

Chapter 64

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A defeated silence fell over the truck. Brinah was so worried about Aislinn she had twisted the handle on the bag she was holding on her lap until it ripped off. "I did make some salves and things that might help anyone who becomes hurt," she said hopefully as if that would fix everything.

Cullen was pissed and Brinah's voice was just pissing him off more. "Got anything to bring life back to the dead," he asked sardonically. The people in the SUV went back to riding in silence. wWw.n(ov)el(wo)rm.c(om)

Rafe walked up to the circle of tall stones. He ran his hand over the surface of each stone with reverence. When Kara entered the circle with Aislinn he indicated for her to be dropped in the middle of the circle. Kara tossed Aislinn off of her shoulder, onto a stone slab set into the ground, in the middle of the circle.

Aislinn hit the stone slab hard and all the air was knocked out of her lungs. Kara smirked. She didn't know what Rafe was turning Aislinn into but she had a hard time believing that it would be anything Kara needed to worry about. So far Rafe had professed, on several occasions, that Kara was the best of his work. She had always been pleased with that.

Rafe was excited. His lifetime quest was finally going to be achieved. First he would complete his change and then he would deal with the rest of the Senach and force the Circle Council to accept him as the head of the Senach. He read the rune carvings on each of the stones carefully and proceeded to place jars of herbs in front of each stone. When he had finished his circuit of the stones he walked to the center. Aislinn had managed to come to a sitting position. Jenna was waiting and watching expectantly and Kara was keeping an eye on Aislinn.

A smallish spotted cat, rather like a leopard came bursting through the trees and into the clearing beyond the stones. He slowed his charge and slunk up to Rafe at nearly a belly crawl. Then he changed into his human form. He stood up on two feet, breathing hard and trying to catch his breath. "Rafe, a caravan of Arnauk was spotted."

Rafe smiled widely much to everyone's surprise. His eyes glimmered with power. He believed he had already won. "Fine. Let Arnauk and his pitiful little pack in. He seems so fond of my mate. Let him come see our union. Then," he looked down at Aislinn, "I'll kill him. A gift for you on our wedding day lamb."

There was no sneaking up on this fight. Cullen pulled his truck up before the main entrance. The gate was down. There was no question that the Tairneach were already there. They had numbers and positioning so the best thing the Arnauk could do would be to try and sneak in. They had the advantage that they knew these woods and hills better than the Tairneach could possibly know them.

The pack already had their orders. As the men and women piled out of the trucks they stripped out of their clothes and bodies began to shift. As each of the lycans completed the change to hybrid or wolf they headed in different directions along the wall. Some of them vaulted the wall while others slipped along the outside of the wall headed for different entrance points. Cullen, Keith, Sarah, and a select group of others formed up and headed, in human form, through the front gate on foot. Brinah was told to stay with the trucks but she had ideas of her own. She trailed behind at a distance scanning the scene for any evidence of Aislinn.

Cullen led his group toward the standing stones. They dropped clothes as they went but remained in human form for the moment. They would wait for Cullen's lead. As the half naked group of men and women passed their second home they could see the Tairneach and the strange weres watching them. It was an uneasy passage. There was no immediate attack. Cullen figured that Rafe was so confident in his position that he wanted to gloat before destroying the Arnauk.

Cullen could smell blood on the air and his wolf howled in his ears at the loss of his friends even before he saw the bodies piled along the side of the cabin as his group passed into the woods. He told himself that at least those deaths were over the territory and not because he was dragging his men into a fight over a woman. He could scent the various intruders throughout the woods. The strange green bonfires were lit. But the coach that Brinah had made overpowered the smell that the bonfires were putting off and Cullen could clearly see the enemy lycans and weres hiding amongst the trees as he neared the standing stones.

As Cullen and the others cleared the edge of the woods that surrounded the stones his control was nearly defeated. A path between the weres that were surrounding the standing stones opened in front of them. The were-cats grinned at them as they passed, knowing where the advantage here lied. There really wasn't anyone present who believed that the Arnauk could come out of this alive.

Rafe was standing bare chested. He wore only a pair of expensive looking suit pants. He had drawn a number of runes on his chest in woad. It was a strange anachronistic vision. Aislinn was naked and on her knees. Her body had been abused. He could see dried blood trailing from a swollen lip. There were numerous scratches across her breasts and bruises covered her legs. There was a were-lion standing behind her. She had Aislinn by the hair, pulling her head back and holding a knife to her throat. Jenna was standing by and she was smiling as though this was all exceedingly entertaining. Cullen's wolf reared. He felt his fangs extend in his mouth and his hands grew claws.

Rafe walked over to Aislinn. "If Arnauk moves from where he is," Rafe said nonchalantly to no one in particular, "attack him. And I should probably tell you." Rafe petted Aislinn's hair, she pulled back and the knife sliced her skin. A trickle of blood flowed from the cut and Rafe used a finger to wipe it. He placed the finger in his mouth and smiled down at her affectionately. Then he looked at Cullen. "Several of your men are still alive. I'll let them live and you and your fool followers all go unharmed as long as I get the word of the mighty Lord General Cullen Arnauk that none of you will ever return to this place and you'll not pursue my mate." His hand reached out and stroked Aislinn's hair again.

Aislinn's eyes were on the ground. She hadn't looked up at Cullen since he had walked into the clearing. He could see tears glistening on her cheeks. Throughout Rafe's talking Cullen could hear howling in his ears. She's right there. Go to her, his wolf cried. Cullen had known that he would be outnumbered. But it looked as though Rafe had brought every Tairneach there was here to fight the Arnauk and that didn't take into account the were-cats and other beasts that Rafe had apparently created. Subtract from that number all the men Cullen had lost to Rafe already and the men he had guarding the men Rafe had turned against him. Could Cullen sacrifice Aislinn to get the rest of the pack out of this?

Keith was the one who spoke. His voice startled Cullen. "I don't think so Rafe," he said with a half smile. Cullen looked at Keith. "This is our land," Keith said. "We all fought and bled for this territory long before Aislinn was a consideration. She's not the only thing at stake here. Even if she's the only reason you're here," he added with a wicked grin. Cullen looked back at Sarah. She nodded in agreement with Keith.

Cullen looked back at Rafe and shrugged. "You heard him," he said with a deadly growl that spoke of his wolf surfacing.

Rafe looked annoyed briefly and then his features smoothed over again. "As you like it. My life will most likely be easier with you dead, even if I lose a few men in the process. But I wouldn't want you to miss the show you've come to see."

Rafe walked over to a number of jars that were on the ground in front of Aislinn. He opened the first jar and dipped his finger in the jar and pulled it out covered in woad. He stepped over to Aislinn and began to draw runes on her chest. Cullen's wolf broke free. He shifted in to his hybrid form and moved to attack Rafe. Before he could get to Rafe he was jumped by several of the weres that were surrounding them. www.N(ov)el(wo)rm.Com

Cullen found himself tearing madly at the flesh of a creature that looked like a cross between a gorilla and a tiger. The man had cat-like wild eyes and claws that sliced into Cullen's side. He had a huge barrel chest and long arms but short legs. He was colored like a tiger, orange with black stripes, across his back that blended into the muscular ape-like chest. He had a grip that nearly broke Cullen's arms as he wrenched them behind the lycan's back and with the help of several other cats forced Cullen to his knees. When Cullen looked up he saw that his men were all in similar positions. They must have tried to join him in the attack. He growled and snapped wildly at the men holding him. But there was no breaking the ape-cat's grip.

Aislinn's scream blazed into his ears. Immediately Cullen's rage shifted its target and he turned to see what had happened. Rafe was standing over Aislinn's writhing body. She shrieked in agony and her body began to shift. Her arms and legs shortened and her head took on the look of one of the cats and her body shortly joined it. She was covered in brown fur and black stripes started at the nape of her neck and covered her back bleeding into spots that vanished into the white fur covering her stomach and the insides of her legs. She was smaller than the other cats present. Cullen figured Rafe probably did that to keep her more controllable.

By the Gods she's beautiful. If Cullen hadn't already been on his knees he would have fallen to them. When the change was completed Aislinn lay still. She was still whimpering a little but the worst of it was over. She tried to stand but her legs wobbled and she ended up sitting back down. Four legs is different than two, Cullen thought gently. She looked around at herself in confusion and then seemed to understand when she saw her tail. There was a pause in her movement as it folded out from under herself.

Rafe looked down on his work. His face and eyes illuminated with hubris. He had done better than he had imagined. He dropped the jar of woad to the ground and walked over to the last jar left. He started speaking in Gaelic, asking the fates to bless his transformation. There was a feeling of energy that crackled around them. Rafe opened the jar he had picked up. This one was red. He held it up and the weres surrounding the circle started howling and screeching.

Rafe put the jar to his mouth. As he downed the liquid the woad on his chest started to run. Sweat began to pour from his face. Once the jar was emptied he dropped it and it shattered on the stone slab. With a roar of triumph tinged with pain Rafe's body began to transform. His dark hair grew into a wild mane. His body grew larger than any lion since prehistory. Rafe's fur was white and the roar sounded bear-like. Polar bear and lion. There may have been other things in there but the main combination was obvious. The jars sitting in front of the standing stones shattered and various liquids poured out onto the ground, seeping into the earth.

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Rafe paced back and forth in front of his audience. The weres were still raising a cheer that rang in the ears of the Arnauk. For the first time in centuries Cullen Arnauk felt fear.