

Chapter One

When the whirlwind struck, Prince Tojas Malock—Crown Prince of Carnag, son of Queen Markinia and King Halock, and member of the Brotherhood of Heathens—was thrown from the top deck of the *Clockwork Heart* and likely would have hit the deck below and broken his back if Hana had not appeared out of nowhere and caught him by the collar of his shirt before he fell out of her reach. The sudden stop jolted his spine, almost ripped him out of his shirt, but then Hana pulled him back up with surprising strength and dumped him onto the deck even as the winds screamed around them with the force of an explosion.

Shaking, Malock got to his feet and looked at Hana, whose Monmouth cap had been knocked off her head when the wind struck and whose long, golden hair flapped about in the wind. The smokestacks of the *Clockwork Heart* sent columns of smoke and flame into the air, but the whirlwind continued to howl and blow about the ship. In fact, when Malock looked out over the lower deck, he saw the wind scoop up one of the automaton sailors and hurl it off the ship into the now-raging sea that surrounded them on every side.

“What's going on here?” Malock shouted, trying to make his voice heard over the sound of the raging winds. “Where did this whirlwind come from?”

Hana shook her head and said, “I don't know. But if I had to guess, I'd say it was one of the gods. Possibly Niham or maybe—“

A strong gust of wind—almost tornado-like in strength—cut her off just then. The gust actually sent her skittering back, her boots scratching against the metal floor, but she grabbed the railing before it could knock her off, which she clung to for her very life.

Malock looked up at the sky. A large black storm cloud had gathered overhead, a storm cloud that looked awfully familiar to him. He ran to the railing and leaned over, ignoring the dangers the whirlwind posed, and squinted as far into the distance as he could, trying to spot what he believed to be the source of the storm.

But alas, no matter which direction he looked, Malock didn't see anything except for the ever-rising waves, the darkening sky, and the automatons below, scurrying to and fro, trying to avoid being swept overboard by the furious sea or getting caught by the wind that had already claimed the lives of one of their brothers.

Pushing his flapping hair out of his face, Malock looked over his shoulder at Hana and shouted, “Why would any of the gods attack the *Clockwork Heart*? The Mechanical Goddess is one of them, isn't she?”

Hana winced as a particularly powerful burst of wind swept through, but she still managed to throw the most annoyed look at him. “Have you forgotten about what the gods think of you or are you just stupid?”

Malock would have said that he had neither forgotten what the gods thought of him nor was he stupid, but he never got the chance because a massive wave crashed into the port of the *Clockwork Heart*, tall enough to reach the ship's highest deck. Tons of water splashed over him and Hana, causing him to gasp from the sharp coldness of the seawater. The groaning of the ship sounded far worse than any sound prior, but it hadn't yet gone under and Malock doubted that it would because he

didn't think that the Mechanical Goddess would let it.

Hana teleported next to Malock; at least, he thought she did because he didn't see her move next to him. She grabbed his left arm as she said, "We've got to go below deck before things get worse!"

Without waiting for his opinion, Hana dragged Malock away from the safety of the railing down the metal stairs leading to the lower deck. Another crashing wave—this one coming from starboard—struck even harder than the last, throwing both Malock and Hana headfirst down the stairs. Malock twisted in midair to land on the deck on his back, but even so his head banged against the metal and a moment later Hana fell on top of him, the impact of her fall knocking his breath straight from his lungs.

At that moment, two mechanical hands reached down and hauled the two to their feet. Malock shook his head and looked at the owner of the hands. It was one of the automatons, the one who wore a long red scarf around its neck and carried a crescent blade at its side. If Malock's memory was correct, this one was called Calir or something like that.

"Thanks, Calir," said Hana, before the ship shuddered, causing her to grab the automaton before she fell again. "Does the Mechanical Goddess know who's attacking us?"

Calir swiftly shook its head, then pointed to the deck under their feet.

"Of course," said Hana, as if Calir had just said something obvious. "We should get below deck. That's where we were heading, actually."

Calir nodded and then ran past them toward the bow. It drew its sword as it did so, like a soldier going to war.

"Where's he going?" Malock said, raising his voice over the violent winds.

At that moment, rain started pouring, prompting Hana to raise her hands over her head and shout, "Don't know, don't care. Come on!"

She once again grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the hatch. She kicked it open—a surprising feat, considering that the hatch was made of thick, heavy metal—and immediately began climbing down the stairs leading below. Malock followed soon after, but before he could get down completely, another huge wave struck and sent tons of water cascading into the open hatch. The water slammed into his legs, causing him to fall on his bum and roll down into the bottom. At the same time, the hatch above shut itself and a *click* indicated that it was now locked.

Panting, Malock sat up and looked down at his soaked clothes with disappointment. While he had chosen these clothes—a gray boat cloak with a white cotton shirt underneath—primarily for their practical value and not their aesthetic appeal, he still didn't like how they clung to his skin like a second skin.

He brushed his sopping hair out of his eyes as Hana, who had somehow managed to keep dry, said, "Kano."

Malock looked at her. "What?"

Hana pointed at the water which was rapidly escaping through the vents in the floors. "Kano has to be behind this. Massive waves, terrible storms ... it's obvious, once you think about it."

Malock glanced up at the closed hatch. The crashing of the ocean waves reverberated through the thick metal bulkheads, mixed with the groaning of the ship itself. "Of course. I'm surprised it took her this long to—"

The sound of feet beating against the metal floor cut him off and the next instant Jenur Takren

stood in the doorway. Like Hana, she was completely dry, but she did have a long chicken leg in her right hand, like she had just been eating. Her short dark hair was brushed back, making her gray eyes look larger than they were.

“What's going on?” said Jenur, looking from Hana to Malock and back again. “Did we run into a storm?”

“Not any old storm,” said Hana. “We think Kano is behind it, but honestly I wouldn't be surprised if the Rain God is helping. He's held a grudge against the Mechanical Goddess ever since she saved you and Malock here.”

Jenur frowned when she looked at Hana. “How come you're still here? Shouldn't you be top deck where you could get knocked off by the waves? Accidentally, of course.”

Though Malock was fairly certain that no one in the room could use pagomancy, the temperature in the room seemed to drop by about a dozen degrees when Hana glared at Jenur.

“For a former Dark Tiger, you certainly aren't very subtle,” Hana said.

Malock groaned internally. Ever since they had left the Northern Isles, Hana and Jenur had been at each other's throats anytime they were near each other. He knew their personal history well enough not to be surprised by it, but whenever he was caught in the middle of their arguments, like he was now, he was reminded of the few times he had seen stray cats fighting in the streets of Port Blasan. That the two had not yet torn each other apart was a miracle, though Malock was not sure how much longer this 'miracle' would last.

“Subtlety's never been my strong suit,” said Jenur. “Because unlike some people, I prefer to confront my problems personally, rather than blackmailing others into doing it for me.”

“Is this really the time?” said Malock as he squeezed the water out of his boat cloak. “We should really—“

“Shut up, Malock,” said Hana and Jenur in perfect unison, prompting him to do just that.

Then Hana said to Jenur, “At least I didn't kill someone's family member.”

“You really just love bringing that up, don't you?” said Jenur. “He's not even really dead, is he? Can katabans actually die or did his spirit just go to wherever it is you katabans go when you don't have a physical body?”

“It doesn't matter,” said Hana. “The point is, your hatred of me is irrational and annoying. Drop it.”

“Irrational and annoying?” said Jenur. “Why, if we weren't on the Mechanical Goddess's ship, I would—“

She was interrupted when the ship suddenly lurched to port, causing all three of them to stagger against the left bulkhead. This was followed by the sound of something large clanging against the deck overhead, though due to the lack of openings, it was impossible to tell what had fallen.

“Look, I understand that you two aren't the best of friends, but for the love of the Powers we should really go deeper into the ship,” said Malock. “You know, away from the attacking gods? You can continue your arguing later or something, okay? We have better things to worry about right now.”

Jenur huffed, turned around, and walked back the way she had come. Hana glared at her back as she left, then followed. Feeling that maybe they weren't going to murder each other after all, Malock went after them both.

They soon entered the dining room of the *Clockwork Heart*, a long room with an equally long oak dining table running down the center of it. To Malock's surprise, neither the table nor the chairs had been knocked over by the ship's sudden movements. A quick glance at the furnitures' legs revealed that they had been nailed to the floor.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of the food. A jug of water had been knocked over, its liquids spilled onto the white tablecloth that covered the table. A plate of eggs lay on the floor, its glass shards scattered and mixed with the eggs. A faint coffee scent filled his nostrils and a quick glance down toward the other end of the table revealed that Rint's coffee cup had been knocked over.

Only two people were seated at the table, on the right side, both gripping their seats for dear life. One was a male aquarian with small tentacles hanging off his face like a beard, who sat similarly to Jenur. He was Quro, Jenur's adoptive father. Malock didn't know him very well, but the aura of experience and wisdom he gave off reminded Malock of Banika Koiro, his first mate back on his old ship, so he trusted Quro well. Quro kept a cool expression on his face, although the way he held onto his seat made it clear that he was not quite as confident as he appeared.

Sitting next to Quro was an old man named Rint Dolan, a fisherman who was the older brother of Kinker Dolan, another fisherman who had been a member of Malock's crew on his first voyage to World's End. Unlike Quro, Rint was not taking this well at all. His head was bent low near the table and he was literally trembling in his boots.

"What's going on out there?" said Rint when he spotted Jenur, Hana, and Malock. His question was addressed to Jenur. "A storm?"

"An attack," said Hana as she took a seat at the end of the table. "By some of the other gods, probably. My money is on either Kano or the Rain God or, far more likely, both."

Rint's eyes bugged out. "Two gods? Good grief, they really want to kill us, don't they?"

"I don't see why they would," said Quro. "It's not like we're doing anything wrong. We're trying to save the world. I would think they would like that."

"I think they're angry about Nimiko," said Jenur, glancing at the floor. She had taken a seat about a dozen chairs down from Hana. "They're probably trying to free him from us."

"Took them long enough to try," said Hana as the ship shook briefly. "I doubt they'll succeed, though. In order to get to the hold, they'd have to kill the Mechanical Goddess, an act which is forbidden by the Treaty."

Another thundering *boom* from above made Rint actually duck his head underneath the table, while Quro frowned. "My understanding of the whole northern/southern gods situation is sketchy at best, but what is to stop these gods from ripping the Mechanical Goddess open, but without actually killing her?"

"She wouldn't let them," said Hana. "Simple as that."

Malock took a seat near Hana; just in time, because the ship lurched forward. An ikadori peach slid past Malock off the edge of the table and onto the floor. It then slid down to the far end of the room, bumping against the steel door that was currently closed.

"You sound very confident about your Goddess," said Quro.

Hana nodded. "That's because she is very intelligent and cunning. Seeing as this ship is part of her body, she designed it in such a way that anyone who tries to break a hole in her hull would kill

her. So I hope you can see why I'm not worried.”

“Brilliant,” said Quro. “I never thought I'd say that about any gods—much less this one—but that is brilliant I will admit.”

“So we're safe?” said Rint, peeking out from under the table hopefully.

Hana leaned back and put her hands behind her head. “Of course we are. Especially since the Mechanical Goddess placed us all under her protection. The other gods can still touch us, but they can't kill us.”

Rint let out a relieved sigh and climbed back onto his chair. “That's good to hear. I was really worried there for a—“

A loud *clang* echoed nearby, causing everyone at the table to look at the door from which Mallock, Jenur, and Hana had just come through. Though the door stood firmly shut and locked, a large dent had been punched in it. Without speaking, everyone got to their feet and stepped away from the door, save for Rint, who hid under the table.

“What ... what is it?” said Jenur, her hand reaching for the knife strapped to her leg.

Hana gulped. “Maybe a servant of the other gods.”

“But how did it get down here?” said Mallock, trying not to sound afraid as he backed up. “Wouldn't the Mechanical Goddess or her automatons keep it out?”

“How the heck am I supposed to know?” said Hana. By now, she was halfway down the table. “It's not like I'm omniscient or anything.”

Clang. Another dent, this one larger than the last, appeared in the door. The outline of the dent vaguely resembled a gigantic fist. Mallock wished he had brought his sword with him because, as it currently stood, he was completely defenseless.

“What are we standing around here for?” said Jenur. “Let's go before that thing—“

WHAMP. The door went flying off its hinges, going so fast that Mallock barely registered it. He dropped to his hands and knees just in time, however, to avoid getting hit. The door flew over his head, almost scraping his scalp, and crashed with a loud crunching sound at the back of the room. Alarmed, Mallock looked over his shoulder and saw that the now-broken steel door had crashed into the other door at the end, effectively blocking off their only exit.

Then Mallock heard a grunt and turned his head slowly to see something standing in the doorway. At first, he was not sure what he was looking at. He saw fists as large as boulders, a hog-like snout, boiling red skin, a cape as yellow as the midsummer sun, and two glowing red eyes that focused on him.

The creature—whatever it was—stepped through the doorway, breathing heavily through its snout. It resembled an ape in stature, as it walked with its front fists before it acting as its forelegs. The sound of thunder clapping and the wind tearing through the sky followed it, which added to its terrifying appearance.

“What is that?” said Jenur, pointing at the weird creature. “A pig ape?”

Hana shook her head. “No. It's a—“

“It?”

It was a moment before Mallock realized that the voice had come from the creature. Its red eyes had drifted over to Hana and looked at her like it was offended.

“Did you just call me an it?” said the creature.

“Sorry,” said Hana. “I mean, *he's* a katabans. Obviously.”

The creature snorted. “Good. I am glad that you corrected yourself because I was about to say —“

Malock never did get to learn what the katabans was about to say because at that moment a ceiling panel opened up above it. Then a massive metal pillar slammed down on him with lightning speed. But rather than explode into guts and blood, the katabans actually caught the pillar on his back, though he was almost slammed into the floor by the sheer force of it.

“Oh, oh,” said the katabans, sweat running down his face as he fought against the pillar. “I see the Goddess is awake after all. No ... ugh ... problem. I expected it.”

The katabans grunted again and, with what appeared to be no effort at all, launched the pillar off his back. The pillar flew straight up back into the ceiling out of sight and Malock heard what sounded like pipes and gears being smashed as the pillar flew up. Bits of broken gears and smashed pipes rained from the hole in the ceiling, dropping onto the katabans' head, though he appeared about as bothered by it as if it were a light drizzle.

“By the way,” said the katabans as he brushed some of the mechanical bits out of his short red hair, “you can call me Vurango, servant of the Rain God.”

“You don't look like a katabans,” said Jenur, her eyes darting between Hana and Vurango. “You look like a pig ... ape ... thing.”

Vurango grunted again. “I had little choice over the form I was given. The Rain God plucked my spirit from the ethereal and gave me this body that he made. I am not complaining, however, because it is very strong, as I just proved.”

“How did you even get here?” said Malock. “The automatons and Mechanical Goddess should have stopped you cold.”

Vurango spat something out of his mouth. It rolled across the floor to Malock. A quick glance showed Malock that it was a half-eaten screw.

“Blech,” said Vurango, sticking his tongue out. “The automatons fell easily, but I am not the only one in this attack. Other katabans are attacking the ship even as we speak. I was the only one who managed to break through the army of machines that was protecting this hatch.”

“Others?” said Rint with a gulp. “How many others?”

Vurango ignored the question. “Enough babbling. Which one of you is Prince Malock?”

Malock stood up and said, “That would be me.”

Vurango grimaced when he looked at Malock. “I see you suffer from the Burn of Grinf. And here I thought you were just born ugly.”

The normally dull, ever-present burning pain in Malock's face flared up at those words, causing Malock to clutch his face. “Why do you want me?”

“To kill you,” said Vurango. He looked around the room and said, “And I may as well kill the rest of you while I'm at it.” He said that in the same tone of voice that a street cleaner used when he decided to do a little extra, dirty work that he had no reason not to do.

Vurango charged at Malock, but Malock rolled out of the way underneath the table. He crawled quickly under the table until he emerged on the right side. The others had joined him on the right side of the table, but Vurango had skidded to a stop and was now glaring at them all like he was thinking of all the ways he could kill them.

“Do you want to die?” said Vurango. “Because a mere table and chairs will not stop me.”

Vurango then jumped onto the table, but before he could do anything, Hana jumped onto the table as well and kicked him in the face. The blow must have been stronger than it looked because Vurango actually went staggering backwards onto the floor, while Hana shouted, “You guys, get out of here! I'll deal with—“

Apparently she hadn't hit him hard enough because one of Vurango's huge fists reached up from the floor, wrapped around her waist, and lifted her off her feet. Then Vurango himself stood up, looking more angry than ever as Hana beat his arm with her hands and feet in an attempt to get him to let go.

“That was a good hit, Hanarova,” said Vurango as he wiped blood off his chin from where Hana had hit him. “But not good enough.”

He threw Hana to the side. She smashed into the far wall, near the blocked exit, and fell to the floor with a dull *thud*. Her body actually left an imprint in the metal wall, which explained why she didn't get up.

“Now, then,” said Vurango, turning to face Malock and his friends. “I believe it's about time that I—“

A couple of *swooshes* was the only warning Malock got. The next moment, Vurango was clutching his throat, blood leaking through his fingers as he gasped for air, while Quro stood there holding his hand up.

“Dragon shark scales,” said Quro, when the others gave him curious looks. “Now we need to go before he recovers. Go!”

Malock didn't hesitate. He ran down the room, with Jenur, Rint, and Quro right behind him, but before he could reach the unblocked exit, Vurango appeared there. Malock had to skid to a halt to avoid running into the katabans, but he was too late. Vurango reached over with one massive fist and grabbed Malock, lifting the Prince off his feet as he glared at him. Blood still ran down Vurango's chest, but somehow that didn't seem to bother him. The dragon shark scales didn't appear to bother him, either.

“Let him go!” Jenur shouted, but before she or Quro or Rint could do anything, Vurango swiped at all three of them with his left fist, knocking them all over and on top of each other.

While they struggled to untangle each other's limbs, Vurango looked up at Malock with pure loathing. He clearly couldn't talk because of the scales in his throat, but that didn't stop his eyes from telling Malock everything that he was thinking.

Then Vurango's grip around Malock's body constricted, causing Malock to gasp for air. It was like being crushed between two huge, thick boulders. In fact, Malock felt like he was going to explode any minute now. He tried fighting back, but due to the lack of air, he succeed only in patting Vurango's fist and weakly kicking it once. His vision began to darken, while the scent of wet fur and mud—which his air-deprived brain realized was coming from Vurango—filled his nostrils, making thinking impossible.

Just as Malock thought he heard something crack, Vurango roared in pain and dropped Malock. Too weak to land properly, Malock fell on his back. His body felt like a crushed tin can, but he did manage to look up and see Vurango had whirled around, revealing the automaton Calir clinging to his back. Calir had driven his sword directly into Vurango's spine, causing blood to gush out from

the wound even as Vurango cursed and roared in a language Malock didn't understand.

Finally, Vurango reached behind his back and grabbed Calir. He threw the automaton off his back, but Calir managed to twist in midair and land on the table. Vurango turned to face Calir, his pig-like face making him look as though he was going to slaughter everyone.

"I see ... I see I didn't smash ... didn't smash all of the automatons who tried to stop me," said Vurango. With his throat cut open and the sword still embedded in his spine, it was a miracle that he was still living at all, much less capable of speaking. "Not ... not a problem. I'll kill you and finish off Malock, just as I was ordered—"

The clicking and clanking of gears caused Malock to look over his shoulder. A panel on the wall behind him had slid away, revealing a dark opening that appeared entirely empty. Vurango noticed it, too, because he turned to look at it and said, "What is—"

Without warning, a gigantic, spiky spear shot out of the hole. Vurango didn't even have time to react. The spear shot straight through his chest, the force of the blow sending him flying backwards. He slammed against the wall opposite, the spear still sticking out of his bloody chest. He no longer moved or breathed, and his face was now frozen in perpetual shock.

Calir jumped down from the table. The automaton inspected Vurango's corpse; at first, Malock thought that he was making sure Vurango was dead. Then Calir shoved his hand into Vurango's corpse, causing more blood to pour out, and a few seconds later pulled his sword out of the body. With Calir's back facing him, all Malock could see was the automaton inspecting his blade, perhaps to make sure it was in good condition, and then sheath it at his side. The sword was incredibly bloody, absolutely covered in the stuff, and the metallic scent of blood filled Malock's nostrils, making him sick to his stomach.

Then Calir turned and bent over Malock. Malock tried to say, "Thank you," but after getting crushed almost to death, he could barely utter even one syllable.

Not that it was needed. Calir just hovered one of his hands over Malock's body, almost like he was casting a spell, and then glanced at his hand. Then Calir stood up and, without another word, ran out of the room back to the hatch. A moment later, Hana staggered into Malock's view. Blood leaked from her crown and her right arm appeared entirely dislocated, but she otherwise looked quite good despite being thrown into a metal wall by a superhuman spirit.

She cast one disgusted look at Vurango's corpse and then turned to look at Malock. "How do you feel?"

Malock just said, "Unnhhh." It was about all he could say.

Hana raised an eyebrow. "Didn't catch that. Is that a mortal word for 'okay' or something?"

Malock didn't know if Hana was being sarcastic or not. He just shook his head, which he figured was a lot less ambiguous.

"I see," said Hana. She looked at the blood on the floor and wall and grimaced. "That's going to take a while to clean."

"Unnhh," said Malock again. He was trying to tell her to stop stating the obvious, but his tongue didn't really want to work.

"Guess I'd better go check the situation top deck," said Hana. "I'll be back in a minute. You just stay there, now. You look way too beat up to go anywhere."

With those words, Hana was gone, running out the open doorway. Malock gritted his teeth,

thinking of all of the choice insults he wanted to say to her, but with his body still recovering, he kept his mouth shut. He would tell her how he felt about her later.