

The Gods in Haven

Preview

Second Draft

(subject to significant change before launch)

Mark W White

Part One

Source of Laughter

Chapter 1 – Ringing in the New

A low note chimed, its tone as clear as a wooden bell. Its unfamiliarity was no great surprise on that morning of all mornings – everything would be new – but Chandra didn't want to be awake yet. Still, he blinked his eyes open.

He stretched, savouring an unexpected bonus of his new, more comfortable bed: his back wasn't aching for once. The nights surrounded by a throng of muttering novices in the dormitory were over. Now, it was just the three of them in a private room, all fresh history department graduates.

Even the natural dawn light filtering in through the shutters of a window on the outside of the Priory was a novelty. In the novice quarters, a week could pass without seeing daylight. And it was so quiet. It was no wonder he'd slept fitfully.

Going by the light outside, it wasn't worth going back to sleep. Before long, the matin bell would ring to summon them to their inaugural day as qualified graduates, the first step on the long road to becoming adept historians. That had been his goal since leaving his family home as a child. It would define his life for the next decade.

Chandra's love of history went all the way back to sitting on his mother's knee, hearing tales of life before the war. The old world had been fantastic, and his mother's way with words had turned it into magic. They'd only been fairy tales, of course, but the fascination remained.

Even the early years in the Priory hadn't fully quashed his enthusiasm, despite their focus on the practical evaluation of the past, and not, you know, actual history. That would come now he'd graduated. It had to, else what was the point?

Chandra waited for signs of life from Barnaby or Dajun before getting up, determined not to set off on the wrong foot with his roommates. He knew them well enough from their novice years, but their relationship would be closer now, whether they liked it or not. They had to make it work.

The chime echoed around the room again, clearer this time. That definitely wasn't the matin bell. For a start, it came from nearby.

Barnaby mumbled from beneath his blanket.

'Who rang that bloody bell? Some of us are trying to sleep.'

'Not me,' said Chandra. 'I blame Dajun.'

Dajun yawned.

'I didn't do it. Came from the bottom of my bed.'

'Well, see what it was then,' said Barnaby. 'And stop it.'

Dajun complied, pushing himself upright to see more clearly. The bell rang once more.

'That– that wasn't...'

He swung his legs out of bed and sat upright. The clear chime rang again.

'What's going on?' said Barnaby.

Dajun didn't reply, instead staring down at his legs for several seconds. He tilted his head, gently lifted one foot in the air, and wagged it. The bell rang.

'What the...'

Chandra and Barnaby stared at each other. Chandra broke first, rolling out of bed, intending to go over and take a closer look. He didn't get far. A lower-pitched chime came from his own feet. He stumbled to a halt. Barnaby was even less impressed.

'You two winding me up?'

'Shut up,' said Chandra. 'It's not all about you.'

He shook his foot. The same note rang out, followed shortly by Dajun's foot chiming again.

Barnaby had had enough.

'Right. Don't move a muscle. I'll see what's what.'

As soon as Barnaby stood, his foot chimed the lowest note of the three. He cursed and slumped back onto his bed, shaking his leg over and over, grumbling every time it rang. Barnaby showed no immediate sign of snapping out of his funk, so Chandra ignored him. He crossed the room and crouched beside Dajun.

'Shake it again. Let's work out exactly where it's coming from.'

Chandra lowered his ear near to Dajun's foot. The sound seemed to come from its rear, so he repositioned himself even closer.

'Again.'

He was confident of the sound's source after a couple more tries.

'It's coming from your heel. I bet we're all the same.'

Dajun had regained his composure. He grinned.

'You know what this means?'

Chandra smiled back at him. Everyone in the Priory knew to be on the lookout for signs of the unusual. If ringing feet didn't qualify, what did?

'A portent?'

'Must be,' said Dajun, almost bouncing with excitement. 'And we're at the centre of it. A new god! Today's gonna be fun!'

Barnaby wasn't so enthused.

'What? It can't be. Not on our first day. Someone's playing a prank.'

'And who would that be?' said Chandra. 'This needs an emerging god's power.'

Barnaby pursed his lips.

'Could be one of the other latter gods doing it.'

'You know it doesn't work like that,' said Chandra. 'Once they're out of the Source, they don't have access to its magic to do something this powerful. Latter gods are weak once they've emerged. This has got to be a sign that a new one's about to appear.'

Barnaby wasn't ready to admit he was wrong.

'Could be the Prior playing a trick on us. The elder gods had power like this. Might be some sort of newbie ritual.'

That was too much, even for Dajun.

'Don't be stupid. We owe the Prior everything. He's too important to waste his valuable time playing pranks. This can only be a harbinger of an emergent deity.'

Barnaby still wouldn't give up.

'Have you met the Prior? No. Well, you don't know him then. You can't trust what other people say.'

'Principal Sabela knows him,' said Dajun. 'According to her, the Prior's a serious man. God. We owe him everything.'

'Some people are so gullible,' said Barnaby.

'Better than being a cynic.'

It was going downhill on their first day. Chandra stepped in.

'This isn't achieving anything. Let's stop bickering and do something about it.'

Barnaby looked ready to explode, but at the last moment, his shoulders slumped.

'Look, all I'm saying is, let's not rush. We need to prove it to ourselves first. Don't want to make fools of ourselves on our first day.'

Now that the initial shock was lessening, Chandra viewed the portent as more an opportunity than an inconvenience. He just needed the others to agree.

'No, that's the wrong approach. We need to make the most of this. Our first responsibility is to report it to Principal Sabela and let her decide. This could be the only chance we'll ever have to be involved in an investigation.'

'And it's urgent,' said Dajun. 'If it is a new god, they've only got today to evaluate it. It'll be all hands to the pump.' He grinned again. 'C'mon. Shake a leg!'

Chandra joined in with a smirk, but Barnaby just glared back. Dajun tried to lighten his mood.

'Think about it. There's usually a party to welcome a new god into Haven. The streets will be full of stalls, music everywhere. They might even let us out of the Priory to join in. Can't wait!'

Chandra didn't believe that. He'd not left the Priory since he joined, but he couldn't begrudge Dajun a little excitement. If only Barnaby felt the same.

'Count me out,' said Barnaby. 'The only festival I went to was too bloody noisy. I'd rather die than get caught in the crowds.'

Chandra couldn't resist the chance to puncture Barnaby's bad mood.

'A fête worse than death, you mean?'

'Ha!' said Dajun. 'Did you just make a joke? That's unusual enough to be a portent in its own right.'

'Sorry,' said Chandra. 'Not sure where that came from.'

'Don't do it again,' said Barnaby. 'This isn't a laughing matter.'

For once, Barnaby was probably right. Despite Dajun's enthusiasm, one fact mattered more to Chandra than anything else.

'Think of it another way,' he said. 'This is our chance to make a name for ourselves. Getting noticed is the quickest way to get to the head of the line.'

'Oh, fine,' said Barnaby. 'Principal Sabela it is. Let's try not to make a noise.'

Dajun snorted a laugh.

'And how do we do that?'

'Shaddup.'

They dressed quickly in their tawny new robes. The early start meant the corridors were empty as they chimed their way towards the office of Principal Sabela, the head of the history department. The Priory overall was massive, built as it was to encapsulate the Source and surround it with all of human knowledge, but it took less than a minute to reach their destination.

'It's early,' said Barnaby. 'She won't be there yet.'

'Yes, she will,' said Dajun. 'She's always the first one up.'

Chandra wasn't sure why they were standing there discussing it when there was an easy way to find out. He knocked on the door.

'Come,' said a woman's voice.

Chandra opened the door without crossing the threshold. It wasn't the first time he'd seen the grey-haired woman behind the desk, decked out in her official black flannel suit. They'd been on the receiving end of Sabela's lectures plenty of times during novice training, but he'd never spoken to her directly before. She gently placed her pen on the desk and methodically moved a paperweight onto a stack of papers before looking up.

'Sorry to trouble you so early,' said Chandra, determined to take the lead. 'We believe we have identified a portent. We thought you should know as soon as possible.'

She raised one eyebrow, but her expression remained stern. At least her words were more encouraging.

'That was the correct course of action. Come in. Describe what you have seen.'

They jangled into the room.

'Not so much seen as heard,' said Chandra.

He shook his foot. The others joined him.

'It's coming from our heels. We woke up like it.'

Principal Sabela sighed.

'I suppose it is overdue. Are you all historians? I don't recognise you.'

'It's our first day,' said Chandra. 'I'm Chandra. This is Barnaby and Dajun.'

'Dajun? That name rings a bell.'

Dajun laughed. Principal Sabela's eyes narrowed.

'It was a turn of phrase, not a joke. I came across your name recently. Do you have important parents?'

'Not me,' said Dajun. 'Maybe it was because I graduated first?'

'Ah yes,' said Principal Sabela. 'That would be the context. You say this your first day?'

'It is.'

She sighed again.

'It's another piece of evidence in favour of an emergence. Powers leaking from the Source often gravitate towards a recent change around the Priory.'

That aligned with what they'd been taught as novices. The Prior had designed the Priory to maximise the chance of uncovering a new god's true nature before it appeared. He controlled the release of magical potential from the Source like steam from a pressure cooker.

Principal Sabela got to her feet.

'This leaves me little choice.'

She flipped up a cover concealing a switch on the wall next to her desk, then pressed it. Nothing obvious happened. The principal's weary expression was unchanged.

'I have summoned the Conclave. Come. We must be ready when they arrive.'

'You want us to attend?' said Dajun.

'Of course. As the initiator, I am expected to bring evidence of any new portent to the Conclave. You are that evidence.'

She headed for the door.

'Follow me. The Conclave will be held in the main history audience chamber.'

'Is there anything we should know before it starts?' said Chandra. 'I want to show our department in the best possible light.'

He was probably overdoing it, but it was better to be too keen than to do something stupid.

'Do nothing unless you are asked. Remain silent. This is a routine procedure, but some principals can be overexcitable. Do not encourage them.'

'We will do whatever is asked.'

Chandra had adopted the role of speaking for all of them, but as Barnaby was dumbstruck for once and Dajun slotted neatly into the overexcited category, there was little choice. It suited him fine.

It was only a short distance to the audience chamber. At least that part was familiar, having been there many times during their novice years for training sessions. They were the first to arrive.

'Stand in the centre of the stage,' said Principal Sabela. 'I will control proceedings from the lectern. This first meeting will be brief.'

Compared to attending a lecture there, it was a lot more nerve-wracking to be standing at the front, looking up at the banked tiers of desks in the chamber. Chandra tried not to imagine all those eyes staring down at their every move. There would be over thirty department heads in attendance. That would get them noticed.

Principal Sabela hadn't finished with the instructions.

'If you address me in this meeting, you must refer to me as History. We principals always call each other by our department names. You will follow suit.'

Chandra nodded. It was an avoidable faux pas as long as he didn't let himself relax. He lined up between Barnaby and Dajun on the stage as Principal Sabela moved away to her lectern.

The principals wandered in, some carrying their breakfast to eat at the desks while waiting for the Conclave to start. Unlike the drab outfits in the history department, the clothes worn by the other heads had much more variety. Some didn't look like uniforms at all. A couple were even wearing dressing gowns over their bedclothes. The air of informality was unexpected.

He knew how many departments existed, but seeing the number of heads as they filed in was a different matter. Now that he was formally part of it, the true scale of the Priory was

finally hitting home. The number of specialities was increasing too. If a department's knowledge grew significantly, and a natural split existed in their discipline, the Prior insisted they create separate, cooperating departments. Small and efficient was the Prior's mantra.

'Wow,' whispered Dajun. 'Isn't this something?'

Barnaby shrugged.

'It's the Priory. This is why it exists.'

For once, Barnaby had a point, although the Priory had two quite distinct roles. Their most critical – if irregular – task was to detect and quantify any new deity before it emerged from the Source in the heart of the building. The Prior would be its judge before the end of the day. It had been a decade since the last emergence.

Otherwise, the Priory's day-to-day role focused on recording all forms of human knowledge, whether recovered from ancient times or newly developed. So much had been lost since the war. It was their job to ensure it never happened again.

As the room filled, the mood in the Conclave continued to confound Chandra's expectations. Principal Sabela – History – remained stern throughout, showing little enthusiasm but remaining resolutely professional. The others were a mixed bag: several were eating or drinking; some had brought work with them, concentrating on reading or writing rather than the surrounding hubbub; a few looked bored; one was dozing. Conversely, others were sitting upright, looking even more eager than Dajun.

Finally, the Conclave was ready to start. History raised her hand and waited for the muttering to stop. It did, but only about half of them were paying attention.

'The moment is here again. The first potential portents of an emergent deity have manifested. It is up to us to investigate.'

She looked around the room and frowned.

'This is not a matter to be taken lightly. The Prior has set in place procedures to ensure that a catastrophic event like the war between the gods cannot happen again – but he cannot do it alone. We must play our part.'

That was the one piece of history that had been rammed home to them during training. The world had been a different place centuries earlier, with humanity numbering in the millions, spread across the whole continent. They lived in relative harmony with the deities that emerged as a natural consequence of the raw magical power swirling deep within the planet. Then everything changed.

A philosophical disagreement broke out among the elder gods over their relationship with humanity. It rapidly morphed from a minor debate into a polarising principle, creating a fundamental schism that led to a war of devastation. By the time it was over, only one god remained. Humanity was reduced to a few thousand souls living on a scorched world. The recovery was slow.

The lone surviving deity, the Prior, led the rebuilding process, founding the Priory as the focal point for future deity emergence. He gathered the remaining humans to live in Haven, the town that grew up around the Priory. Working together, they could ensure a stable future.

Sabela hadn't finished her admonishments to the other principals.

'For some of you, this is the first time you will have experienced the emergence of a new latter god, and you may think it doesn't matter. Your daily responsibilities are more important. If so, you are wrong. Deeply wrong. I'd go further than that: you are in the wrong job. Now, *you will pay attention.*'

Sabela had never been this scary in lectures. Chandra pushed his hand into his pocket to hide the fact that it was shaking – and he wasn't even the target of her ire.

He understood her anger though. The key to the post-war stability was based upon controlling the emergence of any new deities, known as the latter gods. The Prior designed the Source to limit their power. Once corporeal, the gods could forge a role in the Haven community to satisfy all sides – especially the Prior's.

The process wasn't perfect. If the emergent deity didn't meet the Prior's approval, he would dissipate it back into the depths of the Source. Its fate hinged upon an understanding of the god's personality and the role it expected to take in the world. The Conclave's job was to discover as much as possible before it emerged.

Sabela had released her anger. It had some effect, with more principals paying her a degree of attention now, but others were unfazed by the outburst. They'd probably been through it all before. Chandra couldn't help but feel disappointed in them.

'Very well,' said Sabela. 'Let us get down to specifics. What appears to be a portent has been inflicted upon these three fresh history graduates. Today was their first day. That qualifies them as a viable focus for any emergent powers. Our job is to evaluate the nature of these harbingers and to be on the lookout for more signs.'

She paused for breath and turned to face the three of them.

'As you will hear, they each have notes of a different pitch emanating from their heels, like the chimes of a bell. Gentlemen, if you would demonstrate.'

They shook their legs in turn. Coincidentally, they'd arranged themselves in a line of increasing pitch. Their notes echoed around the room.

A woman wearing an informal floral dress with a shawl draped over her shoulders raised her hand. She was one of the younger principals in the room, probably in her early forties, and was staring at them in fascination.

'Yes, Music?' said History.

'That struck a chord,' said Music. 'Can I hear it again please?'

They obliged. Music's face lit up.

'May I approach the stage? It would be easiest to show you.'

'Go ahead,' said History.

Music bounced from her seat and hurried to the front. She stood a couple of metres before them and gave them a reassuring smile. Chandra's hand stopped shaking.

'Humour me,' she said. 'When I point at you, ring your bell as fast as possible. You'll need to do it several times. The timing is crucial.'

Chandra wasn't sure where she was going with it, but he'd volunteered to do anything to help. That didn't stop it from feeling demeaning in front of the crowd when, after only a few notes, he realised she was making them play a tune. The melody was annoyingly familiar too. He couldn't put his finger on it.

History interjected.

'Please refrain from using my staff to hold a concert. I assume there is a point to this?'

Music grinned.

'I wanted to be sure. That's the official Priory March. It only uses three notes: B flat, C, and D. It can't be a coincidence that those notes were chosen.'

Chandra immediately spotted a detail they'd likely miss. This was his chance. He raised his hand and waited for permission to speak, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

'My apologies, but did you say the notes were B, C, and D?'

'B flat,' said Music. 'But otherwise, yes.'

'Those are our initials: Barnaby, Chandra, and Dajun. It's another coincidence.'

'Indeed,' said History. 'Such coincidences increase the likelihood this is indeed a portent.'

A man in the front row with a wild mop of black hair streaked with grey and wearing a shabby suit raised his hand. He'd just filled his mouth with a spoonful of cereal.

'What is it, Language?' said History.

He took his time to chew his mouthful, then swallowed. His frown was a precursor to a gruff response.

'I disagree. It's a random magic burst from the Source.'

'How do you know that?'

'Know?' said Language. 'I don't. I'm merely giving you my humble opinion, but on balance, I'd say it's just as likely an occurrence, maybe more.'

'I wouldn't say it's as likely,' said History. 'This is already a complex interaction of events.'

'Irrelevant,' said Language. 'A localised strike can weave nearby coincidences into a coherent narrative. Magic likes to tell stories. As do I. You need more than this.'

A frowning man sitting beside him in a dressing gown and wearing large spectacles raised one hand without looking up. He was scribbling notes on a pad.

History exhaled a sigh.

'Yes, Literature?'

Literature paused writing, although kept his gaze on his notepad as he replied.

'Language is correct. It's not enough. As you know, puzzles are my thing, and if I'd written this into a cryptic clue, I'd have rejected it. It's unsatisfactory.'

'Why?'

'Too much is unexplained. Like, what does it mean? What is a chiming foot supposed to signify? Why the choice of tune? How—'

'I get it,' interrupted History. 'Thank you for your attention.'

She took a deep breath.

'Very well. I don't agree with their scepticism, but we should keep an open mind. Let's start by investigating these three harbingers as a priority, while keeping a close watch for any further signs of an emergence.'

Music took advantage of her position at the front to get in first.

'Can I take one back to the music department? Study the quality of the note.'

'Will that be useful?' said History.

'Who knows? Its purity may be instructive. Won't take me long. You can have him straight back.'

'Very well.'

Music looked at the three of them in turn, her gaze settling on Chandra.

'I'll take the C, if that's okay?'

Chandra's short-term fate was sealed. He'd been reduced to a note.

Sabela made the other assignments.

'Health, you take Barnaby. Give him a full medical, see if there are any other unusual symptoms. Science, Dajun's yours to investigate as you wish. Call on other disciplines as necessary. Are we agreed?'

Nobody complained.

'Excellent. Please inform me of your results at the earliest opportunity. Ditto with any fresh portents. Barnaby, Chandra, Dajun, see me for reassignment once you are free.'

It was going to be a busy day for them all. Chandra had got off lightly so far, but that could change.

History had one last question before closing the Conclave.

'Liaison, what's the mood like around Haven? The needs of the people often play a role in shaping a new god. It might give us a clue on how to interpret the portents.'

A stubbly middle-aged man halfway back stood up, dressed in a casual T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He could have just wandered in off the street. He yawned before replying.

'If you'd looked outside, you'd have known it's been a rough winter. The mood's improving with the first signs of spring, but it's a struggle.' He shrugged. 'They could do with something to cheer them up, especially around tithe time. Give them hope for the future. That sort of thing.'

'We can bear that in mind when we have more portents. Something will fit.'

'I can only hope this latter god is more useful,' said Liaison. 'That god of poetry we got last time was a waste of space. Tried feeding your kids with a limerick?'

'Point taken,' said History. 'Right. No point in wasting more time here. Let's get to it.'

With that, the Conclave was over. History had handled it with scary efficiency, told everyone what was happening, and had organised the first steps. That was all that mattered. If only everyone had been more interested.

The whole thing wasn't what Chandra had expected, but there was no time to work out how he felt about it. Music was standing there, waiting patiently for him. Except, it wasn't Chandra she was interested in. He was nothing more than a note to be investigated.

Chapter 2 – Poetry in Motion

Anjuna, Chandra's sister, lived in the surrounding town of Haven. The night before Chandra chimed, she'd just returned from a long, sweaty day's work at Haven's largest bakery, the biggest benefit of which was the guarantee of bringing home a loaf of bread to pad out the evening meal. Not everyone had that luxury, particularly over the recent harsh winter. It still hadn't been enough to save her mother.

Maybe nothing could have stopped the disease that ate her away, but a healthier diet would have given her strength. It was galling to know that everyone on the other side of the Priory wall lacked nothing – including her brother. Yet, he'd not even bothered to leave its sanctuary to attend his own mother's funeral. She was done with him. He wasn't worth the effort.

To make things worse, Anjuna didn't know how to speak to her father anymore. Less than a week after burying her mother, his perpetually calm demeanour was hard to take, accepting everything without complaint. In contrast, Anjuna's heartbreak was raw.

She shook her head and stood up, as much to clear her mind as anything. Her mother would have wanted her to make more of an effort to understand her father, and the key to that was the Maven and her Church of Serenity. Its teachings had helped her mother through her illness. Now, her father used the Book of Serenity as his crutch. Anjuna preferred a bandage of anger.

He was always drilling the Maven's credo into her: live in the moment; don't dwell on the past; don't worry about the future. What will be, will be. It held no interest for her, but there was one thing the Maven had got right. It was better to get on with life rather than waste time reliving old grievances.

Right now, getting on with life meant that it was her turn to make dinner. She crossed to the shabby kitchen area of their small living space and opened a cupboard door. It was as empty as when she'd left for work. She turned back to her father, who was sitting on the other side of the room, head down, scratching his grizzly beard while reading the Book of Serenity.

'You did remember to go to the market?'

Her father, Manish, looked up and blinked several times before breaking out a sheepish smile.

'Ah, sorry,' he said. 'I was busy helping to prepare for tonight's service. The Maven is coming in person, you know? I wanted to make sure everything was perfect.'

'Other than having nothing to eat?'

'Don't worry about me. They're putting on snacks after the service to celebrate the Maven staying in Fenestral for the next month. That'll be more than enough to keep me going.'

Anjuna took a deep breath.

'And what about me?'

'You should come. You know how much the Maven meant to your mother. I'm hoping she will pay tribute to her tonight. It would mean the world to me.'

The Maven, the god of contemplation, had founded the Church of Serenity shortly after she'd emerged from the heart of the Priory. She said it was her way of trying to help the community through difficult times, giving moral support and guidance to ease their daily lives. Its following was small, but growing. It now had premises in all eight sectors of Haven, including the southern Fenestral enclave where they lived.

'We've talked about it before,' said Anjuna. 'You know that your church isn't for me. Look, I'm glad it helped Mum, but I won't be hypocritical and go just to get food.'

Her father deployed the bland, accepting smile that annoyed her so much. It was his default expression these days, as if her mother's death had been forgotten.

'What will you eat then?' he said.

'Bread, by the look of things.' She looked in the cupboard. 'There's not even any butter. Damn y—'

She bit off her curse. It wouldn't do any good to lash out at him. She had to get out of there.

'I'm going to the market. There must be something there still.'

'Sorry,' he said. 'Good luck. I'll probably be out by the time you get back.'

Anjuna latched the door carefully as she left, imagining slamming it hard to make herself feel better. As much as she wanted to remain angry with her father, she couldn't. He was who he was – and he wasn't the cause of all the problems around Haven.

Anjuna stopped outside the door, took several deep breaths, and closed her eyes. Only once she felt ready did she set off in the direction of the market.

Her journey was meandering at first, wending its way through Fenestral's back streets until it crossed the main thoroughfare that led from the Priory to the gates in the outer wall. Every sector had a single entrance into the Priory and exit to the world beyond Haven's outer wall, but Fenestral's was unique. It was why Anjuna was glad to live there, despite everything. It made the place feel special.

The outer gates of all sectors gave access to the surrounding fields – except Fenestral's led further. Beyond its fields was a natural gap in the crater wall, the simplest way to access the desolate wilderness beyond. She'd only ever seen the opening on a school trip, but the sight of Priory survey teams heading out to hunt down historical artefacts that had survived the war was a regular occurrence.

Day-to-day, it was easy to forget that Haven sat inside a massive crater formed during the war, but Anjuna knew better. Although large enough to support limited agriculture within its bounds, it barely provided enough food to support its population – but it was all they had. The wilderness beyond meant population growth was impossible – particularly with the Priory leeching the cream off the top.

Anjuna tried to ignore the Priory as much as possible. It sickened her. She crossed the thoroughfare without even glancing at it. Only a short distance on the other side, the walkway opened onto a large square permanently covered in market stalls. Most were empty, having closed for the night. All that remained was a lingering smell of bread and spices.

She slowed her pace, briefly unsure what to do. Most of her normal ports of call were bare, but then she caught sight of one guy she knew. He was in the middle of shutting up shop. She picked up her pace and jogged across.

'Hi Bruce. Got any pies left?'

The man looked up from behind the rickety wooden stall, where he'd been packing a cardboard box. He covered his eyes to shield the low sun shining under the awning.

'Oh, hi Anj. No, sorry. Just about sold out of everything.'

'Damn,' said Anjuna. 'Nothing, you know, under the table?'

The stalls were supposed to sell stuff only from official sources, but there was a thriving black market that topped things up. The authorities turned a blind eye – as long as it wasn't exploitative – otherwise the place would fall apart.

Bruce looked into his box. He lifted a square of cardboard from its base.

'Got some jam. Half a lardy cake. That's about it.'

'What flavour jam?'

'Bit of everything. Just whatever berries were around at the time.'

Anjuna sighed.

'Guess I have no choice. I'll take both, thanks.'

'No problem. Just pay for the jam. Have the cake on me. Thought it was going to waste.'

'Cheers,' said Anjuna. 'Sounds like a busy day? You're not usually this sold out.'

'Yeah,' said Bruce. 'One of those days where everything comes at once. Had a bulk order from the church for tonight, and that was just the start.'

Of course it would be the church. It interfered with her life whichever way she looked.

'Typical. Anyone else I can blame?'

'Just the usual. Collection day for the Priory tithe. Always leaves everyone short for the day.'

'Bastards,' said Anjuna. 'Can't they let up for a bit? There's hardly enough to go around as it is.'

Bruce shrugged.

'It's the way it is. The Priory is why we're here. No point complaining.'

Anjuna was about to remonstrate, but Bruce's gaze had wandered. He was looking over her shoulder with one eyebrow raised.

'Interesting,' he said. 'Not seen that one around here before.'

She looked back. Two individuals walking down the aisle between stalls had grabbed his attention. The young black man, barely out of his teens and struggling with an obviously heavy bag, was nothing out of the ordinary. The pale white woman with him was another matter. She towered over him, her elegant posture accentuating her height. Her immaculate complexion was pale, with the merest hint of rouge in her cheeks, and long dark curls cascading languidly down her back. The woman was impressive.

No, not just a woman. She was a god. Nobody could be that perfect.

As they closed, Anjuna pulled herself upright. Her back cracked, helping to release the tension, but a spasm in her neck after the day at work was the last straw. This was all the

Prior's fault, prioritising his precious Priory above everything – but the Prior wasn't here. This god was.

Here she came, swanning through the market oblivious to the hardship all around. Anjuna clenched and released her fists, mimicking the familiar rhythm of kneading bread, hoping it would help her control her ire. It didn't. She took two strides forward and blocked the god's path.

'Does the Prior know what it's like out here? People are starving. He can't keep taking the tithe to feed his elite while we're suffering. Tell him. Please.'

Her anger had carried her most of the way through, but it petered out towards the end, ending in a pathetic plea. Reality kicked in. She was attacking a god of unknown ability. She might be about to find out what the god could do.

Whatever Anjuna had expected, it wasn't the god blushing and staring down at her feet. The young man answered for her, jutting out his chin in a show of unconvincing defiance. He didn't look old enough to shave.

'Move aside,' he said. 'We– we haven't–'

The god recovered and interrupted him by resting one hand on his arm, accompanied by a gentle smile.

'It's okay, Alton. We've come here to help. We may as well start now.'

The god's captivating blue eyes drifted back to Anjuna, holding her gaze for several seconds. It was disconcerting. Her expression wasn't hostile – if anything, there was a warmth there that bordered on pity. Anjuna wasn't in the mood to be patronised, but she waited for the god to continue.

'Your anger seems genuine,' she said eventually. 'It stems from a good place – your concern is for everyone. It's written on your face.'

That was all very nice, but it hadn't addressed Anjuna's plea.

'Does the Prior understand what it's like? Or care?'

'I do not know. I have no way to learn. Once I left the Priory, I couldn't return.'

'What?' said Anjuna.

Alton's tone was bitter.

'The Prior's no friend of ours. He couldn't give a damn once Laury left the Priory. I...'

His nerve seemed to fail. The god took pity and tried to explain.

'Latter gods are limited. We have to stand alone. We have no contact with the Prior, sitting on his throne.'

Anjuna blinked as the god's odd reply sank in. She was disconcerting. Even her name – Laury – was unusually informal for a latter god.

'So you can't do anything?'

Laury's reply was hesitant, as if disappointing herself as much as Anjuna.

'I will find a way. Although the road is unclear, I intend to make amends. That is why I'm here.'

Alton had taken the break to work out what to say. For the first time, his voice was firm.

'Don't judge Laury without knowing anything about her. She's been good to me, and– and I'm not the only one. Ask anyone back in Dawn. Now we've moved, it'll be the same here.'

He was clearly sincere; whether he was deluded was another matter. It was interesting though. Dawn was the eastern sector of Haven, on the other side of Esper from Fenestral, so it wasn't a move they'd have undertaken lightly. There must be a purpose to it.

'Okay,' said Anjuna. 'I'm happy for you to change my mind. What are you going to do then?'

'I hope to work with locals,' said Laury. 'Form an alliance. Perhaps you will join us? Channel your defiance.'

Laury's voice was warm and soft, but the sing-song of her speech was off-putting. Anjuna was instantly suspicious.

'You're not going to form another damned church, are you?'

'Nothing remotely like that,' said Laury. 'The church works for the Maven, but that's really not my style. Me, I'd rather make a better Haven.'

Before Anjuna could work out what to say next, Alton pulled a leaflet from his bag and shoved it towards her.

'Read this. Come if you like, but for now, let us pass. We've got work to do.'

Anjuna glanced at the writing on the leaflet. The headline said *Helping Haven*. Beneath it were the time and location of the meeting at an address near the Priory wall. It was signed by *The Laureate*. So that was what Laury was short for.

Unsure what to say, Anjuna took a step back. The Laureate smiled.

'I hope to see you there.'

Alton nodded, and they both set off. Anjuna felt the need to say something before they were out of earshot.

'Welcome to Fenestral.'

It seemed the neighbourly thing to do. As they turned a corner and went out of eyesight, she looked back at Bruce. He'd finished packing his stuff away and was standing behind his stall, grinning at her.

'You've got some balls,' he said.

'It's been a bad day.'

It had been, but meeting a god was an interesting way to finish it. All she had to do now was decide what to do about it.

Chapter 3 – Harbinger of Whom?

The Conclave was over; the principals were all filing out. They'd proven to be an unexpectedly motley bunch. It had been his first exposure to the other principals, and he still wasn't sure what to make of them, but he couldn't worry about that yet. He had a new assignment – and another chance to shine.

He left Barnaby and Dajun to their own devices and approached the head of the music department.

'Chandra, wasn't it?' said Music, giving Chandra an unexpected warm smile.

'That's me,' said Chandra. 'I'm ready to serve.'

She chuckled.

'Relax. We're not all fuddy-duddies like History. Some of us choose to have fun while doing our jobs.'

'I– I see.'

Music was in a chatty mood as she led Chandra out of the room.

'I bet the Conclave was nothing like you expected.'

'It was certainly informal,' said Chandra. He felt he ought to say more. She'd wanted him to relax. 'I was surprised at how little some paid attention.'

'Not me,' said Music. 'I live for these days, but I understand why others are jaded. No matter who calls the Conclave, History always manages to make herself the centre of attention.'

'I– I see.'

Music chuckled.

'Sorry. If this is your first day, you've probably not heard anyone be rude about your boss. Don't take it to heart. We don't have to like each other. It takes all sorts of characters to make this place work.'

The question came out of his mouth before his brain thought through the consequences.

'You don't like her then?'

Her laugh was more clipped this time.

'You could say we have a long history. Now, shall we change the subject? I don't want to disillusion you on your first day.'

'Sorry,' said Chandra. 'Didn't mean to pry. Not my place.'

'Oh, I'm not upset. It's nice to have a chat with someone new. I've never been a believer in rigid hierarchies like you have in the history department, so ask away. Let me expand your education beyond the corridors of history.'

Chandra's mouth felt dry. Music sounded genuine, but it would be a risk to be too open. Then again, he wanted to make an impression. He had to ask something relevant.

'Is Principal Sabela that unpopular? There were a lot of principals doing their own thing.'

'Don't make the same mistake as Sabela and assume that they weren't taking it seriously just because they weren't staring at her. The first get-together is always at a superficial level. You can listen without looking. If you don't think you're going to contribute, you may as well keep busy.'

'That's why they bought their work with them?'

'Exactly,' said Music. 'You can still participate and keep busy. Look at Literature. He spoke up to support Language even though he was working on his puzzles.'

Literature had mentioned cryptic clues during the Conclave.

'Crossword puzzles?'

'Usually. It's his hobby. Sends them to us once a week for fun. Well, to some of us. The cool ones. Not History, of course.'

There was another dig at Sabela. If a novice disrespected her like that, they'd be kicked out back to Haven without a second thought. He'd seen it happen. As easy as it was to relax around Music, he couldn't get used to thinking that way.

They'd reached the double doors at the exit from the history department. His every stride was punctuated by a chime.

'That must be distracting,' said Music.

'A little,' said Chandra. 'Getting used to it now. I'll probably miss it when it's gone.'

Portents faded away once the god emerged, or if it was a magical burst, after a few days. He wouldn't be an exception. Hopefully.

They left the history department and headed towards music. Something had changed. Confused, Chandra stumbled to a halt and shook his leg.

'It's stopped.'

'Well, well,' said Music. 'Did you notice exactly when?'

'Must have been when we came through the doors. Around then, anyway.'

'Go back through. See if it starts again.'

It did. One step back inside history, the chime rang again. Moving outside, it stopped.

'That's going to complicate matters,' said Music.

She walked back inside to join him. As she stepped through the doors, she tripped and fell to her knees.

'Ow. What was that? It felt like someone kicked me in the shin.'

Chandra held out a hand to help her up.

'Can't be a coincidence that something happened to both of us crossing the threshold.'

'Guess I have to try again,' said Music. 'Prove it, one way or another.'

She went through the door and turned to face him. Chandra had to admire the way she took a large stride back inside. He'd have used small, tentative steps. In retrospect, she'd probably agree. Music yelped in pain and fell to the floor, claspings her shin.

'Shit. Not doing that again.'

'Think you've proved it well enough,' said Chandra.

'Yeah,' said Music. 'Interesting that it only happens on the way back in, not going out.'

'Just like my bells only work inside. Must mean something.'

Music straightened herself up.

'Right. Let's see what happens when we reach the music department. Might be the same there. Worst case, I'll have to bring my kit back here to measure your bell tone.'

'No problem,' said Chandra. 'Are you okay to walk?'

'I'm fine,' said Music. Her grin returned. 'Let's shake a leg.'

Chandra laughed politely. Being friendly towards another department head felt like an investment in his future.

'Dajun made the same joke earlier. Seems all the rage.'

'Pull the other one,' said Music. 'It's got bells on.'

Chandra's laugh was genuine this time. Relaxing around her felt surprisingly natural. He leaned into it.

'Okay, you win. That was a good one.'

To his surprise, he was enjoying Music's company. Perhaps he'd received a better assignment than his roommates, although in the long term, it'd make little difference to his role in the history department.

'Time for the next test,' said Music. 'Hold on. I'll go first.'

She took a couple of small steps through the door. Nothing happened.

'My turn then,' said Chandra.

He crossed the threshold into the music department and shook his leg. It was silent.

'There goes that theory,' said Music. 'Right. I'll gather my stuff, then we'll have to head back to history. Come. You can help me carry it.'

They entered a room whose purpose Chandra couldn't immediately determine. On the left were two rows of sloped wooden desks. To the right was a raised platform with trestle chairs arranged as if for musical performers. On the far wall was a bench strewn with what, to Chandra's eyes, looked like junk: the disembodied neck of a violin, a bent tuning fork, an ancient meter of some kind, a drum with no skin, and that was just the start. Music headed there.

She pulled a couple of cardboard boxes out from beneath it and searched for stuff to fill them. Chandra waited patiently in the middle of the room until he was of use. That was when things got weird.

Faint music wafted from the platform beside him, although its source wasn't obvious. Multiple high-pitched voices sang over each other, half of which were off-key. The effect was jarring.

Music had heard it too. She frowned, headed towards the dais, and cocked her head.

'It's the bloody Priory March again, but faster. I can make out at least two versions over the top of each other. Off pitch. But where's it coming from? It... What?'

Chandra followed her gaze to the floor. He didn't spot what she was looking at for a moment, but when he did, he could take his eyes off it. Two rows of about a dozen ants were marching towards each other from opposite sides. The sound came from their direction. It was hard to accept what he was seeing.

'Are— are those ants singing?' said Chandra.

'Well, they're making a noise, certainly. Can't hold a tune. It's horrible.'

It was an odd thing to focus on, but she was right. The jarring, high-pitched melody set his teeth on edge as the two files of ants stopped to form parallel lines facing each other.

Chandra stared at them for several seconds, entranced. Music fell silent too. Everything was too bizarre, verging on the comical, but it was only one more oddity added to the day's list.

'Another portent?'

'Must be,' said Music.

'Of what though?'

Music's confused expression brightened.

'It's another musical portent. We've not got a god of music yet. About time one emerged. This could be it.'

Chandra was more worried about something closer to home.

'I've been present at all the portents. Does that mean something? Maybe the magic left my feet when they stopped ringing and went to these ants.'

'Perhaps. No idea if it works like that, but—'

She stopped as the volume rose. The two rows of ants charged each other. They clashed, frantically waving their antennae, and locked in leg-to-leg combat. The singing didn't stop, but got harsher.

'I have a feeling I'm missing something,' said Music. 'I'm—'

She halted again when another melody emerged, soaring majestically above the off-pitch march. The single, slightly muffled voice came from the desks on the other side of the room, accompanied by strumming on a stringed instrument.

'What now?' said Music, tearing her eyes from the ants. 'That's more like a young boy's voice. A treble. An acoustic guitar too. It's... beautiful.'

Compared to the ants, it certainly was. They crossed to the desks and tried to work out where it was coming from, starting from opposite ends. Chandra found it first.

'It's in this desk.'

Music bent down and put her ear next to the old-fashioned sloped desk. It had a hinged top. The voice and guitar strumming came from inside.

'You're right. I guess that rules out being a boy. What do you reckon?'

'I'm not going to try to guess. Can't be stranger than singing ants.'

'Let's take a look.'

Music tentatively opened the desk lid to reveal a stack of sheet music. Sitting in the middle of the top sheet was a single ant, about twice the size of the others. It stood on its rear legs, with a tiny guitar played by its central pair. It looked up at them quizzically, then stretched its front legs and opened its mouth wide. The beautiful melody soared in volume.

Music chuckled. Chandra couldn't help but join in. It was all too bizarre to take seriously.

'Maybe it can get stranger,' said Chandra.

Music gently closed the lid.

'Can't think straight looking at that. All I could imagine was a tiny god of music stringing that ant's guitar.'

'Another musical portent though,' said Chandra. 'You could be right.'

'Hope so,' said Music. 'Guess it means this ant infestation needs to be my top priority for now. Suggest you return and tell History what we've seen here. I'll send a more detailed report when I have it.'

'Of course,' said Chandra. 'Shall I come back afterwards?'

'Not much point. I'll need to study you in your department anyway. I'll come and grab you if I get the chance, but I reckon I've got my hands full here. If History's got a better use for you, tell her to go ahead.'

'Sure.'

Music gave him a parting grin.

'Whatever happens, make sure you have fun! Quite a first day for you.'

'Tell me about it.'

Chandra hurried back along the corridor, trying to make sense of his feelings. No matter how weird everything was, it was thrilling to be involved in something so monumental, but that wasn't the biggest realisation. The world outside the history department was so different, especially Music herself, who confounded every expectation of how a principal should act. She was easy to like.

He slowed when he was about to pass the science department. That was where Dajun had gone. If he could deliver History an even bigger update in one go, it would make a good impression. They might have discovered something already.

Chandra entered science. For a moment, he wasn't sure where to go, but then the clear chime of a bell rang from a door to the right. That meant Dajun's heel was still chiming outside of the history department. Annoying.

No matter. He knocked on the open door of a small laboratory. Inside, Dajun was sitting on a chair, his top half naked, staring ahead at the wall opposite. Science stood next to him. Other members of his department were at the back of the room, working on their own tasks.

Dajun's voice cracked as he spoke to Science.

'What– what did you do? You can't leave me like this.'

Several wires were attached to his chest with sticky tape. Science was standing beside him, holding a syringe of blood, presumably Dajun's. A plaster on Dajun's arm confirmed this. Science was frowning, shaking his head slowly. Neither had noticed him.

Chandra coughed for effect.

'Sorry to disturb you. I was just passing. Is there a problem?'

Science didn't seem to hear him, lost in his own thoughts. Dajun did though, and turned towards him, although his eyes focused off to the left.

'Chandra? Is that you?'

'Yeah. What's up?'

'I can't see,' said Dajun. 'They put this stuff on me. As soon as he took my blood, everything went dark.'

Science pulled himself together enough to jabber a response.

'I– I don't know what's going on. It wasn't me. Can't have been. This is routine. I...'

They were both clearly distraught. Chandra had to be the voice of calm. At least he could make a good guess at what was happening.

'It'll be another portent. There's been one in music too. Strange stuff is happening everywhere. Don't worry, Dajun. It'll wear off.'

He couldn't be totally sure, but from his limited exposure so far, it seemed likely. While others were panicking, it was better to sound like an expert. Maybe he was now.

Science grunted.

'Stupid. I should've realised. Of course it is. It's not like I haven't been through this before, but every time has its surprises. Sorry, lad. Your friend is right. It'll wear off. Don't worry.'

Dajun wasn't immediately convinced.

'That's easy for you to say. You can't be sure.'

Science seemed at a loss, so Chandra crossed and put his hand on Dajun's arm.

'I'm sure it is. Things were weird in the music department. There were singing, fighting ants. One was playing a guitar. You should've seen it.'

Chandra realised what he'd said too late.

'Shit, sorry. I didn't mean...'

'Idiot,' said Dajun. He laughed briefly. 'Guess I've no choice but to wait.'

'Afraid so,' said Chandra. 'Should be over by the end of the day.'

Dajun leant back in the chair and closed his eyes. When he spoke after a few seconds, his voice was calmer, more matter-of-fact.

'My uncle is blind. Guess today will help me appreciate his life better. I certainly won't take my eyesight for granted again.'

Dajun had a way of surprising Chandra. He'd already regained his equilibrium. His influence spread to Science.

'Good lad. I've already got enough data to analyse for now. You should get yourself checked out by the health department to see if they can help in the meantime.'

'That's on my way back,' said Chandra. 'Shall I take him there?'

Science nodded. He looked relieved. He was probably glad to have the problem taken away.

That was another new portent to report to History. It didn't fit with Music's hope of a god of music, but he couldn't let that worry him. It wasn't his job to decipher the clues. He was just a messenger out to make a name for himself.

Chandra waited for Science to remove all the wires, then helped Dajun dress. Being clothed again seemed to complete Dajun's recovery from the shock.

'Ready?' said Chandra.

Dajun rose to his feet.

'Let's do this. Just don't rush. I haven't learned to use my bells for echolocation yet.'

Chandra wasn't sure whether to laugh or sympathise. Instead, he ignored it.

'Here, take my arm.'

They left science and walked arm-in-arm towards the health department, one bell sounding every step.

'Hey, you're not ringing,' said Dajun.

'Mine only works inside the history department,' said Chandra. 'It'll start again once I get back. Odd, but think I got off lightly compared to you.'

'You always were a lucky bastard,' said Dajun. 'Still, I'll have more to look back and laugh about tomorrow than you.'

'That's the spirit. I wonder if anything else has happened to Barnaby?'

'He's probably sitting around drinking coffee and eating biscuits while everyone else does the work.'

'Yeah,' said Chandra. 'He always lands on his feet.'

That turned out to be about as wide of the mark as possible. They entered the health department to find Barnaby sprawled on the floor. Health stood above him in a white coat, frowning at the prone Barnaby.

'What happened?' said Health.

Barnaby's reply was a high-pitched whine.

'I fell over, that's what happened. I couldn't feel my feet. Look—'

He stopped when he noticed Chandra and Dajun entering.

'What're you doing here?'

'Dajun's gone blind,' said Chandra. 'It's another portent. Not the only one, either.'

'So?' said Barnaby.

Chandra ignored him and addressed Health.

'Science asked if you could check Dajun out. See if there's anything you can do to help before it wears off. Make sure there's nothing else wrong.'

'Of course,' said Health. 'The well-being of my patients is always more important than anything. Even gods.'

Health crossed to Dajun and took his arm.

'Come. Sit down. Let me take a look.'

'Thanks,' said Dajun. 'I appreciate your help.'

Barnaby didn't like not being the centre of attention. He tried to struggle to his feet, but fell backwards again.

'Will someone help me up?'

'Okay, okay,' said Chandra.

He pulled Barnaby up by the hands. As soon as he let go, Barnaby swayed backwards again.

'What—'

Chandra caught him just in time.

'Lost your balance?'

'No. I can't feel my feet. It's like there's nothing there.'

Health had noticed what was happening and rushed across with a chair.

'Sit down. Let's have a look.'

Barnaby slumped into the chair. Health pulled off one of his shoes, followed by the sock. It wasn't hard to spot why Barnaby had fallen over: his heel was missing. The back of his foot sloped from below the ankle directly to the arch in almost a straight line. There were no signs of injury. The perfectly smooth skin looked as if it had always been that way.

'What the...' said Barnaby.

Health frowned and scratched his chin.

'This is most peculiar. Does it hurt?'

'I told you, I can't feel anything. Look, what's going on? It's impossible.'

Chandra was getting used to the surprises by now.

'It's another portent. Got to be. They're everywhere.'

Health's worried expression cracked into a smile.

'Ah, of course it is. That means there's no need to worry. It will fix itself, given time, but I'll see what I can do to support you in the meantime.'

'But it's horrible!' said Barnaby. 'I've been maimed. Do something now!'

'Beyond my ability, I'm afraid,' said Health. 'I could give you a sedative, if you like?'

'Bugger off.'

Unprompted, Barnaby shook his leg. It was silent. Chandra risked a smirk.

'At least some good's come of it. No heel, no bell.'

'Bastard,' said Barnaby. 'Don't just stand there. Do something.'

'Okay, I will,' said Chandra. He turned to Health. 'With your permission, I need to tell History of this. May I leave them in your care?'

'Of course,' said Health. 'It's why I'm here.'

'That's it,' said Barnaby. 'Run away and leave us in the shit.'

Chandra grinned.

'Show you a clean pair of heels, you mean?'

Chandra fled before Barnaby could explode, although he heard a shouted *bastard* in the distance.

The portents were rapidly stacking up. That might point to an early emergence, although what type of deity it would be was even more unclear. A god of music was increasingly unlikely. Quite what linked the disparate events was a mystery.

It was odd. He ought to feel scared at the magnitude of events happening all around him, but he didn't, not really. Admittedly his first day was confounding every expectation, but somehow, he was taking it in his stride. Then again, he'd got off lightly. And Music had been calming influence.

Chandra's chime restarted as soon as he entered the history department. No change there. He hurried straight to History's office. Her only sign of emotion at his quick return was a single raised eyebrow.

'I bring news of further portents from the music, science, and health departments. I thought you should know as soon as possible.'

'Go ahead.'

He described everything he'd seen. Putting it together, it all sounded ridiculous, but History took him seriously. She rose to her feet.

'Wait here. I must see these for myself. If these are indeed portents, I will recall the Conclave. When you hear the bell behind my desk ring, make your way to the audience chamber.'

'I will.'

The Prior's War

Once she left, Chandra forced himself to unwind. He'd been swept along by a whirlwind of events from the moment he awoke, and there was likely a tornado waiting once History recalled the Conclave. The break would give him time to recover.

Assuming it were a new god, it wouldn't be long before they emerged. He was a harbinger. Would Sabela present him to the Prior as evidence, like she had at the Conclave? He'd never imagined meeting the Prior!

He had to be ready.