

Chapter 11



After the warm damp of the bathhouse, the underground city seemed far colder. Alastair led them back down the road. They wove through the afternoon lunch crowds packing the pubs and cafés.

In the dim side streets there were numerous stalls set up displaying various oddities. Temperance gaped at them as she was dragged along. There were twisted coloured candles alongside unusual brass instruments and thick books covered in strange symbols. Beside them, she could also see laptop parts and mobile phone charms.

When they passed a butcher's shop, Temperance made the men slow down so she could stare in the window. It was extremely festive, with lights and even a little tree by the door. Their decorations could have rivalled her father's. It was the striped canopy above them that drew her attention however. There was an inflated old snowman perched on the tight fabric. A shiver ran down her spine as she remembered her mother's prediction. She had said the butchers would have this up by morning.

Had she been predicting an event in the faey world?

Temperance shook her head. It was absurd. Every shop would be decorated with snowmen for Christmas. Still, she found the sight chilling. Beside her, the werewolf drooled in at the slabs of beef displayed in the window. Alastair sneered back at him.

"Come on dog, there'll be food where we're going."

Alastair tightened his hold on Temperance and marched them forward. She yanked the werewolf after her. Her shoulders felt like they were being ripped out of their sockets with both men pulling out of her.

When they reached the end of the street, it opened up into a large square. Lining one side was the strangest building Temperance had ever seen. It was an odd jumble of parts that jutted in and out of the rock. Whole sections extended outwards like a jagged row of town houses with sloped tiled roofs. At the base the surface was smooth and flat; a single wall of grey chipped slate with a giant door set at its centre. A metal sign and lamp hung above the entrance, creaking in the cool air.

The most striking part of the building was a staircase that snaked in and out of the stone, like a twisted spine.

“Welcome to the Devil’s Staircase,” Alastair said. They crossed the square, skirting around a large fountain and stopping for a moment to let two people on bicycles pass.

“It’s a hostel,” the wizard explained, knocking on the door.

Temperance could hear metal bolts being slid back. It sounded like they were unlocking a large gateway rather than a simple door.

She reached out to touch the wall, it felt warm. An outline of a red devil climbing three black steps had been carved into the rock.

“It’s neutral ground for all faey, a safe house,” Alastair continued.

“Stay close to me. There’ll probably be werewolves inside.”

Temperance grabbed his arm in panic. “How is this safe? I thought we were trying to get away from them!”

“We have a meeting with the owner. For now, we’re under his protection. It took a lot of negotiating to arrange.”

The door swung inward.

Alastair ducked into the dark passage. He turned back to Temperance and helped her step down into the hall. “Everyone here is bound by magic to do no harm.”

There was an ominous iron door to her right. A large sheet of reinforced glass had been fixed into the centre behind a set of thick steel bars. She wondered why it was needed if it was a safe house.

Inside, she could see a normal office. There was a little desk with a tray filled with beige folders. The fax machine at the back was beeping and paper was feeding into the top of it. A small man appeared behind the glass, he wore a suit jacket with the devil and staircase embroidered on the breast pocket.

“Money,” he said, pointing at the metal tray below the window.

There was a shiny credit card reader fixed to the plate. The green digital display cast a vivid glow in the dim hall. Alastair drew out a worn leather wallet and slipped his credit card into the machine. He peered down to read the little screen, tapped in his pin code and waited. There was a confirmatory beep.

“They’ll find us,” Temperance hissed at him. Alastair glanced at her, his eyes were glittering.

“Ah you’re thinking, I like that,” he smiled.

Temperance blushed. Then she realised it was essentially a compliment on being a devious criminal.

“There’s an amnesty here. Even if you pay with a card, it can’t be traced. It makes their business flow a little smoother. I should bring you on the run with me more often; you’d keep me on my toes.”

His expression changed in an instant, he looked mortified by what he’d said. He glanced at her. Temperance’s face reddened even more. The werewolf made a low guttural growl behind them.

“Come on,” Alastair mumbled, reaching out to draw her forward.

The werewolf stuck close behind, sandwiching Temperance between him and Alastair. When they turned the corner, away from the main door, the corridor brightened up. A long stretch of lamps had been fixed to the ceiling.

They travelled along in single file, with Alastair’s large form blocking most of the way. The place was bustling with people popping in and out of various large rooms. They all had rucksacks. Anyone they met had to squeeze up against the wall until they passed.

Temperance noticed one young man; he looked like a typical student from Carwick. She shimmied by him and he pulled in tighter to the wall. When the werewolf crossed him, the man’s eyes widened and he whimpered. He gripped his bag tighter and raced away. The werewolf watched him go, his golden eyes shining with interest. He sniffed the air and started forward again. He walked into Temperance, not noticing she had paused to watch him.

“He’s a werewolf, isn’t he?” she said.

He inclined his head and pushed her forward.

Alastair shouted down at them, “Hurry up!”

They climbed the stairs to the next floor and Temperance got a sense of how big the building really was. There were numerous levels and each had a warren of rooms leading off the main hallways.

She peered into one room. It was a large lounge decorated like a Victorian billiards room. A group of women were playing pool; one of them was bending over the green table top with a cue stick.

“This place always has terrible reception!”

There was a series of loud banging noises.

Temperance glanced in further. The werewolf hovered beside her. In the corner, a man with a ponytail was slamming his palm down on top of a television with white static. On the shelf beneath it, there was a games console and several stacks of CDs.

“Does anyone know how to fix this?”

He raised his eyebrows at Temperance. She shrugged and withdrew from the room. It was all painfully normal, dull even. Alastair leaned against the handrail and put one boot on the next step.

“Are you finished?” he glared.

“Where are we even going?”

“To the top,” he pointed.

She sighed, craning her neck to look up at the spiralling banister.

With an exasperated breath, Temperance followed after Alastair. The stairs ended at a single wide brown door. She clutched at her bag. The wizard knocked and a faint voice answered. He threw the door open and a gust of cold air hit them. It was refreshing against her flushed cheeks.

There was a large desk in front of a glassless window overlooking everything below. The rolling view made Temperance wonder how big the hidden city really was. She could just about see the roads stretching off into vast caverns in the distance.

In the centre of the room, a short man was watching them. He was leaning back against the edge of his desk, looking smug. He crossed his arms and his elbow knocked over part of an unfinished chess game beside him. As he turned to fix it, Temperance studied him. While he was dressed in an expensive charcoal grey suit, it was wrinkled and too big for him. It was almost like he was playing dress-up in his father’s clothes.

He turned around and smiled. Temperance couldn’t return it. Even though he looked like a boy, there was something in his eyes that aged him. He pressed his right heel to the ground, letting his left foot swing back and forth. He was even too short to fully prop himself up on the desk.

Alastair opened his mouth; but the man fluttered his hand at him.

“I’ll talk to *you* in a minute.”

Temperance noticed that his English was almost perfect, except for a slight inflection. He wasn’t from Carwick.

“Welcome, Temperance Levinthal. I am Konrad Rosier.” He pressed his hand to his chest in greeting.

“How do you know my name, Mr Rosier?” Temperance glanced over at Alastair, “Couldn’t you have given a fake one?” She wanted to shake him.

The wizard frowned at her. “I didn’t mention you.”

“He didn’t have to. Word’s already out that you’re with him. But, I’ve known of your family for a long time,” Konrad said.

Temperance frowned; she opened her mouth, unsure of how to ask why he’d known about them. She felt Alastair’s eyes on her. It seemed like he was thinking the same thing. Konrad’s eyebrows rose; he leaned forward.

“You’ve never heard rumours about the Levinthal experiment, have you?” His eyes flickered to the wizard. Temperance looked up to see Alastair shake his head, he looked as confused as she felt. The word ‘experiment’ resounded in her ears.

“What?”

Konrad heaved a disappointed sigh. “Well, the subjects were never told but I thought maybe an ancestor somewhere along the line might have known.”

Temperance pursed her lips.

“Though, your brother has known for some years. He’s representing faey interests in the East now.” Konrad tilted back on the desk with a mysterious sigh, almost begging her to ask more.

She glared.

“It’s no joke, I assure you!” he laughed.

A chill ran down her spine; Alastair shifted beside her, restless.

“I’m sure you’re wondering how I know. Well, I obtained a few documents from the beginning of the experiment. They’re very old; older than me even.”

He paused, as if waiting for them to say something. When no one did, his lips thinned in a pout. “That’s very impressive you know. Most have been lost.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” Temperance snapped.

“Your family is the product of the longest running breeding experiment in the history of our world,” Konrad stated with a wide smile, nodding as if she should have been excited about it. “They wanted to create the ultimate faey by crossing us all together. While you’ve been boring to say the least, your father showed some promise. Though he’s quite unstable; it’s why they medicated him.”

“He doesn’t have any powers,” Temperance spat.

“Of course he does.” Konrad pointed at his eyes. “He sees a little further than we do. The pills dull his power, but they don’t stop him from seeing everything. There’s no telling what he’d be able to see if he wasn’t on those drugs. Bit like his mother.”

She fisted her hands and stared at the ground. This was nonsense.

She tried to shut him out but his almost hypnotic voice continued, “And your mother, from a family of seers. Faey come from far and wide to hear her predictions.”

“No they don’t,” Temperance whispered in disbelief.

She blocked out Konrad. He gave her a condescending smile. She suddenly couldn’t forget all the people looking for Adora down through the years. How many of them were faey?

“And you,” Konrad lifted his chin.

Temperance froze.

His eyes bore into hers. "You're afraid." He flashed a wide grin. Temperance stared at his sharp pointed incisors. "Vampires are very observant."

She shuffled back away from him. A calming hand rested on her shoulder.

"You should be happy!" Konrad pressed, leaning firmer on his desk. His fingers scraped against the wood. "You can count some of the most powerful faey among your very distant relatives. Some call you an abomination, others, a potential weapon."

He tilted his body to Alastair. "No wonder they're all after you. You've slaughtered a poor lupa *and* stolen a precious asset."

Alastair jerked upright and clenched his fists. He opened his mouth but the vampire stopped him.

"Though, we both know you didn't kill her," Konrad rubbed his chin, his eyes gleaming. "Cyprian did."

There was silence for a moment. The vampire smirked, watching him.

"What?"

"He made it look like you did it. Your uncle framed you."

"He wouldn't!" Alastair glowered at him.

"It's what I heard," Konrad laughed.

He leaned sideways to stare at the werewolf behind them. Temperance tried to block his view. The hand on her shoulder gave a reassuring squeeze.

"You've another interesting specimen tagging along, Alastair, did you know?" Konrad frowned, then pointed at the werewolf. "They want you back in the clock."

"What clock?" Temperance asked. She glanced between them. A shudder rippled through the werewolf.

Konrad ignored her. "And I don't know if I don't agree with them. Killing Cyprian wasn't very nice." He clucked his tongue at the werewolf. "I worked hard cultivating that association. He was tolerable, for a wizard. That message was a bit melodramatic though, don't you think? Tick-tock?"

"You!" Alastair twisted.

Temperance was all that stood between him and the werewolf. She held firm, not sure what to do. It felt like if she moved, they'd leap at each other.

"I... didn't..." the werewolf whispered in a harsh voice.

She jumped in shock. Alastair caught her arm and tried to jerk her out of the way, but the werewolf's grip on her shoulder tightened. His expression was grim. His voice when he spoke again was clearer. "I wouldn't have been so merciful. He was dead when I arrived."

Temperance stared at him. It was the first time he'd said anything. And his words made her skin crawl.

"If not you, then who did it?" Konrad wondered. "Perhaps another wolf? Revenge for the death of the lupa?" He folded his arms. "But then, why the message?"

"No, there was no smell... of any werewolf on the body," he said. He stopped and tried to clear his throat. He winced.

Temperance wondered how long it had been since he'd talked.

"What did it smell of?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Interesting." Konrad toyed with his cufflink; his eyes lingering on the werewolf. "Who knows then?"

"I need to clear my name," Alastair insisted.

"What do you want me to do?" Konrad responded in a disinterested tone.

"Call an Assembly meeting. I want to plead my case. There are three different faey groups after us now!"

"Three?" The vampire's interest perked up again. He put up his fingers and listed off their attackers. "Wizards, werewolves and..."

"Lady Knox's advocate, Lilith Adams," Alastair muttered. "And I don't even know why."

"My, we have been busy." The vampire stretched back and dropped his hand. "*Perhaps* I'll see what I can do." He smiled at Temperance then. "Your eyes are just burning with questions – please ask away."

The other two men turned to look at her.

"What is this clock about?"

"Why not ask what you really want to know? Are you so afraid of the truth?" He didn't wait for a response. "The clock. Well, that story comes from the final battle of the werewolves against the wizards during their great war. It was fought in the werewolf's city; a ghost town now, out there somewhere." Konrad gestured dramatically at the open window.

"The wolves were defeated. But because their leader was an Assembly member, it was forbidden to kill him. So, he was locked away in a clock prison created by Sebastian Bloodworth with Cyprian's help."

"And who was he, this leader?" Temperance asked. The hand on her shoulder tightened.

"The legendary Halvard Wolfram," Konrad nodded at the werewolf, who refused to look at them. His hand slipped away from Temperance. He stared out the window, towards the dark lake in

the distance, his eyes unfocused. Then he turned to watch Alastair as if the parts of a strange puzzle had finally fallen into place. The wizard avoided his eyes.

Konrad yawned. "I don't know any more than that. Come see me alone next time Temperance. If you want to learn more about yourself that is."

Alastair stepped forward with an urgency Temperance hadn't seen in him before. He was afraid the vampire would cut him off and tell them to leave.

"And, will you contact the Assembly? 'Perhaps' isn't going to cut it," he pressed.

The vampire flicked his fingers; an angry bite entered his voice. "Yes I'll contact them. You'll know when it's done. Stick around." Konrad leaned back on his desk, a menacing smile curling his lips. "You'll never be able to pay off this debt, Mr Byron."

The wizard bowed his head with a muffled thank you. It seemed to hurt him to say it. Temperance made her way to the door first.

Her fingers were just touching the handle, when Konrad called out to her.

"Temperance, do stop taking that nasty medication. We might get to see some fabulous fireworks if you do."