

**THE MARK
OF GOD**

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NEMİSTAK

PROLOGUE

Time seemed frozen here. Even the wind avoided this haunted hollow overlooked by the barren cliffs of the Vanok Hills, and so the stench lingered, untroubled by the frost glittering atop torn earth and trampled wheat that would never now yield a harvest. The only thing harvested on this ground had been life itself, stripped from twenty-five thousand souls and countless horses. The men had been buried but the horses lay in rotting tangles, reeking in the thin late-autumn sun. Black and gray and bay and dun and every color in between, they lay tangled like storm wrack where arrows from the ridge above had dropped them in their headlong charge.

Fate sighed, looking at them. All those arrows. Only one had mattered in the end, and it had not struck a horse. Not that these unlucky beasts would care how that single arrow had overturned the world. A terrible sort of sadness touched her. *Their* lives had lain in her hands, too, poor feckless creatures, charging unwittingly to their deaths, trusting the ones who rode them. For them, life had been simple and short. For their masters...

She lifted her fey, amber gaze to the south and the damaged, walled city of the mysterious One God. The fighting men of the tribes of Nemistak, so fierce a fortnight ago, now nursed their wounds in sullen, dazed silence or slipped quietly homeward, chewing on an unpalatable defeat. She could hear them muttering about the godless infidels even now marching away northward under the standard of a young king who had managed an unthinkable victory. A thin smile touched her lips.

Infidels? Indeed, by tribal standards, those victorious Sevakandi were devoid of the proper awe for deity.

Godless? Hardly.

“What now?” asked a soft, unwontedly somber voice behind her.

Fate turned and held out her hand. Her husband stepped out of the wind and took shape in front of her, a slim youth with ancient eyes and silver hair stirring constantly on the restless breath of chaos that accompanied him everywhere. He came, still a bit hesitant to face her. For once his dice, those pesky instruments of his godhood, were firmly tucked in the pocket of his black-and-white shirt. Chance and Destiny had both already played their parts on this field.

“Now we see what Traven Aravon makes of his victory,” she said softly, quietly taking comfort from the warmth of the Thousandth God’s hand in hers. Just so must

mortals rejoice in love. The thought startled her; hurriedly she withdrew her hand lest it weaken her resolve. She turned away, gazing after the army marching toward the ships waiting at the border between Nemistak and Sevakand. “Now we will see what sort of king he really is.”

“And what of Alarion?” the Thousandth God asked. “I thought... I thought the King’s brother was the rock of House Aravon, but you have turned him into a weapon against it. Why?”

He gave her a sideways, nervous grin, so unlike his usual reckless humor that a strange, piercing pain caught Fate’s breath short. He was not made for solemnity, her laughing jester. He had been made for joy and disorder and confusion that left him untouched—and effortlessly upset the careful plans of his much wiser wife. But she could not bring herself to set him aside, for all that the *next* throw of his dice might end the world.

Fate clenched her fists against touching him again and drew the hood of her orange robe against his searching dark gaze. “Do you blame me for Stoneshaker’s interference?” she asked curtly.

He snorted, sounding like himself for the first time. “It was not the god of earthquakes who put an arrow in Alarion’s chest or refused to let him die afterward. The day that one of our kin takes from you a mortal you have willed not to die will be the end of all of us, so what are you up to? If you think a good close look at his own mortality is going to force Alarion Aravon to believe in you, then you haven’t yet even begun to take his measure.”

Fate smiled the sort of smile that sent children fleeing from her in the streets. “On the contrary, husband. I measured him against *this*”—she swept one bone-white hand across the battlefield—“and found him entirely suited to the future.”

He stared at her, even his silver hair stilled for once. “And what future is that?” he whispered.

Fate lifted her gaze toward the broken walls of Ro’om, stronghold of the One God.

“Mine,” she said fiercely.

1 ♦ HOMECOMING

The Sevakandi army retreated, unmolested by vengeful tribesmen, the whole long way from the Vanok Hills to the ships. The White Mreens carried Alarion Aravon in a curtained litter they refused to sling behind a horse. He was more than the King's brother to them, more than their commander or the youngest son of House Aravon. He was the Defender of the Ridge, the rock that had broken the heathen and covered the Whites in eternal glory, and though it had cost them two-thirds of their numbers they would spend what remained of the regiment before they surrendered that honor. Alarion protested, but he was too weak to argue. For days he could not even lift his head from the pillow, hanging in a half-world of blank spaces broken by sharp interludes of red agony. His mind drifted, seeking a place where breathing did not hurt. He found it once, floating peacefully into a deepening blackness, the pain smoothed away by cool hands stroking, numbing—

Abruptly other hands were on him, waking pain like licking flame in his chest. His bodyguard's anxious voice met his ear amid a babble of alarm. Alarion came awake with a sharp cry of agony. A vicious, ethereal hiss reached him, shocking him to stillness. Grays called his name again. Alarion opened his eyes, shuddering in the grip of an overpowering sense that the god of death lurked beside him. *Seev...*

"Shh," a voice soothed, the hands on him tightening.

"Tray?" he whispered, straining to see his brother.

Warm fingers twined through his. "I'm here, Alya. I'm here."

He let himself drift again, reassured. Traven was here. It was all right. *Seev* would never get through *him*.

Above his head, Fenn, sitting cross-legged where Traven should have been, looked across Alarion's still body at Zenan. His fingers were still laced through Alarion's atop the nest of blankets that served for a royal bed in this tent in the middle of nowhere. "Where is he?"

"He is the King. He has other duties." Zenan could not meet Fenn's betrayed eyes, wincing from the pain of a man who had been close friends with both Aravoni from childhood. Nor could he reconcile the king who had cut his way through an army to save his brother with the man who had visited Alarion only twice since they knew he was going to live. It had not escaped Zenan that both times, Alarion had been too drugged to know who was beside him.

Too dazed to look into his brother's face and see—what? Zenan wondered, staring blindly at the tent canvas rippling under the ceaseless cold wind of Nemistak. Was this the reason for the sudden rift between the King and the commander of his bodyguard? S'Boris went about his duties tight-lipped and silent, and even the loyal Commanzik of the guard had begun trying to avoid duty at the King's tent, wary of his temper. An ugly suspicion overtook Zenan; he began to guess why King Traven stayed away from his too-perceptive brother.

Grays muttered something dark-sounding and probably treasonous, his snub-nosed face sullen under the red Mreen turban that was life itself to him. Zenan eased his wounded left arm inside its sling and pretended not to hear. It was not for himself, the newcomer to Alarion's circle, to make judgments about the King's actions. Traven had already lost one brother; was it not to avenge the murder of King Veran that they had all ended up in this cold and death-ridden place? He had the right to fight for his last living blood relative.

But he was also the King. Things got complicated quickly after that.

Had I known what it would entail when my brother bade me get to know House Aravon better, I would have stayed in Mosain, Zenan thought ruefully, but he knew that was a lie even as it shaped itself in his head. He looked at Alarion's face, still cloud-pale under the faint golden down of his first beard, and could not quell a sharp flicker of anxiety. The glass medicine vial atop a trunk beside him looked less fragile.

Perhaps it is just that the King cannot bear to see him this way, either. Indeed, it hurt to see the laughing boy of the summer reduced to this autumn shadow.

Though Zenan said nothing to Alarion about Traven, he could not spare him from pain of a different sort. "Where's Hael?" Alarion asked one night, jerking awake, muttering anxiously about the Aravoni flag falling with blood across its stars. Zenan could not keep quick, betraying dismay off his face.

Alarion tried to sit up. "No! Gods, Zevya, no!"

Zenan shoved him flat with his uninjured hand. "Lie still! If you kill yourself now I will curse you to Shaitan forever! Be *still!*"

Alarion stared at him, his violet eyes wide with shock. Zenan dropped his gaze, ashamed of betraying the depth of his fear. But he could not lie, nor drug the heir to Sevakand senseless and hope he would not remember when he woke. That day was already past.

"He died quickly, my prince. So did S'Dav." He heard Alarion suck in a painful breath over the loss of both his squire and his second in command, and forced himself to go on. "You should be proud of the Whites. They lost almost two-thirds of their number but they held. Favor to Falal, they held..."

A long silence drew his head around. Alarion was watching him, his face glinting with tears. "Who else?" he whispered.

Zenan drew a long breath. "Michal. And Clairra, we think. So many we could not identify—"

"Michal?" It came out a strangled whisper. "Zevya... Michal?"

Zenan lost his voice. He nodded unhappily. Alarion flinched, and cried out, a low hoarse cry of unbearable agony within and without. He tried to twist away; Zenan caught him back, holding him against wild, feeble wrenching. Finally Alarion ran out of strength and collapsed.

“No... No! I should never have let him stand with us! Ah, no—”

Harsh, racking sobs all but tore him in half. One of the Mreen guards ran for a Navri, the other fumbled for sweetsmoke as Zenan cradled Alarion until the drug put him under. Tears for the cousin he would not see again streaked Alarion’s haggard face; Zenan sat beside him while he slept it out, silently cursing Traven for not being there when Alarion needed him most.

It took Alarion a while to notice his brother’s absence. For days the fog of pain and sweetsmoke stole his wits; it was only after he had forced the priests to stop the smoke and lay open-eyed in the jolting litter that he realized it was Grays or Zenan or Fenn who was there when he opened his eyes, never Traven, his brother. It hurt. Tray had worried over Alarion’s broken hand but would not come now when he had taken an arrow nearly in the heart. He would not ask what ailed the King, nor send for him. Instead, he lay in tight-lipped silence with the whispers of the army washing in through the thin canvas walls of his tent, and gathered how nearly he had come into the hand of Seev. And still Traven would not come.

He refused to be carried aboard ship. He would not lend the enemies of House Aravon more ammunition than they could make out of ten thousand dead Sevakandi lost in this war. He walked up the ramp, pale and tottering, and the rejoicing sailors shut their mouths in respectful silence. The long slow voyage restored him somewhat; by the time the galleys had battled their way into the fierce southward sweep of the River Tanis he was up, impatient of coddling, walking the chilly decks and staring across the water at rolling hills swathed in fog and snow. Zenan hovered like an obsidian shadow, his ebony face carefully neutral; Fenn and Grays and the rest of his friends walked as if a sudden move on their part would break some fragile spell. It galled, for Zenan had nearly lost an arm and Grays still limped from a spear thrust and only Fenn’s helmet had saved him from a smashed skull.

“Stop watching me like children goggling at a street fakir!” Alarion snarled at Grays one day when a gust of chill wind staggered him enough to clutch for support.

Grays jumped. “What else is there to watch?” he asked, all innocence.

“See the wounded Haván, half a crystal,” Alarion said crossly, raking tangled fair hair out of his eyes.

“You could always go below,” Grays hinted.

“You’re the ones watching me,” Alarion pointed out.

Grays gave him an elaborate shrug, but he looked tired and far older than nineteen. The muted red and yellow camouflage of his field uniform bore the rips and stains of a brutal campaign. *Like all the rest of us*, Alarion realized, every one of the weary men and women who had marched into Nemistak and out again because House Aravon had commanded it.

Anything else he might have said coiled into a hard knot of guilt under his breastbone. No man should have the power to order another man to die—but what else could they have done? The realities of his world were shaped by ambitious lords at home and sulking tribes nursing ancient grievances across the border. A king who would not wield his power to protect his own people only proved to his enemies that they had nothing to fear.

Zenan, until now a silent statue in brown desert robes and turban, leaned over the rail suddenly, pointing upriver. “Look—Yarom!”

Alarion turned, and stilled. The capital of Sevakand gleamed on the horizon, floating up out of the murk of low fog over the river. The wind had torn a hole in the lowering clouds that had dogged them from Nemistak, letting Falal spear through for the first time in days. A piercingly beautiful shaft of sun fell over the towering, snow-frosted mountains shouldering through the haze, directly onto Yarom. It brushed the pink walls with glory and threw great bars of shadow over the river and the plain below, so that the city stood alone against sullen mauve clouds, a crystal teardrop on a velvet curtain. The Citadel, soaring from the top of its rock, suddenly blazed in a flurry of winking sparks: signal mirrors welcoming a victorious king home.

He blinked back tears, his throat tight. “We made it,” he whispered.

“So we did.” Grays’s voice sounded odd.

Alarion touched his shoulder, guessing it was because the White Mreens had bled themselves dry to ensure it. “It does feel empty, doesn’t it?”

They stared at him. Moodily Alarion traced a long gouge in the railing, scar of a night attack on the ships a lifetime ago. Their eyes burned him; finally he admitted, “I feel as though it’s not really over. Only Crizani stupidity kept us out of the traitor’s trap. He’s still out there, building another.”

Grays shifted uneasily. Zenan said nothing. Alarion turned to look at them. “What?”

“The traitor is dead, my prince. It was Pilot. The tribes killed him.”

“Damon Pilot? But...” It hit him then: the attack on his tent, the timely gift of armor to replace his own, all of it. He sagged against the railing, torn between horror and rage. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Grays and Zenan exchanged a guilty glance. Just the sight of them standing on the same deck together in seeming amity bemused Alarion after three months of them circling each other like wary dogs. This looked like conspiracy.

“You were not strong enough,” Zenan said.

“Pilot,” Alarion said slowly. “If he’s dead, where does that leave Stoneshaker?”

“Wishing,” Grays said flatly.

Zenan turned his face away. Alarion looked at him, and then again, caught by the hard-jawed look to him in profile. “Zevya?”

Zenan looked at him, his dark face so composed that Alarion wondered if his first impression had been a trick of the light. “The Earl should have chosen his allies with more care,” the desert lord said. “The god seems less powerful than he hoped.”

“Or less honorable,” Grays said.

Alarion froze as a memory lost in the blood and agony of Vanok slid into his mind. *Even the gods value honor.* “Stoneshaker killed him,” he whispered.

Grays shook his head. “Some Walkingwolf Mreen killed him. Half the army saw it.”

Alarion stared at him. “Why would Sky Walkingwolf, the most honorable peer I personally know, assassinate Damon Pilot?”

Zenan caught his breath, his black eyes widening. “He wouldn’t. But if someone else knew what Pilot was—”

“Gods of war!” Grays blurted. “Claira! Of course! I didn’t think...” His face saddened. “No wonder she never reported back in. She was hot on Pilot’s trail. And when she couldn’t warn you, Haván, she did what she could.”

Alarion turned blindly toward the rail, his throat so tight he could not swallow. *O my talented one,* he thought, remembering her lean, androgynous face and her wary hope in his goodwill. His mastra of spies had been dreadfully abused by her former patron. He had hoped to win her trust. She had died in his service instead. *Kesh ka’vah, how do you curse Fate?* he wondered, staring at the water frothing under the galley’s oars. It was pointless to rail at the gods. But he wanted to.

The silence deepened around him. Alarion managed to choke down the painful knot in his throat and turned. “Why would Stoneshaker allow the death of Damon Pilot, his only mortal ally?”

Grays shrugged. “With our army outnumbered two to one, maybe he felt he didn’t need him anymore.”

Zenan twitched. Alarion turned toward him just as the ship quivered under them and surged forward. He staggered into Grays, who would have fallen if Zenan had not caught him.

“What in a—” Grays snapped, his lip bleeding from contact with Alarion’s shoulder. The rest was lost in a Tanistani hail from the prow that echoed and rebounded from other ships in turn. Oars begin to flash in quicker time as the long galleys started the traditional race for home.

Grays raised a shaking hand to wipe his mouth. “They might warn a man.”

Zenan twitted him gaily, jerking Alarion’s eyes up in amazement. “A Mreen caught off his guard? Perhaps you are getting a little long in the tooth, Sarjent.”

Grays wiped blood off on his sleeve and did not, as Alarion expected, give the Mosaini back a stiff courtesy, only a lazy grin. “Best watch yourself, lest I wear them down on you, my lord.”

Zenan laughed. Alarion looked from one to the other, wondering when they had arrived at truce, and how.

A sleek galley flying Sind’s silver and white banner pulled even with the flagship. Kevan Toyev laughed at them over the rail and brushed his elegant white sleeve as though flicking gutter trash off the fine wool. “My lord Rafe,” Grays yelled up at the bridge. “Won’t this barge go any faster?”

Rafe Corbinay, heir to the entire province of Tanistan, this galley, and half the other ships in Sevakand, flipped him a rude gesture. Alarion laughed as the triple banks of oars beat still faster, pulling them ahead of the Sindi ship. Then the King’s huge galley,

captained by a master with forty years on the river behind him, cut through the crowd and slipped ahead of the whole pack. Alarion watched the flawless rise and dip of the oars and could only shake his head in admiration.

Grays leaned close to Zenan and muttered, "Favor to Fate for a timely distraction. Why do *you* think Stoneshaker rid himself of Damon Pilot?"

Zenan turned his head. "Can you not guess? The ambitious have no friends—only more useful allies."

His gaze slid to Alarion smiling by the rail, alive and laughing instead of a ghost in Nemistak. Grays jerked upright in horror, staring at the royal banner whipping in the wind over the lead galley. What more useful ally could there be than a king indebted to a god who had saved his brother's life? With Alarion the unwitting bargaining chip...

Zenan sighed. "A life for a life. What could be simpler?"

Grays sagged against the rail, his face caught somewhere between horror and disbelief. Zenan looked at Alarion again and wanted to weep. He knew already that nothing would ever be simple again.

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They came into Yarom at dawn under a sky stacking purple clouds to infinity overhead. Signal mirrors on the border of Beldon had flashed victory weeks ago when the army first crossed out of Nemistak. As the King's ship touched the dock the Green Quarter erupted in wild cheering. Alarion, stepping out on deck to watch him disembark, saw thousands of people on the quays, bundled against the cold, pressing up to touch the ship or smiling and waving at the troops peering down at them. The crowd spotted him as his own ship nosed in beside Traven's, and abruptly the cheering changed to a great shout, a swelling explosion that bore his name.

Startled, he backed out of sight, and found Traven beside him at the top of the stair. He halted, nonplused. "How did you get aboard?"

Traven shrugged. "I see that the tale of your stand on the ridge made it home. I'm glad." He smiled. "And glad you're up and about to see them cheer you for it."

Alarion stiffened. *No thanks to you! Where were you all those weeks when I was flat on my back in agony and you didn't care enough to show up to see how I was?* But his tongue tied itself in a knot at sight of the deep lines in his brother's face. He had aged years since Vanok.

Traven looked up Ship Street toward the Citadel, lined its length with people. It looked like his coronation all over again, but they were still shouting the Haván's name. Alarion frowned. "They should be cheering you, not me. What did you put in the dispatches?"

"The truth," Traven said calmly. "You won that battle, not I."

"Oh, yes, I fought well flat on my back."

"Tell it to the *din'*. Any of them, from any House. They saw you hold the entire Crizani horde with four thousand men. Do you think they don't appreciate what they saw?"

Alarion fidgeted. "None of those four thousand retreated either."

“Because you didn’t. You are well?” The question came casually, his eyes still on the crowd.

Now you ask! “Well enough. Better when I get all my strength back.”

“You will.”

“Easy for you to say,” Alarion muttered. His chest still hurt and cold winds slid into his lungs like knives.

“I have it on good authority,” Traven said unsmilingly, and strode to the upper deck into plain view of the crowd. Alarion watched something bizarre flit through his expression as Yarom greeted its king. Regret? What had a king who had just wrought a fifty-year peace to regret?

Fresh horses from the Citadel waited on the quay for the Comman to disembark and form escort for the King. *Not that he needs one*, Alarion thought. *Any assassin foolish enough to try today wouldn’t live long enough to cast his weapon. Favor to Fate if it was all worthwhile. Michal, Hael, the Whites, all the rest. They gave us a victory even the peers will have to respect for a long, long time.*

The White Mreens were marshaling on the pier around an all-too-familiar litter. Alarion jerked upright. “Oh, no,” he muttered.

Zenan, just arriving at his elbow, jumped. “What?”

“I will not be carried into the Citadel. Tell Hae—Grays to have Sera brought around.”

“But—” Zenan bit it off at the look Alarion flashed him. “Of course, my prince.”

Grays, standing at the top of the gangway contemplating without joy the long march up Ship Street on his sore leg, gave him a disbelieving stare when he relayed the order, then looked past him at Alarion beside the rail. His mouth twisted.

“I’ve seen that look before.” He eyed Zenan. “Can you use that arm yet?”

“It works at least as well as your leg.”

“Where’s that nag of yours?”

“He should have been offloaded with the royal mounts.”

Grays swung away. “I’ll find him. Keep the Haván from killing himself in the meantime.” He limped down the gangway, leaving Zenan staring after him, surprised and vastly honored. Before Vanok, Grays would not have let him stand next to the Haván at the pisspots alone.

Alarion leaned against the rail watching the Comman forming up on the pier. Somehow they had managed to mend battered armor and campaign-ragged surcoats and salvage enough gold arrow pins from somewhere that every black turban had one set into the front at a rakish angle. They could have been parading on some lazy summer morning in the yard at the Citadel, not coming off a grueling campaign. Alarion’s eyes stung, watching them. Those elite ranks were thinner too, with scarcely three hundred still on their feet where five hundred had embarked from this dock two months ago. The peeresses would be mourning along with their humbler sisters this winter.

Zenan came up beside him. Alarion flicked a glance at his disapproving face and returned to watching Yarom. Another great roar shattered the morning as Traven came in sight, striding down the gangway below him. Grays appeared on the pier, leading Sera and Habb. The White Mreens caught sight of the Haván’s white mare and a wild cheer

rocked the docks, sending the winter birds screaming up from their warm nests on the walls. Alarion took his reins from Grays, stepped into the stirrup a Mreen held for him, and swung himself up.

Traven turned to look for the source of the noise, and straightened suddenly on the white stallion. His lips parted; for a moment Alarion saw—thought he saw—the old Tray leaning forward anxiously, ready to call him down for folly. Then he blinked and settled deeper into the saddle, nodded at Alarion and turned the stallion up the hill as the Comman fell in around him.

At last. I'm old enough to take my chances without lectures. But absurdly, Alarion missed the lecture.

He turned Sera to follow the stallion, trying to hide the sudden burning in his chest. Grays took one look at his stony face, swore, and rounded on Zenan. “Keep *close* to him, Anatel!” he said sharply, and then had to run to catch his squad as S’Vannion, the ranking officer in the White Mreens since S’Dav’s death, swung the Whites into a tight formation around Alarion and started them after the Comman.

Alarion squared his shoulders and tried to breathe shallowly. He would not crawl back into that litter with all of Yarom watching. Noise washed over him, echoing back from the water. Habb tried to rear, thinking himself back in battle again; Sera sidled and pranced, her ears swiveling nervously. Alarion glanced aside at Zenan.

“Home!” he shouted, grinning despite the pain.

They forged a slow way up Ship Street through the Green Gate where envious guards left behind from the campaign snapped to attention and yearned after their battered comrades marching past them up the hill. The crowds gave back willingly to the advancing horsemen, but there were so many people there was no room for them to retreat far. It was Traven’s coronation all over again except that Alarion’s name also tossed in echoes between the enclosing walls. He smiled and lifted a hand, watching his brother, who nodded and smiled but seemed distracted, barely acknowledging the affection pouring down on him. *Tray, what is wrong with you?*

Halfway up Ship Street a wild-eyed man in an artisan’s smock, overcome by enthusiasm, darted through the close files of Mreens, straining to touch Alarion’s knee. Sera shied. Alarion swayed in the saddle, reaching blindly for a hold on the tall curved pommel. Zenan wheeled Habb toward him, but Alarion dragged his head up as Grays’s squad tossed the errant artisan back into the crowd. Desperately he blinked away black fog and sat up straighter, twitching the reins away from an anxious Mreen. He turned his head and smiled at the crowd, hoping they could not see the falseness in it.

He could not see *them*. Shifting mist confused his sight and it was all he could do to keep his head up. Still, he was Aravoni; he could not show weakness. How many times had Veran told him that? He could almost hear his eldest brother’s voice laughing at him from wherever souls dwelled while awaiting their next lives. *You started it, Alya. Now finish it.*

It *was* folly. The mare’s nervous prancing pounded through him like hammers. Alarion could feel every beat of his heart like a knife thrust and he could not have brought himself to breathe at all if his body had not demanded it. Cold chills shivered

through him; nausea lurked at the base of his throat, and still the crowd screamed and capered and shouted his name.

“Street of Temples, my lord,” a voice shouted encouragement close beside him. Dizzily he looked down at a Mreen reaching for Sera’s bridle.

Something flashed on his right. Alarion turned his head toward the glittering pillar of the Thousandth God. There, grinning at him gleefully from his perch on the carved globe at the top, crouched the lord of chaos himself, his arms wrapped around drawn-up knees, his silver hair tumbling around a face like a prankish boy’s, handsome and ungovernable with eyes ten thousand years old.

Alarion blinked. The god held a dice cup in one hand. When he saw Alarion watching, he sat up and shook it meaningfully, his grin widening. Suddenly Seev appeared, death personified, an enormous skull-faced shadow draped in red looming behind the jester, his brooding gaze fixed on Alarion.

His breath caught. *I’m going mad.*

He blinked again, but the gods did not go away. Seev’s baleful glare cramped Alarion’s gut with its unblinking chill, a fanatic’s stare, obsessive with thwarted rage. Terror stole the very breath out of his lungs—and then he remembered the dead of Vanok. So many dead, and Seev had touched them all.

Alarion dragged his head up and touched Sera’s side with his heel. The mare danced and curvetted, and the crowd cheered him to the skies. The Thousandth God applauded. He flipped Seev a rude gesture; the red lord scowled and vanished. The jester laughed, tossed Alarion a rakish salute, and flung the dice from the cup. They rolled toward him, white Chance and black Destiny, spinning bigger and bigger in his fogged sight.

If they touch me I’ll go mad.

They reached him, and he knew that his mind had snapped, for they rolled over him, through him, with a touch like a moth’s wing and a sound like thunder, and vanished into the mist. The crowd had seen nothing; they still screamed in demented ecstasy, all but deafening him with his name.

The top of the pillar stood empty. Alarion tried to pull his wits together but could not think. His skin crawled from the touch of those ghostly dice as if the god had set some mark on him. So sick he could barely sit the mare, he only dimly knew they had crossed the bridge into the Citadel. The noise faded all at once to a different sort of cheering, quieter but still intense. He squinted at Traven dismounting at the foot of the Hall of Gods, surrounded by ghouls greeting him with genuine enthusiasm. Kesh ka’vah—the scheming courtiers of the Sevakandi court, *cheering?* That was a shock as great as the last. He swayed on Sera.

A hand tugged at his wrist. Alarion looked around into Zenan’s worried face and slid down Sera’s side. He caught himself from staggering with a hand twisted in the tasseled saddle blanket, leaning against the mare. Zenan dismounted beside him in a swirl of robes; Grays hovered at his elbow, sheltering him from the crowd.

Alarion let go of Sera’s saddle and took a careful step. Zenan reached to brace his elbow; Alarion shook him off. “Would you draw attention from the King?” It came out

through his teeth, for the pain was very bad now and he could feel something warm trickling down his chest: sweat or perhaps blood. “Give him this moment.”

“Alya, this is madness!” Fenn appeared out of the crowd, handing off his horse to a White Mreen.

“Tell him, my lord,” Grays growled, stepping past Alarion to clear a path.

Alarion ignored them both. Twenty steps and he could fall on his face in the royal ways unobserved.

Another step, edging toward haven as Traven reached the top of the stairs and paused between the pillars of the Hall of Gods. The crowd swirled to see better; Grays shoved urgently at a ghoul with his back turned carelessly to the Haván. The man turned. Indignation congealed to horror in his face as Alarion sidestepped hurriedly. The world tilted to the right. He threw out a hand to catch himself, and his chest seemed to tear apart, stopping his breath. He reeled into Zenan.

“Zevya, get me out of here,” Alarion gasped, his vision failing in a spark-shot black swirl. Hands clamped around his arms as the darkness came down.

The cheering changed to gasps and died into a plunging silence. On the steps Traven whirled, reaching for his sword. He froze for one appalled instant, then plunged back down the steps with S’Boris beside him, the pair of them shoving astounded ghouls out of the way.

Zenan, sinking to one knee with Alarion’s dead weight in his arms, looked up as the King’s shadow fell across him. Traven stooped to pull Alarion out of his hold; Zenan resisted. “Majest, he did not want to draw attention from you. Let me—”

“Too late. Give him to me, my lord.”

Reluctantly Zenan obeyed. Traven lifted Alarion as if he weighed nothing and turned toward the royal ways in a hush so deep a horse shifting an iron-shod hoof sounded like the clash of battle. Zenan stood up, knowing how Alarion was going to hate being carried out unconscious in front of the whole court, spoiling Traven’s triumph. But if they had planned the thing it could not have made a greater impression. The ghouls watched in silence as Traven carried his brother across the courtyard, their faces variously awed or respectful or astonished. Most even forgot to tilt their faces into the shadows, their crystal fans frozen mid-flutter.

Zenan’s throat tightened. This was the king they should see, the one he had glimpsed in Alarion’s tent the night he was wounded. Alarion’s stubborn loyalty should not be wasted—*would* not be wasted if Traven would only act like this more often.

The crowd gave ground as Traven strode up the steps. All save one. A black, shapeless bar of shadow speared across his path, flung by a priest of Stoneshaker standing like a mantling crow on the top step beside the door. Zenan caught his breath as Traven, startled, looked at the blackrobe, quickly down at Alarion, and slowly up again. His eyes locked with the Shakri’s for a breath of time measured in an eternity and a single heartbeat, and then Traven strode on through the shadow of Stoneshaker, his arms tightening convulsively around his brother.

“*Hadí!*” a low voice hissed. Startled, Zenan looked around at S’Boris watching the Shakri. Traven turned too; in that incautious instant his eyes met S’Boris’s—and surely

that was terror lurking behind the blue. S'Boris's lips parted as if someone had punched him in the gut. Zenan stiffened as the commander's gaze dropped to Alarion's ashen face. S'Boris's expression crumpled from rage to grief in the instant before Traven shouldered past him through the door and disappeared into the privacy of the royal ways.

Unexpectedly S'Boris shut the door in Grays's face and turned to face the gaping crowd. "Court will commence when the King is reassured as to the Haván's health," he said calmly, ignoring Grays's fury. "The gong will sound at that time."

Slowly the crowd scattered, buzzing with speculation that died to whispers as the ghouls remembered caution. The Young Lords looked shocked; Fenn Major, Rafe Corbinay, and Kevan Toyev had all been Alarion's friends since childhood. Fenn and Kevan had fought beside him on the ridge at Vanok. Abruptly Fenn strode away from them toward the signal heights, a place barred to staring ghouls. Zenan handed Habb's reins to a groom and turned aimlessly toward the ancient white Dome at the foot of the signal heights where he had been quartered since he first set foot in the Citadel. If even Grays was barred from the royal ways there was no hope of a Mosaini outsider getting in.

A hand touched his elbow. He turned angrily, expecting an inquisitive ghoul, but it was S'Boris. Zenan stilled surprise; the commander of the King's bodyguard should be with Alarion and the King. The Commanzik looked haunted and weary beyond measure. Zenan felt for him; this man had already watched one of his royal charges die.

"Come and have a drink while the Navri look at Alya," S'Boris said, and led him, not to the Comman barracks as Zenan had expected, but down the winding steps to the first ledge below the royal ways, where an all-but-deserted Hostage House squatted in silence unbroken by the laughter of the young men who had inhabited it for a dozen years. Sadly Zenan touched the cool stone of the doorway as he went through, thinking about the heirs to the eleven provinces who had lived here as hostages to peace in Sevakand. Onetree Walkingwolf of An-Utah was recovering from a smashed shoulder in his father's capital city of Davon; Donovar Ballymar was now Count of Nerin. Harv devLacey had returned to Francais to oversee his father's affairs, for it was clear the Baron would not recover from the fearsome wound he had taken at Vanok. Casmir Gregor of Kiel had been handed over to his angry, embarrassed father to punish as he saw fit for his refusal to answer the King's summons to war. Lukas Pilot languished in chains in the stony cells under the Citadel, answerable for his father's attempt to overthrow House Aravon. Michal Shea was dead. Hostage House had been shattered beyond recall, but it had achieved its purpose. The best of its sons had stood with House Aravon when their fathers faltered, and Sevakand would never be the same.

S'Boris led without hesitation to Fenn's rooms. He entered without more than a cursory knock, the brash assurance of long acquaintance. A *sev'* lounging beside a window moving a dust cloth by millimeters leaped up and made a great show of tidying before S'Boris jerked a thumb at the door. She slunk out, casting a heated glance at Zenan as she went by. He turned pointedly away but the gesture was lost on her, a would-be courtesan without the looks to further her ambitions. S'Boris rummaged in a

cupboard, shakily slopped spirits into a pair of crystal goblets, and handed one to Zenan before dropping into a chair with all the grace of a sack of flour.

Zenan watched him, sorting words. Unlike Alarion, who was close enough to this man to drop the hard-won “S” in front of his name that marked S’Boris as Commanzik, Zenan knew him only as Traven’s shadow. Finally he said, “Shouldn’t you be seeing to the Comman?”

S’Boris flapped a hand at nothing. “My second needs the practice. Gods... I’m tired.”

Zenan set his drink down untasted. “And afraid,” he guessed.

S’Boris looked away, his lean face full of pain. “Yes. That was a good thing Tray did just now. The court saw a man, not a mask. But it won’t last.”

“Alarion wanted to get away unseen and let him have the moment. Even the ghouls were cheering the King. Wasted now.”

“You haven’t been in Yarom long enough to know how fleeting a thing is real emotion in a ghoul. It disturbs the rhythm of their plotting.” Moodily the Commanzik stared into his glass. “If Alarion dies—”

“He won’t.” Zenan denied even the appalling thought. “He can’t.”

“That’s just it,” S’Boris said strangely. “He can’t.”

He looked up, his expression tormented. “And I think that is going to tear us all apart. Gods, *gods*, how could I wish him dead? I love him like a brother. But... he shouldn’t be alive.”

Zenan sat like stone, hardly even breathing. S’Boris stared sightlessly at the wall. “I saw the way you fought for him at Vanok,” he said after a moment, and Zenan knew then why he had sought out a near-stranger for this conversation. “All alone against that horde... I think maybe you’ve been caught in his spell like the rest of us.” He blinked and gave Zenan a crooked smile. “He caught me when he was two.”

“He is rare in the quality of his friendship,” Zenan admitted, unwilling to confess how effortlessly Alarion Aravon had captured his own loyalty.

“Yes,” S’Boris murmured, and bowed his head. “I would sooner fall on my sword than face this. If Tray has made some unholy bargain... Gods of war, I can’t, my lord. I can’t do it.”

The despair in his voice stirred alarm up Zenan’s nerves. “I don’t understand.”

Boris looked at him. “My oath is to the House.”

“The House...”

“The House, not the King. Trust Kane Major’s ancestor to design something so slippery.” His voice broke. “And so pitiless.”

Zenan dropped his gaze. The other man’s anguish filled the room like a storm breaking. King Veran had been his closest friend, murdered on his watch and in front of him; he was still Traven’s confidant, sword-partner, drinking companion and conscience. Zenan knew that Alarion had followed him like a puppy since the day they met. S’Boris could no more betray them than he could survive a leap into the three-hundred meter chasm below Fenn’s window—but he had sworn his oath to House Aravon. The *House*, not any individual, claimed his duty. If a royal son should run amok and challenge the King, it was his duty to cut him down. If the King proved unfit, then it

was his task to set him aside in favor of a more worthy Aravoni. If the Crizan had broken the Comman lines in the hollow and overwhelmed the King before he could reach his brother, it would have been his duty to abandon Alarion and save Traven. And if Alarion's life stood between the King and his duty to Sevakand...

"Tovarin," Zenan breathed, falling back on Alarion's way of bridging gaps in rank. "Friend" from the lips of that seventeen-year-old born diplomat had charmed even a prickly desert lord bred to suspect intrigue in every smile.

It worked its magic on S'Boris too. He gave Zenan a sad smile and drained his glass. "Never mind. When you're eighteen and flushed with winning entry challenge against three other candidates and they set that black turban on your head, the oath doesn't seem so fearsome, or the ramifications so tangled. Gods..." His voice trailed into a whisper. "I wish Verya was alive."

He stood up, one hand reaching reflexively to settle his black turban. Zenan hunted for words, finally just lifted his glass and drank to him. The gesture won a small smile. Boris set a hand on Zenan's shoulder.

"Don't leave him, my lord," he said. "If you love him, don't let him drive you away. He would, in a minute, if he saw a challenge to Tray. He has his duty. We have ours, eh?" His hand tightened like a vise on Zenan's shoulder. "Do what I cannot, tovarin. Keep—"

But the rest was treason. He whirled away. "I'll clear your path into the royal ways," he flung over his shoulder, and was gone, his footsteps fading swiftly on the polished boards of the corridor. Zenan sank into his chair, staring at the glass in his hand without seeing it.

The words S'Boris had not said hung like lurking lightning in the silence he left behind. *Keep him alive*. The commander of the Comman had just bidden Zenan to cross swords with him, if need be, to keep the boy they both loved from paying the price for Traven's bargain with Stoneshaker.

Zenan set the glass down, picturing the chaos if the peers caught wind of this. Civil war, anarchy, Ariel in turmoil over a god once more...

"No," he whispered, aghast.

He thrust himself to his feet and wandered out of Hostage House. The King's Gong sounded as he stepped out of the stair tower into the inner court. Around him ghouls started toward the Hall of Gods, flooding in with two months' worth of grievances to lay before Traven. Relieved, Zenan shouldered his way against the tide. A Commanzik at the entry to the royal ways flung open the door while he was still three steps clear, saluted him and turned to glare at a hopeful ghoul pressing up the steps on Zenan's heels.

"The ways are closed!" he barked.

The man retreated, his hooded glance marking Zenan for future currying. Zenan hurried through Alarion's audience hall and leaped up the stairs in time to find Grays limping through Alarion's door past two guards who affected not to see him. They held the door for Zenan and stood a little straighter in respect for the mad Mosaini who had defended the fallen Haván at Vanok. Zenan looked away from their admiration. He had not been the only one to fight for Alarion that day.

A green-robed Navri was just pulling the blanket up over Alarion's nakedness when he stepped through the inner door. The healer—not Kirian, who had worked on the Haván after Vanok—flung up a hand, his mouth pulling into a disapproving frown. Grays ignored him and bent over the bed, drawing the blanket back to hunt for blood on the thin bandages obscuring half of Alarion's chest. A Commanzik detailed to watch the priest set a hand on the man's shoulder when he tried to drag Grays away; the Navri subsided, huffily drawing his green robes closer.

"I will not be responsible for any damage all these... visitors... may do."

The Commanzik gave him a wooden glance. "Yes, you will. Of all the men in this room, you are the one I do not trust."

The Navri glared. The Commanzik turned his back on him and saluted Zenan. "My lord. The King had hoped you would come. He could not stay himself..." His voice trailed away into a regretful shrug for the duties of princes.

"How is he?" Grays demanded of the Navri, pulling him without either gentleness or tact into a corner.

The priest jerked free. "He was very foolish to ride, but I think that he did no lasting harm—"

"You think?" Grays's tone could have sharpened steel.

The healer matched his glare. "Say then that I know, as much as it is possible to know. The Haván tore some scar tissue but I came in time to prevent much blood loss. He is still weak and the jarring did him no good, but he will be well. *If he allows himself the time!*"

Grays clamped his jaw shut rather than agree with the priest. Zenan said, "If it is safe for you to leave him, Chosen, rest assured he will be well tended."

The Navri nodded stiffly and withdrew. The Commanzik retreated as far as the outer room. Grays dropped into a chair so gracelessly that Zenan guessed his leg had given out. "Anavar's favor is limited, it seems," he muttered.

Zenan settled gingerly on the edge of the bed, looking down at sleeping Alarion. "Perhaps the god finds it necessary to wrestle with Fate for the Haván's life."

Grays blew a long sigh. "It may be Stoneshaker is not so powerful as he would like us to believe. In which case..."

He reached to draw the blankets closer around Alarion. A slow shudder shook Zenan. *In which case Fate could still win. And it is certain that her hound Seev is still angry.*

He looked from the Commanzik to Grays, both of them prepared to die that Alarion might live, and thought despairingly that loyalty was not enough. Stoneshaker was their only hope. Stoneshaker, who had brought them to this.

He could almost hear the Thousandth God laughing.