

Prior Restraint

A Short Story

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Anjuna didn't understand how to speak to her father anymore. His perpetually calm demeanour was hard to take, especially less than a week after burying her mother. It was still a raw heartbreak for Anjuna, whereas he seemed to accept everything without complaint, leaning on the doctrine of the Church of Serenity as a crutch. The church had helped her mother through her illness too. In contrast, Anjuna was permanently angry.

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 helped. It was galling to know that everyone on the other side of the Priory wall lacked for nothing – including her brother. Yet, he'd not even bothered to leave that sanctuary to attend his own mother's funeral. She was done with him. He wasn't worth the effort.

Anjuna shook her head and stood up, as much to clear her mind as anything. That was one thing the Maven – the god of her father's church – had got right: there was no point in spending her life reliving old grievances. She had to get on with things and try to find positives along the way. Her father 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.

The church held no interest for her, but she'd make more of an effort, if only as that's what her mother would have wanted. That didn't mean she couldn't stay angry.

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, 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. 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. Had to make it a special occasion to celebrate the Maven being there. 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 Mum. I'm hoping our god 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 a decade earlier, 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. It now had premises in all eight sectors of Haven, including the southern Fenestral conclave where they lived. Its following was small, but growing.

'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 left still.'

'Sorry,' he said. 'Good luck. I'll be out when you get back.'

Anjuna slammed the door without replying as she left, then stopped outside and took several deep breaths, closing her eyes to let the anger subside. Once she felt ready, 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 was unique. That dated back to Haven's foundation.

As the victor in the war between the gods, the Prior shaped the human society that re-emerged, choosing a massive crater formed during the war as the location for Haven. It gave protection from the storms that raged for decades after, and was large enough to support limited agriculture within its bounds. The food supply it could support severely restricted subsequent population growth.

The outer gates of all sectors gave access to the surrounding fields – except for Fenestral's. That opened into a natural gap in the crater wall which led to a narrow valley. It was the simplest way to access the desolate wilderness beyond, making Fenestral the regular route out of the Priory for the survey division's excursions to hunt historical artefacts that survived the war.

Anjuna had no interest in the Priory and tried to ignore it as much as possible. She crossed the thoroughfare without even glancing towards it. Only a short distance on the other side, the walkway opened onto a large square that was permanently covered in market stalls. Most were empty, having closed for the night.

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 stall, where he'd been packing a box.

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

'Damn,' said Anjuna. 'Nothing at all?'

Bruce looked into his box.

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

'What flavour jam?'

'Mix of everything. Just whatever berries they had to hand when things were scarce a few months back.'

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 was interfering 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 when she realised Bruce's attention 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. Walking down the aisle between stalls were two individuals. The young black man, probably around twenty and carrying an obviously heavy bag, was nothing out of the ordinary, but the white woman beside him was another matter. She towered over the man at more than two metres tall, her posture perfect. Her immaculate complexion was pale, with the merest hint of rouge in her cheeks, and long dark curls cascading elegantly down her back. The woman was flawless.

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

As they closed, Anjuna's anger began to rise. All this poverty was the Prior's fault, prioritising his precious Priory above everything – but he wasn't here. This god was though, swanning through the market oblivious to the hardship all around.

Anjuna couldn't let the opportunity pass by. She took two strides forward and stopped in 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. She was attacking a god. She had no idea of its powers. Maybe she was about to find out.

Whatever Anjuna had expected, it wasn't the god blushing and staring down at her feet. The man answered for her, looking nervous but sounding defiant.

'Move aside. We haven't got time—'

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. She waited for the god to continue.

'Your anger is 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 stepped in to explain. His tone was bitter.

'The Prior is no friend of ours. He expects the latter gods – that's what the new ones are called – to be self-sufficient. Once he deems they pose no threat, he releases them into the community to find their own paths and help others. Trouble is, he hamstringing them first, restricting their powers and limiting their ability to make a difference. If you're expecting us to have influence over the Prior, you couldn't be more wrong. He's washed his hands of us.'

That was blunter than Anjuna had expected. It still didn't help.

'So you can't do anything?'

The god's reply was hesitant, as if disappointing herself at the same time as Anjuna.

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

'Laury's doing herself a disservice,' said Alton. 'She helped plenty of people back in Dawn, like my parents, but it was hard to make a big impact. We hope that might be different here.'

So her name was Laury, which was unusually informal for a god, as was the fact she was moving to Fenestral. Dawn was the eastern sector of Haven, on the other side of Esper from Fenestral. She must be travelling that far for some reason.

'What are you going to do?'

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

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

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

'Nothing like that,' said Laury. 'The church works for the Maven, but that's not my style. I'd rather create a new Haven.'

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

'If you're interested, come to our meeting tomorrow night. We could use your anger. But for now, please let us pass. We have much to prepare.'

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 like 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 good was an interesting way to finish it. All she had to do now was decide what to do about it.

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The evening of the day after her unexpected encounter with the Laureate in the marketplace, Anjuna was sitting having dinner with her father. He'd remembered to get food during the day, helping to make the atmosphere more relaxed. It was their first chance to catch up since the previous night.

'I wish you could have been at the service,' said her father. 'The Maven paid tribute to your Mum. She even went out of her way to talk to me afterwards. It was such an honour.'

'That's nice,' said Anjuna. 'Had a chat with a god myself.'

She instantly felt a pang of guilt at stealing his thunder, but it had been too hard to resist. It didn't seem to faze him.

'Really? Where?'

'In the market. Bumped into them as they were passing through.'

Her father's face brightened.

'Ah, that must be the Laureate.'

'How did you know?'

'The Maven told us she was moving to Fenestral. Asked us to welcome her if we saw her.'

It shouldn't have been a surprise that the gods knew what each other were doing. It likely meant they were all working together. She wouldn't forget that.

'I did welcome her,' said Anjuna.

'That's good,' said her father. 'What was she like?'

'She was...'

Anjuna wasn't sure what to say. The Laureate had been physically perfect, just like all the other gods she'd heard about. Unexpectedly uncertain too, but Anjuna had gained no real sense of her personality. Only one thing stood out in her mind's eye.

'...very pretty.'

It was inane, but her feelings about the Laureate wouldn't come into focus. She still didn't know what to do. Her father didn't seem to notice.

'I hope the Maven invites her to the church soon. Maybe she'll read one of her poems.'

'Poems?'

'She's the god of poetry. Didn't she say?'

Her father knew more about the Laureate than she did, despite never having met her. That wasn't what annoyed her most. Anjuna hadn't fully admitted it to herself that the Laureate's promise to create a new Haven had given her a tinge of hope – but what use was a god of poetry?

'No, Laury didn't mention it. Explains the way she talked though.'

'Laury?'

Anjuna shrugged.

'That's what her companion called her.'

Her father frowned.

'That's a little presumptuous, my dear. We should show our gods some respect.'

Compared to the way Anjuna had ranted at her as soon as they met, calling her Laury was nothing. Away from the heat of the moment, she couldn't believe she'd had the gall to act like that, but she wouldn't apologise. She wasn't even sure she should.

'Laury was pretty informal. She even invited me to a meeting tonight.'

'That's quite an honour. What time is it?'

'I haven't decided to go yet. Not sure what the point is.'

Her father's eyes widened.

'You must. It's not something you can turn down.'

'It was clearly optional. She said she wanted ideas to help Haven, but I don't know what good a god of poetry can do.'

She expected her father to react even more angrily, but he relaxed back into his seat and smiled.

'You're always complaining about life in Haven, and for once, here's an opportunity for you. You're not one to sit around and let others do all the work. Go find out what it's about. See if you can help. If it amounts to nothing, then you haven't lost anything – but it could be what you've been waiting for.'

'But... poetry?'

'She's still a god. Wise. Influential. There'll be more to her than meets the eye. Imagine if she could make a difference, and you didn't turn up to help. You'd regret it.'

His tone was supportive rather than accusatory. And he was right, damn him.

'Fine. I'll listen to what she has to say.'

'And blame me if it's a waste of time?'

She smiled back at him.

'You know me well.'

Having finally admitted she should go, there was no turning back. As soon as their meal finished, she set out on a leisurely walk across Fenestral, passing through the market on the way to the venue. Annoyingly, there were more stalls still open now that she didn't need to buy anything. Things worked so much better without the haemorrhaging effect of the Priory's tithe.

Once she passed out of the far side of the market, she headed towards the looming Priory wall, well away from the main thoroughfare. The buildings became more ramshackle the closer she got, gloomier too. Eventually she reached her destination – a narrow street in an exceptionally poor and rundown area.

The meeting was to be held in what appeared to be a disused old mill, nothing like what she'd expect for a god. She took that as a good sign. Not too many airs and graces on show.

The Laureate's companion, Alton, waited at the door. He raised his eyebrows when he saw her.

'Glad you could make it,' he said. 'Must admit, I wasn't sure you'd come.'

'Nor was I. Let's hope it's worth it.'

He gave an unexpected, somewhat disarming grin.

'Well, that's largely up to you. It'll only work if we all muck in together.'

'I'm used to muck. I was hoping for something different.'

'Let's see if we can surprise you. Go on in. We're in the room at the back.'

Anjuna couldn't resist a shrug as she went through the door. She entered a short corridor with doors off either side, and headed straight past them to the far end. It opened into a larger chamber, presumably what would have been the heart of the old mill. Four rows of eight trestle chairs were set along one side, with only about ten occupied. Everywhere was grubby.

Anjuna seated herself at one end of the third row and waited, studiously avoiding eye contact. Luckily everyone else was doing the same, even the few people who arrived after her. Ten minutes later, Alton entered and stood in the centre of the space before them.

'Greetings,' he said. 'As– As you may know, my name is Alton, and it is my honour to be the Laureate's assistant. I– I...'

He grimaced and pulled himself upright before giving a rueful smile.

'My apologies. I'm not used to all this, but I'll get there.' He paused again. 'It's probably best if I set the scene before Laury comes to the stage, help you set aside any preconceptions you may have.'

His delivery was becoming more certain as he went. Anjuna just wanted him to get it over with so they could get to the main event.

'You're probably wondering what's the use of a god of poetry? If so, you're not the only one: Laury has often asked herself the same question.'

He shook his head, an uncertain smile breaking through his nervousness. It seemed less aimed at the audience, more in response to a memory that had bubbled to the surface.

'She's wrong. I've seen what good she can do. Her words brought great pleasure and comfort to my parents when they were alive, others too, but she's right that her impact could only be felt on a small scale. She wants that to change.'

Anjuna didn't miss the warmth in his voice when he spoke about his parents. Maybe it was time to set aside her preconceptions. He was in danger of coming across as genuine.

'That's why we're here. It's why we moved to Fenestral, as we believe it provides more opportunity to do good on a wider scale – but we can't do it alone. We need your help, both on a practical level and also for ideas. That's the purpose of this meeting.'

Anjuna didn't understand why Fenestral was more suitable than their previous home sector of Dawn to make changes, but hopefully that would become clear – if only he'd get on with it.

'Without further ado, it is my honour and pleasure to introduce the Laureate to start our conversation. She prefers to be called Laury. I trust her. I hope you will too. Her intentions are pure.'

Instinctively, Anjuna didn't trust anyone with pure intentions. Before she could justify it to herself, the Laureate entered from a side door, keeping her eyes on Alton. She touched his shoulder, her expression warm.

'Thank you, my friend. You are too kind.'

She let her gaze drift around her small audience, catching everyone's eye in turn. After the god briefly studied her, Anjuna was left with the eerie impression that she was still at the centre of Laury's attention, even though her gaze had moved on. That was a neat trick. It was also unnerving.

'Thank you all for coming,' said Laury. 'I'll try not to waste your time. The first thing people ask me is: why do you always rhyme?'

A couple in the audience chuckled. Laury's lips twitched into a wry smile.

'Although it comes naturally, I fear it is expected. My message is important – without rhyme I'd be rejected.'

Anjuna wasn't so sure about that. It was already getting annoying.

'I prefer to speak in prose, and I do so with my friend.' Laury nodded towards Alton, her expression warm. 'Now we are all together, I can bring it to a stop. I mean close. Something like that.'

That got a few more laughs. Anjuna looked at the other people properly for the first time. There were a couple younger than her, and a mix of genders, but the majority were what she'd classify as *grumpy old men*. She let out a quiet sigh.

'Let's be serious now,' said Laury. 'I am genuine in my desire to improve conditions in Haven. It's been a tough winter for everyone, but that only exacerbated the underlying problem. The cause is systemic. The inequitable imbalance between the Priory and Haven is at the heart of the malaise.'

Anjuna focused properly on the Laureate for the first time. Unless she'd misunderstood, that sounded more interesting.

'Don't get me wrong. The work of the Priory is crucial, but it does not happen in a vacuum. The support provided by Haven is critical to its operation. You supply their food. New recruits into their workforce come from here. Unless Haven survives, the Priory will die.'

A man at the end of the front row raised his hand. He was middle-aged, with short brown hair and a scowl. Laury gave her permission to speak with a single nod.

'Why don't you just tell the Prior, then?' he said. 'You're a god.'

The man's voice was gruff, but calmer than his expression advertised. Laury didn't seem upset.

'It doesn't work like that. A covenant exists between the latter gods and the Prior. It's a condition for our entering Haven's society – indeed, it's a condition for being allowed to exist. We vow to dedicate our powers to improving Haven's society; in exchange, the Prior will not interfere. He will not enter Haven, and we cannot re-enter the Priory, nor have direct contact with him.'

The man frowned, but couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Unfortunately, unlike the old gods – and unlike the Prior – our powers are severely restricted. For example, I have the gift of heightened empathy, allowing me to see into your soul and understand what moves you; my power of language allows me to express those emotions with eloquence; my life expectancy is many of your own. Beyond that, there's not much more – but that doesn't mean I cannot help.'

There was more passion in her voice now, more determination in every word. It didn't come across as an act.

'My very nature gives me privilege. I can be a figurehead for every good cause, and aid individuals along the way, but that's not enough. I must find a way to spread the net wider. The Maven has found her path, but that approach isn't for me. Giving people the mental tools to cope with life isn't enough – I want practical solutions to help those most in need. But how?'

It was hard not to get swept along in her rhetoric, buoyed by an almost overwhelming physical presence, but Anjuna remained aware that she'd given no details yet. Words might be her power, but they had to lead to something concrete.

'The first step is to gather a group of willing volunteers to help carry out the plans we must form. This needs to be a team effort. I do not have all the answers myself.'

She held her arms out wide.

'My aim is to harness your expertise. After all, you encounter problems day-to-day more than I ever will. Identifying such issues will be the first step on the road to transformation. We can make a difference if we explore every possibility, persevere, and work together.'

Was that all? She was just asking for volunteers, with nothing specific planned, other than to get others to come up with solutions on her behalf? That was a disappointment. It also wasn't a surprise.

'Now, I don't expect anyone to have fully fledged ideas here tonight. On your journey home, and across the next week, consider the suffering you see all around. Bring your thoughts to our next meeting. It doesn't matter if you have no solution. Starting the conversation will be the first step to a resolution.'

Anjuna's heart sank with every word. All the Laureate wanted was to talk. She may as well have endured one of the Maven's interminable services, for all the good this pointless wittering would do. At least it seemed to be reaching a conclusion.

'If anyone has any immediate thoughts, I'm happy to listen to anything you have to say here tonight. Please raise your hand if you'd like to speak.'

The scowling man in the front row was the first to respond.

'Yes, Sacha?'

Given his penchant for asking questions, it was no surprise that Laury already knew Sacha's name. Although his expression looked as perpetually angry as Anjuna felt these days, his voice was remarkably controlled.

'I've found great comfort in the Maven's teachings. They help me get through the day, yet you seem to have something against her. Why's that?'

The god took it in her stride.

'I don't. Far from it. I have a great working relationship with the Maven – indeed, she helped me with my relocation to Fenestral. However, whereas her approach matches her skill set perfectly, it doesn't match mine. I need something different, but whatever I do, it must complement her church. We are allies, not competitors.'

That seemed to satisfy Sacha. It only served to hammer another nail into Anjuna's disillusionment. A woman not much older than Anjuna put her hand up.

'You say you're unable to enter the Priory, but can't someone else do it for you? Pass on a message. Ask for changes.'

'Unfortunately, that's already been tried. I have contacts inside the Priory, mainly those whose job it is to interact with us out here. They were sympathetic, but it achieved little.'

'Doesn't the Prior care about us?' said the woman.

Laury took her time to reply.

'The Prior's focus is entirely on the Priory. He's aware of the importance of Haven to his goals, but sees our difficulties as transient in nature. The hardship is cyclical. Things will naturally ease.'

Anjuna wished Laury would be honest and not try to be so diplomatic. Sacha was even more frustrated.

'That's not good enough. It's not even true. I've spoken to my grandparents, and from what they say, Haven has been getting poorer every generation in living memory. Look, it's understandable that the focus is on the Priory, but surely we must improve the lot of our children, not simply accept less and less. It can't go on like this.'

'Yes,' whispered Anjuna under her breath.

That was more like it. To her credit, Laury seemed to agree.

'There is some truth in what you say, but that doesn't help in finding a solution. We need a different approach. Does anyone else have any thoughts?'

An older man raised his hand.

'My brother lives in the Priory. He said that during winter, their rooms are kept warm using hot water from the Source beneath the Priory. They keep it all to themselves, but I'm sure there must be surplus heat that could be pumped into Haven. It might not be much, but if we used it to heat a communal space, people would have somewhere warm to go in the depths of winter.'

'An excellent idea,' said Laury. 'That's something worth raising with our contacts.'

Anjuna found herself with her hand in the air. She'd been mulling over something, trying to decide whether to bother to discuss it, when her arm seemed to act of its own volition. Laury gave her the go ahead. Anjuna had no choice but to put it into words.

'It's just, well, we've all seen what the markets get like on tithe day. I nearly had nothing to eat yesterday. It's...'

She was focusing on the wrong thing. She had to cut to the chase.

'Look, the level of tithe they take is too high. It's one reason things get worse every generation. It's slowly eating away at our ability to survive. Unless we stop it now, it could be too late.'

Sacha got in before Laury could reply.

'Damn right. The tithe is at the root of everything. It's got to change.'

Laury ignored Sacha and replied directly to Anjuna.

'Unfortunately, that's been raised too – and not just by me – but the Prior won't budge. He says the current level is essential to support the Priory's operation. Any lower, and they couldn't be effective in their activities.'

Sacha wasn't going to give up without a fight.

'Now, I know that's a lie. I've family in the Priory too. I'm told they keep a massive surplus in there, way more than they need to comfortably survive. Even after this winter, they've plenty of supplies left over, but they keep everything for themselves – and still keep taking fresh stuff. It's got to stop.'

Anjuna felt like cheering, but found herself distracted that Sacha wasn't the first one here with family in the Priory, and had managed to stay in contact with them. Since Chandra had entered service, they'd heard nothing from her brother. Sounds like that had been his choice. Typical.

Sacha's passion didn't impress Laury.

'Whether it's true or not, it doesn't lead us to a plan of action. Unless you have an idea?'

'Yeah,' said Sacha. 'I do. It wouldn't be hard to break into the Priory and find their stockpile. Bet they wouldn't even notice if we took some of it back. No need for negotiation that way.'

'And what would you do with what you stole? Feed yourself?'

'Give it to the most needy people,' said Sacha. 'We all know plenty who are desperate. Maybe that could be your role: you choose who gets it.'

Laury didn't immediately balk at the idea, which was the first thing she'd done that had raised her in Anjuna's estimation. She thought to herself for a few seconds before replying.

'It's audacious, I must say. We're going to need to take risks to make a difference, but obviously I cannot condone criminality.' She looked away from Sacha. 'Out of academic interest, does anybody here support this course of action?'

'Yes!' said Anjuna without hesitation. 'If they won't take less, then they don't deserve to keep it all. It's not criminal to take it back – starving us is the bigger crime. Putting that right is the first thing I've heard here that makes sense.'

Anjuna was surprising even herself. Laury gave her an unexpectedly warm smile.

'I see. Anyone else?'

The others all kept their eyes down. It was too much for them. Anjuna's moment of excitement petered out as the disinterest from the others became apparent. Sacha turned to her, gave her a nod of appreciation, then shrugged.

The rest of the meeting was dull. Anjuna politely waited for it to be over, taking no active part in the conversations. Finally, Laury wrapped things up with an invitation to return the following week. It was irrelevant. Anjuna had lost interest.

As they stood to leave, Sacha caught her eye and gestured her over. At least he'd had some gumption. She went across to see what he had to say.

'Good to meet someone else who cares,' he said. 'The tithe is a cancer eating us away. I wish more people would help me reclaim some of it.'

'You're really going to try?' said Anjuna.

'Got to do something. My brothers in the Priory have told me all I need to know. I'm sure it can be done, even if I have to do it on my own.'

Anjuna's frustration had found an outlet. She was in the mood to be impetuous.

'You're not on your own. I'm in.'

Sacha raised one eyebrow.

'Sure you're up for it? It could be dangerous.'

She gave one of her trademark shrugs.

'My father says I'm not one to sit around while others do all the work. I've been moaning about the tithe for a while. About time I put my money where my mouth is.'

'Sure?'

'I'm sure.'

'Perfect,' said Sacha.

He raised his hand and waved across the room. By that time, the only other people left were Alton and the Laureate. They both walked over.

'She's in,' said Sacha.

'Wait,' said Anjuna. 'You're working with them?'

The Laureate smiled and answered for him.

'Sacha's the reason we moved here. He's got the contacts and the plans. All we needed was more people to help us, but I couldn't openly say we wanted to rob the Priory. We had to use a little subterfuge. I must admit that I'd hoped for more than one volunteer, but I'm sure you'll make a big difference. I sensed your righteous anger the moment I met you.'

'Welcome to the team,' said Alton.

'No second thoughts?' said Sacha.

Anjuna blinked twice, trying to get her uncertainty under control. Then she realised the butterflies in her stomach were flapping hope, not fear.

'None. I'm in.'

'Great,' said Sacha. 'Let's go plan a heist.'

Anjuna followed the Laureate, Alton and Sacha into a side room. Six trestle chairs surrounded a rickety wooden table. That probably meant they'd hoped to recruit two more people, but they were stuck with her alone.

'Please take a seat,' said Laury. 'My apologies for the conditions. We haven't had the opportunity to renovate yet. We will, but that's less important than starting our endeavour.'

Anjuna sat down without replying. For all her bravado out in the main room, her nerves began to come to the fore. She was alone in a small space with two strange men and a god. So much could go wrong. The quickest way to calm herself was to talk.

'Before we start, can I ask a few questions?'

'Of course,' said Laury. 'We've nothing to hide.'

Anjuna took a few seconds to collect herself. Alton and Sacha were sitting opposite her, with Laury at one end of the table. Up close, the god's height gave her an almost overwhelming physical presence, made worse by the perfection of her complexion. She had to get used to it. The quickest way would be to understand them all better.

'You said you came to Fenestral because of Sacha. How did you meet?'

Laury didn't hesitate.

'I met Sacha's brother, Toma, back in Dawn. He was my primary contact in the Priory's liaison division. It's fair to say he's sympathetic to the plight of everyone in Haven and would like to help more than he's allowed. After all – and unlike most in the Priory – he gets to see the conditions firsthand. He told me about Sacha.'

Sacha frowned, his permanently grumpy expression deepening, but when he spoke, his voice was calm and assured.

'Both of my brothers know how I feel. They can't act overtly on our behalf from within the Priory, but they'll do what they can to smooth the way, whatever we decide to do.'

Anjuna found it hard not to focus on trivial details. One aspect had been gnawing away at her.

'How come you can keep in contact with your brothers in the Priory? I've not heard from mine since he became a novice.'

'It's easier for me,' said Sacha. 'Toma spends a lot of his time in Haven anyway; that's what they do in the liaison division. Luka's different. He leads a survey team, so regularly goes out on trips to explore the wilderness. We catch up when he passes through on the way out.'

'That's related to why Fenestral is so convenient for us,' said Laury. 'Thanks to the survey division's needs, there are more options for getting in and out of the Priory here. It wasn't just for Sacha that we relocated. It's for ease of access.'

'I see,' said Anjuna.

She wasn't sure what else to say. Sacha rubbed salt into her open wound.

'What does your brother do? There still should be no reason he can't keep in touch. There's no prohibition against it.'

'He's a historian.'

'Ah,' said Laury. 'That explains it. History is a special case.'

'Why?'

'Sacha knows that best.'

'Yeah,' said Sacha. 'Luka's not impressed by the head of history. She's a stickler for secrecy. Unless there's a good reason – and often not even then – she expects her staff to cut all ties with the outside world. Your brother will have had no choice.'

She wasn't ready to let Chandra off the hook yet.

'But he didn't even reply when I wrote to him that his mother had died.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Laury. 'That's awful – but I doubt it's his fault. He won't have been told.'

'You need to understand,' said Sacha. 'The head of history controls all important information flow into and out of the Priory. It's designed that way. It's the most influential department.'

That was news to her. Reluctantly, she pushed blaming Chandra to the back of her mind.

'What makes history so important?'

'That goes to the heart of why Luka dislikes them,' said Sacha. 'When a survey team discovers ancient artefacts – indeed, anything at all – out in the wilderness, they deliver it to history for processing. It's their job to decide what gets passed where. Much of it goes no further, on direct instructions from the Prior. Knowledge of the past is carefully controlled.'

'What? They suppress stuff?'

Sacha glanced at Laury. She nodded and took over.

'The official purpose of the Priory is to gather and restore lost knowledge, but some information is dangerous. An event like the war between the gods must not happen again. The Prior will suppress anything he sees as increasing that risk – including limiting us latter gods.'

'You mean what powers you have?' said Anjuna.

'Partly,' said Laury. 'The Prior cannot stop raw magical power from forming new gods – it's inherent in our world's nature – but he can control how it manifests. That's another purpose of the Priory. It ensures that every new god is limited, weak compared to the old gods, and unable to have a significant impact.'

She hesitated as if deciding what to say, then ploughed ahead.

'The Prior would rather we didn't exist at all, but he has no choice. So he restricts our abilities – assuming he deigns to let us live. Often he doesn't. We can feel it out here when the potential builds enough to form a new god. There's one due any day now; I just hope they pass muster. We can hear the scream when the Prior kills them. It's horrible.'

It was the first note of bitterness Anjuna had heard in the Laureate's dulcet voice. She tried to imagine the world through Laury's eyes. The god could have been so much more if the Prior hadn't intervened. He held her life in his hands.

When Anjuna didn't reply, Alton must have worried where her thoughts were heading. He nudged her in an interesting direction.

'The Prior's approach may seem to be designed to ensure everyone's safety, but there's more to it than that. He wrote the history of what happened in the war. You can't take everything at face value.'

'What do you mean?' said Anjuna.

Alton went to reply, but Laury put her hand on his arm. He fell silent. Anjuna hadn't fully worked out the dynamics between the two of them yet, although Alton was coming across as

more of a sidekick to the god. In contrast, the body language hinted that Laury treated Sacha as an equal. Still, she shouldn't underestimate any of them.

Laury's gaze locked on Anjuna, her expression as sympathetic as ever.

'Humour me. What were you taught about the cause of the war between the old gods?'

Anjuna suppressed an instinctive flash of irritation. There must be some point to the question, as patronising as it felt.

'That the gods were split between wanting to serve humanity's needs, and wanting humanity to serve them.'

'That's certainly how it evolved,' said Laury. 'And how did the war end?'

'The Prior discovered how to turn a god back into its raw form. Killed the whole damned lot of them. No gods, no war.'

'Good enough,' said Laury. 'And which side of the war was the Prior on?'

'He...'

Anjuna stumbled to a halt. It wasn't something she'd ever heard discussed.

'Well, he did save us. Brought everyone here and founded the Priory to protect us.'

She felt stupid as soon as she'd said it. She'd automatically stood up for the Prior, yet everything she'd experienced spoke to a different truth. Laury remained silent. It gave Anjuna the space to voice her doubt.

'We're just serving him, aren't we? Doing whatever he wants. Bending to his every whim.'

'She gets it,' said Sacha. 'You read her right.'

Anjuna's hackles were up.

'So all that meeting out there was a lie to size me up?'

'No, not at all,' said Laury. 'Everything was true. I want the group to meet regularly, and I'll take forward every good idea that emerges. But it won't be enough. I wanted to see who would stand up and be counted – and be worthy of joining our effort. You were the first. I hope there will be more.'

'But it *was* a test?'

'To an extent. I said that one of my powers is heightened empathy. Although I was sure I'd read you correctly, how you acted would confirm what I needed to know. You didn't disappoint. I hope that meets with your approval?'

'I guess,' said Anjuna. 'So you're saying that the Prior is our enemy?'

'I wouldn't be that blunt,' said Laury.

'I would,' said Sacha.

'Now, now,' said Laury gently. 'Let's be fair. The evidence of the Prior's role in the war could still be read both ways, but we can't ignore the possibility that he may not have humanity's best interests at heart. We know he can be ruthless. All our planning must take the worst-case scenario into account.'

Alton filled the brief silence.

'Most important of all, the Prior can't find out that Laury's involved. If something goes wrong, you must not betray her. Understood?'

'You mean we're on our own?' said Anjuna.

'You're missing the point,' said Sacha. 'The Prior can kill a god with a snap of his fingers; any whiff of a problem, Laury will vanish. That's why I don't want Alton to come with us. His relationship with Laury is public knowledge, but ours isn't.'

'We're expendable, you mean?'

'Definitely not. I'm not going on a suicide mission for anyone – but we are more expendable than Laury. She's the glue that holds all this together. I won't risk that unnecessarily.'

Anjuna took a deep breath. She was glad they were being honest about it. It oddly gave her comfort.

'Understood.'

'I'm going to have to take part eventually,' said Alton. 'You won't be able to carry much out of the Priory with only two of you.'

'Yeah,' said Sacha. 'Let's hope we've recruited more people by then.' He addressed Anjuna directly. 'We need to do a scouting mission first. Prove we can get in and out easily. Find the best route to the supplies and work out how to transport them. Do it in a way that doesn't look too suspicious if it goes wrong.'

'Sounds like you've thought it through,' said Anjuna.

'The scouting trip, yes,' said Sacha. 'But it's never exactly what you expect in reality, so we should keep it simple. This will be as new to me as it is to you. You up for it?'

She'd come this far. It was daunting, but the thrill of actually being able to do something practical was exhilarating. She'd had enough of moaning.

'Damn right. When do we start?'

'In a few days,' said Sacha. 'Luka's out on a survey at the moment. I need to check a few details with him first.'

'What am I supposed to do until then?'

'You've probably had enough for one night,' said Sacha. 'If you're free, why don't you come back tomorrow evening? We can go over our plans then. See if you've any suggestions.'

'Sure,' said Anjuna. 'Expect I'll have more questions by then.'

'Anything else you want to know now?'

'Nothing important,' said Anjuna.

That was too hasty. There was one thing that had been niggling away at her. She bit the bullet.

'Was what you said in the meeting about being a follower of the Maven true, or just something to get conversations started?'

'It's true,' said Sacha. 'Her teachings have helped me a lot.'

'You should have seen him before,' said Alton, a grin on his face. 'He had anger issues.' Sacha feigned upset.

'I think of it as expressing concern for my fellow citizens. But yeah, the Maven helped me get it under control. Most of the time. Why the question?'

'Oh, my father's a devotee. So was my mother. Things were tough, especially when she was ill, but the church made them accept everything without question. It was frustrating. I couldn't understand their complacency.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Laury. 'It's not unusual though. Even without the church, most people accept their lot without complaint. I have a theory – but no direct evidence – that the Prior can influence people in Haven to make them more compliant. If so, it's of limited effect, but it's enough to keep the peace.'

'Doesn't seem to affect us,' said Sacha.

'I expect some people are less susceptible,' said Laury. 'Like all of us.'

'So the Maven's church helps to support that influence?' said Anjuna. 'Is she working for the Prior?'

'I don't believe she thinks that way. Nor do I. I trust her. She is doing her best to help the people of Haven in the only way she knows.'

'And she definitely doesn't make people compliant,' said Sacha. 'Look at me. She's given me ways to cope with life better, but the anger is still there. I can put it to good use now.'

It was an evening to confound Anjuna's expectations. Maybe she needed to cut her father some slack over the church, especially given how it helped him. Her instinctive suspicion would take a while to dissipate though. For now, she'd target her ire at the Prior.

'Is there–' began Anjuna.

She stopped when, out of the blue, Laury emitted a low, plaintive wail. The god's expression contorted into a wide-eyed look of horror. She'd been such a calming presence, but now she was distraught, struggling to form words.

'I– I said a new god was coming. He's– He's gone now. The Prior killed him. He–'

The Laureate's look of dismay shifted into one of shock, bordering on wonderment.

'There's something... something else. A presence. A whisper beneath his scream. I–'

A glow appeared, floating at the far end of the table. From its centre, a light, sibilant wind blew at them, hot enough to be coming from the desert wilderness. They all jumped to their feet and backed away as a mist formed. Within it, blue specks of light blinked into existence and swirled around, brightening as their number increased. A pattern formed. It settled into the shape of a person, about the same height and build as Sacha.

'It can't be,' whispered Laury.

Before anyone else could speak, a brilliant flash exploded from the form. It faded to reveal a bizarre man standing at the end of the table, wearing a simple white singlet and light cream trousers. His skin was alabaster white, his hair even lighter. The only flash of colour was his piercing blue eyes, opened wide in terror beneath snowy eyebrows. Somehow, he seemed even more surprised than them.

His legs almost gave way. Groaning, he staggered forward, catching himself on the end of the table. Laury rushed forward to help, pulling out the chair and lowering him into it. He slumped forward and put his head in his hands. He remained silent.

'It's okay,' said Laury. 'You're safe now.'

When the newcomer didn't speak, Anjuna had to ask.

'What just happened?'

'I'm not sure,' said Laury. 'But I know who this is. It's the new god. Somehow.' She placed her hand on his shoulder. 'That's right, isn't it?'

The man looked up and took a couple of seconds to focus on Laury's gaze. He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

'I thought I was dead,' he said, his voice weak. 'The Prior... He ripped me apart.'

'I know,' said Laury. 'I felt it.'

'But I didn't disappear,' said the new god. 'I found myself floating. Semi-conscious, barely aware of what was happening. Something, someone, held me together, supported me, reshaped me.' He took a deep breath. 'And then I was here.'

Laury flashed her warmest smile.

'You're among friends now. May I ask your name?'

He looked down at his hands, shaking his head. He reached up and touched his own face, running his fingers up his cheek.

'I don't know. I've changed. I'm taller. Paler. I feel different too.' He pulled himself upright. 'I was to be the god of puns. That's not me anymore. As to what I am now, I have no idea.'

'We'll work it out together,' said Laury. 'For now, I guess you're an enigma.'

His lips quirked with wry amusement. It was the first sign of a personality emerging from the shock of being alive.

'That'll do for now,' he said. 'Call me the Enigma. It's as good a name as any.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Laury. 'I'm the Laureate, the god of poetry. My friends call me Laury.'

'Well if we're being informal, I guess you can call me Enny. After all, I could be the god of ennything.' He grimaced. 'Sorry. I used to be good at puns. Not so much now.'

Laury took his hand.

'I sense we'll get on fine.'

Enny blinked several times.

'I wish I knew what just happened. One moment, I'm joking away, having fun with the humans in the Priory, using the power of the well to signal the type of god I would be. You know, like we're supposed to do.'

'But the Prior didn't like it?' said Laury.

'He wasn't impressed, but couldn't decide what to do. Left it for the humans to decide.'

He sighed.

'Apparently my jokes were divisive. Huh. Came down to one little idiot I'd played with. No sense of humour. And then the Prior killed me – except someone brought me here.'

'That's the bit that's worrying me,' said Laury. 'How you ended up here, specifically. The implications are troubling.'

'Go on,' said Enny.

Laury turned to Sacha.

'You realise it means that whoever did this knows of our mini-rebellion against the Prior. More than that, they knew where we were tonight. They know this is the right place for Enny to be. That he can help us.'

'Who could know?' said Sacha. 'I've only told my brothers.'

'Would they have told anyone else?'

'Only those they trust who support our cause. You reckon it was one of them?'

'No. That wasn't a human,' said Laury. She turned back to Enny. 'That was another god, wasn't it? It felt like they deliberately let us see them.'

Enny nodded.

'And not just any god,' said Laury. 'That wasn't one of us latter gods in Haven. It wasn't subject to the Prior's limitations. It was powerful.'

'Ancient,' said Enny.

Laury nodded. Anjuna was struggling to keep up. She wasn't used to being around gods, and now there were two of them in the room, talking about another.

'What are you saying?'

Laury stared at Enny, as if sharing a thought. He nodded.

'An old god saved Enny – but not the Prior. That means another god survived the war.'

'It's been here all this time?' said Anjuna.

'I don't know,' said Laury. 'Maybe. If so, it's been hiding itself well. I'm sure we wouldn't have spotted it if it hadn't wanted to be seen.'

Sacha saw the implication.

'Why is it revealing itself now? And why to us?'

'Good question,' said Laury. 'All I can do is conjecture. What if it's been alone all this time, trying to work out how to beat the Prior? It might have been waiting to find people to help.'

'Why doesn't it just ask us then?' said Sacha. 'Throwing another god at us is a weird way to start a conversation.'

'Cheers,' said Enny.

'Sorry,' said Sacha. 'Nothing personal.'

'Maybe it's not sure about us,' said Laury. 'It wants to see what we'll do. See if we prove ourselves.'

'So it's on our side?' said Anjuna.

'Possibly,' said Laury. 'Let's not jump to conclusions. We still don't know for sure who was on which side in the war.'

'At least it saved me,' said Enny.

'True, but that's not the most important thing. There's a bigger implication.'

Laury took her time to continue, looking around the table at each of them in turn. When she spoke again, her normal gentle tone was gone. This was deadly serious.

'The ancient war between the gods isn't over yet. It's about to kick off again – and we're in the middle of it.'