

The Mask of God

S. A. Bolich

© 2014 by S.A. Bolich

Published by Sky Warrior Book Publishing, LLC.
PO Box 99
Clinton, MT 59825
www.skywarriorbooks.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental.

Cover art by William R. Warren.
Cover layout by M. H. Bonham.
Publisher: M. H. Bonham.

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

Fate could put the future off no longer.

Silent as smoke, she swept unseen through the desert dusk, trailing echoes of incipient peril. Towering rocks loomed above her, smoldering in every color of the sunset just sinking to ash in the west. She slid around them, sometimes through them, stirring a dusty chill. Finally she whispered into being atop a hilltop cloven long ago by some tantrum of nature. In the fading pearl dusk, orange robes gathered themselves from nothing, enfolding a thing only shaped like a woman.

“You’re late,” Seev said, a petulant hiss out of the dusk.

Long-fingered hands took shape at the ends of orange sleeves, plucking voluminous folds into order. “I did not have to come at all, brother.” Fate’s voice was no warmer than the wind.

Seev sculpted himself from the sand, a hulking, faceless thing in robes the color of fresh blood. “It’s time. You promised me.”

“Ah? Are you taking to yourself my prerogatives now, foretelling when and how mortals should die?”

Seev paused, a slight, fatal hesitation. Fate drew back her hood and smiled. The god of death shrank visibly under it.

“I thought not.” Fate’s chill ivory face matched her laugh. “You are greedy, brother. Have the grace to acknowledge it.”

“You promised me an Aravoni. When the youngest was born, even you said House Aravon was over-blessed with sons. You said one would come to me beforetime.”

“You have already claimed an Aravoni. Can you not be content with the father?”

“His death is long forgotten. It’s of no profit to me. You promised!”

Fate turned away. “I remember.”

“Then choose.” Seev lifted his head, his hood falling together over the empty air where his face should be. “Or is it that you cannot? House Aravon has ever been your favorite. For too long, say I.”

“Because they scorn your best traps and laugh in your face when you finally win.” Fate laughed as sand swirled up around her with an angry hiss. Her smile faded when the sand rained back in a spray like blood across the bluish-purple stone at her feet. Blue

for House Aravon. Blood for a death she owed. Even the gods could not dodge such debts. Not on Ariel, anyway.

She sighed, rattling the spindly branches of the hayak bushes down the hill. Seev raised his head, sensing victory. “Shall I choose for you?”

“Ghoul.” Her contempt sent him shrinking to the far edge of the broken hill. “I know which one you would choose. No. He is mine. Of the other two—”

She spread long, pale fingers, erasing the dusk and the hillside. Three young men laughed at her out of the night. Behind her, Seev stirred. His eagerness to set a royal house mourning disgusted her; to spite him she tarried, studying these three upon whom hung so much. The smiling eldest with eyes the midnight blue of his house. The second, tawny as a trafe, wide-shouldered and solid. The youngest crowned in hair like molten silver tinged with gold. Eldest to youngest, there could be no doubt they were brothers, and brothers of that rarest kind in Sevakand: three who had no quarrel with each other.

Fate sighed again, so softly it—almost—went unnoticed by Seev. Regretfully she closed her fist. One of the faces shivered and vanished.

“You may have *that* one.”

A shiver of anticipation rippled Seev’s red robe. “Begone,” Fate told him coldly. He vanished with a fading, derisive snort.

“Forgive me,” Fate whispered to a man who would never hear her. Only the night saw her tears.

Yarom

1 ❖ Nameday Gifts

The Hall of Gods was haunted, to hear the ghouls tell it, full of the ghosts of House Aravon's enemies. It brooded atop the Citadel like a trafe crouching over its kill, clutching in its stony claws the spirits of angry priests. History recorded that plenty of them had died in the destruction of the Hadí temple that had once stood here. The walls probably still bore bloodstains, built as they were of redstone salvaged from that stronghold of fanatics. Alarion Aravon held a low opinion of the flutters of court hangers-on, but still... The echoes in here could raise the hair on his arms even on days when it was not jammed, as now, with folk who spent their lives plotting for power. The crystal masks of the gods mounted on the erthwood rails of the upper galleries caught dazzle from sun shafts falling through the skylights, seeming to shift and wink as though living faces looked out from behind the shield of glass. Reason told him there were no gods; memory told him otherwise. When he was five he had watched Fate step out of her mask above the main doors and stalk down the hall to touch his father. A minute later Papa lay dead, murdered on his own throne.

All in all, Alarion hated this place.

He stood just inside the entrance, peering over the shoulder of a perfumed courtier who chimed at every breath from the movement of myriad crystal drops sewn to his pale green court robes. Two or three hundred of his glittering, chiming fellows whispered between the tall white pillars flanking the central aisle, a pastel sea of ambition. Alarion risked a glance toward the throne, wary of drawing the gaze of either of his brothers. Veran sat attentively between the snarling and peaceful stone hounds forming the arms of the throne, listening to the Mastra of Protocol reading a woman's petition. Traven stood beside him, a tawny giant in a black Comman turban and a black tunic quartered with gold, as wary and watchful as the guards he commanded. Alarion willed him to look elsewhere. He was *not* going to spend his last few hours of freedom on this, his seventeenth nameday, standing up there being gawked at by the so-aptly named ghouls of the Sevakandi court.

He squinted through the confused play of light and shadow toward the peers' gallery to the left of the dais. Fenn sometimes sat there to watch the King of Sevakand deal justice. Not today. No shaggy brown head and broad shoulders loomed among the sparse occupants of that rarified box. Frustrated, Alarion went up on tiptoe to peer around a plumy feather jutting from the turban of a stout ghouls in front of him.

A hard hand on his shoulder snatched him backward. “Get down before the Mastra sees you!” Grays’ deep voice hissed in his ear.

Reflexively Alarion ducked, for he and his self-appointed bodyguard had been dodging authority together for years. Blindly he turned toward Grays—and smacked instead straight into a willowy courtesan in a dress consisting of a half-dozen artfully placed green veils. His face ended up mashed against something warm and disconcertingly soft. Her delighted laugh ruffled his hair as Alarion fought his way upright.

Heat scorched up his cheeks. “Pardon, Miza,” he mumbled, and did not object when Grays dragged him away from her, out through the open main doors onto the long portico. A summer breeze cooled the fire in his face. Alarion straightened, grasping after his dignity as he peered down into Grays *din’Aravon’s* lean, snub-nosed face.

“Why am I ducking the Mastra?”

Grays pulled him away from the door. “I heard the King tell her to watch for you. I think he wants to be sure you’ll actually be at the ceremony tonight.”

“I’ll be there! I just came to find Fenn for a fast gallop up to the overlook. It might be a long time before we get another chance.” Alarion glanced up at the summer-green mountains looming over Yarom on the other side of the deep chasm separating the Citadel from the city proper. He had a glum notion about what life was going to be like after that official coming of age.

Grays cocked a sandy eyebrow half hidden under the red turban of a King’s Mreen. “What if you’re late getting back? The King will be thrilled when you turn up looking like *that*.”

Eyes the color of blued steel took in every scuff mark on Alarion’s disreputable riding boots, every frayed thread on his ancient blue tunic with the silver stars of House Aravon fading on the sleeves. Alarion flipped him a rude gesture; Grays grinned his hellfighter’s grin, unafraid of royal wrath. Two fingers shorter than Alarion and two years older, he wore the crimson and gold of the Citadel guards, his red turban and sleeves bearing the white rank stripes of a sarjent. He had fought his way into the White Mreens at sixteen and won the regimental championship against the Blacks two out of the three years since. No one questioned his right to stand grinning at the shoulder of the prince he had shadowed since they were both too young for anyone to care what they did.

“What are you doing here?” Alarion asked. “Aren’t you ever on duty?”

“Constantly, *my lord*.” Grays gave him a small, mocking bow.

Alarion eyed him, but the restless need to find Fenn and go overwhelmed his curiosity. He poked his head in the door again, and recoiled from the sight of a terribly deformed infant in the arms of a red-robed priest of Seev. With the serene indifference of death itself, the Seevri ignored both the frantic young woman pawing his sleeve and the lusty squalling of the babe. Alarion swallowed hard. No, he most definitely did not want to hear *that* petition. He would not be king for all the crystal in Sevakand, not when it meant choosing whether Death or a grieving mother should have an armless child.

He took an unwary step sideways, and startled away from a sudden flash of blue and green and a voice blaring, "Make way! Make way for Prince Alahrion, you fools!"

A middle-aged ghoul, so new to court he did not even manage to pronounce Alarion's name correctly, dug his elbows into close-packed bodies, grinning triumphantly over his chance to earn the favor of House Aravon's youngest son. With the single-minded intensity of a borer rat gnawing through a ship's hull, he cleared a path to the head of the steps, ignoring annoyed gasps. Faces turning in protest caught sight of Alarion and faded quickly aside.

"Didn't I say?" Grays muttered.

On the dais, a dozen black and gold-clad Commanzik of the King's Guard turned toward the commotion, reaching for swords. The Mastra of Protocol whipped around in a swirl of blue and gray robes. "Prince Alarion Aravon!" she blared, the words shattering to echoes against the skylights.

The space around Alarion widened as though he had developed plague. Furious, he found himself alone on the top step in full view of the entire court. *Fate find all ghouls.*

He glared at his blue and green nemesis. "Next time you feel inclined to interfere in a stranger's affairs, Mir," he said, with chill and polite venom, "at least pronounce his name right. It's *Alairion*, not *Alahrion*."

The ghoul paled and elbowed his way into the crowd. Seething, Alarion cast a hopeless glance down the long aisle. Veran crooked a finger at him; stuck, he started down the steps, abysmally aware that he must look like some by-blow of a Great House, entitled to its colors and not much else. Whispers rose like pointing fingers. Turbans tilted; jewel-toned fans made of thin fingers of crystal lifted as he passed, shielding conversations, hiding expressions, winking color like the sly flash of cats' watchful eyes. A slim courtesan in jewels and feathers and not much else gave him a predatory look that lifted all the hair on Alarion's neck. Hastily he averted his eyes. He had not yet worked up the nerve to patronize an orvi, despite an inordinate number of embarrassing dreams about them.

He gritted his teeth and climbed the three steps to the dais, hoping Veran would wish him happy nameday and let him go. Instead, the King waved him toward the empty place on his right. Traven smirked at him from Veran's left. Alarion glared back and turned to face the court.

Every eye in the place was on him; he could *feel* the whole gauzy, glittering pack wondering the same thing: *Will or won't the King make his little brother a new power to reckon with?* He sighed, hating the Great Dance of Sevakandi politics.

"Bored already, Alya?" Veran, King of Sevakand, Hebron and Nemistak, propped his elbow on the snarling redstone hound to his left and cocked a wheat-fair eyebrow.

Alarion gave him a baleful look. "Come on, Verya, it's my *nameday*—"

"And I can see you're thrilled by the gravity of the occasion." Veran's gaze wandered over the scuffed boots and threadbare tunic. "To think I dared hope you might deign to wear those marvelous clothes a dozen tailors have labored on all these weeks in your honor."

Alarion flushed. Traven chuckled. "Ease up, Verya. I recall that you hid out in the stables before your coronation."

"I had a crown to don," Veran said airily, reaching down to caress one of the two black hounds sprawled at his feet. "All *he* has to do is graciously receive a few hundred gifts from people who wish him well."

"As they climb up my coattails to reach your ear," Alarion muttered.

Traven snorted. "I told you he's not as naive as people think."

Veran straightened on the throne, smiling gently. "I know."

Uneasily Alarion wondered how his brother, his king, really was planning to fill his youngest brother's time from now on. Veran liked surprises. Alarion had watched too many recipients of them wince and stutter over their thanks not to be wary.

"Was there a point to dragging me in front of the whole court looking like the King can't afford to keep me in clothes?" he inquired sweetly.

Traven chuckled; Veran flipped Alarion a mock salute. "Hevai, little brother. Point to you." He nodded over Alarion's shoulder at the Mastra of Protocol. Alarion braced for the unspeakable infant, but she turned toward the side doors.

Alarion gave Veran a narrow-eyed glance. "What are you up to?"

"Me? Merely doing a favor for a friend. Since your elusiveness is legend, some of *your* friends asked me for help in presenting their gift to you."

"Why don't they just present it tonight after my coming-of-age ceremony?"

Veran gave him a maddening smile. "This way *I* get to see your face."

He stood up, hushing the court in surprise. Even the ghouls whispering in the shadows between the pillars looked up, wary lest the Great Dance take a new pattern and leave them behind. Veran let the silence stretch until the guiltier ones slunk behind the pillars and then said amiably, "All here know that today is our brother Alarion's seventeenth nameday. We intend to shower him with gifts at his formal coming-of-age, but we are informed that his friends have another they wish to present outside. We will risk the wrath of waiting delegations so that we may enjoy the look on his face when he receives it."

Outside, the King's Gong crashed its deep-throated announcement that court had ended. Alarion started. He could not remember a single time in the twelve years since Veran had been crowned that his brother had abandoned court early.

Warily he stole a look at Traven, who shrugged as he started down the steps. The Commanzik were already moving into escort position. Lords' sons every one, they had fought as hard for the black turban and the right to put *din'*Aravon after their names as any farmer's child fighting entry challenge into the Mreens—but Mreens neither got the elite S' in front of their names, nor faced the irrevocable shame of losing their turbans if they put a foot wrong. Alarion had spent his life eluding that black and gold royal cage; he eyed them now and despaired of ever riding up to the overlook alone again.

Captain S'Boris, second in command of them behind Traven, leaned over to whisper in Alarion's ear, the three gold pips of rank on his black turban winking in the sun shaft. "Don't spoil it. He's been planning it for weeks."

Alarion looked up at this broad-shouldered cat of a man who had been Veran's friend for as long as he could remember. Boris winked. Torn between embarrassment and curiosity, Alarion started down the steps as an indulgent laugh ran through the hall. Commanzik stalked like steel-hung shadows on either side; Veran's pair of black hounds nosed along in front, giving the crowd yellow-eyed appraisals that sent ghouls shrinking back into the ranks behind them. Alarion would have laughed if he had not seen his father's hounds tearing at the throats of the men who had killed him right here on these steps.

They emerged onto the portico into a swelling roar as the crowd took note of the King. The courtyard between the Hall and the inner gate seethed like a pot on a slow boil, a milling rainbow of provincial colors studded here and there with blaring priestly robes and the vivid banners of House delegations awaiting audience. The long stone steps lining three sides of the yard, fronting the ancient white Dome on the right, the sprawling pink bulk of the royal ways on the left, and the Hall of Gods itself, were packed with a noisy sea of humanity buzzing like a dumblebug trapped in a stone jar. A moving river of people jammed the gleaming arch of the Founder-built bridge linking the inner gate tower and the outer gate at the top of Ship Street, hopeful petitioners coming to court on the only day of the week the Citadel breached its natural defenses to allow all and sundry into the King's house. Above, a soaring thumb of pinkish-gray granite rose to the signal heights above the Dome, spearing a blue-violet sky brilliant with the first sunshine in weeks. Alarion sighed. What a waste of a beautiful day.

Traven, standing on the top step of the portico, turned and gave Veran a disgusted look. "You and your bright ideas. Look at this place."

"What should we do, toss them off the bridge?" Cheerfully Veran waved toward the pink walls of Yarom lining the plateau on the far side of the chasm.

"Not a bad idea," Traven muttered.

Veran laughed. "Diplomacy, Tray. You should try it."

"That's what I have you for."

We may need it, Alarion thought in dismay. Directly below the steps, a Mosaini delegation was next in line for a now-canceled presentation. Alarion winced, thinking of wounded sensibilities in a House famous for blood feud. He surveyed them, hunting offense behind the exotic desert robes and the pointed turbans and the sand veils that made their faces all eyes. An ebony-skinned young man holding a short, recurve bow seemed to be the leader. It was probably a gift for Veran but Alarion could not fault the Commanzik for eyeing it askance; even the heathen Crizani tribes feared the horse archers from Mosain. He smiled into the man's eyes as the Mosaini rose from a deep bow to Veran but could read nothing of whatever mood lurked behind the veil.

Traven started down the steps, and halted so abruptly that Alarion peered around him to see what was wrong. A red-robed priest of Seev, reeking of incense that put Alarion sharply in mind of a dead cat he had once seen rotting in the summer sun, stood on the steps in Veran's path, silently daring a Commanzik to sweep him aside. Veran ignored him. The Seevri's scowl changed to surprise when an orange-robed priestess of

Fate stepped from behind a pillar and stopped, casting a long shadow across the steps. Alarion recoiled; Traven glared, refusing to budge. Veran edged out of her shadow.

“So much for diplomacy,” Traven muttered, but Alarion, his nerves jumping from the flash of orange robes, could not bring himself to scoff. Legends left over from the bad old days of the Hadí theocracy said a priest’s very shadow could kill. He did not *really* believe that, but... He used to have nightmares about how Fate’s shadow had stalked ahead of her down the hall before she touched Papa. If any part of that legend was true, then it was better to offend Seev, who could only kill you. Fate could make you miserable enough to go gratefully.

Veran turned his head. “Is everything ready, Sarjent?”

Alarion discovered Grays standing beside him again. He smirked at Alarion and said, “Indeed, Majest.”

He turned and whistled. It occurred to Alarion that Grays had been under orders to make sure a certain prince never made it out the gate, but he forgot it when Fenn appeared out of the crowd, leading the chestnut stallion Veran had imported from Renland last week.

“V-V-Verya,” he sputtered. Traven threw back his head and laughed. “Gods, I mean, Majest. I mean—Veran, that’s your horse.”

“No, he’s not,” Veran said genially as Fenn arrived at the foot of the steps, a broad young man with brown hair and a square, serious face lightened now by a triumphant grin. “I bought him for you. I was irritated when they delivered him early until I saw how well you liked him. It’s nice to know in advance that a gift will be well received.”

“But—” Alarion fingered the sword Veran had given him this morning.

Traven reached down and touched the hilt, grinning. “This is from me, little brother.”

Veran cocked an eyebrow. “Will you keep the poor beast standing in the sun after all the fuss over him?”

Fenn held up the reins; Alarion salvaged his dignity with a flying mount as people scattered to clear a space. He wheeled the stallion and started across the shell-patterned cobblestones, still dazed. A Renli warhorse all his own...

Sharp movement by the arch into the outer court caught his eye, as out of place here as a snake in a cradle. Four men elbowed a hole in the crowd and charged across the conveniently cleared inner court toward the steps. A woman shrieked as Commanzik ran to meet them, drawing their swords.

Three more men appeared out of the throng in front of the Hall of Gods. Boris spun around, shoving Veran aside. One of the attackers tackled him; another engaged two other Commanzik as Boris fell. The third leaped through the gap in the ring of guards, steel glittering bright menace in his hand.

“Verya!”

Alarion heeled the chestnut into a skittering run, its shod hooves ringing on the cobbles. Ghouls shrieked and shoved in panic, impeding Commanzik trying to get to the King. Cursing the pastel shapes in his way, Alarion drove the battle-trained stallion between the four runners and the steps, snatching out his new sword that had never

even seen a practice bout. The attackers scattered; the chestnut grabbed one's shoulder, drawing a shrill scream. Alarion parried another's curved blade as Grays leaped to engage a third man.

A distinctive click warned him. Alarion threw himself flat on the stallion's neck with a gasping curse as the wicked triangular blade of a flick knife shot past his ear. He heard it ring and slither on the cobbles as the stallion reared, forefeet flailing, came down—and kept going, rolling onto its side. Alarion had time only to kick clear. He crashed to the cobbles on his back, the breath leaving his lungs in a great *whoosh*. He tried frantically to roll aside, staring in disbelief at a curved sword hanging above him, silhouetted against the sun.

A silver-banded arrow sprouted below the assassin's ear. The man staggered sideways, the sword dropping from his hand with a clang of metal on stone. Alarion did not watch him fall. He rolled over and staggered to his feet, dragging air into his tortured lungs.

"Verya!" he screamed, not seeing him. "Tray!"

Commanzik stood in a tight, bristling ring on the steps, menacing shocked ghouls craning past them. Mreens and more Commanzik poured into the inner court; five or six spotted Alarion and ran to surround him, but the fighting had ended; the whole place seemed frozen save for them. He clawed them aside, desperate to get to his brothers. Abruptly his guts turned inside out as though some cold, slinking *thing* passed through him, setting him staggering under a wash of dread.

From nowhere Fenn's arm curled around his shoulders, bracing him up. Grays arrived at his other side, sword drawn and dripping red. Alarion ignored them, trying to see over the heads of the crowd. He could not spot either of his brothers. Shuddering and sick, he fought Fenn's hold; the big man let him go and started shoving people aside. Alarion trailed him through an eerie silence full of staring faces. Steel gleamed beside him; he flinched away before he noticed the black and gold armored figure holding it. Alarion looked up in wild relief but it wasn't Traven, just a Commanzik who looked as shocked as he felt.

Terror poured out of Alarion in a shout that rang off the royal ways. "Where are my brothers? Fate find you, *where's the King?*"

The man's mouth worked but no sound came out. Alarion faltered. Someone was dead: Veran, Traven, maybe both. Probably both. *No*, he thought in anguish, shivering so hard he could hardly stand.

A solid ring of Commanzik facing grimly outward with swords drawn, stood between him and the steps of the royal ways where his brothers had been standing. He could not see anyone beyond them. Not Verya, not Tray.

The last two guards in his path stepped aside. Alarion halted. Veran was sprawled on the steps, his head cradled in Traven's lap. Blood had soaked the front of his blue court robes and splashed a dreadful pattern across the pink stone. One of the hounds lay beside him, bloody and still; the other was busy ripping a dead man to rags three meters away. Traven lifted his head. With a shock as if the world had turned inside out, Alarion realized he was alive.

He dropped to his knees, reaching for Veran's pulse. Traven caught his wrist. "He's dead, Alya," he grated in a voice Alarion did not recognize. Tears gleamed on his face.

"NO! No, he can't be! Kesh ka'vah, Tray, he can't be!"

"The King is dead," said a voice overhead. "Fate favor King Traven."

Alarion looked up in horror at plump Lord Worley, who had been a regent during Veran's minority and was now just a ghoul. Traven's head jerked up, his lips forming denial as some of the crowd hesitantly began to pick it up.

"Fate favor King Traven!"

Traven sat frozen as the crowd seized on the chant to dispel horror. Alarion wanted to scream at them to stop hailing a new king before the old one was even cold, but the priestess of Fate stood behind Traven, her orange-clad arms folded implacably. And so he understood who had summoned Seev.

"No," he moaned, numbly aware that he too, had stood in Seev's path—but it was Veran who had walked through Fate's shadow.

Feet shuffled behind him; he looked up dully at stunned Boris leaning toward Traven, who snapped, "Who was it? They looked like dockers. Why would—"

Boris shook his head. "No, Tr—Majest. Crizan."

"*Crizan!*" Traven gaped up at him.

Alarion stared. It had been twenty years since his father's crusade had forced the heathen tribes below the march to sullen restraint in their autumn raiding, and with it the carping of Great Houses demanding action. Why would Crizani tribesmen travel a thousand kay, dress up as dock workers and lay an ambush for the King in his own house, tossing aside a treaty both sides had bought in blood?

Boris, his jaw clenched on grief, tore his gaze from Veran and pointed. Commanzik were dragging corpses into a ragged row in front of the chestnut stallion, which lay unmoving on the cobbles amid gleaming tracks of blood.

"Oh, no," Alarion whispered.

Traven glanced at him and stood up, pulling Alarion up with him. Alarion stared at the bodies of seven men, unremarkable in the cross-hatched breeches and green turbans of the docks, slashed and stained with gore. He had never seen a Crizan, alive or dead; a queer shock of disappointment jolted through him. They did not look like demons, or even particularly odd save for the green tribal tattoo on one's forehead, exposed by the loss of his turban. The dark fierce eyes of the nearest glared at the sky, still hating the House that had exiled his ancestors three hundred years before he was born. Three of them looked to be in their twenties, the others middle-aged, with the leathery, bronzed skin of the southern march—or of Nemistak, land of fanatics.

"All dead?" Traven asked harshly.

"Aye, Majest." Boris looked down, shame written in every line of him. It should have been a mark of pride that the Comman left none of its enemies alive. But they had not been quick enough to save the King, and now they had no chance at answers.

The King's Gong boomed suddenly, bringing every Commanzik up on his toes. Alarion jumped. Traven never even flinched, standing stony-faced as the deep voice of the gong began to toll a king's death. The weird wailing of Mosaini horns underscored it,

blurring Alarion's eyesight, closing his throat with grief so intense he thought he'd choke.

"Why?" Traven muttered, and then lifted his head and screamed it. "*WHY?*"
Only the echoes from the signal heights answered.