

Chapter 10



In a blind panic, Temperance tried to squeeze the ladder. She flinched expecting the friction to burn her hands, but no matter how tight she gripped she didn't feel anything. She couldn't control her fall.

It came to a natural end, however, when she reached the bottom rung. She stepped onto solid ground in a daze, struggling to regain her footing. She turned to see an old door behind her. An exit sign flickered over the frame.

Reaching out with a shaking hand, she pushed it open. A wave of light and colour swept over her. She blinked and found herself in a bustling café. The door had opened at the back of the shop. She was on the employee side of a long glass display case filled with cakes and gourmet sandwiches. There was a queue of people waiting to be served, wearing normal-looking suits and dresses. Several of them were talking on mobile phones and studying palm-sized internet devices. Others were lounging in comfortable leather chairs at tables dotted around the room.

Lucy glanced over from the till at her.

Temperance dropped her hold on the door and it swung closed behind her.

"Hurry up!" someone at the back of the line shouted. "I have to be in work up above in fifteen minutes!"

Temperance stumbled over into a seat, knocking over a small white bowl filled with little packets of sugar. She watched with an open mouth as the people paid for their ordinary coffees with regular money and hurried off to work. It was all very normal. Then, she looked out the front window.

She stood up from the table and pushed her way outside. She heard Lucy call to her over the counter as the door to the shop swung closed. It was darker outside than it should have been.

Her eyes shot upward. There was no sky, only a dark cavernous space.

In the far distance she could see stalactites looming down. There were colonies of bats flapping around them. She stumbled backwards and bumped into someone.

"You okay?" a man in a jogging suit asked, slipping off his headphones.

She pressed her lips together and nodded, watching him trot away.

The road stretching away from her was like a distorted mirror image of Threadneedle Street. Temperance stared at the buildings. They were carved into the rock face, the tops stretching up into the cavern.

“Temperance!” Alastair shouted, emerging from the shop. The werewolf was right behind him. The two men paused to watch as she jerked her finger mutely at the buildings and the absent sky.

The wizard rubbed his hands over his face, taking a deep breath. He nodded, struggling to find the right words. “Yes, I’m sure this is a bit of a shock.”

“A bit!” she gaped.

“It’s nothing to worry about. These buildings are just extensions of the ones up above - they’re pretty much the same.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Sort of,” he amended.

“This place is...”

“Where the faey community do their private, and mundane, business; most of them own the entire building. And a lot run the shops up above as well.”

Temperance swallowed. Her head hurt. Was there something beneath Haven too? Perhaps it was a magical bookshop. Her first thought was to look for it and use it to escape back to the safety of her old life.

She rested her hand over her heart, bunching up the fabric of her coat. She took a deep relaxing breath, remembering methods the doctors had taught her to calm down.

She stared around them.

The vast streets were illuminated by tall lamps, flooding the area with artificial sunlight. Some of them were aimed down onto flowerbeds to make them bloom. Even with the massive lights, the darkness still pressed down on them. Shop windows were lit-up and people were going about their everyday routines. They wandered the streets with plastic shopping bags dangling from their fingers; there were even groups of school children.

Temperance had to look again.

They were wearing the same uniform she had worn years ago. In the distance, someone was putting out tables and chairs, setting up a small restaurant.

“People live down here?” She pointed at a large square at the end of the street. The children were skipping down it, laughing and swinging their backpacks. The square broke off into several other roads that led into deep caverns in the distance where people were cycling and strolling. A man on a scooter suddenly beeped at them. Temperance leapt out of his way.

“The world up there is as much the faey world as here,” Alastair told her pointing up. “But, yes, there are some who have their homes down here.”

Temperance gripped her bag, wondering what she’d gotten herself into.

Alastair took her hand. “We’d better find the Harpies Bathhouse.”

The further they went, the clearer it became that even if the world above their heads was connected to the world below, it didn’t quite match up. The paths weren’t the exact same. Temperance knew her way around Carwick, but these new streets made no sense.

The roads were on a tiered slope that led down to a huge underground lake. Alastair brought her towards it. There were houses dotting the shoreline on the far side of the water. Someone had transported massive towering trees into the caves, helping them grow using artificial lights connected to the vast ceiling above. The light streamed down onto the dark water of the lake. Temperance saw people rowing along its black surface.

The wizard pulled her into a shop on one of the side streets.

Temperance glanced back to make sure the werewolf followed them in. She wondered if she might be able to get some information out of him after they cleaned him up.

She blinked until her eyes adjusted to the lack of light inside the shop. A gust of clogging steam enveloped her. The small enclosed space was filled with a grey haze. All of the wooden counters and seats were moist. The walls were covered with dark panels. There were various sized pots with green luscious ferns placed around the room. At the back, a piece of cloth fluttered over an open archway. Beyond it, there was the sound of splashing water. Alastair rang a bell on the counter. The fabric at the back of the room moved and a small woman sashayed out to greet them.

She was striking, with hypnotic blue eyes and snow-white hair. She had it piled high on her head, fixed in place with rainbow coloured ornaments that jingled when she moved. Her cheeks were flushed and damp. Stray strands of hair fell into her face; she looked out of breath as if she had been very busy before they called her.

“Hello,” she breathed in a husky voice. Temperance followed the woman’s eyes to Alastair. Her tone sounded alluring. It made Temperance wonder what sort of bathhouse it was exactly.

She glided over to them, reaching out to touch Alastair’s arm. Temperance stared at her small bird-like figure. She looked delicate, yet she didn’t react when Alastair roughly shook off her hold.

“What can I do for you?” the woman asked.

She stepped back around the counter and slid out a laptop. She turned it on and watched the three of them over the screen.

Alastair jerked his thumb at the werewolf. “We’re obviously here because of that.”

The woman's eyes narrowed on the dishevelled man. Her nose wrinkled. "That, sir, is a lot of work."

"It's just a good bath." Temperance folded her arms.

The women held up her hand, using the other to check the computer. "Give us three hours and we will fix him right up." She pointed at the screen. "We've had a cancellation. We can take him straightaway."

She rang the bell. Three women, who could have been her sisters, appeared from behind the curtain. Tittering, they drew the werewolf inside with them. He went willingly enough.

"What are you going to do with him?" Temperance asked.

"Everything. You'll see in three hours," the woman said. "It'll be expensive though."

Alastair rolled his shoulders. "Fine, can my friend wait here?"

"Friend..." The woman smiled and slid her eyes to Temperance. "As you like."

She slapped the laptop closed and put it under the counter. Stepping out she took Temperance's hand, leading her to an alcove where she could sit. There was a table with colourful magazines on it. She recognised the glossy covers. The woman slipped back behind the curtain.

Alastair sat down beside Temperance. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. Winthrop was right; you never should have been brought into this."

"Can't be helped," Temperance shrugged.

"I'll fix everything, nothing will happen to you. You have my word," he said.

He leaned forward; his expression intense. She couldn't look away. He seemed too close. All of a sudden the booth felt very intimate. Swallowing, she turned away with a nod to show she believed him.

"What are you going to do once this is cleared up? Are you going to go back to the wizards?" she asked. She didn't think he could return to them, not when they hadn't believed his innocence in the slightest. They had more or less disowned him.

The question unnerved him. His dark eyes darted from side-to-side. He drew a hand through his hair, tousling it.

"Honestly, I don't know."

She let out an apologetic sigh, hating that she had brought up the painful subject. "You could go back to university? We still have that occult class to attend right?"

He froze.

Temperance's cheeks flushed. She bit her lip, it sounded like she was asking him to stay with her. She took up one of the magazines and ducked behind it.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes. "You're lucky, you know."

"How so?" she asked, arching an eyebrow at him. She didn't feel lucky.

"You have a family to go back to and they're really good people."

They stared at each other.

Temperance swallowed. "Don't you have other family?"

"I don't know anything about my father or his people. Cyprian hated him. All I know is that he's dead."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Her heart sped up; her palms were sweaty. She struggled to think of something, staring at the garish pages in her hands.

"I have to go and set up a meeting. It may take me some time. It would be safer if you stayed here. Though, you could come with me... if -"

"No it's okay," Temperance cut in, still using the magazine as a shield. "I'll stay here."

He coughed and straightened in his seat. His leg brushed against hers as he stood. "Right, yeah, it's better if you stay here anyway. Keep an eye on him," he amended.

"Yeah..." She tried to subdue the part of her that regretted her hasty response.

"I'll be back as quick as I can."

Temperance nodded, only looking up when she heard the door click closed.

"He's a very strapping man," the woman called as she swept back into the front of the shop. "A wizard?"

"No," Temperance replied in a calm voice. She wasn't going to get caught out by anyone. She met the woman's pale eyes. "He's one of Winthrop White's people."

"That explains it then," the woman grinned. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes please," Temperance smiled back at her.

The hostess glided away, returning a few minutes later with a tray in her hands. She put the cup down with a bowl of sugar and a milk jug.

"He's very dashing...very strong." Her hands flexed around the tray. "How did you find him? Mr White's people are hard to pin down."

"He's a friend," Temperance said, staring up at her.

"*Friend*," the woman said, with a slow laugh. "I see."

She headed back inside. Temperance heard the girls giggling. The Harpies Bathhouse was starting to remind her of her own kitchen during the winter solstice.

She tossed the magazine aside.

She itched to go home and see her parents. Make sure that they were safe. At least their memories would have been changed by the Assembly until the whole mess was resolved. If they weren't, she didn't know what Pratchett and Adora might do.

She squirmed in her seat. Her disappearance and Cyprian's death could trigger a breakdown in her father.

She rubbed her eyes and pushed the tea aside. She was paranoid that there might be something in it. Leaning back in her alcove, she stared up at the stained ceiling.

She heard a pair of disjointed voices close by.

"-inthal experiment, I'm sure of it."

"Wasn't the wizard, Bloodworth, involved in that?"

"Yes!"

There was a sharp shushing noise. Temperance ignored them. Instead she rolled onto her side, feeling exhausted. She was nudged awake, what felt like moments later.

"He's finished!"

Temperance sat up with a muffled yawn. She blinked at the man in front of her. Three women were clinging to him, finding any reason they could to touch him.

"That couldn't be..."

She jumped to her feet, staring at his golden eyes.

They really had done *everything* to him. She wondered how. He no longer looked malnourished; his build was lean and strong. His tattered clothes had been repaired. He now wore a rich velvet jacket that buttoned across his broad chest. They had cut his hair back short and shaved him clean. Before it had been impossible to place an age on him; now it was clear he was in his mid-twenties. He was as handsome as Alastair and he was very much aware of it. His eyes shone with a smug confidence.

"He was a lot calmer before your friend left," one of the women remarked. "But he seems much better now he's near you."

"Did he say anything?" Temperance asked, meeting his warm eyes. "What's your name?"

He didn't say a word. It had been too much to hope for.

The door to the shop swung open. Alastair stepped inside looking a little bedraggled. He paused when he saw the werewolf. The two men stared at each other; Temperance had to clap her hands before the wizard would look away.

"You really did everything," he muttered.

The woman who had served them stepped over to the counter and Alastair handed her a wad of notes.

“Do come back whenever you like, boys,” she smiled and waved her fingers.

The women around the werewolf giggled and brushed themselves up against him. Alastair snorted in disgust; the other man gave a seductive flash of perfect teeth that made the girls gasp.

“Vain,” the wizard said, looking away.

He glanced at Temperance and held out his hand. She stepped forward. As she took it, the werewolf whined and reached out to grasp her other hand.

Alastair levelled a glare at him.

He clucked his tongue. “Getting territorial, isn’t he?”

Temperance sighed and then caught the warning smirk on Alastair’s lips.

“Careful, mutt.”

The werewolf’s eyebrows rose, then he gave a bark of laughter.

Temperance squirmed as Alastair’s hand tightened around hers. “Don’t laugh at me.”

The werewolf closed his mouth and gave a small nod, though Temperance could see his shoulders were still shaking. Something about Alastair talking back to him was very amusing.

The werewolf needed to be more careful; perhaps she should warn him that Alastair was a hunter. Temperance frowned down at the dagger on the wizard’s belt.

Alastair dragged them out of the shop to a chorus of unhappy sighs.

“We have a man to meet.”