

## Chapter 76

The front doors opened into a large main room with a vaulted ceiling three floors high. There were doors on all the walls of the huge room and stairs that led to a balcony that circled the room and led to the second and third floor balconies. There were lots of overstuffed couches and chairs arranged around the room so that several groups of people could sit and talk with each other in separate little areas. There was a gigantic fireplace on the far wall and the room as a whole was decorated with a lived-in, worn, comfortable, antique feel.

As they walked through the room to the stairs there was a lot of staring. But no one said anything. Aislinn noticed that everyone seemed to be in jeans and plain t-shirts. It almost looked like they were wearing a uniform. She figured that no one had time to pack a bag before coming out here for the fight. They were all wearing clothes from the closet storeroom she guessed.

Cullen led Aislinn up the stairs and along the third floor balcony. Then they headed through another set of doors and down a long hall. His room was at the end of the hall. Aislinn smiled when they walked in and she found herself in a room that could almost be a replica of his bedroom back at the Madadh-Allaidh Saobhaidh. There was a lot of dark blue. The first room they walked into had a desk and a couple book shelves and a sitting area with a television and a couch similar to the ones downstairs. There were a couple doors. One led to the bathroom and the other to the bedroom.

Cullen headed into the bedroom and over to his dresser to pull out some clothes. "I'm gonna get a shower. I'd bring you along," he smiled at her, "but I don't think we'd get out of here before next week if I did."

Aislinn smiled back and stretched out on his bed. His eyes followed her cat-like movements and he had to force himself to head for the bathroom. Aislinn was so comfortable lying on his bed and cuddling with the pillows that smelled so much like him that she fell asleep almost the instant Cullen was out the door.

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Aislinn knew the minute the dream turned from a simple walk through her imagination to a nightmare of a premonition. She didn't know if she should be proud of herself for coming to the point where she could consciously recognize it or if she should be terrified. The battle wasn't over yet. She was padding on four feet through the Tairneach manor. The rooms were all dark. Aislinn felt drawn through the building. She was compelled to keep going. The stairwell seemed to be ten times longer than it had looked when she had been there. The white marble floors were ice under her feet. When she reached the top of the stairs there was a long hallway. Again the hall seemed longer than it should have been. By the time she reached the open door at the end of the hall she knew she was too late. Too late for what?

Aislinn walked into the room and she felt as though she was shrinking. Or the room was getting bigger. There was a desk against a wall and there was a light on the desk. She had to jump to get into the chair and then again to get onto the desk. She felt as though she was being watched. She slunk against the desk toward the light at the back of the desk. It was shining down on a book.

Aislinn jumped up onto the book and was walking across the gaelic writing. It was hand written. She stared down at the writing, trying to make out what it said.

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As Cullen showered he had a strange feeling of fear and fascination fill the back of his mind. He didn't think that Aislinn was in trouble but he knew that something was happening. He cut his shower short and headed out of the bathroom toward the bedroom, grabbing a towel as he went.

When Cullen came back into his bedroom he was rubbing a towel into his wet hair trying not to think about Aislinn in the shower all wet and rubbing herself with soap. Aislinn was curled around one of his pillows. He padded over to the bed and stood there watching her. Something was upsetting her in her sleep. Even knowing that she wasn't really in danger his wolf was feeling rather protective. He wanted to keep her safe even in her dreams. Cullen was in the process of dropping the towel and joining her in the bed when a knock on the door tore through his thoughts.

I'm gonna kill him, Cullen thought angrily as his wolf took over his senses, waking Aislinn up.

She turned groggily to see what was going on just in time to hear a door slamming and then a body slamming. It took a moment for her mind to clear. She had been trying to read the book and was attempting to bring the image of the words back to her mind. But nothing was coming.

When Aislinn got to the door of the bedroom Cullen was in his hybrid form and had Keith by the shirt, back against the wall. Keith's eyes were submissively lowered as Cullen growled menacingly at his friend. Do I need to give you a reminder lesson about how I ended up in charge around here?

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Keith bowed his head and raised his hands apologetically. "Cull, I just came up to tell you about the satphone call I just made. I didn't mean to barge in."

Aislinn could feel Cullen's common sense warring with his wolf. Keith saw her at the doorway. He looked up with a warning as if to tell her to stay back. Cullen picked him up higher and bashed him against the wall, regaining Keith's full attention. Keith winced as his head cracked against the wall. "Cull, I'll leave. Really. Just put me down."

Aislinn walked up to them and put her hand on Cullen's arm. "Cullen?" she asked in confusion. Keith seemed to brace himself for something awful to happen. To his surprise Cullen calmed immediately and lowered him to the floor, but had yet to let go.

Aislinn leaned in and nuzzled against his arm. "Are you okay?" she asked softly. She could feel that he wasn't.

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It took Cullen a moment to force the wolf back. But even his wolf seemed to be responsive to Aislinn. Cullen felt his wolf backing down like a little kid who'd gotten caught doing something bad. When he had regained his human form Cullen looked back at Keith and then released his friend's shirt. He shot Keith an apologetic look and Keith nodded back indignantly.

"Like I said before," Keith growled. "You need to get the ceremony dealt with. And with how worked up you are you may need a month off instead of a week."

Cullen nodded. "You'd better watch how you come in here for a while." He rubbed his face with both hands. "Maybe we should just announce it. If I'm going to start going off on people like that, it could be dangerous."