

## Chapter 5



Fierce spine-chilling howls echoed from every direction. Temperance couldn't tell if they were ahead of, or behind her. She clapped her hands to her ears and slashed through the damp undergrowth. Her elbows knocked off tree trunks. Sopping leaves and sharp branches whipped out at her, snagging her clothes.

Large shapes flashed by, some crashing through the bushes. Others slipped through like ghosts. Whenever she twisted towards them, they were gone. She could almost feel the wild dogs snapping at her heels, hot saliva dripping off their sharp teeth. She'd soon be lying savaged on a forest track.

She ran faster.

She kept her eyes pinned on Alastair's back. He flitted through the trees untouched, a dark shadow she could barely see. She was grateful for the light the moon gave. She ducked, trying to mirror his movements only to trip into the bushes. It was almost like he was prowling through the forest, not running away. That's what *she* was doing.

Every few minutes he snatched up her arm and veered to the side, obeying some invisible sign. He'd drop his hold on her as soon as he could and rush forward.

When they breached the edge of the forest, she gave a haggard gasp of relief. The snarls around them died away. Her harsh breathing filled her ears. She twisted around in a circle. A ring of trees hemmed them in. They hadn't left the woods. She took a shuddering gulp of cold air. They'd been herded into a clearing.

"What's happening?" she panted. Alastair had his back to her, walking them both into the centre. "Where did they go, have they stopped chasing us?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he threw her bag back to her. It felt abrupt but she couldn't bring herself to care. She slung the strap across her body. Exhaustion started to settle in. The twinkling stars reminded her she should be wrapped up in a warm bed. Without her coat, she was starting to feel the cold bite in the air.

"Alastair, what did you do?" she asked, through chattering teeth.

He didn't reply.

Whatever was happening, she was certain he and Cyprian were to blame. The feral dogs had never attacked anyone before.

The night's events started to replay in her head.

"My god, Cyprian is..." she bit down on her fist, not wanting to finish the sentence.

"Shut up," Alastair hissed.

"No," she spluttered at him, her cheeks burning with the fury she felt. "Tell me what's happening!"

She tried to shake his arm but it was like swinging off a wall. He didn't move. He shook her off and she fell back.

"Just shut up and listen!"

He crouched forward, his arm raised. The knife glinted in the moonlight. He scanned the tree line. She held her breath. At first there didn't seem to be anything. Then she heard it. Low growling; it caused the hair on her arms to stand on end. She tilted sideways to look out between the trees.

In the darkness, numerous eyes began to open like ominous yellow flares. The black forest lit up like a starry sky as more of the dogs appeared. The growling reached a deafening crescendo only to be cut off into a tense silence. A branch snapped and a large grey animal emerged from the shadows. It stalked forward, its claws digging into the soft ground, churning it up. Its ears were pinned flat against its head. Its black lips curled back in a vicious snarl to reveal gleaming fangs longer than her fingers. Temperance gaped at its size. It was like a small bear. Two more animals, almost as big, emerged from the woods to flank it.

“Cowards,” Alastair taunted. “You had to hunt me in a pack?”

Temperance raised her eyebrows. One of the other animals in the woods barked. All of the dogs threw back their heads and howled.

Temperance wrapped her arms around her chest. Alastair was unaffected; he swung his knife at them, the blade shone red as if superheated. Bright sparks fell from it, trailing in the air like a fiery whip.

“Change!” he shouted. “Fight me like men! You vermin slaughtered a member of the Assembly! You broke the rules, now you’ll pay the consequences!”

Alastair stretched out his fingers to the main dog. It snarled and gnashed its teeth, its massive body twisted as though fighting against an invisible noose.

Temperance shuffled back.

It bent low to the ground, its muzzle on its paws. A small whine erupted from its throat as its limbs began to spasm and lengthen. The animal's claws and fur retracted to leave dirty fingernails and pale white skin. In seconds, a naked man was crouching in its place.

Temperance blinked; her breath caught.

This couldn't be happening.

The man clutched at the damp twigs and leaves around him. He gasped through gritted teeth. His skin shone with sweat.

He forced himself up, staggering to his feet. His black hair was shoulder length and shaggy. His striking features, while not traditionally handsome, were attractive.

"Fight you like a man? But we're werewolves, Alastair Byron," he bared his teeth, his brown eyes flashing. His muscles flexed with suppressed anger. "We didn't break any rules. But you did! You slaughtered a lupa."

Temperance stared at him.

Alastair reared back, horrified. "We don't hunt females. It's forbidden."

"Freya was killed tonight by you!" the man snarled.

"No," Alastair bit back. He drew up to his full impressive height. "Not by me."

A wolf with dark brown fur snorted.

"You've got something to say?" Alastair raised an eyebrow. Like before, it began to shudder, its hair retracted, leaving another man dazed on the ground.

"Liar!" he groaned. He craned his neck to look up at them. "Fenrir, this is the wizard. It was his weapon!"

*Wizard*, Temperance mouthed to herself.

"So you're the new Alpha." Alastair's expression grew calculated. "We've been looking for you."

"And you found my mother instead," Fenrir spat.

“I didn’t kill her, but *you*...” Alastair murmured, his voice low. “Killing Cyprian will be the last mistake you ever make. And the others, they’ll exterminate the rest of your mutts.”

Their words seemed to fade away, until she felt dizzy and lightheaded. A feeling of nausea rose up inside her. Sweat broke out across her forehead, Temperance felt her chest tighten and her breathing speed up. She clutched at her top with a trembling hand and stumbled back away from the men. Her medicine had finally stopped working for her. There was no way this could be happening.

She was having a full-blown hallucination.

She’d spent her life dreading this moment, and now it had happened.

Panicked thoughts flashed through her mind, where was she really? Sitting in bed, staring vacantly at the wall in Cyprian’s house? Or maybe the meal had been part of the illusion too.

Was she at home?

In college?

Temperance took deep steadying breaths, struggling to calm down.

Slowly, her breathing returned to normal. Snippets of the conversation between the men began to reach her again.

She glanced over at them. They were tall and well built. She was really impressed by her imagination. She couldn’t remember when she’d ever seen stomach muscles like that. A burst of manic laughter escaped her.

“Now this is my kind of winter solstice.”

The men all looked over. They seemed unsettled by her laughter. Alastair frowned at her.

“Your mate?” Fenrir jerked his chin at her.

His mouth began to overfill, his teeth lengthening into fangs. His features shifted as he started to change back. His words were more like snarls. “Her death will be a fitting revenge... for a start...”

“No!” Alastair shoved Temperance behind him. She peered over his shoulder. “You won’t hurt her.”

He waved his left hand.

There were great thundering cracks; large trees toppled to the forest floor. Their roots ripping free of the earth with a sickening groan. Agonising squeals erupted from the wolf pack as they disappeared under falling branches, leaving only Fenrir standing.

Alastair flicked his fingers.

The ground rumbled.

Temperance skipped over the cracks forming under them. Sharp rocks speared up from the earth with a deafening scrape.

It created a barrier between them and the animals.

Fenrir crouched with a roar and finished his transformation mid-leap. He landed on Alastair, his claws digging into his shoulders, cutting deep furrows down his arms. Alastair caught the werewolf’s thick neck and forced the snapping teeth away from his face. They scuffled in the undergrowth, snarling and shouting at one another.

Temperance avoided them.

With skill she had never suspected, her imagination had Alastair flipping the animal over and driving his knife into its wide ribcage. The wolf gave a shrill whimper and tried to scramble away. Alastair’s magic lashed out. Fenrir flew across the clearing and slammed into the stone wall.

Snaps and splintering filled the air as more of the forest toppled to the ground. Alastair stalked forward to finish his attack on the unconscious man, a triumphant smile on his face.

“Stop, no more violence,” Temperance whispered, hoping her subconscious would obey her. Even in her delirium she didn’t want to see any more death.

Alastair fisted his hands and twisted towards her. She met his dark eyes; they were shining with a fevered madness. She heard the trees behind her give way as his powers swung in her direction. She didn't bother to move when one of the thick branches just missed slamming into her. The displaced air hit her face as it whooshed past. Alastair leapt forward and wrenched her out of the way.

"What is wrong with you?" He glared, shooting a look behind her at the destruction. "Let's go."

"I don't really feel like running," Temperance said with a shrug. "You're just a hallucination."

He tugged her forward; she stumbled and yanked her hand back.

"I don't need this," he muttered. He ran his hand through his hair. Then he bent as if to scoop her up into his arms. She jumped back out of reach.

Putting up a finger, she warned, "I will hurt you."

"We need to leave," Alastair stated, over-pronouncing each word as if he was afraid she couldn't understand him anymore. "You are in danger here."

Temperance plucked a leaf from his hair. She lifted it to her nose, inhaling its musty smell. "Everything seems so realistic."

He gave a tired impatient sigh. He spread his hands out. "Why do you think you're imagining this?"

A shiver ran through her.

"It's happened before, but it's never been this intense," she whispered. Saying it out loud made it more real. Her mouth felt dry and her heart rate sped up again.

Alastair grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "This is real."

"So you just saw dogs turn into naked men, did you? And you destroyed the woods with magic?" she shouted, pointing at the destruction.

He bent to look her in the eye. "Yes I did."

She paused for a moment to consider the chance it had all happened and then shook her head. Alastair clenched his jaw shut. He leaned down and pinched her. She shrieked in pain and clutched at her arm.

“Even if you don’t believe me,” Alastair tapped the side of her head. “You still feel pain; imagine their teeth ripping into your flesh. You’re a liability. Now move!”

He propelled her out of the clearing. Temperance’s arm was still aching. She didn’t think she could feel pain like that in an illusion, though she didn’t know how it was possible that this was real. If it was, she’d just watched Alastair become a murderer.

She blinked; it was like she was emerging from a dream. The chill of the forest seemed to reach her again. A different sort of fear started to spread through her. She was a witness to his crime. He had just called her a liability.

It was probably her turn to disappear.

Without warning, she dashed to the side and sprinted away, criss-crossing through the trees. She wasn’t going to give him a chance to silence her. Just when she thought she might be escaping him, she started to slow down. No matter how much she pumped her arms, she didn’t seem to get any further. The same plants surrounded her. Her body felt heavy. It was like moving through thick syrup.

A black shape materialised to her right. Alastair stormed over to her, his boots crushing everything beneath them. She realised he must have used his magic on her.

He pulled her around. “What are you doing?” His grip was agonising.

“Clearly, I’m attempting to escape,” Temperance said. She tried to pry him off. “You just killed that man! I’m probably next!”

“You’re safe with me.” He scowled and then continued in an even tone. “And unfortunately, he’s not dead, but with any luck he’s severely maimed.”

Temperance paled.

A chorus of howls echoed in the distance. She felt Alastair's fingers flex against her arm as if he was working through the urge not to go back and hunt them.

She pointed into the forest. "Instead of running from those monsters you want to chase them. You're crazier than I am. I don't want to meet them a second time!"

Alastair turned back to her.

"At least you grasp that I'm real again," he drew her closer. She held her breath at his threatening expression. "There's no one else to protect you. They have your scent now. They won't stop until they kill you."

"Look, I'm not important. I just want to go home. I won't say anything about what happened tonight. Who would believe me anyway?" Temperance forced out a high-pitched laugh.

She patted his arm then tried again to extract herself from his tight grip.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Alastair repeated.

Temperance stopped struggling and stared up at him. He seemed almost insulted that she thought he would. He dropped her arm and pointed back at the escalating noise.

"If you go back, those werewolves will track you to your house and kill everyone there. Do you want that?"

Alastair stared at her, waiting for her response. She looked away. He let his hand fall to his side. She bit her nail and watched him go. His shoulders were hunched together, whether against the cold or the rejection she wasn't sure.

"Wait!" She sprinted forward and caught the back of his jacket. He stopped but didn't look back. "How do you plan to stop them?"

"We need to contact my people."

He veered down one of the narrow tracks, knowing she would follow him.

