

The Heart of God

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The Prince

1 & Gods in the Hall

The god of chaos had a bone to pick with his wife. It probably did not help his cause, he realized, to broach the subject while hanging upside down in mid-air over the throne of Sevakand; reluctantly he righted himself, regretting the opportunity to view the Hall of Gods from a new angle. The deliciously named ghouls of the Sevakandi court crowded the spaces between the pillars, a sea of pastel robes and plumed turbans and chiming crystals draping vulnerable mortal flesh. Neither they nor the black and gold-clad guards lining the aisle took note of the silver-haired boy with the ancient eyes sitting cross-legged above them. The Commanzik were too busy watching the ghouls and the ghouls were too busy laying bets on whether or not the Haván of Sevakand, heir to the throne, would die before the night was over. It would delight a good many if that clever and interesting boy should lose his battle with pneumonia and leave King Traven the sole denizen of House Aravon. But that, the Thousandth God had decided a minute ago, would be giving his detestable cousin, Seev, god of death, too large a victory.

“What are you up to, wife?” he called down the length of the hall. She stood in chill and quiet watchfulness at the foot of the three steps below the entrance, slim and remote in her orange robes. Her beautiful, pale face might have been cast from crystal like the mask of Fate hanging from the gallery rail over her head—her own, which watched the machinations at court for her when she was not there.

Fate did not turn her gaze from the young and harried king sitting on the redstone throne at the other end of the aisle. “Hush. I want to hear this.”

“But—”

She did look at him then, an instant’s flicker of colorless eyes. It shot through the Thousandth God with the exquisite chill of a sleet storm; abashed, he fell silent, quashing his curiosity with difficulty. Fate never did anything without purpose. For some reason she had chosen to be here for this confrontation between king and court; therefore, it had meaning within the great web of futures she had begun to spin last summer, if he could but glean it. He bit down hard on questions, propped his chin on his

fist, and tried to gather his attention out of the vast, swirling storm of possible outcomes that attended his every breath. Concentration was so hard...

“Majest, reports from the Temple of Anavar say the Haván is near death.” The oily voice of the Earl of Renland insinuated itself into the murmuring hush in the hall like a borer rat slinking into a crack in a warehouse wall. The whispering ghouls fell silent to listen, their faces avid, intent. “The crown owes us the truth.”

On the throne, Traven lifted his head from brooding contemplation of the dais steps. Tawny hair stirred in a wintry draft filtering in from somewhere, but his face, like Fate’s, might well have served for a mask, carved in lines too grim for a man just past twenty-one. Not one muscle betrayed the loathing the Thousandth God sensed pouring off him in waves.

“Truth? The man who declared my brother dead in the desert and myself a madman, with no proof of either, demands truth? That’s rich. And since when does the Temple of Anavar blab the condition of its patients to the world?”

Alexian Walker paused, a silver-haired blob of a man in expensive green silks from his own province. The Thousandth God snickered, watching the Earl trying to craft a denial that he had spies in the temple of the healer god. “Is it true, Majest?”

“Be very careful, little lord,” Fate whispered, a cold gust of a sound that went unheard by any ears but her husband’s. Even so, it set every ghoul in the place shivering with sudden premonitions of death walking.

The Thousandth God quivered under a rolling wave of wonderful chaos trembling on the next word from Traven’s lips. The boy possessed an awesome potential for destruction, and the world had already witnessed his single-minded love for his younger brother. Torn between anticipation and trepidation, the Thousandth God turned his head toward Fate, wanting the answer to Walker’s question quite badly himself.

He could not read anything in his wife’s face. Frustrated, he returned his attention to Traven. The King’s voice nearly froze the Hall of Gods. “My brother survived an arrow to the chest at Vanok. He survived a relapse while hunting last month. I have *faith* in Anavar that he will survive this.”

Faith came out of his mouth with a certain ironic twist that only the gods in the hall could appreciate. The Thousandth God chuckled into the frightened silence overtaking the ghouls in the face of the King’s anger; Fate sighed, a very small sound.

He sobered. Mortals whispered that her heart had frozen in the moment of her creation. The jester knew better. Still, what her plans were for Alarion Aravon, he could not guess and she would not tell him. He did not understand anything that had happened in the past six months save that the King and his brother had been dragged to war, survived it, and still ruled Ariel. As to why Fate had chosen to stir up nearly every peer in Sevakand and every tribe south of the march in opposition to them, he had no idea.

The Earl of Renland puffed out his fleshy cheeks, a grotesque caricature of sympathy. “Anavar will be pleased to hear that, Majest, but—”

“But? But what, my lord? Don’t try to pretend that you care whether Prince Alarion lives or dies save as it profits you.”

The Thousandth God winced. Truly, Alarion was the diplomat in that family. Fate's warning to Walker shivered down his neck. Traven was so edgy with worry that even a peer of the realm might end up taking the traitor's leap off the cliff below the Citadel if he were not very, very careful. And what good would that do House Aravon, his wife's favorite? Every other peer would rise up in outrage and likely bring the whole House down.

Stealthily his hand crept into his shirt, which echoed his divided nature. Black on the right with a white sleeve, white on the left with a black sleeve, it matched the dice he pulled from an inner pocket. White Chance and black Destiny, they came into his hand with a comforting crackle of the power bound up in them to change even fate.

"No," whispered Fate. "Do not interfere. This must be."

What? he almost screamed. Blood feud between Renland and Aravon over a death that had not yet happened? Confusion warred with the intoxicating roil of chaotic echoes emanating from the hall, for he had thought—no, he knew—that Alarion Aravon stood at the heart of whatever web his wife was weaving. She could not kill him and still complete her pattern. Yet a civil war sparked by Traven's obstinate dislike for his nobles would likely end in both Aravoni dead and Sevakand reduced to the battleground it had been before Aravon himself overthrew his quarrelsome brother kings and made himself supreme. Two hundred years of peace rode on Traven's ability to be a king. Alarion had shed blood to try and teach him that stark fact.

Alexian Walker's heavy face flushed the color of a desert sunset, so alarmingly red that the Thousandth God expected to see Seev appear at any moment to claim his life. He stole a glance at his wife. Was that was this was about? Had she lost some strange bet to her brother?

He leaned forward in anticipation, but the Earl was nothing if not experienced in insult; Walker managed to keep whatever he was thinking about boy kings off his tongue and said instead, "Untrue, Majest. The life of the Haván is cherished by us all. But if Fate should be so unkind as to let him die—"

"You will be no closer to the throne, my lord," Traven said cuttingly.

"But House Aravon will be reduced to one: your own person, Majest. And if anything were to happen to you..." Artfully he let his voice trail off, inviting multitudinous horrors into the hall.

And now at last what he was after became clear. The Thousandth God saw it hit Traven at the same time he himself realized what the fat man was fishing for. He flung himself into a back flip in glee. Oh, what a tapestry of confusion began to flap around him, a delicious moil of possible futures hanging on female laughter and girlish glances, Houses maneuvering to dangle daughters in front of royal sons, and the Great Dance of Sevakandi politics ensuring that someone somewhere ended up nursing a grudge against the crown.

The King stiffened. "You want to talk about marriage contracts *now*?"

"The King owes Sevakand an heir, Majest. Now more than ever. Had your brother Veran lived there might even now be an heir on the way." Ever so delicately Walker reminded Traven that the Earl's own daughter had been betrothed to the eldest son of

House Aravon before his untimely demise. “You won your war. You cannot postpone your domestic duties any longer.”

“Your daughter will be queen when the oceans freeze, little lord,” the Thousandth God whispered in Walker’s ear. He laughed when the man startled away from the soundless gust ruffling his hair, but the Earl was too intent on driving the King where he wished him to go to look around or wonder. His slitted gaze was batted on Traven, leechlike and prepared to suck him dry.

Traven’s big hands moved restlessly on the redstone arms of the throne as though he could unleash the carved stone hounds to rip sly Walker to bloody rags. But with Alarion perhaps on his deathbed, he could not deny the need to speedily produce an heir. Sevakand would tear itself to shreds if House Aravon fell; it had already tottered perilously close to that precipice once this winter. The Thousandth God grinned a malicious grin at sight of Traven grinding his teeth on that truth. He liked the boy, really he did, but the distant thunder of possible futures stirred up by House Walker intoxicated him.

“We—” Traven paused, that royal *we* hanging like deadly fruit in the hush. Visibly he changed what he might have said. “—take the lord of Renland’s advice in the spirit in which it is offered”—The Thousandth God clamped his hand over his mouth to still a shout of laughter.—“and acknowledge its wisdom. We shall take up the matter when Prince Alarion is recovered enough to lend his advice.”

Walker’s jowls quivered as his head lifted sharply, but the least politically savvy ghoul in the place could see that Traven would bend no further. Smoothly the Earl touched his hand to his heart above the mailed boot embroidered in gold on his chest, so terribly inapt for a man who fought his wars in court.

“All of Sevakand hears your promise, Majest,” he said silkily. “We look forward to greeting our new queen. And, soon thereafter, we trust, your firstborn.”

No mention of dragging his own daughters into the mix. The Thousandth God’s silvery eyebrows lifted sharply. The old monster had been three months short of becoming a whispering power behind the throne when King Veran died; if not his own daughter in Traven’s bed to mutter her father’s schemes in her husband’s ear, then... whose?

The jester looked to Fate for answers, but she faded to nothing as he watched, leaving her crystal mask in her place, behind which strange glints hinted of watchful eyes. The Thousandth God looked down at the dice still in his hand, sorely tempted to toss them across Traven’s path and lend the boy a little luck. But Chance might yield to Destiny, and then what would his wife say? Uneasily he thrust them back into his shirt, remembering the last time he had cast them across Fate’s web. The world had nearly come apart.

Then he grinned, caught up once more in the mystery of his wife’s weaving and the tremors of power shivering far to the south. That had been *fun*, no matter that she had been wroth with him for weeks. He sniffed the dank air in the hall. It smelled of perfume and oiled steel and the rank sweat of frightened ghouls—and a trickling draft of wintry chill not born in the snow assaulting the Citadel’s red walls outside.

“Ha!” The Thousandth God swooped happily into the echoes in the far corner, chasing a red shadow that squawked and fled. “Come back here, Seev, and tell me what has brought you slinking to court.”

But the god of death hissed into the wind squalling down from the mountains and melted into the red stones of his temple where the prankster could not winkle him out. Grinning, the Thousandth God settled himself cross-legged atop the strange, carved column in the Street of Temples that served him for a shrine. Below him, a determined sort of self-importance marked the busy passage of priests in a bewildering variety of colors, robes flapping in the gusting wind. They liked to call themselves Chosen of the gods they served, but the jester thought it more likely the solid stone walls of the temples and the contents of the offering bowls attracted them more than some zeal to serve a deity they could not see. None wore his colors, for he had no priests, no acolytes, and no temple save this obelisk with its weirdly carved vines and leering faces. That suited him fine; keeping track of mortals sworn to his name would have bored him silly.

He peered up the steep rise of the hill across the rooftops of Yarom, but drifting snow hid the Citadel and the Hall of Gods and all that might be passing there. No matter. Power and destiny began to move around him, swirling ponderously into a slow whirlpool sliding in a great circle around Sevakand’s capital city, a shimmer like heat haze to immortal eyes. He recognized it for what it was, and chuckled happily down the wind.

“Do you see it, wife?” he asked of the air. “Whatever you’re up to, be very, very careful. I think that if you don’t want more trouble than you can handle, you had best kill Alarion after all.”

“Be still,” she bade him, a bodiless voice from nowhere and everywhere.

He took out his dice and began to juggle, reveling in the way each toss made the maelstrom quiver. Alarion had made that vortex of power, though he did not know it. Perhaps its very creation was all that Fate had wanted from an extraordinary boy with the power of his ancestors to create the gods themselves. And maybe not.

“If all you wanted was a child I can give you one!” he called, collecting a chill blast in the face for his impertinence. The Thousandth God laughed and settled down to await developments.

A new year that had begun to be boring showed some promise after all.