

# Chapter One

When Aorja Kitano awoke in her prison cell, she did a quick check of her body to make sure that her fellow prisoners hadn't tried to rape her in her sleep. Considering her privates felt in order, she supposed she had only been paranoid, even irrational. It wasn't like the other prisoners of Rock Isle had the guts to so much as touch her. Not after what she did to that disgusting Vicrun her first week in the prison, anyway.

Sitting up on her cot, Aorja yawned widely as she looked at her cell. It wasn't much, especially in comparison to her old room back in North Academy. The walls were made of old gray rock, slightly damp thanks to the ever-present sea mist that covered Rock Isle like a veil. On the wall opposite her was a series of scratches that acted as a simple calendar that let her know how many days and months she had been here. Her cell door was open, but it almost always was, seeing as that Vicrun fellow she had killed had torn the old door off during her first week here. She had tried to repair it, but Aorja had never been very good at etimancy and had been unable to convince the guards to repair it.

*Again, not like the other prisoners would think of even trying to gut me in my sleep, Aorja thought, a smile crossing her lips at the thought. They remember Vicrun. And Tascum. And Ohmak. They all may be a bunch of the world's worst murderers, rapists, thieves, blasphemers, and general thugs, but they have enough common sense to know that they shouldn't mess with people like me, at least if they want to live a full, long life.*

A scream of pain, followed by a loud *thud*, didn't even make Aorja flinch. She was used to waking up to the noise of prisoners

fighting each other. Sometimes, the fight ended in a draw and both prisoners lived; other times, one of them would kill the other in cold blood.

And sometimes, Aorja would awake to the sound of the prisoners violating each other. That was always disturbing, but Aorja was of the opinion that as long as they weren't touching her or looking at her lustily, they could do what they wished to each other.

*It's not like I even want to be here, Aorja thought, feeling her hair, which used to be long and beautiful, but was now short and grimy after going so long without a proper bath. But those guards are way too good at their job. Last time someone tried to escape Rock Isle ... oh, those guards are even more merciless than me.*

For some reason, Aorja giggled. Perhaps it was because she genuinely loathed her fellow prisoners, so anytime the guards mistreated them, it was like free entertainment for her. Sometimes, she would even frame a prisoner she particularly disliked for doing something that she did just to get him or her punished. That was always fun.

But as fun as it was, Aorja was beginning to think that she would have to get out of here sooner rather than later. When she first got here, she hadn't expected to still be in here after a year. She had thought that maybe her former master, the Ghostly God, would save her; after all, she had served him faithfully for about a year before her treachery was revealed and she was banished from North Academy, the most elite mage school in the world, forever for her crimes.

*Then again, I guess that's expecting too much from those southern gods, Aorja thought. They treat their servants like how spoiled children treat their old toys. I probably shouldn't have ex-*

*pected anything better from him.*

Her throat was too dry for her to be thinking such thoughts, so she called out, “Raka, get me a glass of water. I'm thirsty.”

She didn't know if Raka was around or not. The old woman, who acted as Aorja's servant, was sometimes still sleeping at this time. Based on what Aorja could see of the sky outside of her cell, it was still early morning; nonetheless, she waited patiently to see if Raka would show up.

A moment later, Aorja heard the shuffling of feet just outside of her cell door. Then an old woman, with stringy, silver-gray hair, the gray uniforms that all prisoners wore, and an empty pistol holstered around her belt, shuffled into the cell. She carried, with a shaking hand, a stone cup full of water. Aorja normally didn't trust the food or liquids offered to her by the other prisoners, but over the past year she had learned that Raka could be trusted, at least as much as any of these prisoners could be trusted.

Aorja took the cup from Raka's hand and sniffed the water. She didn't smell any poison or excrement in it, so she downed it in one gulp. Letting out a relieved sigh, Aorja handed the cup back to Raka, who said not a word as she took the cup back.

“Thank you for being so prompt, Raka,” said Aorja, flashing her usual brilliant smile, even though she knew Raka didn't need it. “How are the rest of the prisoners this morning? Anyone kill someone else?”

Raka shook her head. “No, Miss Kitano, no, no. Two aquarians got into a fight, but they knocked each other out. Some of the other prisoners are taking turns assaulting them, while the former thieves are rifling through their belongings for anything valuable.”

“Sounds like another normal day at Rock Isle,” said Aorja.

She giggled, but then stopped when her stomach growled. “Raka, could you get me something to eat? Remember, I don't want any bread more than five days old and make sure that the fish is only half-rotten.”

Raka bowed. “Yes, Miss Kitano, I will be back with your breakfast shortly.”

Raka shuffled out of the cell. Aorja watched her go, not letting herself breathe normally until Raka was gone.

Then Aorja leaned back against the rock wall of her cell. Raka was one of the few women at Rock Isle; at least, one of the few women who had not been thoroughly abused and discarded like a torn sock. She had been here longer than most of the prisoners, at least thirty years. And according to what a handful of the older prisoners had told Aorja, Raka had been known as the Southern Killer back in her youth, a nickname she had earned by killing in the name of the southern gods, who she claimed to worship.

Nowadays, though, Raka was quieter and slower. She never killed or attacked or stole from the other prisoners. She was probably in her seventies (though Aorja didn't know her exact age) and thus too old to get into any fights with the others. Even so, nearly every other prisoner on Rock Isle gave Raka a wide berth. Some said she was a cannibal, a trait she had taken from the southern gods, who were said to eat humans, but so far Aorja thought that that was just an unfounded rumor.

Even today, Aorja didn't quite understand why Raka chose to serve her. She suspected it had to do with Raka's affiliation with the southern gods. On some nights, when Aorja couldn't sleep, she would sometimes hear Raka praying to some southern god or another. Some nights it was the Loner God, other nights it was the Leaf Goddess, but she never seemed to get an answer to her

prayers.

*Maybe she heard I used to serve the Ghostly God and thinks that, if I help her, I will somehow connect her to the southern gods again, Aorja thought. Or maybe she's just a submissive old lady who thinks allying with me will keep her safe from the other prisoners.*

At that moment, a massive, deafening explosion suddenly shook her cell. It knocked her straight off her cot, sending her sprawling to the floor tangled in her old, moldy blankets as cries and yells from the prisoners and the guards crashed together in the air to create a resounding madness that made it almost impossible for Aorja to hear her own thoughts. She untangled herself from her blankets and dashed out the open doorway onto the walkway that ran along the walls and led down to the bottom.

Rock Isle's main prison area was shaped like a pit, with the cells dug out of the rock walls, dozens and dozens of cells that were currently empty of the other prisoners. Almost all of the prisoners had gathered in the bottom of the prison, near the massive rock that stood between the prison itself and the sea on the other side.

Or it *used* to, anyway. A giant hole had been blasted in the wall, far larger than something the average prisoner could even hope to create. Through the hole, the crashing of the waves mingled with the shouts of the prisoners and guards, a sound so loud that Aorja wished she had known enough audimancy to silence everyone.

Chunks of debris from the wall were everywhere, with a handful of the larger chunks having fallen on some of the prisoners, likely killing them instantly. The guards—large, burly men who wore thick black armor, with the hook symbol of the Goddess

Hona carved into them, and carried long swords and spears—were trying to herd the prisoners back up into their cells, but the prisoners were so disoriented by the explosion and the water that kept splashing through every now and then that the prison guards were not seeing much success. Everyone was running around everywhere, it seemed to her, and no one seemed to know what was going on.

*What in the world is going on here?* Aorja thought. She looked at the hole in the wall. *Did one of the prisoners somehow cast an exploding spell or something?*

That was when she noticed someone standing in the hole. From a distance, he was hard to see, but when Aorja leaned over the railing of the walkway to get a better look at him, she saw that he was undoubtedly Carnagian. His dark skin gave that away immediately, although she had never seen a Carnagian with such light hair before, almost like he was part Shikan as well.

The man stood in the wall for a moment, as still as a statue, before raising what looked like a large war hammer and then bringing it down on the ground underneath his feet.

The minute his hammer's head hit the wall, it sent a massive tremor through the entire prison. Aorja was almost thrown off the walkway and down to the floor of the prison below, but she managed to catch herself before she fell to her death.

As for the prisoners and guards below, they had been knocked off their feet and lay in a heap on the floor, confusedly yelling and untangling each other from themselves. None of them seemed to notice the Carnagian man yet until he spoke loud enough to drown out every other noise in the area, including the crashing of the waves of the sea behind him.

“Prisoners of Rock Isle,” the man's voice boomed, like that of

a god's. "Cease your senseless bickering and confusion. Rise from your feet and listen to your savior who has come to rescue you from your unjust treatment by the guards."

Aorja gulped. Although she still held onto the railing as tightly as she could, she felt a strong desire to obey this man, whoever he was. She stood up, just as the other prisoners below did the same. Even the guards rose, although they quickly separated themselves from the prisoners and pointed their weapons at the mystery man.

"Who the hell are you?" one of the guards shouted. "Did you make that hole in the wall?"

The Carnagian man chuckled. "Indeed. It was a simple task, but an effective one at getting your attention, don't you agree?"

"I know what's going on here!" another guard yelled. "This guy is staging a prison break!"

The Carnagian man ran a hand through his hair. "Oh, you got me, all right. You discovered my dastardly plan. I will now give up, like a good criminal, and allow you to put me in my cell, where I will no doubt be treated very kindly by the other prisoners."

Aorja smiled. She still had no idea who the man was—he sounded somewhat older based on his voice—but she liked that kind of sarcasm in men. Whoever he was and whatever he was doing here, Aorja decided then and there to support him.

The guards, however, didn't appear as infatuated with his sarcasm as she was, because they were now climbing up the wall to reach the hole. None of the prisoners dared move a muscle, even though this was probably the best opportunity they were going to get to make an escape.

Very soon, the guards reached the hole in the wall and surrounded the Carnagian man. Swords and spears blocked off every

conceivable exit the man could make, but despite that, he didn't seem very bothered by it. He simply brushed his hair out of his eyes and looked around at the guards as if unimpressed.

That was when Aorja felt powerful magical energy radiating from the Carnagian man. As a mage, Aorja could sense the magical energy from other mages, but she had never quite sensed the kind of power this man had. While it wasn't as much as the kind of power that the Magical Superior had, it was far more than the average mage had, and she could tell that he wasn't even using his full power yet, if he had a limit to his power at all, because she could not sense one in him.

That was why she wasn't surprised when the Carnagian man held up one hand and an immense fire erupted around him. The fire enveloped the guards, cutting off their cries of shock as abruptly as if they had never been there at all. The flames grew so large that they completely obscured the Carnagian man and the guards and even blocked off the hole in the wall. It kept growing larger and larger, causing Aorja to think for a moment that it was going to consume all of Rock Isle and kill every guard and prisoner on it.

But then the flames rapidly died down, retreating like they were being sucked down a drain, and when they did, they revealed that the Carnagian man still stood where he had been standing before. There was no sign of the guards except for piles of midnight black ash on the ground, but those soon vanished when a wave from the ocean outside crashed through the hole and washed the ashes away. The Carnagian man did not get wet in the slightest, which was probably because of some spell he had cast on himself to repel water off his body.

“There,” said the Carnagian man as smoke rose from his

shoulders. “Now, does anyone else wish to fight me or will you do the wise thing and listen to what I have to say?”

None of the prisoners said a word. Indeed, none of the prisoners even seemed to be breathing. They just stared up at the Carnagian man with awe and fear. Aorja, meanwhile, leaned even further over the railing, trying to get a better look at the man.

Even from a distance, Aorja could tell that he was a fine specimen of a man. Large muscles, gold-and-red robes that accentuated his physique rather than take away from it, a strong square jaw that was to die for ... he was practically the perfect man, much better than any of the men she had known back in North Academy and infinitely superior to the walking piles of dirt known as the male prisoners of Rock Isle.

Yet there was something about his appearance that made Aorja feel déjà vu. She was sure that she had never seen this man before, yet at the same time, she thought that she must have. It wasn't just his face, but his skin color, his hair, his whole build, even the hammer in his hands. She only wished that she could remember *where*.

*More importantly, how could I ever forget a man like that?* Aorja thought. *He looks a little older in years, but that's fine. Older men are more mature than younger men, more experienced. Definitely make better partners, anyway.*

“I see no one has the courage to talk back to me,” said the Carnagian man. “That is a problem I will have to deal with later, after I train all of you to transcend your Limits and rise to new levels of magical power unknown to most mages.”

Still none of the prisoners spoke. No doubt they were all afraid of the man, too afraid even to ask him what he meant by what he just said. After that massive display of power he showed

earlier, Aorja didn't fault them for it. She herself felt a little fear mixed with her desire for him after all.

Nonetheless, Aorja began climbing down the stairs to the floor of the prison, wanting to get closer to the Carnagian man to see if she could jog her memory.

“But of course, I am ahead of myself,” said the Carnagian man. He held up his hammer. “Do any of you know what this is? It is a symbol of the god Grinf, the God of Justice, Fire, and Metal, patron god of Carnag, and the Judge of the World. It is a symbol of justice, a sign that all who have committed terrible crimes against humanity and the gods will one day receive the punishment they so richly deserve.”

The passion in his voice as he said that ... oh, Aorja *liked* that. It made him look even stronger and manlier; indeed, he appeared almost divine. That just made her walk down the stairs more quickly, listening as the Carnagian man lowered his hammer.

“But do not fear,” said the Carnagian man. “I am not here to harm you or punish you for your crimes. For Grinf is a merciful god as well as judgmental, and I am no different, even though I am not a god myself. Grinf has told me that you prisoners have served your time and that soon—very soon—each and every one of you shall be free from this wretched jail for the rest of your lives.”

Aorja actually stopped when she heard that, even though she hadn't reached the floor of the prison yet. The prisoners began looking around at each other, confused, as if wondering if this was some kind of trick.

“How do we know you're not just going to do to us what you did to those guards?” one of the prisoners shouted. “And you haven't even told us your name, so how can we trust your word?”

“I am not finished speaking yet,” said the Carnagian man. “There is only one condition you must swear by, if you accept my offer to walk free: You must become my servants and train under me to push past the false Limits you have created in your minds, the ones that keep you from achieving your true potential as mages.”

Aorja continued walking down the stairs, reaching the prison yard just as another prisoner yelled, “What, we have to give up one prison in exchange for another? That's an awful deal!”

The rest of the prisoners began shouting in agreement before the Carnagian man glared down at them all, silencing them instantly. Aorja, on the other hand, found herself drawn even more to him when she saw that. She'd serve him even if he hadn't promised to help them push past their 'false Limits,' whatever that meant.

“I don't think you understand,” said the Carnagian man. He pointed behind himself with his gavel. “The outside world is dangerous and hostile towards prisoners like you. If you walk out now, you will likely be recaptured at some point and thrown back in here. If you wish to *stay* free, then follow me and I will teach you how to keep your freedom even if the whole world tries to take it away from you.”

By now, Aorja stood at the back of the crowd of prisoners, ignoring their combined body odor that smelled like sweat, excrement, and dirt mixed together to make a poor perfume. She had to stand on her tiptoes to see over the heads of her fellow prisoners, staring as hard as she could at the Carnagian man looking down on them all like one of the gods.

“And I offer this for free,” said the Carnagian man, holding out one hand. “You will be under no obligation to serve me once

you have learned all you need to learn. Once I have taught you how to beat your Limits, you may go and do whatever you wish with your new freedom. How does that sound?"

"Too good to be true," said one of the prisoners near the front. "You still haven't told us your name, dark-skin. We'd be more likely to take your offer seriously if maybe you had properly introduced yourself first."

The Carnagian man stroked his chin, as if considering that request, and then nodded. "Very well. I should get this out of the way now so we can continue the negotiations on more personal terms. You may call me Jakuuth Grinborn, a Limitless mage ... and the one and only son of the great god Grinf."