

The Gods in Haven

Preview (third draft)

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Part One

Source of Power

Chapter 1 – Poetry in Motion

Haven was Anjuna's home. She'd just returned from a long, sweaty day's work at the local bakery, the biggest benefit of which was the guarantee of a loaf of bread to pad out the evening meal. Not everyone had that luxury, particularly over the recent harsh winter. She didn't take it for granted.

Haven was humanity's home too, growing like a festering pearl with the Priory at its centre. Centuries ago, the Prior – the lone remaining elder god – gathered the remnants of the human race there to nurture their recovery after the apocalyptic war between the gods. Few had survived.

That was a long time ago. Now, Haven had seen better days. Every year in Anjuna's recent memory was tougher than the last, with food supplies stretched to the limit – not that the bastards in the Priory cared. They sickened her. Something had to change, but for now, all she could do was live day to day.

After a quick freshen up, she headed out into their main living space. Her father, Manish, was sitting in the low chair in the corner opposite the shabby kitchen area. He was looking down, scratching his grizzly beard while reading the Book of Serenity, as ever.

'Shall I make dinner then?' said Anjuna.

'Um, sure,' said her father. 'Thanks. Good day at work?'

She shrugged.

'The usual.'

She didn't know how to speak to him anymore. His perpetually distant demeanour was hard to take, less than a week after burying her mother. He accepted everything without complaint. In contrast, Anjuna's heartbreak was raw.

Maybe nothing could have saved her mum, but a healthier diet would have helped. Sneaking the odd treat out of the bakery was never going to be enough. It was galling to know that everyone on the other side of the Priory wall wanted for nothing – including her brother. Yet, he'd not even bothered to leave its sanctuary to attend his own mother's funeral. She was done with him. He wasn't worth the effort.

Still, her mother would have wanted her to make more of an effort with her father. That was difficult when all he cared about was the Maven and her Church of Serenity. Admittedly, its teachings had helped her mum through her illness too, but it did nothing for Anjuna. Her father used the Book of Serenity as his crutch. Anjuna preferred to wrap herself in anger.

He was always drilling the Maven's credo into her: live in the moment; don't dwell on the past; don't worry about the future. What will be, will be. Despite its triteness, there was a lesson in there she was trying to learn – it was better to get on with life rather than waste time reliving old grievances. That was tough too.

Right now, getting on with life meant preparing their evening meal. Her father showed no signs of helping. She crossed to the kitchen cupboard, opened the door, and stared in unsurprised dismay. It was as bare as when she'd left for work.

She turned back to her father.

'You did remember to go to the market?'

He looked up and blinked several times before breaking out a sheepish smile.

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

'Other than having nothing to eat?'

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

Anjuna took a deep breath.

'And what about me?'

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

The Maven was one of the latter gods – those who'd been born since the end of the war. They were weak compared to the deceased elder gods, each limited to a narrow speciality defined as they emerged from the Source at the heart of the Priory. Officially, the Maven was the god of contemplation.

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

'I've told you before,' said Anjuna. '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 checked back in the cupboard. 'There's not even any butter. Damn y—'

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

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

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

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

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

Her journey was meandering at first, wending its way through Fenestral's back streets before crossing the main thoroughfare that led from the Priory to the gates in Haven's outer

wall. Every sector had a single entrance into the Priory and a single exit to the farmlands beyond the wall, but Fenestral's was unique. It was why Anjuna was glad to live there. It made the place feel special.

Cocooned within Haven's walls, it was easy to forget that the town sat inside a massive crater formed during the war, providing extra protection from the surrounding wilderness. The crater's steep rim made it hard to leave – except from Fenestral, where a natural gap allowed access to the desolation beyond.

That made Fenestral special to the Priory too. It was the route out for their survey teams when heading off to uncover any historical artefacts that survived the war. Recapturing the past and building for the future was the Priory's official role. Haven didn't seem to be included in their plans.

Anjuna had seen the track leading out of the crater a couple of times, but only on school trips to visit the farmlands surrounding Haven. The space within the surrounding ridge was large enough to support limited agriculture, but it barely provided enough food to sustain its people. Further population growth was impossible. The Priory leeching the cream off the top was the final nail in that coffin.

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

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

'Hi Bruce. Got any pies left?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What flavour jam?'

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

Anjuna sighed.

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

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

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

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

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

'Typical. Anyone else I can blame?'

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

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

Bruce shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

As they closed, Anjuna pulled herself upright. Her back cracked, helping to release the tension, but a spasm in her neck after the day at work was the last straw. This was all the Prior's fault, prioritising his precious Priory above everything – but the Prior wasn't here. This latter god was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What?' said Anjuna.

Alton's tone was bitter.

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

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

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

Anjuna blinked to let the god's reply sink in. She was disconcerting. Even her name – Laury – was unusually informal for a latter god.

'So you can't do anything?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Laury's voice was warm and soft, but the sing-song of her tone was off-putting. Anjuna was instantly suspicious. The odd pattern of her speech seemed designed to hide the fact that she never quite answered any question.

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

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

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

'Read this. Look, we want to make people's lives better, but we can't do it alone. Come if you want to help, stay away if all you're going to do is complain, but for now, let us pass. We've got work to do.'

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

Unsure what else to do, Anjuna took a step back. The Laureate nodded and smiled.

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'I hope to see you there.'

They both set off. Anjuna felt the need to say something before they were out of earshot.

'Welcome to Fenestral.'

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

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

'It's been a bad day.'

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

Chapter 2 – Ringing in the New

A muffled note chimed, the tone as clear as a wooden bell. Its unfamiliarity was no great surprise – everything would be new that morning – but Chandra had hoped for a quiet start. Reluctantly, he blinked his eyes open.

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

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

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

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

Even the early years in the Priory hadn't fully quashed his enthusiasm for the past. Their training had focused on the role of the history department within the Priory and their practical responsibilities after graduation. There wasn't much, you know, actual history. That would come once they'd proven themselves and neared adept status.

Chandra's training had provided enough historical context to understand the importance of their work. The old world had a significantly higher level of technology than at present, leading humanity to consider themselves equal to the deities that walked among them. Their hubris had played its part in turning the gods against each other. It was the Priory's role to ensure it never happened again. The lessons of history were central to that.

Although Chandra had received limited exposure to it so far, the Priory's other departments investigated – and sometimes used – old technology and artefacts recovered from the wilderness by the survey teams. Very little was allowed out into Haven though. The knowledge held by adept historians of the failures of the past informed what was safe to release. Chandra couldn't wait to learn everything. He was convinced his mother's tales all contained a kernel of truth.

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

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

Barnaby mumbled from beneath his blanket.

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

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

Dajun yawned.

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

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

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

'That— That wasn't...'

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

'What's going on?' said Barnaby.

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

'What the...'

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

'You two winding me up?'

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

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

Barnaby had had enough.

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

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

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

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

'Again.'

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

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

Dajun had regained his composure. He grinned.

'You know what this means?'

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

'A portent?'

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

Barnaby wasn't so enthused.

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

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

Barnaby pursed his lips.

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

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

Barnaby wasn't ready to admit he was wrong.

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

That was too much, even for Dajun.

'The Prior doesn't do pranks. It's disrespectful to even suggest it.'

Barnaby still wouldn't give up.

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

'Principal Sabela knows him,' said Dajun. 'According to her, the Prior's a serious man. Serious god, I mean. Show some respect. We owe him everything.'

'Some people are so gullible,' said Barnaby.

'Better than being a cynic.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'A fête worse than death, you mean?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dajun snorted a laugh.

'And how do we do that?'

'Shaddup.'

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

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

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

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

'Come,' said a woman's voice.

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

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

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

'That is the correct course of action. Enter. Describe what you have seen.'

They jangled into the room.

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

He shook his foot. The others joined him.

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

Principal Sabela sighed.

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

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

'Dajun? That name rings a bell.'

Dajun laughed. Principal Sabela's eyes narrowed.

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

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

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

'It is.'

She sighed again.

'That's another piece of evidence in favour of an emergence. You should have been taught this. Who can tell me why?'

Just because they'd graduated, it wasn't going to stop Sabela from treating them like novices. Still, it was a chance for Chandra to impress.

'Power leaking from the Source gravitates towards recent changes around the Priory?'

'Correct,' said Sabela.

The Prior had designed the Priory to maximise the chance of uncovering a new god's true nature before it appeared. It controlled the release of magical potential from the Source like steam from a pressure cooker.

Principal Sabela rose to her feet.

'This leaves me little choice.'

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

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

'You want us to attend?' said Dajun.

'Of course. As the initiator, I am expected to bring evidence of any new portent to the Conclave. You are that evidence. I have no choice.'

She headed for the door.

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

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

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

'Do nothing unless you are asked. Remain silent. I do not encourage contact between my junior employees and other departments, but needs must on this occasion. Do not let me down.'

'We won't,' said Chandra.

They'd not been allowed to leave the history department during their novice years, but that prohibition no longer applied. The Priory's charter imposed certain conditions to encourage interdepartmental cooperation. It also allowed each department to set its own rules internally. Sabela ran a tight ship, but she could only go so far.

'Be aware,' said Sabela. 'This is a routine process, but some principals can be overexcitable. Do not encourage them.'

'We will follow your lead at all times.'

Chandra had adopted the role of speaking for all of them, but as Barnaby was dumbstruck for once and Dajun could get overenthusiastic, there was little choice. It suited him fine.

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

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

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

Principal Sabela hadn't finished.

'Take care with the formalities. Do you remember how to refer to me with other departments present?'

Chandra should know, but before it would come to mind, Dajun got in first. That was annoying, especially as he was right.

'As History, ma'am. All principals are referred to by their department name during official business.'

'Correct. Do not forget.'

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

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

He knew how many departments existed, but seeing the number of heads as they filed in was a different matter. Now that he was formally part of it, the true scale of the Priory was finally hitting home. The number of specialities was increasing too. If a department's knowledge grew significantly, and a natural split existed in their discipline, the Prior insisted they create separate, cooperating departments. Small and efficient was the Prior's mantra.

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

Barnaby shrugged.

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

For once, Barnaby had a point, although it wasn't the whole story. Yes, their most critical task was to detect and understand any new deity before it emerged from the Source in the heart of the building. Then the Prior could adjudicate its fate – but it wasn't something that happened often. It had been a decade since the last emergence.

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

As the room filled, the mood in the Conclave continued to confound Chandra's expectations. Principal Sabela – History – remained stern throughout, showing little

enthusiasm but remaining resolutely professional. The others were a mixed bag: several were eating or drinking; some had brought work with them, concentrating on reading or writing rather than the surrounding hubbub; a few looked bored; one was dozing. Conversely, others were sitting upright, looking even more eager than Dajun.

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

'The moment is here again. The first potential portents of an emergent deity have manifested, and as principal of the originating department, I have called this Conclave. It is now up to us to investigate.'

She looked around the room and frowned.

'This is not a matter to be taken lightly. Limiting the power of new gods is part of the Prior's initiative to ensure nothing like the war between the gods can happen again, but he cannot bear the burden alone. We must all play our part.'

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

A philosophical disagreement broke out among the elder gods over their relationship with humanity. It rapidly morphed from a debate into 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 surviving deity, the Prior, led the rebuilding process, founding the Priory as the focal point for future deity emergence. He gathered the remaining humans to live in Haven, the town that grew up around the Priory. Working together, they could ensure a stable future.

Not all the principals seemed to think that included them. Sabela was unimpressed. She didn't only treat fresh graduates like novices – the principals were now in her sights.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, Music?' said History.

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

They obliged. Music's face lit up.

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

'Go ahead,' said History.

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

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

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

History interjected.

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

Music grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What is it, Language?' said History.

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

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

'How do you know that?'

'Know?' said Language. 'I don't. It's my opinion. What makes yours more valid than mine? On balance, the evidence says it's just as likely to be a random event. Let's not jump to conclusions.'

Chandra held his breath. He'd never heard anyone speak with such insolence to Sabela before, and she didn't come across as one who'd take it well. Yet, she responded calmly.

'I wouldn't say it's as likely. This is already a complex interaction of events. That's sufficient evidence there is intelligence behind it.'

'No it's not,' said Language. 'If the growing potential fails to coalesce into a god, it's got to go somewhere. Magic like to tell stories. The released burst can use nearby coincidences to form a coherent narrative. Stop trying to take shortcuts. You need more than this.'

History glared at him for several seconds but didn't respond. Chandra had the impression this wasn't the first time they'd butted heads. The dynamic was fascinating, and it hadn't finished yet. Sitting beside Language, a frowning man sporting large spectacles and wearing 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. His delivery was slow and deliberate.

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

'Why?'

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

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

She took a deep breath.

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

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

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

'Will that be useful?' said History.

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

'Very well.'

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

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

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

Sabela made the other assignments.

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

Nobody complained.

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

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

History had one last question before closing the Conclave.

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

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

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

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

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

'Point taken,' said History. 'Right. Let's not waste more time here. Get to it.'

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

The whole thing wasn't what Chandra had expected, but there was no time to work out how he felt about it. Music was standing there, waiting patiently for him. Except, it wasn't Chandra she was interested in. She only wanted to listen to his foot.

Chapter 3 – Rhyme or Reason

The day after her unexpected encounter with the Laureate in the marketplace, Anjuna was eating her evening meal with her father – their first chance to catch up since the previous night. This time, he'd remembered to get food during the day. The atmosphere was more relaxed.

'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.'

Anjuna swallowed some spicy lentils and put her spoon down.

'That's nice. Had a chat with a god myself.'

It had been too hard to resist stealing his thunder, but 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 that they were all working together. She wouldn't forget that.

'Don't worry,' said Anjuna. 'I did welcome her.'

Probably not the time to say her welcome was more of a verbal assault.

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

'She was—'

Anjuna coughed, her throat dry. She took a sip of water to give herself time to think. The Laureate had been physically perfect, just like all the other latter gods she'd seen or heard about, but Anjuna hadn't gained a 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 didn't fit into any of the godly stereotypes. 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 to herself that the Laureate's promise to create a better 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. She couldn't believe she'd had the gall to act like that in the heat of the moment, 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.'

Her father was pressing all the wrong buttons. Telling her not to do something was a bad idea, especially now she'd heard that the Maven had given her support to the Laureate. Still, she'd try to keep things constructive.

'It was 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 to do something. 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.'

Maybe he did know what to say at times.

'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. Even in times of scarcity, things could still work 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 as she got closer, coinciding with the town's odour shifting from the agricultural to damp rot and rusty metal.

She had to watch her step. She crunched over broken glass where the window of an abandoned shop had been shattered. The next building wasn't much better, the external plasterwork of its upper floor having flaked away and fallen into the street. The air of decline continued until she reached her destination in a narrow street.

The meeting was to be held in what appeared to be a disused mill, nothing like what she'd expect for a god: more broken windows, grubby paintwork, and rotting wood. She took that as a positive 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.

'Didn't think you'd come.'

'Nor did I,' said Anjuna. 'But I'm here. What do I do?'

'Go on in. We're in the room at the back.'

Anjuna couldn't resist a shrug as she went through the door. She walked down a short corridor, filthy enough that footprints were visible in the dirt on the floor. She added hers to the mix, ignoring the closed doors on either side and heading straight for the open door at the far end where a dim light glowed.

Beyond was a larger chamber, presumably the heart of the old mill. It was in no better condition than outside: the walls looked like they'd last been painted a couple of decades ago; the air was musty, with an undercurrent of mouldy grain; from the bird crap on the floor, something was nesting in the roof. Anjuna liked the place.

Set along one side were four rows of eight trestle chairs, with only about ten occupied. Anjuna seated herself at the end of the third row and waited, studiously avoiding eye contact. Everyone else was doing the same, even the few people who arrived after her. It wasn't a big crowd.

Ten minutes later, Alton appeared, standing in the centre of the space before them.

'Hi,' 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. The nervous young man she'd first seen was back.

'Sorry. I'm not used to all this, but I'll get there.' He paused again. 'Let's get a few things out of the way before you meet Laury.'

Anjuna would rather they skipped to the main event. It would only be merciful. Alton's discomfort was palpable.

'Right,' said Alton. 'I bet you're wondering what's the use of a god of poetry? If so, you're not the only one. Laury often wonders the same.'

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

'She's wrong though. I've seen what good she can do. Her words brought great comfort to my parents when they were alive, but her impact could only be limited. She wants that to change.'

The warmth in his voice when he spoke about his parents sounded genuine. He still had a long way to go to convince her though.

'That's why we're here. It's why we moved to Fenestral – but we can't do it alone. We need your help.'

Anjuna didn't understand why Fenestral was any better than Dawn to make changes, but hopefully that would soon become clear. He'd nearly finished.

'Right. It is my honour to introduce the Laureate. Um, she prefers Laury. I trust her. I hope you will too.'

The Laureate came in through a side door, keeping her eyes on Alton. She touched his shoulder, a gentle smile on her lips.

'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 had 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.

'Still I prefer to speak in prose, and I do so with my friend.' Laury smiled at Alton again. '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.

'Okay,' said Laury. 'It's time to get serious, but there was a point to having a little fun first. As difficult as the fight to improve conditions around Haven will be, we mustn't lose sight of our humanity. Work hard, but enjoy life while doing it. Then success will bring its own rewards.'

Nice sentiments, but no specifics. Anjuna wanted more.

'You don't need me to tell you something must change,' said Laury. 'It's been a tough winter for everyone, but that only exacerbated the underlying systemic issues. The imbalance between the Priory and Haven is the heart of the problem.'

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 doesn't happen in a vacuum. The support provided by Haven is essential 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 appear upset.

'It doesn't work like that. A covenant exists between the latter gods and the Prior: we vow to dedicate our powers to improving Haven's society; in exchange, the Prior will not interfere. The Priory remains the Prior's sole domain. No other gods can enter without his permission.'

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

'Unfortunately, we latter gods are severely limited in our powers. For example, I have the gift of heightened empathy, allowing me to understand what moves you; my power of language allows me to express concepts with eloquence; my life expectancy is many times your own. Beyond that, there's not much more – but that doesn't mean I cannot find a way to 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 good causes and aid individuals along the way. My presence can open doors.'

She grimaced and shook her head.

'I want to achieve more than that. The god of contemplation, the Maven, has found her path, but her 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 her almost overwhelming physical presence, but Laury had said nothing specific. Words might be her power, but they had to lead to something concrete. Still, it was a decent start.

'The first step is to gather a group of willing volunteers to help carry out the plans we create. 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 it? 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 solutions. Starting the conversation will be the first step to a resolution.'

Anjuna's disappointment changed flavour with every word until it turned bitter. 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 Laury was 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 efforts. Why's that?'

The god took it in her stride.

'I don't. Far from it. I have a good 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 will 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 indirect contacts inside the Priory. They are 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,' he said. 'It's not even true. According to my grandparents when they were alive, 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 didn't disagree.

'There is some truth in what you say, but it 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 the 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 shoved her hand in the air. She'd been mulling it over, wondering whether it was worth the effort, but doing nothing was the coward's way out. She had to try.

Laury gave her the go-ahead. All Anjuna had to do now was find the 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 why things get worse every generation, eating away at our ability to survive. We've got to stop it before it's too late.'

Sacha got in before Laury could reply.

'She's right. People take the tithe for granted, but it's like a cancer, eating us away.'

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 survive. Even after this winter, they've supplies left over, but keep everything for themselves – and still take fresh stuff. Can't we get some back?'

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

Laury poured cold water on the idea.

'I'm afraid not. As I said, the Prior insists the tithe level is correct, and that includes the surplus they retain as a contingency. It's not an issue that's up for discussion.'

'Then we do something about it,' said Sacha.

'In what way?'

'Take it back. It wouldn't be hard to break into the Priory and steal from their stockpile. Bet they wouldn't even notice. 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 positive thing she'd done for a while. She thought to herself for a few seconds before replying.

'It's audacious, I'll give you that. We're going to need to take risks to make a difference, but I can't condone criminality.' She looked away from Sacha. 'Out of academic interest, does anybody here support this course of action?'

Anjuna's hand shot up.

'You agree?' said Laury.

'Damn right I do,' said Anjuna. 'If they won't take less, then they don't deserve to keep it all. It's not criminal to make things fair – starving us is the crime. Putting that right is the first thing I've heard here that makes sense.'

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 defiance petered away as the disinterest from the others became apparent. Sacha turned to her, gave her a nod of appreciation, then shrugged.

It seemed to be the pattern of the meeting: brief flashes of hope followed by crushing disappointment. Anjuna wasn't going to get sucked in again. She politely waited for it to be over, taking no active part in the conversation. Even Sacha remained silent. Finally, Laury wrapped things up with an invitation to return the following week. It was irrelevant. Anjuna wouldn't be there.

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.

'Likewise,' said Anjuna. 'Pity nobody else agreed about the tithe.'

Sacha grinned unexpectedly.

'That won't stop me taking some back.'

'You're really going to try?'

'Got to do something,' said Sacha. 'My brothers in the Priory have told me all I need to know. I'm sure it can be done.'

She'd ached for a way to make a difference for too long. Was this what she'd been waiting for?

'I'll help.'

It was impetuous, but thinking about it would only spoil things. 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 remaining were Alton and the Laureate, lurking in the shadows on the far side. As they approached, Sacha spoke.

'She's in.'

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

The Laureate smiled and answered for him.

'Sacha's one 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.'

'It was a trick?' said Anjuna.

'A recruitment technique,' said Laury. 'I said that we latter gods are often nothing more than figureheads, but sometimes that can be useful if used judiciously. Regretfully, it's more effective than my poetry skills.'

'I— I see.'

'I must admit that I'd hoped for more than one volunteer, but I'm sure you'll make a big difference. I had a good feeling about you the moment we met.'

'No second thoughts?' said Sacha.

Anjuna blinked twice, giving herself time to think. The subterfuge had been irritating, if understandable, but she didn't know what to make of this latter god yet. At least the Laureate didn't have the haughty airs and graces of the Maven. And Sacha had plans.

Her stomach was churning with doubt. Then she realised the butterflies inside were flapping away at the hope, not the fear.

'None. I'm in.'

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