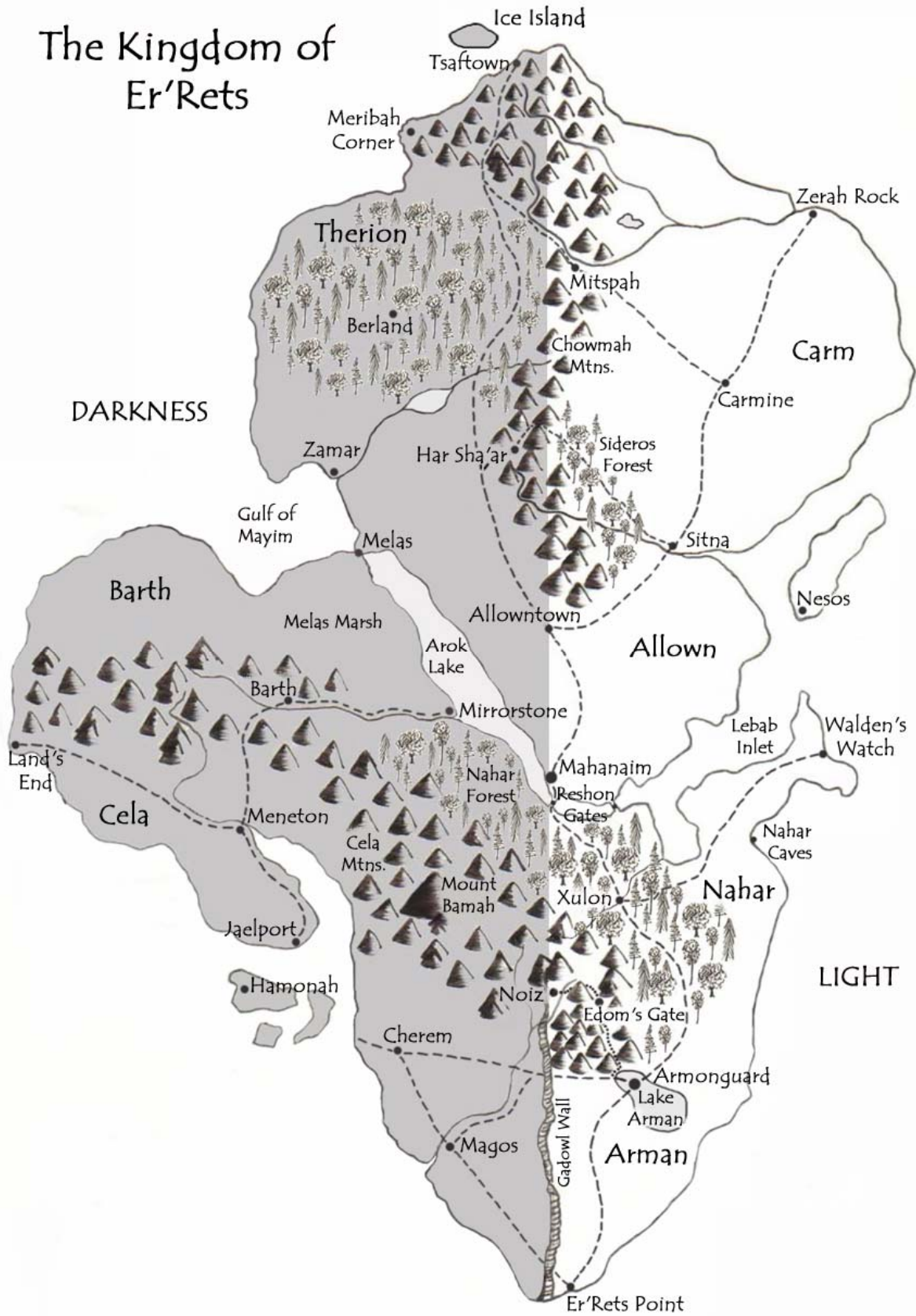


JILL WILLIAMSON

BY DARKNESS HID

BLOOD OF KINGS BOOK I

The Kingdom of Er'Rets



Part 1

Achan

Achan stumbled through the darkness toward the barn. The morning cold sent shivers through his threadbare orange tunic. He clutched a wooden milking pail at his side and held a flickering torch in front to light his way.

He wove between dark cottages in the outer bailey of the castle, mindful to keep his torch clear of the thatched roofs. Most of the residents of Sitna still slept. Only a few of the twenty-some peasants, slaves, and strays serving Lord Nathak and Prince Gidon stirred at this hour.

Sitna Manor sat on the north side of the Sideros River. A brownstone curtain wall, four levels high, enclosed the stronghold. A second wall sectioned off the outer bailey from the inner bailey, temple, and keep. Achan wasn't allowed to enter the inner bailey but occasionally snuck inside when he felt compelled to leave an offering at Cetheria's temple.

The barn loomed ahead of him in the darkness. It was one of the largest structures in Sitna Manor. It was long and narrow, with a high, thatched gable roof. Achan shifted the pail to his torch hand and tugged the heavy door open. It scraped over the frosty dirt. He darted inside and pulled it closed.

The scent of hay and manure drifted on the chilled air. He walked to the center and slid the torch into an iron ring on a load-bearing post. The timber walls stymied the bitter wind, and Achan's shivering lessened.

The torch cast a golden glow over the hay pile, posts, and rafters and made Achan's orange tunic look brown. A long path stretched the length of the barn with stalls on each side penning chickens, geese, pigs, and goats. Two empty stalls in the center housed hay and feed. He approached the goat stall.

"Morning, Dilly, Peg. How are my girls? Got lots of milk for me?"

The goats bleated their greetings. Achan rubbed his hands together until they were warm enough to avoid getting him kicked. He perched on the icy stool to milk Dilly and begin his tedious routine. He could have worse jobs, though, and he liked the goats.

By the time Achan had finished with Dilly, the stool under his backside had thawed, though his breath still clouded in the torch's dull glow. He lifted the pail to get a better look. Dilly had filled it a third. Achan set it between his feet, slapped Dilly on the rear, and called Peg. When he had finished milking her he moved his stool outside and set the pail on top of it. He grabbed a pitchfork off the wall.

"Anyone hungry?"

Dilly and Peg danced around as Achan dumped fresh hay into the trough. The goats' excitement faded to munching. The other animals stirred, but they were not his responsibility. Mox, the scrawny barn boy, had arrived a few minutes ago and now shuffled from stall to stall at the other end of the barn.

As Achan leaned the pitchfork against the wall, he had to pause. A chill ran through him that had nothing to do with the temperature. He felt the familiar pressure in his head. It wasn't painful, but it brought a sense of a looming, sinister shadow. Someone was coming.

“Lo, Mox!” a familiar voice called from near the barn's entrance.

“Moxy poxy hoggy face, we know you're in here.”

Achan sucked in an icy breath and slid back into the goat stall. The voices belonged to Riga Hoff and Harnu Poe, Sitna Manor's resident browbeaters.

Mox's young voice cried out. “Stop it! Don't do that! Ow!”

Achan set his jaw and thunked his head against the wall of the stall, earning a reprimanding look from Dilly. Poril would flay him if he returned late. And there was no guarantee he could beat both boys. He should mind his own business. Regular beatings had made him tough—they could do likewise for Mox.

Or they could cripple him for life. An image flooded his mind: a young slave being dragged through the linen field by Riga and Harnu. They'd crushed his hands so badly that all the boy could do now was pull a cart like a mule. Achan sighed.

He edged to the other end of the barn, stepping softly over the scattered hay. Two piglets scurried past his feet. He clenched his jaw. If the animals got out, Mox would be punished by his master too. Riga and Harnu knew that, of course.

Achan spotted them in a pig stall at the end of the barn. Harnu was holding Mox's face in a trough of slop. The mere thought of the smell turned Achan's empty stomach. Riga leaned over Harnu's shoulder, laughing, his ample rear blocking the stall's entrance. Fine linen stretched over Riga's girth and rode up his back in wrinkles, baring more skin than Achan cared to see.

He sent a quick prayer up to the gods and cleared his throat. “Can I help you boys with something?”

Riga spun around, his mess of short, golden curls sticking out in all directions. His face was so pudgy Achan could never tell if his eyes were open or closed. “Stay out of this, dog!”

Harnu released Mox and pushed past Riga out of the stall. The torch's beam illuminated his pockmarked face, a hazard from working too close to the forge. “Moxy poxy piglet got out of his pen. He needs to learn his place.” Harnu stood a foot taller than Riga and was the real threat in the barn. He stepped toward Achan. “Looks like you need to learn yours too.”

Achan held his ground. “Let him go.”

Harnu's gaze flitted to a pitchfork propped against the wall. He grabbed it and swung. Achan jumped back, but the tines snagged his tunic, ripping a hole in the front and scratching his stomach. Achan squeezed his fists and blew out a long breath.

Harnu jabbed the pitchfork forward. Achan lunged to the side and grabbed the shaft. He wrenched the weapon away and spun it around, prongs facing Harnu. He waved it slightly back and forth, hoping to scare the brute into flight.

“The barn is off limits to your instruction. Anything else I can do for you boys? A little hay? Some oats, perhaps? Drag you to the moat, tie a millstone to your ankles, see how well you swim?”

Like a dog being teased with a bone, Harnu lunged.

Achan stepped back and raised the pitchfork above his head the way he'd seen knights do in the longsword tournaments. With nothing to stop his hurtling bulk, Harnu stumbled. Achan swung the tines flat against Harnu's backside, and the bully knocked head first into the chicken pen. The birds squawked and fluttered, sending a cloud of dust over Harnu.

Riga slipped past the stall and made toward the milk pail. Achan darted forward and stuck the pitchfork in the clay earth to snag Riga's foot. The big louse tripped and sprawled into the dirt and hay.

Footsteps behind Achan sent him wheeling around just in time to lift the pitchfork to Harnu's chest. Over Harnu's shoulder, Achan could see Mox climbing out of the geese pen with a squirming piglet under one arm.

Harnu raised his hands and stepped back, a thin scratch swelling across his reddened cheek. “Lord Nathak will hear 'bout this, stray. You'll hang.”

Achan knew he wouldn't hang for a tussle like this, but he might be whipped. And Lord Nathak's guards were merciless. But Achan doubted Lord Nathak's servants would bother their master with such a trivial matter. He shrugged. “Not much to tell. You fell into the chicken pen.”

“You attacked me with a pitchfork when I caught you trying to steal a horse.”

A tremor snaked down Achan's arms. Stealing a horse was cause for a hanging. And no one—especially Lord Nathak—would take the word of a stray over a peasant, even one like Harnu. Achan jabbed the pitchfork out. “If Lord Nathak hears a breath of that tripe, I know where you lay your head.”

Harnu snorted and beat his chest with a clenched fist. “You dare threaten me?”

Achan glanced around for Riga, but the swine had vanished. He backed toward the hay pile, feeling cornered. Achan took another step back, keeping the pitchfork aimed at Harnu. His boot knocked against something.

Harnu cackled and pointed behind Achan's feet. Achan looked down. The stool and pail lay on their sides, milk seeping into the clay soil.

Pig snout!

Riga charged out of the hay stall with a roar. Achan turned, but Riga jerked the pitchfork away. Harnu rushed forward and battered Achan to the ground.

The pitchfork dug into Achan's back. He gritted his teeth, not wanting to give the brutes the satisfaction of hearing him scream. He was more upset over the spilled milk than the pain.

Pain, he was used to.

Mox pointed at Achan from the end of the barn, his face gooey with slop. "Ha ha!"

The ungrateful scab was on his own next time.

Dilly and Peg kicked against the wall of their stall, agitated by Achan's distress.

Harnu crouched in front of him, grabbed the back of his head, and pushed his face toward the puddle seeping into the dirt floor. "Lick it up, dog!"

Achan thrashed in the hay but lost his battle with Harnu's hand. He turned his head just as his cheek splashed into the milky muck. The liquid steamed around his face. Harnu released Achan's head and sat back on his haunches, his wide lips twisting in a triumphant sneer.

Riga chortled, a dopey sound. "I'd like a new rug, Harnu. What say we skin the stray?" He dragged the pitchfork down Achan's back.

They never learned.

Achan pushed up with his arms. The prongs dug deeper, but he was able to slide his right arm and leg underneath his body and twist free. He grabbed the handle of the pail and swung it at Harnu's face. Harnu fell onto his backside, clutching his nose.

Achan scrambled to his feet. He grabbed another pitchfork off the wall and squared off with Riga.

The portly boy waddled nearer and lifted his weapon. Achan faked an upswing.

When Riga heaved the pitchfork up to block, Achan swung the shaft of his weapon into Riga's leg.

The boy went down like a slaughtered pig.

Harnu approached, pinching his nose with one hand and wiping a fistful of hay across his upper lip with the other.

"This does grow old," Achan said. "How many times do I have to trounce you both?"

"I'm telling Lord Nathak." Harnu sounded like he had a cold.

“You’ve no right to attack us,” Riga mumbled from the dirt floor.

Achan wanted to argue, *And what of Mox?* but he’d sacrificed enough for that thankless whelp. He grabbed both pitchforks and fled from the barn.

Pale dawn light blanketed Sitna Manor. Achan jogged toward the drawbridge, glancing at the sentry walk of the outer gatehouse. The squared parapet was black against the grey sky. A lone guard stood on the wall above like a shadow.

Achan ran through the gate and over the drawbridge. As usual, the guards ignored him. Few people in the manor acknowledged anyone wearing an orange tunic. One small advantage of being a stray. He sank to his knees at the edge of the moat to wash the blood off the pitchforks.

Riga and Harnu wouldn’t let this go easily.

Achan sighed. His fingers stiffened in the rank, icy water. One of these days he’d accept pretty Gren Fenny’s offer to weave him a brown tunic, and he’d run away. He was almost of age—maybe no one would question his heritage. He could tell people his mother was a mistress and his father was on Ice Island. Sired by a criminal and almost sixteen, people wouldn’t ask too many questions.

But could Achan convince Gren to come with him? He scrubbed the pitchfork prongs with renewed vigor to combat the dread in his heart. Any day now, Gren had said. Any day her father might announce her betrothal and crush Achan’s hopes. He’d hinted at running away together, but Gren hadn’t seemed keen on the idea. She loved her family. Achan tried to understand, but as a stray, the concept of family was as foreign as a cham bear. He could only dream of it.

When the pitchforks were clean, Achan returned to the barn. His attackers had left and, thankfully, had not done any damage they could blame him for. He shuddered to think of what their feeble minds hadn’t. The torch still burned in the ring on the post. They could have burned the barn to ashes. They were truly the thickest heads in Sitna, maybe even in all Er’Rets.

Not that Achan was much brighter, sacrificing himself for an ingrate who was probably out chasing piglets.

Achan hung one pitchfork on the wall and used the other to clean up the hay. When the ground was tidy, he grabbed the empty pail and sat on the stool to catch his breath.

The consequences of his heroism were suddenly laid before him. The scratches on his back throbbed. The goat’s milk had completely soaked into the ground, the front of his tunic, and his face. Only the latter had dried, making the skin tight on his left cheek. His nose tingled from the cold. He shivered violently, now that he’d stopped moving. He scowled and pitched the pail across the barn. It smacked the goat stall, and the girls scurried around inside, frightened by the sound.

But Achan didn’t want a beating. So he picked the pail up again, dragged the stool into the stall, and managed to squeeze another two inches of milk from the goats. It was all they had. Poril would be furious.

Achan jogged out of the barn, around the cottages, and across the inner bailey. By now, more people were stirring—it was almost breakfast time. He wove around a peddler pushing a cart full of linens and a squire leading a horse from the stables. A piglet scurried past, just avoiding the wheels of a trader’s wagon. Achan ignored it. Mox could hang for all he cared.

Pressure filled his head again.

This time the insight that followed was not dread but kinship and hope. Achan paused at the entrance to the kitchens and turned, seeking out the source of the sensation. His gaze was drawn to the armory.

There, Harnu slouched on a stool clutching a bloody rag to his nose. His father stood over him, hands on hips. The warm glow of the forge behind their menacing forms brought to mind the Lowerworld song that Achan had heard Minstrel Harp sing in the Corner last night:

When Arman turns away, Shamayim denied

To Lowerword your soul will flee.

At the fiery gates meet your new lord, Gâzar

And forever in Darkness you’ll be.

Achan shuddered. The sensation of kinship was definitely not coming from them.

He spotted someone else. A knight stood leaning against the crude structure of the armory, watching Achan with a pensive stare. He wore the uniform of the Old Kingsguard—a red, hooded cloak that draped over both arms and hung to a triangular point in the center front and back. The crest of the city of Armonguard, embroidered in gold thread, glimmered over his chest. The knight pulled his hood back to reveal white hair, tied back on top and hanging past his shoulders. A white beard dangled in a single braid that extended to his chest.

Achan recognized him immediately. It was Sir Gavin Lukos, the knight who had come to train Prince Gidon for his presentation to the Council.

For what purpose did the knight stare? Achan had never met anyone above his station who hadn’t wished him harm or hard work. Yet his instincts had never been wrong. Sir Gavin harbored no ill will. Achan gave the old man a half smile before entering the kitchens to face Poril’s wrath.

* * *

Achan settled onto a stool by the chest-high table that was worn by years of knives and kneading. The kitchens were two large rooms under one roof. One was filled with water basins, tables, and supplies for mixing. The other held six chest-high tables and three hearth ovens that left the room sweltering nearly all day.

Poril, a burly old man with sagging posture, poured batter into stone cups and carried them to one of the hearth ovens. Serving women scurried about filling trays with food and gossiping about Lord Nathak's latest rejection from the Duchess of Carm.

Achan's stomach growled at the smell of fried bacon and ginger cake. He wouldn't be able to eat until after the nobility were served, and then he would be allowed only one bowl of porridge. Poril had a knack of knowing if Achan had eaten something he shouldn't have. Achan suspected the serving women's tongues flapped for extra slices of Poril's pies.

The scratches on his back burned. He was in no mood for Poril's daily lecture, nor could he stomach the cook's nagging voice and the queer way he spoke about himself using his own name. Especially not when he was hungry and had a beating coming. He only hoped Harnu would keep his accusations of thieving to himself. Maybe it was time to talk to Gren about that brown tunic.

Poril scurried back to the table with a linen sack of potatoes. His downy white hair floated over his freckled scalp. Sometimes Achan wanted to laugh when he watched Poril. The man looked more like he should be wielding a sword than a wooden spoon. Some of the serving women said Poril was part giant. Achan wasn't convinced. The cook might be tall and thick, but his sagging posture and thinning hair just made him look old.

"It's what comes from giving a stray responsibility, that's what. But Poril's a kind soul, he is. Mother was a stray and no kinder woman there ever was, boy, I'll tell yeh that. Worked hard so Poril could have better, she did."

Poril dumped the potatoes onto the table. Several rolled onto the dirt floor, and Achan scrambled to pick them up. He spotted a crumbled wedge of ginger cake on the floor and stuffed the spicy sweetness into his mouth. It was even a bit warm still. Achan took his time setting the potatoes back on the table and pressed the lump of cake into the roof of his mouth to savor it, hoping Poril wouldn't see. Then he grabbed a knife and hacked at the peel of the biggest potato.

Poril pointed a crooked finger in Achan's face. "It's only 'cause Poril's the best cook in Er'Rets that Lord Nathak won't be aware of yer blunder with the milk today, boy. 'Tis my responsibility to beat some sense into yeh, not his. Poril's a fair man, and yeh deserve to be punished, that's certain. But turning yeh over to the likes of the master is cruel. And cruel, Poril's not."

Achan set the peeled potato aside and picked up another. Poril always threatened to tell Lord Nathak of Achan's every misstep, but the man was all talk. He was more scared of Lord Nathak than Achan was. True, Poril was not as cruel as some, but he was of the opinion that beatings with the belt were kinder than beatings with a fist. Achan grew tired of both.

Poril clunked a mug of red tonic onto the table beside Achan's potato peelings. Achan glanced at it.

The old man's grey eyes dared him to refuse. "Drink up, then. Poril's waiting."

Achan sucked in a long breath and guzzled the gooey, bitter liquid. The taste killed the lingering ginger cake flavor on his tongue. He'd been fed the tonic every morning his whole life, and every morning Poril insisted on watching him drink.

The thick mixture always churned in his gut, begging to come back up. Achan sat still a moment, breathing through his nose to calm his nerves. Then he rose to settle his stomach with a few mentha leaves from the spice baskets. Achan might not have free range of the kitchens, but Poril had learned long ago to allow Achan as much mentha as he needed.

Poril always claimed that Lord Nathak had insisted Achan drink the tonic to keep away illness—that strays were full of disease. But the tonic hadn't prevented Achan from being ill several times in his life. Plus no other stray he knew had to take it. The one time he'd refused, he'd received a personal summons from Lord Nathak.

Achan shuddered at the memory and chewed on the leaves. Their fresh taste dissolved the tonic's bitterness and tingled his tongue.

Poril wiped his hands on his grease-stained apron and sprinkled a bit of sugar over the prince's ginger cake. Hopefully he'd forget to clean the crumbs off the table when he left to deliver it.

"Never wanted yeh, Poril didn't. But the master brought yeh to Poril to raise, and that's what Poril's done. Yeh brought none but trouble to the kitchens, the gods know. None but trouble. 'Tis why I named yeh so."

As if an orange tunic wasn't humiliation enough, *achan* meant trouble in the ancient language. Achan returned to his stool and raked the knife against another potato, trying to block out Poril's braying voice. His pitchfork wounds stung, but it would be at least an hour before he could tend to them.

"...and Poril will teach yeh right from wrong too. That's Poril's duty to the gods."

If that was true, Achan would like to have a little talk with the gods. Not that the all-powerful Cetheria would be burdened by the prayers of a stray—despite all the pastry tarts Achan had offered up at the entrance to the temple gardens over the years.

Day-old tarts didn't compare to gold cups, jewels, or coins when you're trying to win a god's favor.

An hour later, Achan stood over the sink basin, washing dishes while Poril delivered Lord Nathak and Prince Gidon's breakfast. There were servants to do the task, but Poril insisted on being present when the first bites were taken.

Achan shifted his weight to his other leg. He hated cleaning dishes. Standing in one position for so long made his back ache, and today, with his pitchfork wounds, the pain doubled.

Though strays were lower even than slaves in most parts of Er'Rets, Achan had more freedom than most slaves. Poril kept him busy tending the goats, getting wood, and keeping the fireplaces hot and both kitchens clean, but at least there was variety. Some slaves worked fifteen hours a day at one task. Such tediousness would have driven Achan insane.

Achan dried the last pot and hung the towel on the line outside. When he came back in, Poril had returned. The cook wiggled his crooked fingers, beckoning Achan to follow him down the skinny stone steps to the cellar. Achan sighed, dreading the bite of Poril's belt buckle.

The cook lived in a cramped room off of the cellar, furnished with a straw mattress, a tiny oak table, and two chairs. Achan slept in the cellar itself, under the supports that held up the ale casks, although he barely fit anymore. He feared to be crushed in his sleep one night when he rolled against one of the supports and it finally gave way.

As per routine, Achan went to Poril's table, removed his tunic, and draped it over the back of one chair. He straddled the other chair in reverse and hugged it with his arms. His teeth fit into the grooves of bite marks he'd made over the years. He clenched down and waited.

Poril ran a finger down one of the scratches on Achan's back. "What's this?"

Achan quivered at the feel of crusty blood under Poril's touch.

"Well? Speak up, boy. Poril don't have all day to waste on yer silence."

"I met some peasants in the barn this morning."

"Spilled yer milk, did they?"

Not exactly, but Achan said, "Aye."

"Yeh cause trouble?"

Achan didn't answer. Poril always complained when Achan defended himself or anyone else. He said a stray should know his place and take his beatings like he'd deserved them.

"Ah, yer a fool, yeh are, boy. One of these days yeh'll be killed, and Poril will tell the tale of how he knew it would come to pass. The boy wouldn't listen to Poril. Had to smart off. Had to fight back. Not even Cetheria will have mercy on such idiocy."

Achan doubted it mattered if he stuck up for himself or not. If a stray was invisible to man, how much more so to the gods?

He heard the swoosh of Poril pulling his leather belt from the loops on his trousers. He hoped his pants fell down.

When Poril was done flogging Achan, he swabbed his back with soapy water, washed the blood from his tunic, and gave him an hour off to rest while it dried.

Good old Poril.

* * *

A kindly presence flooded his mind.

Achan was returning from the well carrying a heavy yoke over his shoulders with two full buckets of water. He rounded the edge of a cottage and found Sir Gavin Lukos heading toward him. Achan stepped aside, pressing up against the cottage and turning the yoke so the buckets wouldn't hinder the great knight's path. The buckets swung from his sharp movement, grinding the yoke into his shoulders.

Sir Gavin slowed. "What's your name, stray?"

Achan jumped, wincing as the yoke sent a sliver into the back of his neck. Sir Gavin's eyes bored into his. One was icy blue and the other was dark brown. The difference startled him. "Uh...Achan, sir."

The knight's weathered face wrinkled. "What kind of a name is that?"

Poril's voice nagged in Achan's mind, *'Tis trouble, that's what.* "Mine, sir."

"Surname?"

Achan lifted his chin and answered, "Cham," proud of the animal Poril had chosen to represent him. Chams breathed fire and had claws as long as his hand. Such virtues would tame Riga and Harnu for good.

Sir Gavin sniffed. "A fine choice." His braided beard bobbed as he spoke. "I saw a bit of that ruthless bear in the barn with those peasants."

Achan stared, shocked. He'd seen the fight? Would he tell Lord Nathak? "I...um..." Had Sir Gavin asked him a question? "I'm sorry?"

"I said, what's your aim, lad?"

"I should like to serve in Lord Nathak's kitchens...perhaps someday assist the stableman with the horses."

"Bah! Kitchens and stables are no place for a cham. That's a fierce beast. You need a goal fit for the animal."

What could the knight be skirting around? "But I...I don't have a...what choice have I?"

"Aw, now there's always a choice, lad. Kingsguard is the highest honor to be had by a stray. Why not choose that?"

Achan cut off a gasping laugh, afraid of offending the knight. “I cannot. Forgive me, but you’re...I mean...a stray is not permitted to serve in the Kingsguard, sir.”

“It wasn’t always that way, you know. And despite any Council law, there are always exceptions.”

Achan shifted the yoke a bit, uncomfortable with both the weight and the subject matter. He cared little for myths and legends. Council law was all that mattered anymore. Despite his fantasy of running away, he was Lord Nathak’s property, nothing more. The brand on his shoulder proved that. “Even so, sir, one must serve as a page first, then squire, and no knight would wish a stray for either.”

“Except, perhaps, a knight who’s a stray himself.” Sir Gavin winked his brown eye.

A tingle ran up Achan’s arms. He’d known Sir Gavin was a stray because of his animal surname, but it had been years since strays had been permitted to serve. Surely he couldn’t mean—

“Come to the stables an hour before sunrise tomorrow. Your training mustn’t interfere with your duties to the manor. Tell no one of this for now. If I decide you’re worthy, I’ll talk to Lord Nathak about reassignment to me.”

Achan’s mouth hung open. “You’re offering to train me?”

“If you’re not interested, I’m sure another would be eager to accept my offer.”

Achan shifted under the weight of the yoke. “No. No, sir. I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Good. I’ll show you a trick or two you don’t yet know.”

Achan grinned. “Yes, sir.”