

## Chapter 6



The black wrought iron gate creaked open. The Georgian house loomed up in front of them. Alastair stole along the pathway. He grabbed the brass knocker, slamming it against the wooden door. Temperance huddled against the metal bars and tried to stop her teeth from chattering. She couldn't feel her feet anymore.

Alastair had set a punishing pace to get them into town. Without his beaten up car, the journey was slow. Temperance stumbled along every little stretch. They'd managed to lose the werewolves after a few near misses. They hadn't said a word to one another since they'd escaped the woods and skulked along the country back roads.

Temperance turned to peer up at the white building. She knew where she was now. It was a quiet, well-to-do residential area, off the main shopping street. Haven bookshop was just around the corner. The houses along the road were full of the elite members of Carwick's high society.

A dull brass plaque was fixed to the front wall. She had never been close enough to see it before. She swallowed, reading the inscription; Mayor's Residence.

Her eyes trailed up the wall.

It was a beautiful house. Imposing and elegant; everything hers was not. She'd often admired it.

The mayor seemed like he was busy entertaining tonight. All the windows were lit up. Shadows flitted across the curtains. She wondered how Sebastian Bloodworth could help them with their werewolf problem.

The door swung open, she sighed, relieved at the prospect of escaping the cold. Alastair spoke in a low voice with a butler. Temperance slipped past him with an awkward smile. She rubbed her raw hands together. The warm glow of a roaring fire in the hall greeted her. Her fingers burned and tingled. She brushed her boots across the mat, cringing when she noticed they were encrusted with mud. As the old man tried to close the front door, she shuffled to the side, knocking into a mahogany coat stand.

Her bag snagged on one of the hooks and she yanked it free with a muffled apology. She hadn't realised how full it was. Pulling the zipper back a little, she saw Alastair had packed her jacket. She jerked the fastener closed with a relieved sigh.

Inside the mayor's house was just as impressive as outside. There were dark wooden floors and pristine cream walls. All illuminated by a large crystal chandelier hanging above her head. A staircase to her right swept up to a balcony that stretched along the length of the corridor above.

To her left, behind a white door, she could hear voices and clinking glasses. It seemed there was some kind of late-night gathering. A small bell rang inside, leaving a hushed silence and a single man making an announcement.

Temperance leaned closer.

"Cyprian's dead," someone muttered in a low tone. "There was writing on the wall - did you see it? Do you know what it means?"

There was low murmuring before another person stated in a clear voice.

"The most important thing is that with Cyprian dead, our Seat is empty and vulnerable. We've called this urgent meeting to implore our host to take up his former position immediately - as a fine and noble member of the Bifrost Assembly!"

"And enact our revenge on the wolves!" another man shouted.

Cheering erupted in the room. Temperance stepped back. She couldn't believe they already knew about Cyprian's death.

The noise died down and someone cleared their throat. "If you insist, then I must comply with your wishes. I will take the Seat."

Temperance frowned, trying to place the familiar voice. She bent closer to the keyhole no longer hiding her eavesdropping.

"First, Alastair must..."

The butler coughed, drowning out the faint words. He placed a gentle wrinkled hand on her elbow. She sighed at him. The old man's grey eyebrows bunched together in a disapproving frown.

"This way, Miss."

The butler guided her over to a delicate looking chaise longue by the fire, away from the door. She suppressed the urge to shake him off.

Turning, she watched Alastair throw open the door. He stood in the entrance, his hand clenched around the handle. Temperance caught a glimpse of dark wooden panels, a large bookcase and flickering candlelight. The room was silent until the man, who had accepted Cyprian's empty Seat, spoke again.

“Alastair, what have you done? You killed a lupa! You’ve gone too far – the Assembly will not ignore this! Do you have any idea what this will do to us?”

“I didn’t kill her,” Alastair said, giving his head a fierce shake. It sounded more like a plea to be believed than a strong denial. Temperance saw his eyes shining with rejection as if he fully expected to be cast aside as a liar. He was more like a chastised child now than the dangerous warrior he had been in the forest. His posture sagged. It was clear their opinions mattered to him.

A chair scrapped across the floor.

“Come in and explain yourself.”

Sebastian Bloodworth appeared beside him in a finely pressed expensive suit and placed a hand on Alastair’s shoulder. He looked out into the hall and his piercing blue eyes fixed on Temperance. He stopped, his expression darkened. He rubbed his fingers over his beard. She tried not to flinch under his scrutiny. He inclined his head to his butler.

“Look after our visitor.” He closed the door with a muffled click.

“I’ll get you some refreshments, Miss,” the old man said, hurrying away.

Temperance rolled her eyes.

It was quite clear they didn’t want her overhearing any of what was happening inside the room. She was still confused as to why they were there at all.

She fidgeted for a minute, wondering what to do. Steeling herself, she stepped back over to the door to continue eavesdropping. There was a small bang. She fisted her hands and retreated. Rather than sitting down, she moved to the fireplace to warm herself. She stared up at an old family portrait hanging above the mantelpiece. The severe woman in the painting looked down her nose at her. Temperance squirmed under her disapproving stare.

“Oh, it’s the lab rat.”

She turned.

A pale-faced man looked down at her from the gallery above. He had long blond hair and high cheek bones that gave him a Cheshire Cat-like grin. He leaned against the banister with a plate in his hand. He picked up a biscuit and crunched into it, tapping the crumbs onto her head.

“What did you just call me?” She swiped a hand through her hair with a scowl.

“You don’t know what a rat is?”

He pushed out his front teeth and pretended to claw the air. He guffawed at his own joke, chomping the last of his biscuit. He trailed his fingers along the polished handrail and descended the carpeted steps.

“We’ve never met. I think I’d remember you.” Temperance shot him a dismissive glare, taking in the designer clothes and shiny black shoes. “I’ve done nothing to you *yet* to be labelled a rat.”

“Oh it’s not what you’ve done; it’s just what you are,” he smirked, titling his head to study her. “We haven’t met but that doesn’t mean I don’t know who you are, Temperance Levinthal. You’re famous in certain circles.”

“*What?*” His eyes crawled down her body. “Who are you?”

“Ah, I never introduced myself. I’m Seth Bloodworth. Where are my manners? I should offer you something to eat.” He held up a biscuit and flung it towards her. “You look starving.”

It landed on the hard wood and shattered into pieces.

“I think I’ll pass.”

Seth gave her a short smile and hopped off the last step. He was the same height as her. It made her laugh. She was short for a girl so that made him a ridiculously small man.

His expression grew cold. He stepped over to crush the biscuit into the floor with a twist of his expensive heel.

A flood of fear welled up inside her at the menacing glint in his eyes. She swallowed it back, regretting her taunts, remembering she was in a new world now with different rules. She didn’t know who or what Seth really was.

“I see the rat has teeth,” he said.

He hurled the plate to the ground. It smashed apart at her feet. She jumped and clutched her bag, backing away from him.

“But you should be careful little rat,” Seth warned, wagging his finger.

“I don’t understand why you keep calling me that.”

“Of course you don’t.” He stuck out his bottom lip and scrunched up his face in mock sadness. “Poor crazy Levinthals, I hope you’ve taken your medication today, you’d be mad not to!” He gave a low sneering chuckle.

Temperance pressed her lips together.

It felt like at every point in her life she’d been teased.

When she was younger the children in her class had been merciless. Their parents wouldn’t let them associate with her in case it was *catching*. Now she felt as small as she did back then, sitting in the corner of the classroom alone, eating whatever Adora could find in the kitchen to put in her lunchbox.

“Oh Temperance, don’t make me angry and I won’t hurt you.”

Seth stepped forward and reached out to touch her cheek. It was damp. She hadn't meant to cry. She refused to let such things upset her anymore.

She jerked away from his fingers. He curled them into a fist close to her chin. A livid expression crossed his face.

There was a horrific bang from inside the study. Angry shouting filtered into the hall. Alastair stumbled out, coughing. Smoke billowed after him. He tossed a silver candlestick aside with a thump. He placed his hand on the door and black symbols fanned out under his touch. They criss-crossed the wood, like intricate chains and blocked the exit. Temperance jumped when an explosion erupted inside. The door bounced on its hinges.

Alastair glanced at her. Her mouth fell open. She pointed a finger at him.

"What did you do now?"

"Nothing." He held his hands up. "But we have to go."

He stopped, taking in her situation. His expression was fierce. His eyes bored into Seth. The other man dropped his arm and turned to face him.

"Are you all right?" Alastair asked her.

"Of course she is." Seth grabbed her in a pinching grip. "And she's not going anywhere. My father will break your little binding spell in a moment, so we'll just wait here."

"Don't touch her." Alastair's jaw clenched, he marched towards them.

Seth thrust his palm forward. The air around Temperance grew heavy.

"Don't tell me what to do!"

Alastair batted something aside; it slammed into the fireplace with a loud crack and splintered the stone. The pressure in the hall lifted. Seth gasped.

Alastair clamped his hand around Seth's wrist. The man's strange twisted smile creased into a grimace of agony. His hand flayed and he tried to claw at Alastair's skin, forcing him to let go. Alastair shoved him away from Temperance into the old butler, who had reappeared with a large tea tray in his arms. The china crashed to the ground, boiling tea splashing over them both. Seth shrieked and flung the butler away from him.

Alastair flicked his fingers, the front door flew open. He grabbed Temperance's hand. They stumbled out and down the steps. She tripped and he hauled her up with him, almost carrying her. Once she found her feet again, they sprinted down the road.

Shouting echoed after them. Temperance shot a look over her shoulder. People were flooding out of the mayor's house and onto the street. Four of them stepped forward with raised arms. Something slammed into the ground around her. Dirt and concrete blasted into the air. She shrieked as it pelted her. Alastair enveloped her in his arms, shielding her from the worst of it. They staggered away, almost blinded.

"Stop!" Sebastian roared. "Don't harm the girl!" Temperance glanced back to see him knocking their hands aside.

With the pause in the attack, they managed to escape around the corner. Alastair darted towards the nearest alleyway. Temperance grabbed him.

"That's a dead end!"

He nodded and changed direction. He scanned the road and then lunged towards a neighbouring house. The gate rattled under his hand, locked tight. He twisted towards Temperance and grabbed her arms.

"No!" she cried, but it was too late.

He hauled her up and tossed her over the low hedge. She landed in a heap. He vaulted into the garden after her. Lying half on top of her, they froze. Temperance caught her breath, gazing up at him with wide eyes. He stared back at her with a frown. The first of Sebastian's people thundered passed them. He leapt to his feet, dragging her up. They dashed down the side of the house.

The garden behind was small, with cracked flagstones and a tipped over bin. There was an open shed at the end. They crept down and slid inside. In the cramped space, she was almost pressed up against him. She leaned away but she could still feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest. The handle of the lawnmower dug into the small of her back.

They heard people yelling.

They didn't move until all of the sounds had stopped. She shuffled her feet and hissed when she stumbled over some plastic pots. Alastair swung towards her and his arms slid around her waist to catch her before she hit the ground.

"Are you hurt?" He patted her body for injuries.

"I'm fine!"

Temperance grabbed his forearms, pushing him away. He didn't move very far. He looked down at her.

A back light went on in one of the rooms upstairs in the house. Even facing away from it in the dark, Temperance could see Alastair's strong jaw was clenched. A faint glow was thrown over the rest of the shed's contents. She felt him studying her.

"We can't stay here," he murmured. "But..."

He went quiet.

He rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. She realised he didn't know what to do. She still wasn't sure what was happening, but it was clear those other men had turned on him. Alastair was now as lost as she was. He probably didn't know what to do now that his own people were hunting him.

"You're right, we can't stay here," Temperance said, deciding to take charge. She brushed past him. "I know where we can go."

She stepped out into the garden, keeping tight to the wall. Alastair followed her without a word.

"The university should be deserted by now. I know a place on campus where we can hide for the night, my cousin Sara's room."

He frowned at her, but didn't say anything

The journey to the college was tense. She led the way and Alastair marched after her without a word of complaint. He scanned the road continuously.

When they slipped through the main archway, they were met by drunken students in the square. The university was alive with people.

She'd forgotten about the end-of-term Christmas parties.

Two tipsy girls lurched by, giggling. They eyed Alastair; one of them approached him. She stopped when Temperance glared at her and reached over to grab Alastair's hand. The drunken woman retreated with an angry pout.

Temperance tried to stop herself from thinking about the warmth of his hand in hers. He stared down at her in confusion but didn't shake her off.

The old granite dormitory buildings were three storeys high and lined a large square at the back of the university. They heaved with students; small crowds had spilled out from the rooms and were outside laughing and chatting. Temperance knocked against empty beer cans lining the path. Music blared from the open windows, coloured lights shone onto the cobblestones and people shouted out at them as they skirted past.

Temperance focused on the dark buildings to the side where the first year college students were housed. Few of them would still be there.

She crouched by a flowerbed and overturned the stones until she found the fake one Sara had told her about. Twisting open its compartment, she removed the two keys.

The large glass panelled door scraped open. The hallway inside was dark and the walls were plastered with old posters advertising various college events. There was a smell of polish and bleach, as if the hall had been cleaned recently. She waved Alastair in, peering out before she fastened the door closed. They crept forward. She grabbed the thick wooden banister and led the climb up. Each step groaned under their feet.

When they reached the upper floors, she glanced at the room numbers, tracing the metal digits with her fingers when it was too dark to see them. Eventually she found the right one. She ushered Alastair inside.

The room was chilly. The net curtains were drawn over the long windows. For a single bedroom, it was quite large with a high ceiling. It easily held the desk, chairs and the small double bed. Temperance could still hear the faint thump of music coming from nearby. She dropped her bag to the ground and slumped onto the bed. Alastair leaned against the side of the window, staring out.

“We should be safe here for now,” Temperance said.

Alastair turned towards her. “You said this was your cousin’s room? But both your parents are only children.”

“My Dad was adopted into a large family,” she said, slowly. “How do you know my parents were only children?”

“Cypr...” He gave a dismissive shrug and went back to looking out through the netting. “It’s not important.”

“I want explanations,” she sat up. “What exactly happened tonight?”

“I’m not sure,” Alastair said. She rolled her eyes.

“Tell me what you do know.” Temperance waved at the chair opposite her. “Sit down and start talking, you owe me that much.”

Alastair stared at her, she glared back at him with what she hoped was a threatening expression. He snorted and dragged the chair closer to the window.

“Where would you like me to begin?” He sat down, clasping his hands together. He leaned forward to look up at her.

Temperance opened her mouth then shrugged. “Start with what happened after dinner, I suppose.”

“Well you know Cyprian left. He’d gotten word that a criminal had escaped. He was charged with recapturing him and I was left to babysit,” Alastair said in a bitter voice.

He sat back in his chair with a frown.

“But I disobeyed him. I left you alone. I went into the woods and tried to find the wolf we’d seen earlier. I was hours following its tracks. I ended up circling around the forest like a fool and eventually I was led back to the house. I knew something was wrong.”

Alastair took a deep fortifying breath. “When I went inside, I found Cyprian. Then I heard the wolves and ran upstairs to you.”

“So those wolves were...” Temperance cringed at having to finish the question, she felt like an idiot. “They really were werewolves?”

“Yes,” Alastair answered with a serious expression. She studied him, waiting for him to burst out laughing, to tell her it was all a joke. He didn’t.

“And, what, you can do magic spells? That makes you a...” She shook her head. She didn’t even want to say it. She pulled her legs up to rest her chin on top of her knees.

Alastair took pity on her. “I’m a wizard and so is Sebastian. And the others at his house tonight are my people, or at least I thought they were.”

Temperance glanced over at him. His shoulders were slumped. He was like an abandoned dog. She felt her heart tilt a little at the sight.

“And this Assembly they were talking about, who are they?” she said, showing him she’d been paying attention.

“The government, I suppose you could say. It’s made up of six Seats, but not every species is represented. It depends on strength and numbers. There are no werewolf representatives for example; they’re nearly extinct. Cyprian held a Seat for the wizards. Sebastian had it before him.”

“There are more types of...” Temperance rubbed her forehead unable to believe what she was hearing. “What would you say?”

“The term would be faey - mythical creatures, vampires, witches, magical people,” Alastair said.

“Is all of it real?” she asked in a flat voice.

“Most of it, but there’s a little more science than myth. We are all related; all species of human, descended from a common ancestor. But in general terms, you would be called human and I would be faey.”

Temperance shook her head. “And why do wizards hate werewolves?”

“It stretches back hundreds of years. There was a war between us, which never really ended.” Alastair clenched his teeth. “On a more personal note, they killed my parents. I wouldn’t mind if they were exterminated, but genocide is frowned upon by the Assembly.”

“Good to know!” Temperance spluttered.

Ignoring her comment, he continued. “It’s why the females of all species are protected. We are allowed to cull however, especially the stronger, more dominant werewolf males. Like the one we saw tonight - Fenrir.”

“That’s why the werewolves attacked, because someone killed a female... a lupa,” she said. “For some reason they think you did it.”

He dropped his head. “They think I killed her and in retaliation the werewolves killed Cyprian. It’s an inexcusable crime; no one can murder a Seat holder.”

“You’ve been framed then,” Temperance said in a matter-of-fact tone.

He studied her with an expression she couldn’t decipher.

“Why don’t your own people believe you, why did they attack you?” she pressed.

“I don’t know,” Alastair rubbed a hand over his face in exhaustion. “I don’t know what’s happening.”

Temperance sighed. “That makes two of us.”