

NOTE: This scene extends Gareth's stay in Paath when he bullies the smith into making him some armour. We cut it because it didn't really belong in *Firestorm*. Rather, it should be part of a new story that continues Gareth's/Aeralt Kingswold's plotline.

They passed two nights in Paarth without seeing the spy again.

They'd kept mostly to their inn – lying low as Kul'Das put it. The forced confinement grated on him. It was as if he'd spent a long time in one place, bound there, incarcerated, unable to free himself until –

A sharp stab in his temple. It was one of *those* questions. Kul'Gareth had learned to avoid certain lines of thought and now he couldn't help but see a pattern emerging. The headaches came when he wondered about his past. What was he trying to hide from himself?

'Let's go down to the common room.' It was the night before he was due to collect his armour. 'I could do with a drink.'

'I don't think that's a –'

'Come on, Kul'Das. I feel like a fugitive up here.'

She frowned – was it at something he'd said? Then, surprisingly, she smiled. 'Very well. Just one drink.'

As they walked down the scuffed staircase, Kul'Das said, 'Why do you call yourself Kul'Gareth? You realise it's forbidden until your mother deems you worthy to wear the title.'

'What else should I call myself?'

'You seemed happy with Gareth before.'

'Gareth.' He considered the name. It felt lacking in his mouth, somehow. 'I don't think it's appropriate now.'

He was spared further explanation when the innkeeper spotted them. 'You've finally grown tired of each other, I take it?' His grin was more of a leer.

Kul'Das went crimson. 'How dare –'

‘Mind your business,’ Kul’Gareth said in a voice full of menace, ‘if you want me to mind yours.’

The innkeeper took a step back and then looked disgusted at himself. He seized a glass and began polishing it with unnecessary fervour. ‘No need for that, sir. I meant nothing by it.’ Putting the smeared glass down, he said, ‘What can I get you?’

‘Ale,’ Kul’Gareth said and tossed him a white stone. Some cautious interrogation had given them a rudimentary knowledge of the currency. ‘For my friend too.’

‘It’s polite to ask people what they would like before ordering for them,’ Kul’Das grumbled, but she drank the ale readily enough when it came. They chose a table which gave them a view of the room and, at her insistence, Kul’Gareth made sure his coat sleeves hid most of the gauntlets.

The place filled as afternoon became evening. They ordered more ale. Keeping half his attention on the common room and its customers, Kul’Gareth said, ‘I should send Ūmvast an envoi tomorrow, give her our position. As long as Argat meets us on time, we should be in Rairam before the northern arm of the Fist.’

‘Do you think we’ll win?’ Kul’Das slowly rolled the mug between her hands. ‘Iresonté has thousands of men at her disposal. We only have ourselves and the Wielders who don’t even know what’s coming.’

‘Brégenne will change that.’ His memories of her brought a smile. ‘I can almost see her beating sense into the other Councilmembers.’ Kul’Gareth paused to scan the room. ‘She’s respected in Naris. The Wielders will follow her.’

‘You regard her very highly,’ Kul’Das said.

‘She helped me when I needed it. And she’s a great Wielder.’ He took his eyes off the room to slide her a sidelong look. ‘Don’t you agree?’

‘Hrumph.’ Kul’Das drank more ale. ‘I suppose.’

‘I forget. You should go to Naris, Kul’Das. Ask for training.’

She was silent. Kul’Gareth knew she agreed; she just didn’t care to admit it. He smiled, thinking of her reaction on being handed novice robes. The Wielders had no idea what –

‘It’s him.’

Kul’Gareth’s head shot up. He spotted the spy straight away, shaking rain from his cloak. The man glanced in their direction, a casual glance that said plainly, *I see you. I don’t fear you.* It made his hackles rise.

Kul’Das clamped a hand on his upper arm. ‘Don’t react. Let’s play his game.’

‘I could strip the flesh from his bones.’

‘If you do, we’ll never find out why he’s interested in us.’

He acknowledged her point with a grunt, but continued to glare at the stranger, who now sat at a nearby table, drink in hand, bold as day.

A boy took their empty mugs. ‘I’ll get us some more,’ Kul’Gareth said, rising. When she began to protest, he added, ‘It’ll look odd if we sit here without drinks.’

The man watched as he crossed the room; there was a challenge in his eyes. It mocked Kul’Gareth and he found himself slowing, stopping by the stranger’s table. A glance back at Kul’Das showed her white-faced. She shook her head, mouthed, *no*.

‘A foul evening,’ he said to the man, pulling up a stool.

‘Indeed.’ The word was oddly accented – odd but familiar. Kul’Gareth wondered where he’d heard it before. Close up, the man’s face was more feminine than it had looked from a distance, the hand holding his drink long and thin-fingered. A moment later, he realised it *was* a woman. She had a dark cap of hair and hazel eyes which darted, skittish, from his face to the room and back again. It made him think of a deer.

‘Your stealth skills need a little polishing,’ he said.

‘Perhaps I wasn’t trying to hide,’ she answered, that accent tormenting him with familiarity. *Where* had he heard it?

‘Who are you?’

‘Unimportant.’ Her hand moved to her jerkin so fast that he reacted instinctively, his own hand shooting out and pinning hers against the edge of the table. She smiled wolfishly, said, ‘I knew it was you.’

A moment later, he realised his mistake and jerked back. Hond’Lif gleamed beneath his frayed sleeve. The woman brought her face close to his. ‘Why have you left your tomb, Kingswold?’

He flinched, tried to push the stool away, but she gripped his collar, held him tight. ‘My master is displeased. You have defied him.’

His head was swimming. What had she called him? ‘Who is your master?’ he asked thickly.

‘You know him as Serjo.’

His skull rang, as if the name were the clapper inside a vast bell. He gasped, raised both hands to his temples. ‘No,’ he murmured, barely able to hear himself. ‘Take it away.’

Thrust delivered, she released him and sat back, watching him with her deer-wild eyes. Their brief tussle had attracted a few glances, but the woman didn’t seem to care. ‘You walk instead of sleep, Kingswold. Why is this?’

The accent – he finally had it. He’d grown up hearing it – his brother had brought it home from that hellish college, from Thabarat. He’d never been the same.

*I don’t have a brother.*

The memories told him otherwise.

Kul’Gareth felt as if he walked upon a precipice. Madness as terrible as Serjo’s waited to catch him if he fell. He *could not* fall. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said.

She narrowed her eyes, as if she too could see the chasm at his feet.

The common room shimmered. He tried to blink it into solidity. Rising unsteadily, he turned his back on the woman and her dangerous words. Kul’Das was at his elbow. She treated the stranger to a cold glare before taking his arm and steering him out of the room. Kul’Gareth managed one look over his shoulder – the woman sat there, calmly sipping, as if nothing untoward had passed between them. But her restless eyes followed him and her lips seemed to form the word, *Kingswold*.

He shuddered, letting Kul’Das drag him up the stairs. He felt as if he ran a fever, head stuffed full of rags and bells, sweat breaking out across his body. He needed to get away, to put distance between them. Even the thin wooden door offered sanctuary.

But when they pushed it open and stepped across the threshold, it was to see the walls daubed with head-high letters, letters which formed three damning words.

Aeralt. I come.