

Chapter 1

I've never seen such a pathetic slave market, and I've been to some real ass-end of the universe places. This one is just a rotting wooden platform in a field of mud and yellow grass, with us slaves corralled off to one side. There are six of us, down from the eight that left Ventia a week ago. The old man died at sea, and the girl was bought up before we even stepped off the ship, by a whorehouse, I think. The woman who bought her looked like a madam; I saw too much ankle and bosom at either end of her dress for her to have been a Lady. She spent some time looking at the teenage boy with us, but finally left without him. Erion was probably asking too much. The girl kicked one of the slavers as she left, so I think she'll be okay. I hope so. I'd rather be worked to death in the fields than suffer her fate any day.

As we wait for the inevitable, I stand silently with the others: the boy; two broken looking men in their late thirties; a big, brooding fellow a few years older than me; and a sour woman not quite old enough to be my mother. All of us have our hair sheared down to the scalp. It marks us as slaves and keeps the crawlies off our heads. It's better than branding, which I've heard still happens on some planets. We're under *tight* security, our hands bound loosely in front of us and a single sleeping slaver sitting guard outside the corral. The fact that no one, not even the kid, has tried to make a run for it just shows how dismal Traxen is — even if we did escape, there isn't anywhere to go.

The auctioneer is a fat man with a big nose, one of those fat, red noses that looks like it hurts all the time, not like mine, which is just too large for my face. He must drink a lot. I would, if I had a nose like that. He's over in the shade of a canvas tent, talking with Erion, the slave trader in charge of our ragged asses. They seem to be waiting for the slave owners and potential slave owners to gather, but I think the dozen or so men sitting impatiently on the overturned wooden crates in front of the platform is all the crowd we're going to draw.

As we all wait, I scan the faces of the men and then I take a good look at their shoes. Most of the time, you can tell an off-worlder by his shoes. Not always, but both times I was dragged through a world gate, it was by men wearing strange shoes.

I rest my bound wrists on the weathered fence rail and bite the inside of my lower lip. I don't want to be taken off Ashael again. I was born here; this planet is my home. It might not be much, compared to more advanced worlds, but I'd rather till the land here with just a mule and a plow than stitch someone's strange, weightless shoes together, or wash out the bilges on their space freighters. I don't think I have to worry about it, this time. Traxen is a long way from Greater Kormunae. Erion steps out into the sun and strides in our direction.

They start with the kid, of course, the auctioneer lying through his teeth to try and push the bidding up. Strong as an ox, my foot. He sells for more than I had guessed, to a weary looking farmer in a battered straw hat. Scratch that as non-definitive — they're all weary looking farmers in battered straw hats. This one has a drooping mustache and a knife tucked into his belt.

I watch the farmer lead his new slave down the road. I'm pretty good at judging what kind of master a man will be by the way he leads his slave. Mean ones jerk on the rope. Nice ones leave some slack. Horrible ones make you run along behind their wagons. This guy leaves slack, so maybe the kid'll be okay. I don't have time to worry about it, though — I'm up next.

"Great Maele, would you look at this fine young man!" I slouch and look down at my bare feet, caked in thick, black mud. "At seventeen years, he's just entering the prime of his life..." Who're they kidding? I'm six months shy of twenty-one, though I suppose I hardly look over eighteen. That's what happens when you never get enough to eat. "...an

educated man, learned in reading and writing...” Educated, ha! I can write my name and read a little. I guess for a slave, that *is* educated. “...but strong and hard-working. He can plow, sow, reap, slaughter, woodwork, millwork, stonework.” Yeah, but I’m not very good at any of them. “If his master hadn’t taken ill and died, this man would not be standing before you today.”

If I hadn’t beaten my master with a rake and run away, and then been dumb enough to get caught by Erion, I wouldn’t be standing here. I’d probably be dead, considering my master was trying to pour lamp oil on me and light me on fire when I took off. Said I looked at his daughter funny. Well, she was pretty funny looking, a long-necked goose of a girl with buggy green eyes, but I never looked at her like *he* meant.

“This is a once in a lifetime opportunity,” the auctioneer continues. “Now, who’ll give me a half-coin for this fine specimen?”

I roll my eyes. I’m worth at least three coins, but none of the farmers seem to realize it. Maybe I look like I eat a lot. One of them, a lean man with a scar across his left cheek, finally raises his hand, making a bid. His clothes are mostly leather, worn slick and shiny, and he’s got spurs and a rope, so I’m guessing he’s a rancher, probably from a fair distance, since this isn’t exactly cattle country. I hate cows.

“If I let this fellow go for less than a coin, it would be highway robbery,” the auctioneer says, stepping closer to me. He reaches up toward my face and I open my mouth before he has a chance to touch me, showing the crowd my teeth. I know the drill, and I hate being touched. “Look at those fine teeth!” He turns me around and lifts my shirt, showing them my back. “Not an ounce of fat on him.” There’s a muttering in the crowd and I scowl down at my feet. I’d like to see one of them live my life and look better. It’s not like I asked to be beaten, and whipped, and cut, and burned.

The auctioneer steps away from me and I turn around. The few gathered farmers have moved to one side of the market. I guess it wasn’t me they were muttering about. A horse and rider have come right up to the platform. My heart begins to pound in my chest as I take a second look. It’s a unicorn, a black unicorn, with a hooded and cloaked rider, his face hidden in shadow. He raises a hand and points at me, and I can feel the color drain from my face, because it’s not a hand, it’s a claw — like a hawk’s or a dragon’s — slim, black, curved, and gleaming. I try to swallow, but my mouth has gone dry.

He tosses a small sack at the auctioneer’s feet. It clinks like money and several gold coins spill out. It’s probably three times what they’d get for me, even in a big city. “Sold,” the auctioneer says, his voice barely more than a whisper as he brings his gavel down, missing the podium completely. He doesn’t seem to notice. He’s shaking as he hands the end of my lead to my new master. I want to ask him, *What the hell are you afraid of? He didn’t just buy you*, but I bite my tongue.

As I step down from the platform, I glance over at the other slaves. They’ve crowded the rail and I can see it in their eyes, that intense relief that it’s me instead of them. I’ve seen that look many times, worn it occasionally, so I can’t blame them. I turn away and trot alongside the unicorn as my master heads out of town.

I’ve never been this close to such a beautiful beast. The only unicorns I ever had contact with were the worn pair of brown mares one of my richer masters kept to pull his carriage. It was my job to muck out their stalls, but I was never allowed to get this close. This big, black stallion gleams from horn tip to tail tip, and carries himself with such fierce pride I have to wonder how anyone could even manage to get a saddle on him, let alone mount up. But then I raise my eyes to my new master, to the claws holding the reins. I guess that explains it.

It’s not easy to run with your hands bound in front of you, but my master seems in no hurry, lucky for me. Still, I’m hurting by the time he turns off the main road, my legs and back and every breath burning as we begin to climb a well-worn mountain path.

Grassy hills rise up on my left, with a handful of fat brown sheep scattered near the top, and slope down to a patchwork of farmland on the right. The unicorn blocks most of the view to that side, though. I glance up at my monster of a new master, seeing nothing but darkness inside his hood. He hasn't said a word to me, and I'm not much of a talker anyway, even when I can breathe, so the journey is a silent one. I'm starting to wish the rancher had bought me.

We come around a bend in the trail and I can see a single pointed, slate-shingled roof silhouetted against the sky. Another few steps and more of the tower comes into view — a single arched window looking sightlessly out over the village and the sea. A castle. I hate castles. A castle means a lord, someone you have to bow and scrape to, and wash and dress and clean up after. I've belonged to several lords, none of them with towers as tall as this, and the ones who *just* beat and kicked me were the nice ones. It seemed that the richer and more powerful they were, the more cruel and perverse they felt they could be. If my master's castle is any indication of his wealth, I'm probably better off running for it. Hell, I'm probably better off dead.

I should have made a break for it back when the hills were gentle and covered in grass. Now it's just dirt and gravel rising up beside me and, beyond the unicorn, it looks like the ground just drops away. It could be a fall of five feet, or five hundred, and I'm not going to chance it unless I have to, because there's quite a range between short enough to walk away from and far enough to kill you, and I'd rather not lie broken and bleeding at the bottom of some cliff until something hungry finds me and finishes me off. So I guess I'm going up. Unicorns are nimble and quick, and I'll probably end up being stabbed in the back by that dark, spiral horn, but the closer we draw to the castle, the more I can't allow myself to be taken inside. Better a quick death than a slow one.

I grab the lead rope in my hands and jerk on it. It slips from the taloned hand easier than I expect and, for a second, I just stumble along beside the unicorn, the rope slithering along under my feet. Then I turn and scramble up the hill, but it's a lot looser than it looks, and I have to fight a slide of scree and dirt. It's worse than running up a hill of sand, because these rocks are sharp, and the dust rises up, choking me. I'm not getting anywhere and I glance over my shoulder to see how close my master is, but he's just sitting astride the unicorn, that blank, empty hood turned up toward me.

I lose my footing and hit my knees, my hands digging deep into the hillside as I start to slide, but I just pull more dirt and rocks down after me. Eyes closed, I roll down the hill and slam into the legs of the unicorn, which feels like being thrown into an iron fence post. I would know. I lay on the trail, half buried in debris, holding my side as I cough and choke and try to breathe. I can't get up. I may have broken a rib. Wouldn't be the first time. Squinting up at my master, silhouetted against the pale afternoon sky, I wait for him to decide what to do with me. Hopefully, he'll just throw me over the cliff and be done with me.

After several moments, he swings down from the back of the unicorn and grabs me by the arm. I wince, expecting those talons to cut right through my flesh, but his claws don't feel any different from human hands. He pulls me to my feet and I cry out, leaning into the pain as if that will somehow make it go away. It doesn't. I grit my teeth and straighten up. I am taller than him by nearly half a head. He pushes back his hood and scowls at me. He's just a man, for some reason reminding me of my uncle Asrard, who I've not seen in nearly fifteen years, his eyebrows full and beginning to gray, his eyes dark, but his face not unkind, even as he frowns at me. He beats the dirt off my shoulders, his hands just hands now.

"Idiot," he mutters, pulling a small knife out of his belt. I flinch, but he just cuts the rope that binds my hands. I rub at my wrists, the skin red and raw, and glance down

the trail, the urge to run so very strong, even with my side screaming with every breath I take.

“Run if you want, but there’s nowhere to go,” he tells me.

My eyes dart from the village, half a mile away, to the scattered farmhouses in the valley below, to the sparkling ribbon of river winding through the valley and down to the bay, and then to the wide dirt road heading east along the edge of a rocky headland. He’s right. I’m hundreds of miles from any place I would even begin to call familiar, in the middle of a damn fishing village and farm country. Why the hell did Erion even bring us here? I turn back to my master.

“Give me a hand, will you?” he asks, putting the knife away. He grabs a handful of the unicorn’s mane and I help him up into the saddle, drawing a sharp breath between my teeth as the pain cuts through me. I lean one hand against the unicorn’s flank to keep from doubling over and he swats me a stinging blow across my face with his tail. “Hey, are you okay?”

I step back and look up at my master. “Yes, M’Lord,” I answer automatically, pulling my hand away from my side. No sense letting him know where to aim if he wants to kick me, though he doesn’t strike me as the kicking type. “Please, M’Lord, what is going on?” I ask. He nudges the unicorn in the ribs, heading toward the castle as he begins to speak. I have to follow if I want to hear.

“I’m not your lord, nor anybody else’s. My name’s Thadyn. I’m — I *was* Lord Sactaren’s assistant, but I’ve gotten too old for the job, which is why you’re here.”

“Lord Sactaren?” I ask.

“Yes,” Thadyn says. “He’s Traxen’s resident mage.”

I stop short and swallow hard. Mages. I’ve never been owned by one, but I’ve met people who had been. At least, I’d assumed that they’d once been people. I glance up at the castle. Money and power and magic. Is there a worse combination?

“Hey, you coming?”

I want to tell him no, but I’ve really got nowhere else to go. And he looks none the worse for wear, as far as I can tell. I sigh and follow him.

“What’s he like, if I might ask?”

“Sactaren? Well...” Thadyn squints up at the castle, “you won’t meet another man like him. What he’s like, exactly, depends a lot on you.” I start to ask him what he means, but he doesn’t let me. “So they said you can read and write. Is that true?”

“Yes,” I say after a moment’s hesitation. “But not very well. I read better than I write.”

“Good enough,” he says. “If you don’t know something, ask Schaff — that’s what he’s there for.” We reach the end of our climb, crossing an open table of stone toward the main gate.

“Who’s Schaff?”

“He’s a pain in the ass, but he’s supposed to help in the shop. That’s what you’ll be doing during the day, selling potions and charms to the villagers. And don’t worry — it’s mostly love stones to witless girls and colic remedies to new mothers. Sometimes a cow will stop giving milk or a chicken become ensorcelled by a pegwitch, but it’s been years since anything really exciting happened around here.”

We pass under the gate and into the inner courtyard. Some castles make grand gardens of their courtyards, with trees and flowers and fountains, or training grounds for guards and soldiers. This one is just empty flagstone from one wall to the other. I glance up at the blank, barren walls, not a banner or pennant to be seen. Two corners of the castle are low battlements, the third is the high tower, and the fourth is a lower, blocky tower with what looks like plants growing on top of it.

“What is that?” I ask, gesturing toward the greenery.

“Her Ladyship’s garden,” Thadyn says, scowling in that general direction.

He dismounts and I follow him as he leads the unicorn to a dark doorway cut into the northern wall. I jump back as something with pitch black skin and too many arms leans through the doorway and takes the reins from him.

“What the hell was that?” I ask.

“That’s Qito — he looks after the animals. Come on, I’ll show you around the shop.”

He takes me through a door in the south wall, into the castle proper, and I’m surprised by how empty it is. The corridors are wide, but the floors are bare stone, lit by flickering torches that dance in the chill draughts. My hopes rise. Maybe he’s not so wealthy after all.

We enter a room that looks exactly like a general store, with shelves on each wall and a long wooden counter. There’s so much stuff in here, I can’t make out anything specific for a moment, and then my eye falls upon a neat stack of bones sitting between bottles of pickled snakeheads and a box of shriveled roots. Now I see feathers, fur, scales, stones, sticks, leaves, all sorted and labeled and priced, just waiting to be bought. I make a slow circle of the room, my mouth dropping open anew as each strange thing comes to my attention.

“He looks like a grouper.”

I turn, but it wasn’t Thadyn’s voice, and I see no one else in the room.

“Do you have to walk around with your mouth flapping open?”

I step toward the counter, toward the strangest cat I have ever seen sitting beside a basket of pink, heart-shaped stones. He’s a deep red color, a bit more rusty than blood, and nearly black down his back and across his shoulders, with a more pointed muzzle than most cats, more like a fox, and very large ears. His eyes are a dark, glittery gold, and his tail is full and bushy, tipped with white, very much like a fox. I begin to wonder if he’s really a cat at all.

“At least you’re quick,” the cat-fox says, though he sounds a bit sarcastic to me.

“You must be Schaff,” I say, reaching out to scratch between his ears. He growls and bats my hand away with a surprisingly heavy paw.

“Do that again and there will be claws,” he tells me, jumping down from the counter and stalking out of the room. Thadyn beckons me into the back room.

“I would try to stay on his good side, if I were you,” he says, and then shows me the more powerful and expensive potions and charms. I scan the labels, picking out a word or two here and there, and hope I haven’t insulted Schaff too much. I’m really going to need his help.

At the rear of the back room is a staircase leading upward. Thadyn motions for me to go up. The stairs are dark and I go cautiously, one hand on the outside wall as the steps spiral around a center post. The air grows warm, with a slightly smoky, musky smell, and I begin to see a faint light filtering down from above. The stairs open suddenly into a room crowded with tables and shelves, cages of small animals, and strange instruments I can’t begin to describe, nor guess what they do.

“Where are we?” I ask, my voice barely louder than a whisper. Thadyn clears his throat.

“My Lord Sactaren?”

I swallow loudly. I’m filthy, my feet black with mud, clothes dirty and torn and stinking of sweat. Not exactly how I want to meet my new master.

“Yes, Thadyn?”

His voice is soft, slippery, and I can’t tell where it’s coming from. For a round room, this place has a lot of shadowy corners. Actually, it’s not all that round, I notice, as

my eyes sweep the walls. It's more of a half-circle, with a flat wall of shelves to my left, beginning at the stairwell and ending at a fireplace.

"M'Lord, this is..." He nudges me in the ribs with his elbow, making me wince.

"Lark," I say through gritted teeth.

"This is Lark, M'Lord."

"Lark, like the songbird." I don't like that voice; it moves from shadow to shadow, seeming everywhere, or right behind me. "Thank you, Thadyn, you may wait downstairs." I want to grab him, beg him not to leave me alone with the mage, but can't move as he disappears down the stairs. Sactaren's voice draws my attention back to the room. "Can you sing, Lark?"

"Not very well, M'Lord," I reply, trying to still my shifting eyes. He has to be in the room, but I cannot find him.

"How old are you?"

"Nearly twenty-one, M'Lord."

"And you can read?"

"Yes, M'Lord."

"On the table near the window is a book bound in red leather. Read from it."

I walk to the table, my hand shaking as I pick up the book and open to a random page. My stomach is tight and trembling. I don't know what he will do with me if I fail his test; I don't want to find out, either. For a moment, the writing swims on the page, so many squiggles that mean nothing, but I take as deep a breath as I can manage with my hurt rib and start at the top of the page.

"... of my own. Let me help you find your way,' the wo- wolf said." It's a children's story! I start to sigh in relief, but wince as my side gives another twinge. Definitely broken. "Sana sh-ook her head. She...knew not to tr-tr-trust a wolf. The wolf—"

"Enough."

I quickly set the book down. I'm sweating, and not just because it's hotter than the fires of Hell in here.

"Lark, catch."

I turn as an egg flies through the air toward me from out of nowhere. Quick reflexes are all that save me as I cradle the egg to my chest, my heart thumping loud in my ears.

"Put it in the bowl on the table." I do as I'm told. "Now, look out the window." Night has fallen and the faint lights in the village and the ships in the bay wink up at me. "Look at the sky, Lark, and tell me how many stars you can see. If you see more than two, you may go."

It's a cloudy night, but patches of deep navy sky show through here and there. Still, I count but a single star. I wait as long as I dare before I answer, begging the clouds to open up, but that one star continues to gleam coldly at me.

"I see one, M'Lord."

"Very good, Lark. Now come here."

His voice creeps across my skin, surrounding me, and I don't know where to go, so I walk to the center of the room. I wait, looking all around the room for him, and then he's suddenly standing beside me, close enough to touch. I jump, drawing a sharp breath and wincing as my side screams in protest.

He's about my height, but thin, so he seems taller, his skin a warm, rich golden color, not like anyone I've ever seen before. His eyes are exotic, too — large and wide, veiled by thick, dark lashes, and a pale blue to rival the clearest winter sky. They make his other features seem small and delicate. I am captivated by his hair, the way it falls straight down his back to his waist, sliding off his shoulders like a curtain of black silk streaked with locks of silver and turquoise. He has several thin braids woven through

with bones and stones and feathers and carved charms. Several charms and amulets hang on cords around his neck. He is wearing a simple, thin white shirt, the laces undone down to his navel, and his skin glistens in the firelight, damp with sweat. His pants are dark blue suede, and his feet are bare. He's frighteningly beautiful.

"I am Lord Naeven Sactaren," he says, his voice making the hair on my neck prickle as he devours me with his eyes. He suddenly reaches for me and I stiffen, but force myself not to move as his hand slides up under my shirt, his fingers pressing into the sore spot on my side. It hurts. I bite down hard, but a small sound slips out anyway and I cast my eyes down as he looks at me.

"It's not broken, I think, just bruised," he says, walking past me to a table crowded with jars and vials. As he picks through them, he speaks. "So, Lark, you are a brave young man, and intelligent, and quick, and honest. I value these traits quite highly." He selects a jar and returns to my side. "Now, tell me what you would consider to be your greatest faults."

I swallow hard. "M'Lord, I..." He opens the jar and dabs his fingertips into the pale lavender salve inside. "I'm stubborn and willful, and I'm not worth near what you paid for me."

He regards me for a moment, then reaches under my shirt again and rubs the salve into my side, making me wince and my breath catch in my throat.

"Tell me one thing you have done that you are ashamed of."

I lower my eyes, my four-year-old sister's cries echoing through my mind as if mere days had passed, and not thirteen years. I'd been eight, and she'd been bugging me, so I told her if she didn't leave me alone, I was going to sell her. A few days later the government took our farm and the slavers took us away. My father and I were loaded onto one wagon, my mother and sister on another. I can still hear her crying, over and over, "I sorry, Lark, I sorry." That was the last time I saw them.

"I-I beat my master with a rake and ran away," I say. My sister, my parents, my memories, they are all I have that is *mine*, and I can't — I won't share them with him. I feel the weight of his gaze upon me and I swallow hard. After a moment, he takes his hand out from under my shirt and lets me breathe.

"Will you run away from me?"

I keep my eyes fixed on the floor as I answer softly, "I don't know, M'Lord." He is frightening, but his demeanor does not seem at all cruel or perverse, though I do have a painful habit of looking for the good in people and missing the bad. "I don't think I will."

"And if I must 'discipline' you, will you beat *me* with a rake?" I don't look up, but he sounds almost amused by the thought.

"I will try to never give you cause to discipline me, M'Lord," I say. I want to add that the paranoid old bastard had been trying to kill me, but that would sound like I'm trying to make excuses. I'm not. There is no excuse for what I did. A master has every right to do with his property as he pleases, from painting his shutters red to setting his slaves on fire. I reacted without thinking — more evidence of my willful streak.

"Then I'm sure I won't have to," he says, stepping past me and taking a small wooden box down off one shelf. From the box he pulls a round, black stone about the size of an acorn. "Hold out your hand," he commands. He sets the stone on my palm and I jump as it starts to flash red, yellow, gray, green, brown, orange — so many colors I can't keep track of them. Lord Sactaren raises his eyebrows. "You have more diseases than a third-rate whorehouse," he says, and his gaze turns appraising once again. I look back down at the floor. It's not *my* fault.

I glance up as he steps back over to his table of potions under the window. He picks up a little bottle and an old silver spoon. "Come here, Lark," he says as he fills the spoon with a thick, pink potion. He holds it up and I hesitate, then open my mouth. The

potion is sickly sweet, clinging to the inside of my mouth and making me want to gag. He glances at the stone, still flashing in the palm of my hand, and then sets the bottle down. Next, he has me eat a piece of bitter root, and then drink something that looks a lot like watery pus. Luckily, it just tastes like dirty water.

He keeps glancing down at my hand, and I finally realize that every time he gives me some new potion or herb, another color disappears from the flashing stone. He's curing me.

"You're very lucky," Lord Sactaren says after a moment. He hands me another glass of some bitter smelling brew. "Many of these infections have been in your body for years. A few more years, and they would have killed you." He takes the empty glass and hands me a small, pale blue pill. "Last one," he says. I swallow the pill and look down at the stone, now just a dull red color, and watch as the red slowly fades to white. Lord Sactaren picks up the stone and it turns black again before he returns it to its box. Does that mean he's sick?

I watch him place the box back on its shelf. He doesn't look sick. He turns and catches me looking at him. "I'm not ill," he says quietly, and I drop my gaze back to the floor. "You're very intelligent, Lark. I think you'll do quite well here." He turns away and takes a seat at his desk, the old wooden chair creaking under his weight. "I think you'll find I'm not a difficult man to please, just be polite to the customers and don't let them steal anything."

He picks up a stack of papers and begins leafing through them. I hesitate a moment, wondering if that means I'm dismissed. I hope so; beads of sweat are beginning to trickle under my arms and down my back from the heat. Before I can take a step toward the stairs, though, he says, "Oh, and try and stay away from my wife."

"M'Lord," I say quickly, my mouth suddenly very dry, "I-I would never—"

He laughs, a soft, whispery sound. "I'm worried about your safety, not hers. The Lady Sactaren can be cold and spiteful, and I would not have you run afoul of her. Luckily, she rarely leaves her part of the castle. Now, go back downstairs and Thadyn can finish instructing you. Good night, Lark."

"Good night, Lord Sactaren," I say, bowing low as I back toward the stairwell. I'm halfway down the stairs when I realize that my rib has stopped hurting. I can even draw a deep breath, though I quickly find out that it still hurts to touch. I pause and glance over my shoulder. A raw, flickering golden light is playing across the inside of the stairwell above my head. For a master, he doesn't seem that bad.