

The Wolves of Kirkney
Renard De Fleureaux

Chapter 7

Charlotte sighed heavily, staring at her reflection in her vanity's mirror. There was a subtle change in her, since the hunt. Her eyes were more luminescent, her features sharper, if only slightly. In a photograph or portrait, she would be almost identical to how she was before her marriage. In person however, with the way she carried herself, the way she interacted with the world, she was an entirely different person. Her own mother might have trouble recognizing her.

"I just spoke with Nanny Samson, she's put little James to bed," Wolsey announced, the Lady's Maid setting a cup of tea next to Charlotte. "One less thing to worry about, at least."

"Indeed," Charlotte took the tea and sipped at it, her eyes going wide. "What is this, Wolsey?"

"Oh, uh... darjeeling, with sugar. I thought you could use a cup after such a frightful day. Did I make it wrong?"

"No! Heavens, no." Charlotte waved off Wolsey's concern. "It's perfect, it's only... it has been so long since I had darjeeling." She smiled.

Wolsey nervously echoed Charlotte's smile. "I am sorry about the day's events. Poor Master Oliver... we were all relieved downstairs when we heard he was already recovering. And that poor American!"

The noblewoman nodded. "Yes, it is a pity- he seemed a pleasant gentleman, and Duncan seemed quite taken with him. His family's been informed by telegram, but we won't hear from them for days."

Wolsey nodded, moving around the room and tidying up where she could. She turned back to the other woman. "Ma'am... may I ask you a few things?"

Charlotte turned to look back at her. "By all means, Wolsey. We've known each other long enough."

"Is everything alright with Mr. Levy-Johnson? Only, he never came down for dinner and this afternoon... did the other nobles bring their dogs into the house?" Wolsey paused, trying to read her lady's reaction. "Mrs. McLeod acted like she hadn't heard anything, but I heard such barking and baying- they sounded like terribly big brutes."

Charlotte laughed in spite of herself, which only confused Wolsey further. She raised her hand. "I'm sorry Wolsey, it's nothing you've said. I..." she sighed. She studied Wolsey, her kind face and bright eyes, and held out her hands. Wolsey, somewhat hesitantly, placed her hands in Charlotte's. "Back home at Clearview, one of the maids, Chloe, dressed me and my sister. She became a very close friend to me. And I should like us to be friends, too."

Wolsey smiled softly. "I... I would like that as well, ma'am. If you would like it, ma'am, you could call me Emily."

Charlotte grinned, taking effort not to grip Emily's hands too tightly. She was slowly growing aware of her new strength. "Emily." She paused, weighing her options. "Now, friends mustn't have secrets between them- not that a Lady has many secrets from her Lady's Maid. There's something I would like to share with you, but you must promise not to be scared."

Emily frowned. "Scared, ma'am?"

Before Charlotte could explain further, there was a knock at the door. Emily exchanged a look with Charlotte before going to answer. Charlotte's head snapped up; she smelled oak and

honey, Duncan's scent. She also smelled a rich cologne, valiantly masking the stale scents of a crypt.

"Charlotte? I'm here with Mr. Levy-Johnson, he says it's urgent."

"One moment." Charlotte pulled her robe tight around her to maintain modesty as she joined Emily at the door. When she opened it, Duncan was likewise dressed for bed- Samuel was still dressed in one of his finely tailored suits.

"I'm sorry to bother you, my dear, but Mr. Levy-Johnson wanted both of us," Duncan explained.

"Again, my apologies, Lady Charlotte," Samuel bowed his head. "But I feared you two would be the only ones to believe me. I sense another of my kind."

"Another va-" Charlotte glanced to Emily, then sighed. "Emily, would you mind getting me another cup of darjeeling? I think I will need it before bed."

Emily looked between the three, but slowly nodded. "Of course, my lady." The trio watched as the Lady's Maid left the room.

Samuel continued. "I'm sorry to be brief, but I fear it may be Mr. Albescu. I can't imagine what he means to do here, as he showed no interest in genuinely hurting Oliver or anyone in the Galbraith family, and all the other nobles have left."

"Except for Lord Curzon," Duncan added. "He's arranged to leave tomorrow morning."

"What makes you think Mr. Albescu is coming? No one else has picked up a scent," Charlotte asked. "Never mind that he's supposed to be behind bars."

Samuel waved his hand impatiently. "You and yours use your noses, we use our eyes and ears. I'll also remind you that he managed to mask his scent with my own during the hunt. I don't

want to alarm either of you, but Albescu is a dangerous, elder vampire. Whatever he intends to do, we must act *now*."

"If there is a target, it must be father or Lord Curzon," Duncan reasoned, but then paused, his features going cold. "Unless... he wouldn't."

In that moment, instinct struck Charlotte and sank into her stomach. "James. I'm going to check on James."

Duncan exchanged a look with Samuel, and jogged after Charlotte.

Charlotte's heart was pounding in her chest as she moved faster and faster through the corridors towards the nursery, Duncan and Samuel trailing her. Her nose twitched, a new, dreaded scent making her eyes water. It was only growing stronger as she reached the corridor where the nursery was located. Desperately clawing the door knob, she threw it open, and her heart froze.

She saw the figure of a tall, gaunt creature, eyes glowing red in the dim light. He was cradling a sleeping James in one arm, and holding a knife above her child's chest. Charlotte's reaction was instantaneous. With a primal roar, she tore off her amulet, leaping for the vampire.

"Get away from my son!"

"Charlotte, *wait!*" Duncan cried.

Charlotte embraced her inner beast and tackled the vampire, slashing at his arm with talon-like nails growing into claws. Albescu turned his back to her, shrouding James from her sight. He swerved to face her again, his red eyes drawing her in. She heard a voice echoing in her head, *"Be still."* Her body slowed, she inhaled sharply and summoned her strength, but it was like she was drowning, an invisible pressure weighing down upon her.

"Albescu, this ends *now*. Let my wife and child go!" Duncan demanded, moving into the room, ready to snap his own amulet off.

"You're only making this worse for yourself, Vladimir. You can't possibly hope to get away with this," Samuel added, drawing his pistol.

Albescu looked at Duncan grimly. The werewolf turned away, refusing to look him in the eye. "I am sorry, dog lord. This is just business." He produced James from the shadow again, the child still sleeping soundly. With Charlotte enthralled, Vlad's voice echoed in her head. "*Attack*."

With a strained growl, the half-transformed werewolf lunged for Duncan, as he snapped off his own amulet, before he was knocked to the ground by Charlotte's clumsy charge.

Deftly dodging the two werewolves, Samuel came closer to Vlad, his pistol trained on the elder vampire. "I looked up to you, Vladimir. You were a hero. You guided people like me into something more than savagery, made certain we didn't lose our humanity. And now *this*? How could you have fallen so low?"

"Don't you pass judgment on me, young one. You haven't stood in our ranks for more than a few decades. You have no idea what they are capable of. They would wipe us out in an instant if they were given a chance," Vlad growled.

"All fine words to say, while you're holding a knife to the neck of a *newborn babe*. We're supposed to be better than this! Lower the knife, Vladimir. You are teetering precariously close to the edge."

"You don't think I know that?" the elder vampire spat back. Samuel watched him closely, his hand hesitating.

"You can't do it, can you?" Samuel said. "Not even now, you know whatever you think you're doing, it's not in you to hurt the child."

Charlotte and Duncan, now fully transformed, were slamming into the walls of the corridor as they wrestled, Duncan holding Charlotte at bay with his great strength— if only just. "N-no h-hurt James!" Duncan cried out in desperation.

Annoyance flickered across Vlad's face. "No. But you can't, either." He held James closer, using the infant as a shield. "Is your hand so steady from working your pen in the Home Office?"

Samuel's response was to cock the pistol, but he too hesitated, his hand starting to shake. "They will follow you, you know. Wolves are like that. They'll do anything to protect their young— or lacking that, avenge them."

"I know." Vlad continued moving towards the window, training his eye on Samuel's pistol. There was one last look between the two vampire before Vlad disappeared out of the window. Samuel raced to the sill, only to see a huge, leathery creature soar into the sky.

Charlotte let out a strangled, heart-wrenching cry. "*NO!*"

Samuel turned back to the two. "I'm going after him!" He leapt out of the window, his body unraveling into a cloud of mist that darted across the sky. Back in the nursery, Charlotte fell to her knees, banging her fists against the floor as she let out a baleful howl that carried across the grounds, as Duncan held her tightly.

Suspenseful minutes crept by as Charlotte and Duncan retrieved their amulets and the rest of the household, awakened by the commotion, leapt into action. Madeleine, as the fastest after Oliver, had been sent out immediately to check the village and summon Lieutenant Dalton, while Garrison and Mrs. McLeod were directing the servants to do a clean sweep of the house. The entire Galbraith clan gathered in the dining room, even Angus robbed of words as they waited

for any bit of news. Charlotte could only stare into the fire, a shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

"It's my fault," she said hollowly. "I had no idea... I wasn't... able to fight what he did to me."

Duncan frowned softly, squeezing her shoulder. "It was your first time against a vampire, you couldn't have known."

"I can still feel him in my arms..." she hissed, emotion bubbling up from the pit of her stomach. "His little hands grabbing my finger, already so strong... my boy..." she shuddered, burying her head in her hands, sobbing.

Duncan bowed his head, taking in deep, bracing breaths as he tried to hold in his own tears— Angus was watching him. "We'll get him back. I swear it," he said in a leaden voice.

The dining room's door creaked open, and Matthew Curzon entered, the white-haired noble's face a portrait of sympathy. "I was told I could find you all here. The entire Curzon clan grieves with you this night. Such a monstrous crime... the boy was so young."

"My Lord Curzon, please," Olivia rose from her spot near Angus and Edith, speaking in a soft voice. "You seem to speak out of presumption. James has been kidnapped, not murdered."

"Kidnapped?" Curzon's face betrayed his surprise. "That is a relief to hear... forgive me, when I heard that monster had been left alone with the child, well..." he spread his arms. "Vampires are not known for their... restraint." Charlotte flinched at Curzon's statement.

"Be that as it may, we are certain he was kidnapped, unharmed. And that he will be returned to his family as soon as possible," Olivia said, a hint of steel in her voice.

"Of course, my apologies. I did not mean to add to your distress."

The door opened again, and every member of the family looked up as Garrison led a haggard looking Samuel in. "Mr. Levy-Johnson, my Lord."

Charlotte and Duncan looked up with desperate looks on their faces. Samuel could only purse his lips, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I trailed Albescu as long as I could, but he quickly outpaced me. He is heading due south by southeast, however— which means he is most likely headed for London."

"What dark purpose could he possibly have to take a Galbraith pup to London?" Angus growled. "If he expects a ransom, he won't get a penny. I'll tear him apart with my bare hands first."

"Angus." Olivia rapped her cane against the polished wooden floor. "Enough. We will do whatever it takes to get James back, safe and sound."

Charlotte rose her head, dabbing at her eyes. "I am willing to do anything to get James back, but we must decide on a stratagem." She turned to Samuel. "Mr. Levy-Johnson, you are leaving for London in a few hours, yes?"

"Correct."

"Then we must secure first class tickets for myself and Emily- Wolsey, that is," she said matter-of-factly.

The family all reacted to that. Edith cut across the room to put her hands on Charlotte's shoulders. "My dear, we all want James back, but what would you do in London?"

"More than I would be able to do here, waiting for someone else to find my child," Charlotte said brusquely. "You all made me into a wolf, and now my pup is threatened. I will not sit idle."

Before anyone could respond, Garrison was again at the door. "My Lord, Lieutenant Dalton is here. He has information concerning Mr. Albescu's escape."

"I'm sure the women don't need to hear such grisly details," Curzon said gently. "Angus, Charlotte is hysterical. Let us not upset her further. And what of your wife and poor mother?"

"Matthew, I am not so ancient and delicate that a police investigation shall send me into palpitations- or do I need to remind you of the Hunt of '42, when I snapped the neck of that wight about to maim you?" Olivia said, prim and thoroughly unamused by Curzon's suggestion. "I believe you will find the women of this family do not lack for fortitude- Garrison, send the man in."

"My Lady," the butler bowed his head dutifully, turning to open the door and led Lieutenant Dalton in. The police officer doffed his helmet, bowing to the family. "M'lord. M'lady. The village is horrified at this monster's vile actions. We thank the Lord James still lives, and I have every officer combing the village to see if we can find any trace of this villain."

"Doubtful you will, but commendable, Lieutenant," Samuel sighed.

"You reported you do have information, Dalton?" Duncan asked.

"Indeed, Lord Duncan." Dalton produced a note in his gloved hand. "Mr. Albescu escaped with help. What help, I cannot say, but I imagine you all would be more familiar. The stone wall of his cell was seemingly melted away- nothing but slag remains, and a hole big enough for him to slither out of. This note was all that we found."

Angus snatched the paper from Dalton, frowning. "What the Devil is the Brotherhood of Strix?" the elder werewolf snarled.

Charlotte managed to take the letter next, furrowing her brow. "'The Brotherhood of Strix gives you this second chance to redeem yourself, brother. Kill the newborn mongrel pup in

Kirkney Castle with the enclosed silver blade, and return to London with all haste." She put her hand to her mouth, gasping softly.

Curzon gently pried the letter from Charlotte's hand. "My dear, I know how upsetting this must be. You are not the first of our kind to lose someone to these monsters." Samuel exchanged a dark look with Duncan at Curzon's comment, but said nothing.

"It doesn't make sense..." Charlotte finally said.

"It doesn't, but that is the cruelty of our world," Curzon said consolingly.

"No, my Lord, this doesn't make sense." Charlotte looked to Duncan and Samuel. "We all saw Albescu. He didn't kill James."

"He admitted he couldn't," Samuel added.

"He had a crisis of conscience," Duncan said. "But to what end?"

"This brotherhood sounds like it was growing impatient with Albescu..." Samuel stroked his chin. "His only reasonable haven would be the Red Lady's Court, then. It would keep him safe from the brotherhood and the clans."

"Hardly safe," Angus growled. "If that is his course, then let us go to London and deliver the Red Lady an ultimatum— surrender the creature and if any harm comes to James, no vampire in Britain will be safe."

Samuel, his eyes widening at Angus' statement, cleared his throat. "My Lord, such an ultimatum would not go over well. My offer still stands— the Home Office, as a neutral arbitrator, will be much more... palatable to the Red Lady and her courtiers."

"Whatever is to be done, we must set a course now. If the Red Lady will give us James, then I intend to be there myself for this exchange," Charlotte said.

"Lady Charlotte, I think it best if Lord Lothmaddy and I handle this. Mr. Levy-Johnson can communicate with us from the Home Office, and two pack elders will certainly lend weight to our demands," Curzon said.

Charlotte's mouth turned. "Lord Culvershire, I'm sorry, but I am going. I have lived by the rules set by the clans, and become one of you. The Galbraith clan has made me stronger, taught me to hunt, and given me the instincts of a wolf. I will not stop until James is back in my arms."

Duncan nodded. "Father, Lord Culvershire, this is our only child and the future Earl of Lothmaddy. The both of us are going to London."

"Two clan leaders rushing into London may play into Albescu's hands," Samuel said. "If I may say, it would be best for Lord Duncan and Lady Charlotte to come with me to London. The Red Lady will respect their position, but will not see it as prelude to a war. But Lord Lothmaddy, Lord Culvershire, we will be able to stay in constant communication through telegrams. Once we speak with the Red Lady's Court, Lord Duncan will write you himself. If you don't hear from us, by all means, rain hell down upon the Court."

Curzon gasped. "Mr. Levy-Johnson! There are women present, watch your tongue."

"Lord Culvershire, please, we have had far greater shocks," Charlotte said, more snappishly than she intended.

Curzon stared at Charlotte. The elder noble looked as if he were about to say something, but decided against it. "Angus, Duncan, why don't we speak in private for a moment?"

Edith sighed. "I'm going to check on Oliver and Madeleine. Charlotte dear, is there anything you need?"

"No, thank you, mother. Would you have Garrison let Wesley know to begin packing a travel bag for me?" Charlotte asked.

"Of course," Edith squeezed her daughter-in-law's arm, offering a small smile. Olivia trailed Edith, leaving Charlotte alone with Samuel.

"Mr. Levy-Johnson?" she asked, turning to him.

The vampire nodded. "Lady Charlotte, again, I am sorry. What Mr. Albescu did was horrible, and you have my word, I will do everything in my power to help you and Lord Duncan get him back."

"Peace, Mr. Levy-Johnson, I've not come to quarrel." Charlotte stepped closer. "My husband has come to trust you, it seems."

Samuel grinned tightly. "I aim to be worthy of that trust."

"And can I? Trust you, that is."

The vampire furrowed his brow. "Lady Charlotte?"

"A little more than a year ago, if you had told me about all this... shadow world business, werewolves, vampires, fairies and all the rest, I would've thought you quite mad. I've been on a difficult curriculum ever since." Charlotte said, her voice muted, looking between Samuel and the fire. "And now, my darling boy is gone."

Samuel twisted his mouth. "I know what it's like. I didn't know anything about vampires when I was sired. It's a baptism by fire, isn't it?"

Charlotte laughed bitterly. "Yes, it is. I must ask you... I am tired of being caught off guard. While we travel, I want you to teach me everything I must know about vampires. How to avoid... whatever it was Mr. Albescu did to me. And how to kill them." She looked at Samuel in

such a way, an intense stare that made the vampire uneasy- that amber glint in her eyes showed she really had become one of them.

"I will... tell you all I know, Lady Charlotte." He held out his hand.

"What, are we to be friends?"

Samuel thought for a moment. "Allies, at least."

Charlotte nodded, and accepted Samuel's hand. Leaning in by her nose, she sniffed the air. "Ah."

"Madam?"

"Royal English Leather," Charlotte said, turning to leave. "Your cologne. I knew there was a reason Duncan liked you."