

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



A Return

Gareth awoke in the living room of his own home. He'd fallen asleep in one of the hide-coated, padded chairs, next to the fireplace. A small flame still flickered with life. If not tended, it would soon die out.

As he shifted in place, a soreness made itself known. It felt as though he'd run for miles before crashing into the first seat he could find. Despite the pervasive discomfort, he reached up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

Once the blurriness went away, Gareth scanned the interior of his family's abode. Everything seemed in its place. A stack of clean, unfolded laundry was left on the dinner table. Nattia likely placed it there until she found the time to deal with it.

After a few seconds, Gareth realized that neither Nattia nor Shea were around. Visible through the west-

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facing windows, the sun was still out. Usually, during the day, the pair rattled on incessantly as they performed chores or worked on Shea's schoolwork. Though he wouldn't admit it aloud, Gareth enjoyed the constant babble generated by his family.

With creaking muscles and joints, Gareth got to his feet. His legs were a bit rubbery and he reached out to the fireplace mantle to steady himself. He looked at the clock on the far wall. It was an heirloom, given to Nattia by her grandmother, with an ivory face and brass numbers. He was relieved to see that it was still ticking away and that the time was now 4:02.

He felt a strange joy to see something so simple. He shook his head and stepped away. As he moved aimlessly through the house, he caught a whiff of Nattia's floral perfume. This caused a smile to curl his thin lips. If she wasn't around, she'd only just departed. Perhaps she and Shea left him to rest as they went on an errand.

For some reason, he examined his body, as if he'd uncover some answers there. He was dressed in casual clothes; a linen shirt, wool trousers and a pair of well-worn leather boots. He was wearing none of his gear. He went to the wooden chest that sat beside the fireplace and flipped the lid open. Within was all of his equipment, cleaned and packed away for a future date. By the polished sheen of the boiled leather cuirass, he could tell his return was recent.

Why wouldn't I already know that? Gareth thought as a scowl creased his forehead. That he could forget such a thing was unlike him. Perhaps he was more tired than he

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first thought.

Before long, he heard rustling from elsewhere in the house. His head cocked to the side. The cottage wasn't big by any measure.

"Nattia?" he eventually called out. When his voice sounded strange to his own ears, he paused to clear his throat a few times. "Nattia, where are you?" he inquired. This time, the timbre felt right.

Needing desperately to check in on his wife, Gareth strode to the bedroom door. It was ajar and only took a nudge to open with a creak.

As he stuck his head in through the doorway, he saw the shape of Nattia, who on her side and covered from head-to-toe by the fur-lined quilt. Her breathing was soft and regular. Upon seeing this, he nodded to himself. If Nattia was in here, then Shea would certainly still be in her own quarters.

It was unlike any of them to sleep in this late. Maybe they'd enjoyed a long night, a bit of excessive revelry upon his recent homecoming and were now resting it off. A few too many drinks on his part, coupled with the exhaustion of the road seemed like a fair enough explanation for his wooly-headedness. Nattia had never been a heavy drinker. Perhaps she'd enjoyed one too many glassfuls herself.

Despite her energetic nature, Shea was a slow riser. Without one of them to wake her, she might still be in bed.

With a sideways glance, Gareth located his sword, in the stand at the back of the room. Despite the fact that it

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was where it should be, he felt reassurance at seeing the blade again.

Gareth pulled the door closed. He slipped away and went to his daughter's quarters. Like her mother, Shea was buried beneath her covers.

Gingerly, he sat down at the edge of the bed and reached out with his right hand. For a moment, Gareth ran his fingertips through Shea's hair. Though she moaned in protest, she slept on. He could feel warmth radiating from her forehead.

While he'd always been happy to see his family after every trip abroad, this time he felt something more. It was as if he'd been away with no expectation of ever returning. Concerned, he thought back on his recent travels as he rested a hand on Shea's shoulder.

Gareth struggled to fill in the hole that was his recent past. What memories were there felt stitched together over a void. The longer he contemplated this, the more his brain ached. The effort took more energy than he had to give. Before long, he shook his head and rose to his feet. In the end, all that mattered was that he was home and both Nattia and Shea were alive and well.

He stood up and began to step away from Shea's bed. Just as he reached the door, a chill ran down his spine. From the other room, Nattia let out a series of deep, chest-rattling coughs. Their intensity grew. After a few seconds, the fit tapered off.

"No..." Gareth muttered as his heart sank. He struggled not to collapse to the floor as inexplicable grief gripped his chest. It was just a cough.

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The hair on the back of his neck rose when he overheard the wheeze from Shea.

An alien thought entered his mind as he slumped against the doorframe.

I got home too late.