

Prior Enragement

A Short Story

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Prior Enragement

An unfamiliar noise woke Chandra. Despite an awful night's sleep, he was alert enough to realise that an unexpected sound that morning should be no great surprise. Everything would be new.

For a start, his back wasn't aching, thanks to a more comfortable bed. It was so different from the one he'd learned to tolerate over the years in the dormitory, surrounded by a throng of muttering novices. Now, it was just the three of them in a private room, all fresh graduates in the history department.

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

It wasn't worth going back to sleep. Going by the light outside, it wouldn't be long before the matin bell rang to summon them to their first full day as graduates, ready to take their initial steps as qualified historians on the long road to Adept status. That would be his life for the next decade.

Chandra waited for signs of life from either Byron 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 clear chime of a bell echoed around the room. That definitely wasn't the matin bell – it came from nearby. Belatedly, he realised it was the same sound that had woken him a few moments earlier.

Byron mumbled from beneath his blanket.

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

'Not me,' said Chandra. 'Came from Dajun's direction.'

Dajun yawned.

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

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

That was typical Byron. He liked to assert his authority to take control of any situation, not that ever knew what to do once he got it. Still, 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 Byron.

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 waggled it. The bell rang.

'What the...'

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Chandra and Byron 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. Byron wasn't 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.

Byron had had enough.

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

As soon as Byron stood, his foot chimed the lowest pitch of the three. He cursed and slumped back onto his bed, shaking his leg over and over, grumbling every time it rang. Byron showed no immediate sign of snapping out of his self-absorbed 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 knew. Everyone in the Priory was supposed 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. Today's gonna be fun!'

Byron 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 a god's power.'

Byron pursed his lips.

'Could be one of them doing it.'

'You know it doesn't work like that,' said Chandra. 'The Prior won't let them mess around in the Priory after they've emerged. Dajun's right. This is a sign that a new god's about to appear.'

Byron wasn't ready to admit he was wrong.

'Could be the Prior playing a trick on us. Some sort of newbie ritual.'

That was too much, even for Dajun.

'Oh yes, because if there's one thing the Prior's famous for, it's his sense of humour. Don't be stupid. This is a harbinger of an emergent deity.'

'Let's not rush,' said Byron. 'We need to prove it to ourselves first. Don't want to make a fool of ourselves on our first day.'

Now the initial shock was lessening, Chandra saw the portent more as an opportunity than an inconvenience. It needed all of them to agree to make the most of it though.

'Show some backbone. Our first responsibility is to report it to Principal Jenna. She'll call a Conclave to decide what it is, but we'll be involved all the way. It could be the only chance we'll ever get to see this.'

'And it's urgent,' said Dajun. 'If it is an emergent deity, 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 Byron just glared back. Dajun tried to lighten his mood.

'Think about it. If it is a deity, there'll be a big celebration to welcome it into the community. It's long overdue. Been three years since the last festival. I love all the streets full of stalls, all that food and drink, all the music. Can't wait!'

'Count me out,' said Byron. 'Too bloody noisy. I'd rather die than get caught up in the crowds.'

Chandra couldn't resist the chance to puncture Byron'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 Byron. 'This isn't a laughing matter.'

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

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

'Oh, fine,' said Byron. 'Principal Jenna 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 new brown robes. The early start meant the corridors were empty as they chimed their way towards the office of the head of the history department, Principal Jenna. The Priory overall was massive, built as it was to encapsulate the Source and surround it with all of human knowledge, but the history department itself was relatively small. It took less than a minute to reach their destination.

'It's early,' said Byron. '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 talking about her. He knocked on the door.

'Come,' said a woman's voice.

Chandra recognised the grey-haired woman behind a desk, decked out in her official black flannel suit. He'd seen Principal Jenna plenty of times during his novice training, but had never spoken to her directly before. He bit the bullet.

'Sorry to trouble you so early. We believe we have identified a portent. We thought you'd want to know as soon as possible.'

She briefly 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. Chandra took the lead.

'Not so much seen as heard.'

He shook his foot. The others joined him.

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

Principal Jenna 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 Byron and Dajun.'

'Dajun? That name rings a bell.'

Dajun laughed. Principal Jenna's eyes narrowed.

'It was a turn of phrase, not a joke. I came across your name recently, but can't remember why.'

'I graduated first,' said Dajun.

'Ah yes,' said Principal Jenna. 'That was 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 always 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.

Principal Jenna stood.

'This leave me little choice.'

She flipped up a cover concealing a switch on the wall behind her, 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 Chandra.

He knew they'd be involved, but hadn't expected to be at the initial meeting of all the heads of departments.

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

She headed to the door.

'Follow me. The Conclave will be held here 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 Byron looked star-struck and Dajun slotted neatly into the overexcited category, it seemed the best option. He intended to make the best impression possible.

It was only a short distance to the audience chamber. At least that part was familiar. They'd 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 Jenna. '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. It was Chandra's chance to shine.

Principal Jenna 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 watched the principals as they 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 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 growing 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.

The Priory had two roles. Its most critical task was to detect and quantify any new deities before they emerged from the Source in the heart of the building. The Prior had to be ready to greet them before the end of the day. It only happened every couple of years on average, but the timing was unpredictable. It had been three years since the last.

The Priory's role otherwise focused on recording all forms of human knowledge, whether recovered from ancient times or newly acquired. So much had been lost. It was their job to ensure it never happened again.

The world had been a different place more than a century earlier, with humanity numbering in the millions, and 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 amongst the 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 devastating war. 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 deity, the Prior, led the rebuilding process, founding the Priory as the focal point for future deity emergence. He encouraged the human survivors to live nearby. Working together, they could ensure a stable future.

The key to that stability was controlling the emergence of any replacement gods. The Prior designed the Source to limit the maximum power of any deity and allow the needs of humanity to shape its abilities. Once corporeal, the gods could forge a role in the 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 was based on 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.

As the room filled, the mood in the Conclave confounded Chandra's expectations. Principal Jenna remained stern throughout, showing little enthusiasm but remaining resolutely professional. The others were a mixed bag. Many were eating or drinking. Some had brought work with them, concentrating on reading or writing rather than the surrounding hubbub. Some looked bored. One was dozing. Conversely, others were sitting upright, looking even more excited than Dajun.

Finally, the Conclave was ready to start. Chandra stood in a line with Byron and Dajun a few metres away from Principal Jenna. No, she was History now. He had to remember that.

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

'You all know why you're here. What appears to be a portent of a new deity has been inflicted upon these 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 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 young woman wearing an informal floral dress raised her hand. She looked to be one of the youngest principals in the room, probably in her late thirties, and was staring at them in fascination.

'Yes, Music?' said History.

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

They obliged. Music's face broke into a broad smile.

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

'Go ahead,' said History.

Music bounced from her seat and hurried to the front. She stood a couple of metres before them, failing to hide her excitement.

'Humour me. I'll point randomly at each of you. When I do, ring your bell as fast as possible. 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, but 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 his 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: Byron, Chandra, and Dajun. It's another coincidence.'

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

An older man wearing a shabby suit in the front row 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 just as likely this is a random magic burst from the Source.'

'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. It needs more than this to make a judgement.'

A young man sitting beside him in a dressing gown raised one hand without looking up. He was scribbling notes on a pad with the other.

History exhaled a sigh.

'Yes, Literature?'

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

'I concur with Language. As you know, puzzles and riddles are my speciality. If this were a cryptic clue, it would be unsatisfactory as it stands. There are too many unexplained elements.'

'Like?'

'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. 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, maybe the C? Study the quality of the note.'

'Will that be useful?' said History.

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

'Very well.'

That was Chandra's short-term fate sealed. He'd been reduced to a note. History quickly made the other assignments.

'Health, you take Byron. Give him a full medical, see if there are any 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. Byron, Chandra, Dajun, see me for reassignment once you are free.'

It was going to be a busy day for them all. Chandra reckoned he'd 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 town? The needs of the people helps to shape a new god. It might give us a clue how to interpret the portents.'

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

'If you'd looked outside, you'd know 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. 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 it's something 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 efficiently, told everyone what was happening, and had organised the first steps. That was all that mattered. If only everyone had been more interested.

He approached the head of the music department, leaving Byron and Dajun to sort out their own assignments.

'Chandra, wasn't it?' said Music.

'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 job.'

'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 wanted him to relax. 'I was surprised how little some of them paid attention.'

'Not me,' said Music. 'I always enjoy these days. Maybe once I've gone through it as many times as History, things might be different, but I hope not. It's why we're here.'

'I guess it's a distraction from the daily job. A lot brought their work with them.'

'Like Literature, you mean?' said Music. 'That wasn't work. He enjoys creating puzzles for us principals to solve. I bet he was working on one of those. Sends them round once a week for fun. Well, to some of us. The cool ones. Not History, of course.'

They walked along the corridor towards the double doors at the exit from the history department, every stride 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. Chandra suddenly realised something had changed. Confused, he 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 to join him inside history. 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 shins.'

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 out the doors 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, clasping 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 would only aid his career.

'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.'

As they continued on their journey, Music's informal nature made it easy to loosen up. He'd definitely received a better assignment than his roommates. By the time they arrived several minutes later, Chandra felt confident enough to chat openly.

'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 and we'll head back to history. Come. You can help me carry it.'

They entered a room whose purpose Chandra couldn't immediately determine. It had a bit of everything. To the left were two rows of sloped desks. To the right was a raised area with chairs arranged as if for musical performers. On the far wall was a bench strewn with what, to Chandra's eyes, looked like junk. Music headed there.

She pulled out a couple of cardboard boxes 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 dais 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. 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 around a dozen ants marched towards each other from opposite sides of the dais. 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 the noise, certainly. Can't hold a tune though. It's horrible.'

It was an odd thing to focus on, but she was right. The jarring melody set his teeth on edge. He watched as the two files of ants stopped to form two 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 locking 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 sounds 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 of the rows. 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 it 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. Sat 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 legs. 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 be 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. He found it fascinating how 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. It was worth checking if they'd discovered anything yet.

Chandra went through the doors into their main corridor. 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. Being a musical expert now, he immediately recognised it as a D. That meant Dajun's heel was still chiming outside of the history department. That was annoying.

No matter. He knocked on the door and entered the small laboratory. Dajun was sitting on a chair, his top half naked, staring ahead at the wall opposite. His 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 what was happening.

'Don't worry. It's a portent. There's been another in music too. Looks like weird stuff is happening everywhere. Don't worry, Dajun. It'll wear off.'

He tried to sound more confident than he felt. It seemed to help. Science rolled his eyes.

'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.'

Dajun leant back in the chair and closed his eyes.

'Good to know, thanks.'

He paused. When he spoke again, his voice was calm and 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 once I get it back.'

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

'Good lad. I've already got plenty of 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 the 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.'

Dajun's composure made Chandra oddly uncomfortable. He 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 Byron?'

'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 Byron sprawled on the floor. Health stood above him in a white coat, frowning at the prone Byron.

'What happened?' said Health.

Byron'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 Byron.

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.'

Byron 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 Byron up by the hands. As soon as he let go, Byron swayed backwards again.

'Wha—'

Chandra caught him just in time.

'Lost your balance?'

'No. I can't feel my feet. The heels of my shoes keep collapsing.'

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

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

Byron slumped into the chair. Health pulled off one of his shoes, followed by the sock. It wasn't hard to spot why Byron 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 was no sign of injury. The perfectly smooth skin looked as if it had always been that way.

'What the...' said Byron.

Health frowned and scratch his chin.

'This is most peculiar. Does it hurt?'

'I told you, I can't feel it. 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 heal itself, given time, but I'll see what I can do to support you in the meantime.'

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

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

'Bastard,' said Byron. '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 Byron. 'Run away and leave us in the shit.'

Chandra grinned.

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

Chandra fled before Byron exploded, 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 musical ants, ringing feet, missing heels, and loss of eyesight, was a mystery.

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 their department heads concur these are portents, I will recall the Conclave. When you hear the bell behind my desk ring, make your way to the audience chamber.'

'I will.'

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. He needed the break. It was time to close his eyes and relax while trying not to move his feet.

The summoning bell rang. It felt like no time had passed, but he'd likely drifted off. Shaking off the drowsiness, he rushed to the chamber, hoping to be the first to arrive. He was.

Working on the assumption History would want the three of them at the front as before, he fetched some chairs. The others wouldn't want to stand in their condition, assuming they came, and neither did he.

History, Health, Music, and Science arrived together. Dajun was on History's arm, while Health pushed Byron in a wheelchair. Chandra moved one chair out of the way to make space. Everyone took their positions with little comment and waited for the room to fill. Finally, the Conclave was ready again.

History outlined all the portents discovered so far: the ringing feet, the singing ants, Dajun's blindness, Byron's heels, even the oddities at the edge of the history department. Nobody else had anything to report, so she tried to bring things to a conclusion.

'To me, these are clear portents of an emergent deity. The question is: have we met the criteria to summon the Prior? I believe we have. Are there any dissenting voices?'

Language raised his hand urgently, although was unable to speak, thanks to a mouthful of cake. He'd brought along a large slice on a plate with a mug of steaming coffee. Literature was sitting next to him again and spoke without looking up from his notepad.

'My friend will be with you shortly. I believe he objects. If it's for the reason I expect, I agree with him.'

Literature returned to making notes. History crossed her arms and tapped her foot for effect. Finally, Language was ready.

'Nothing's changed. Yes, these could be portents, but they're all linked to the original harbingers. They could equally be manifestations of the same magical burst.'

History wasn't ready to back down.

'It's true that the same individuals connect the portents in health and science, but that's not true of the singing ants, is it?'

'The C note was there, but had been silenced. Its latent magic could have manifested externally rather than remaining quiescent.'

'Perhaps,' said History. 'That's a bit of a leap for me.'

Language was equally reluctant to change tack.

'There's another problem. Not only do we have to be certain before summoning the Prior, we ought to have some idea of the nature of the deity that will emerge. We don't have that, do we?'

Literature looked up and nodded.

'I agree. We don't even know where to start in interpreting these phenomena. If you can form a narrative that links them, I'll be happy to reconsider, but until then, I say no.'

That was the part Chandra agreed with the most. Everything was too random. History shook her head, but didn't immediately come up with anything. Language took that as permission to ram his point home.

'Look, I'm not trying to be difficult, but until I see a portent without a direct causal link to the original, I cannot—'

Language stopped dead in his tracks as a brilliant flash of light came from his plate. With a cry, he leant back and covered his eyes. A plume of white smoke billowed up in front of him, and when it cleared, a large iced cake had replaced his single slice.

'That good enough for you?' said History. 'No unused latent magic here right now.'

Language peered at the top of the cake. He let out a single snorted laugh.

'It's got writing on it. It says *direct causal link*.'

'Ha!' said Literature. 'Looks like it's trying to make you eat your own words.'

To give him credit, Language joined in the laughter. It was cut short when the cake vanished in another puff of smoke.

'What was that all about?' said Language.

They looked at each other. Science raised his hand for permission to speak.

'Literature just provided the answer. It was a literal manifestation of *eat your own words*. The cake vanished as soon as he got the god's joke.'

'It's one interpretation,' said Language. 'Perhaps a new deity is the most likely cause, but I'm not sure where it gets us with understanding its nature. Nothing—'

He stopped as Literature jumped to his feet and executed a perfect pirouette. After completing a single, elegant spin, he slumped back into his seat.

'What?' said Language. 'Why did you do that?'

'It wasn't me,' said Literature. 'At least not consciously. I just spun around for no reason.'

History used the moment of confusion to get the meeting back on track.

'That's another pair of portents, one with a plausible explanation. All we need to do now is explain the rest – then we'll understand the nature of the deity.'

'I have an idea,' said Science. 'With your permission, I'd like to try an experiment.'

'Go ahead.'

Science stood and made his way to the stage. He crouched down by Dajun's chair.

'Dajun lost his sight the moment I took a blood sample for analysis. You could say he was *blinded by Science*.'

Dajun blinked several times, then squinted.

'I can see!'

'And there we go,' said Science, patting him on the shoulder. 'That's a relief. Chalk that up for two literal interpretations of phrases.'

'Okay,' said History. 'Looks like we're onto something. Health? Any thoughts about Byron's feet? What were you doing when it happened?'

Health frowned, almost mumbling out his response.

'Nothing really. I was getting my stethoscope out, but hadn't started doing anything. I...'

He hesitated, then spoke more defiantly.

'Look, my job is healing people. Not working out riddles. I—'

He stopped when he saw the look on History's face. Her mouth had dropped comically open, but her voice conveyed a tinge of weariness.

'You just said it. Your job was to heal him.' She lifted her foot and pointed underneath. 'To *heel him*.'

Byron's eyes widened. He stamped his feet. His bell rang again.

'They're back!'

'That's... terrible,' said Health. 'Is that supposed to be funny?'

'Not to me,' said History. 'It was more a pun than a literal interpretation of a phrase, but it's another attempt at humour, however bad.'

Music raised her hand.

'It gets worse. I've just worked out mine.'

'Go on.'

'There were two sets of ants fighting. You could say they were discord-ants. Their singing was discordant too.'

History sighed.

'What about that lone desk ant?'

'I'd forgotten about that. I...'

Music stumbled to a halt, then put her head in her hands. She mumbled the answer.

'You just said it: it was a singing desk ant. And it was singing a descant. That's what we call a treble melody sung over the main tune. A desk ant singing a descant.'

'You're right,' said History. 'It's getting worse. I guess that means we have a god of humour, or something like that.'

'God of bad jokes, maybe,' said Music.

Literature shouted out.

'It's puns. It's got to be.'

'Why?' said History.

'You know I make puzzles. Well, I've just been set one instead: I *spun around*. That's a cryptic clue, telling me the answer is an anagram of spun. Puns!'

History shrugged.

'God of puns, god of humour, god of bad jokes, it doesn't really matter. We all get the gist. We have the answer.'

Chandra shook his foot. The bell still rang.

'Sorry to interrupt,' he said. 'We still haven't explained our ringing feet.'

That got a glare from History, just as she thought she was wrapping things up, but Music added her support.

'Nor why I fell over going back into your department.'

A tic below History's right eye betrayed her irritation, but she passed it back to the audience.

'Any thoughts, anyone?'

Chandra tried every combination of bell or heel pun he could imagine, but came up blank. *Dropped a clanger* didn't work. Something about a ring seemed a good bet, but he couldn't get any further.

A lot of mumbling ensued between the principals. When no answers emerged, History soon had enough.

'Let's not let it delay us. We already have enough to summon the Prior. Once he has brought forth the new god, we can ask it in person. Is everyone agreed?'

A chorus of ayes filled the room.

'Then let us reconvene at the Source.'

Chandra had seen the Source once during novice training, but hadn't expected to visit it again for many years, restricted as it was to department heads and their invited guests. Yet, here he was back on his first day as a qualified member of the Priory. Maybe this new god did have a sense of humour, after all.

The Source was in the dead centre of the Priory, housed in a massive circular room lit by skylights in the high roof. A natural shaft in the ground disappeared down into the depths of the planet. A mustard mist oozed from it, visible magic potential that spread across the room to conceal the rocky floor. From this, the new god would take form.

A massive stone throne sat on the far side of the shaft. History guided Byron, Chandra, and Dajun to stand with her on the left of the room. The remaining principals stood on the right.

'Attend us, Prior,' intoned History. 'We beseech your judgement on the emergence of your kin.'

Chandra instinctively held his breath. Luckily the process didn't take long. Orange points of light blinked into existence and swirled around the throne. They coalesced into the shape of a sitting man, then faded away to reveal the only deity to survive the war between the gods. The Prior had arrived.

The Prior took the form of a tanned, muscular man wearing a toga, with a softly handsome face that bordered on pretty. A laurel crown topped his mop of dark curly hair. If he stood, he'd reach about three metres in height.

Chandra wasn't sure what it made of him. His initial reaction was to be overawed in the presence of a legend, their saviour, and the founder of the Priory. Yet, a sensation of being

underwhelmed nagged at the back of his brain. It was like the god had taken little effort in choosing his form. He was impressively predictable.

He couldn't let it distract him. That was something to worry about later. For now, they had a job to do.

The Prior nodded at History and got straight to business.

'State the nature of the deity emergence.'

History straightened and replied in a calm, firm voice.

'The portents hint at a playful deity, one with a fondness for puns and plays on words. Perhaps a god of humour.'

'Describe the portents.'

She went through everything they'd encountered. The Prior listened to her detailed descriptions without comment or sign of approval. Their job was to provide information. His was to reach a determination on the god's fate.

The Prior was insistent that another war must never occur between the gods. The previous one only ended thanks to his emergent ability to dissipate any deity back to its natural state with nothing more than a snap of his fingers. He opted for a total reset, reverting all the gods to raw potential that seeped into the planet. He formed the Priory to shape their re-emergence and limit their power.

'I agree with your conclusion,' said the Prior.

He spread his arms wide and spoke towards the shaft.

'Reveal yourself and be judged, god of humour.'

The mist swirled, rose, and solidified into the space between History and the Prior. It cleared to reveal a small man, no more than a metre high, naked other than a loincloth. The impish god grinned.

'I see myself more as a god of puns.'

The Prior cocked his head and stared down at the puny form of the new deity with a tight-lipped smile.

'Not all your portents can be correctly classified as puns.'

The new god's smirk didn't waver.

'If the god of puns says they're puns, then they're puns.'

'I see,' said the Prior, a sigh in his voice.

Chandra's immediate reaction was that the new god had already shown more personality than the Prior, but it could rapidly become grating. Then again, who was he to judge a pair of gods? It was still a shock to realise how readily this felt normal to him.

'Very well,' said the Prior. 'You understand that before you gain access to the world of humanity beyond these walls, I must be satisfied you pose no threat to the stability of the community.'

'Got it, boss,' said Puns. 'You're the gatekeeper. I gotta make you laugh.'

He broke into a burst of tap-dancing. The Prior's frown deepened. Chandra reckoned Puns was trying too hard, but then again, he had no idea what made the Prior tick.

'Cheer up, boss,' said Puns. 'This day will go down in history.'

He singled out Music, who was standing at the front of the principals.

'Just like this lovely lady did whenever she tried to enter the history department. I bet you always wanted to go down in history, didn't you, my dear? Well, I made sure you did.' He grinned. 'Down in history. You know. Falling down. Geddit?'

It was the first time Chandra had seen Music anything other than relaxed and friendly. Her icy glare wasn't as frosty as her voice.

'How funny. It's always a sign of a good joke when it needs explaining to death. And I'm not your dear. Nor your lovely lady.'

'Sorry, sweet cheeks,' said Puns. 'I—'

'Enough,' interrupted the Prior. 'Given your nature, the optimal way to judge you will be for us to join in mental communion. Do you consent?'

'Whatever you say, boss,' said Puns.

They closed their eyes, their expressions going blank. The room remained silent. It gave Chandra time to think back over the day.

Just after they'd awoken to the first portent, he'd spontaneously made a joke at Byron's expense. It was out of character for him. Even Dajun had been surprised. Was that the influence of this god, leaking his humour into the world? Chandra wasn't sure how he felt about that. Even History had accidentally made a joke when they first met her.

His train of thought stopped when the gods' eyes reopened. The Prior frowned and shook his head.

'I fear I must defer my judgement. There is no overriding reason I should not admit this entity into the community, despite his style of humour not being to my taste. However, I worry the general population may find it divisive. Many will be amused. More may be annoyed.'

'Hey,' said Puns. 'I thought you liked puns. Even your name is a pun. You're the Prior, the only god left from *prior* to the war.'

The Prior's reply was deadpan.

'That is a coincidence, not a pun.'

'And what about your emergence timetable? You take a day to decide on deicide. That sounds like a pun, although admittedly, not a very good one.'

The Prior stared at him for several seconds. Then, without reply, he turned his gaze to the department heads.

'I will not let my personal distaste cloud this decision. As it will primarily affect the mood of your community, it should be humanity who decides his fate. You, the principals of the Priory, are their representatives here. We shall hold a vote. Judge him as you wish.'

Chandra watched as hands were raised, first for the new god, then against. History voted against. Interestingly, Music didn't choose either option, preferring to abstain. It would be close. He couldn't predict which way it would go.

The Prior instantly assessed the result.

'I said his humour was divisive. So it has proven. The result is a dead heat.'

He paused, then interrupted the muttering that broke out.

'Very well. Under the circumstances, it is appropriate to give the casting votes to the three harbingers. They have been the butt of his jokes. They will decide his fate.'

Prior Enragement

Chandra's mouth went dry. He hadn't expected that. He had no idea what to do. Somehow, on his first working day in the Priory, the life of a deity was in his hands.

The god of puns turned to them, his grin still in place. It no longer looked convincing.

'Hey, it's been fun, hasn't it? You wouldn't be here to see all this otherwise. No harm done.'

Dajun kept his wits about him. He shook his foot. The bell rang again.

'What was this supposed to mean?'

Puns bounced up and down on the balls of his feet. His grin widened.

'In the glorious story of my emergence, you were nothing more than footnotes. *Foot notes*. Geddit?'

Dajun laughed.

'Okay, you can stay.'

'No, he can't,' said Byron. 'That was terrible.'

The two gods looked at Chandra. He had to say something, but one question remained unanswered. He shook his silent foot.

'Why doesn't mine ring all the time?'

'Easy,' said Puns. 'You're only a footnote in history.'

Chandra stared at the smirking form of the god of puns. Afterwards, guilt and doubt would wrack him, but he let his instincts take over. The words came out of his mouth without conscious volition.

'Kill him.'

The god's grin disappeared.

'Wai—'

The Prior snapped his fingers.