite, your Highness.”

“What d’you mean, not quite?” Varnak was starting to resemble his father. “I either am or I’m not.”

“They believe—I think—that you and I are taking part in a kind of entertainment laid on for their enjoyment, in which a murder is simulated and the passengers are expected to join in the investigation,” Mordecai said. “I have heard of such things having a brief vogue among the higher aristocracy of Briom. These ladies are evidently not of so lofty a status.”

“A simulated murder!” Disgust was apparent in every syllable. “Mordecai, that’s sickening. To pretend that a life has actually been taken—I mean, it’s just about all

right on the stage where you can see it's not real, but—" He stopped. "I suppose Parrunz *is* dead?"

Mordecai went back down the forward stairs, carefully lifted the hurriedly spread tarpaulin and regarded that which lay underneath for a long moment. Then he climbed back and walked to the bow.

"If he is not, Highness," he said, "then he is a more convincing actor than you or I will ever be."

"Convincing!" Varnak snorted. "Father had someone from the theatre to dinner once, did you know? Chap spent the whole time trying to persuade him to get you to help make his effects more *convincing*. I mean, honestly, I ask you."

Mordecai said nothing.

"You don't go to the theatre to be *convinced*," Varnak went on, "you go to use your imagination. I mean, when two chaps in silver-painted woollens get up on stage and bang their wooden swords together for a bit, and then one chap tucks the other chap's sword under his arm and falls over, you *know* he's supposed to be dead, don't you? You don't need to see him soiling his breeches and vomiting blood all over the place. I tell you, Mordecai, this drive for realism will be the death of the drama."

Mordecai, who had spent an enjoyable week devising such convincing special effects that when the manager in question had seen them demonstrated he had been forced to take to his bed for a month, privately concurred, but said nothing.

"And now this." Varnak shook his head. "Theatre pretending to be real life. If I hadn't already known Briom was sunk in decadence—" He broke off. "So now I'm Prince Varnak, pretending to be an actor pretending to be this Ambril Vodantis pretending to be Lord Ildras who *was* pretending to be Humpoletz the merchant."

"Let us hope we do not need to add any further layers," Mordecai said.

"It's all right for you," Varnak said. "You're just Alonso the clerk."

"Alias another actor, alias myself," Mordecai reminded him. "And I am running out of metaphors."

"Well, whose fault is that? You invented the fellow and his absurd conversational style." Varnak sighed. "And all this is very amusing, but horribly inapropos. That man is dead, Mordecai, and someone really killed him. We're going to have to find out who. We can't be playing entertaining games for a bunch of schoolgirls."

"I know, Highness, believe me I know." Mordecai glanced around. "And we are going to have to move him. I do not know if anyone will be inclined to eat lunch as

it is, but Master Parrunz's presence will hardly enhance the experience. I can prevent further decomposition, but not here."

Varnak looked back towards the salon. The passengers had dispersed, and two crewmen were moving around inside, laying tables. "Can we move him without disturbing them?" he said dubiously.

"I think so," Mordecai said. He began to ready a spell.

"What about your power?" Varnak said, as they descended the stairs again.

"No, you were right, Highness. If I keep on husbanding it, waiting for the right moment, the right moment will pass by and I shall have saved it for nothing. Now please be quiet. This is tricky."

Mordecai closed his eyes and concentrated. Three bodies, two living, to be seen, heard and smelled by each other but by nobody else...the balancing of forces was delicate, but he had been practising with Willibald and that thought nearly ruined his concentration but he thrust it aside and carried on.

"It is done," he said at last. "I think."

"You think?"

"We had better move quickly," Mordecai said, grabbing a foot and pulling. "The sooner I can banish this spell, the better."

\*

Zorn hesitated. If he were wrong, this would certainly mean his head. His loyalty to his prince was absolute, deeply ingrained in his heart as it was in the hearts of all J'tahni. But his loyalty to his king ran deeper, and it forced him to recognise the flaws in Chaz's character that only time and experience could correct. His people held to no god, unlike the weaklings of Briom, nor did they acknowledge them by omission like the men of Tamland; but in that moment Zorn came as close to praying as he ever could.

Then he opened the door and stepped inside without knocking.

He took in the situation in a moment; the woman out of her bonds, caught almost comically in mid-stride; his prince slumped in the chair she had occupied, his eyelids drooping, his posture one of total relaxation. *She* had clearly been interrogating *him* the whole time, and he was powerless to resist her.

Zorn acted without conscious thought. His hand was at his belt, the spore-thrower

out, and the woman's head engulfed in a dense cloud of *torashya* spores within no more than two heartbeats. She swayed, tried to speak, and then surrendered to the drug and fell heavily to the floor.

Zorn bent to peer into Chaz's face, lifting one eyelid with his thumb. The eye beneath it suddenly focussed on his worried face, and Zorn leapt back as the prince stood up suddenly, fumbling for his sword.

"Zorn," he hissed. "What did I tell you about—" He looked around. "Where is my sword?" he demanded.

"Do you not know, my prince?" Zorn was walking on eggshells full of the deadly *dachal* juice, he knew. "Why would that be?"

Chaz was not stupid. He too took in the situation at a glance. Zorn could practically see the tree of thought flowering behind his eyes.

"It seems I must thank you, Zorn," he said at last, his tone carefully neutral. "I underestimated the woman. A mistake I shall not make again."

Zorn, sensing what was required of him, stooped and picked the entranced woman up. He rearranged her in the chair, retied her bonds, hesitated.

"Should I cut her tongue out, my prince?" he said.

Chaz winced. "That would reduce her value," he said. "A tempting suggestion, Zorn, but no. Simply gag and blindfold her for the time being. She may still be able to work her foul magic after that, but I doubt it."

"She will—" Zorn busied himself finding suitable lengths of cloth among the extraordinary collection of naperies and draperies that seemed to be *de rigueur* among Tamlanders. Cloth for the beds, cloth for the bodies, cloth for meals, and all different. A woman's idea, he had no doubt. "She will begin to burn for the spores after this," he said diffidently.

"Let her." Chaz's tone was callous. "She thought she could overcome me with her magics. Let her know that some things can not be overcome. Maybe I will let her dream again. Maybe I will not. It is up to me. Let her reflect on that."

He began to pace, working off his anger. Zorn watched him warily. At any moment Chaz's uncertain temper could fire off in an unexpected direction, such as at him. Any movement might trigger it. He tied lengths of cloth across the dreaming woman's mouth and eyes, and tried to efface himself.

"I do not understand these people," Chaz said suddenly. "In J'tahn we work by

reason, not gods or magic. Reason tells us that men are the stronger sex, and therefore must assume a dominant role or waste their strength in foolishness. Why is this not obvious to all? Because myths and fantasies confuse the minds of those who are not guided by reason alone. The women of Zenej mutilate their men to make them docile, and are still not happy. The men of Briom and Tamland defer to their women, and hopeless muddle results. When I am king...”

Zorn tuned out. He had heard all this before. The prince would rant for a while, then notice his presence and dismiss him angrily. But he had done his duty, and escaped with his life, and that was no bad thing. The woman would learn obedience. It was, after all, only reasonable.

\*

Slowly, awkwardly, Mordecai and Varnak extricated Dardash Parrunz from his impromptu hiding place, and hefted him between them, Varnak as the stronger taking most of the weight. The forward stairs were still unfrequented.

“Not a sound,” Mordecai warned as they began the ungainly descent to the lower level. The stiffness of death had come on, and Parrunz was mostly still in the position in which he had been found, less than ideal for being lugged about. It took some time to find the best angle at which to feed him into the narrow companionway, and he seemed far heavier dead than he could have been alive.

At the bottom of the stairs they stopped dead. The ap Gavrus sisters were standing just outside their rooms, conversing animatedly. Mordecai and Varnak held their breath and tried not to move.

“I vow, Maranni, this is the outside of enough!” Idyla was saying. “You gave our promise—”

“Now, Idyla,” Lonira interrupted, “indeed you are most unfair. It was but the most trifling of lapses; and Maranni is thoroughly repentant. I am sure it will be quite forgot, if only you too will consent to forget it.”

“My dear Lonira,” Maranni said, “you are too good. I fear—”

Varnak shifted his stance a little, and Idyla flinched and looked round, her eyes narrow behind her spectacles.

“Let us go up,” she said suddenly, cutting into Maranni’s somewhat fulsome praise of her sister. “I feel we are observed, though I cannot tell from where. Every one else will be at luncheon already.”

The sisters turned and made as one for the aft stairs, and Varnak and Mordecai

waited till they were out of sight and earshot before shifting their burden.

“Tam be thanked,” Varnak muttered. “Where are we going?”

“Our rooms,” Mordecai grunted. “Only place.”

They got the cadaver through the door, and Varnak leant against it.

“Use my room,” he said, indicating the door to the smaller bedroom.

“Highness?” Mordecai was startled.

“We may need this one for other things. I can doze off anywhere. For Tam’s sake, Mordecai, *move* before he comes apart in our hands.”

They arranged Dardash Parrunz on the tiny bed, as best they could, and Mordecai applied a basic preservation spell. “That should hold him for a week or so,” he said. “If we are not finished with this whole business by then it will scarcely matter who killed whom. Now then.”

A knock on the outer door startled both of them, and Varnak went to answer it. Mordecai had taken a pair of tweezers from his belt pouch and was examining Parrunz’s clothes. As the prince came back in, he fished something out of a fold in the coarse fabric and held it up.

“Look at this,” he said, and with a melodious *ping* the tiny object freed itself from the tweezers’ grip and sailed past Varnak’s nose into the corner of the room. Mordecai swore.

“Brilliant,” Varnak said, “though I imagine the audience would have to sit quite close to get the full effect. I mean, it’s not one of your big tent tricks.”

“Help me find it,” Mordecai snarled, ferocity covering an insane impulse to laugh. They both got down on their knees, and eventually located the tiny thing under a chair.

“I take it you found this thing on the body,” Varnak said, when the thing had been conveyed to the table in the main room and lay there in the light that filtered through the skylight in the ceiling. “Well done. What is it?”

“I cannot be sure,” Mordecai said, “without running further tests. But it looks very much to me like a rivet from a Tseneshi hair-frame.”

They looked at each other for a long moment.

\*

