

The Wolves of Kirkney
Renard De Fleureaux

Chapter 10

Mrs. Green had drawn the curtains and moved the furniture back with Naughton's help to clear the drawing room, making space for Duncan, Samuel, and Charlotte. Samuel and Charlotte stood in the center of the room, while Duncan watched carefully.

Samuel had drawn himself up straight and tall, hands behind his back. In the gloom, his eyes shimmered like polished rubies. "Vampires have a variety of talents and skills at our disposal. Like you, our power swells in the absence of light. Of course, we cannot be killed unless silver enters our veins. Stories about stakes, crucifixes, and garlic flowers are only so much guff."

"Nothing about churches and crucifixes affects you?" Duncan asked, sitting up a bit straighter.

"The cross had no hold over me in my human life, why would it touch me in death? The simple fact is, many crosses and crucifixes are made of silver and gold. It's as much a myth based on ignorance, happenstance, and local legend as werewolves being moved by the full moon." Samuel explained. "Consecrated ground, however, will dampen our powers, same as yours, but that is not the sole province of the Church."

"What are your powers then, Mr. Levy-Johnson?" Charlotte asked, bracing herself.

Samuel paused, appraising his would-be student. "A vampire's powers are about stasis and control, subverting and pushing back entropy and decay. My personal theory is that we are

creatures of the Unseelie Fae, but there is much debate about that. If I were to bite someone, then it would be a battle of wills. Think of it as being made drunk. Your inhibitions lower, your senses dull, you become more pliable—and I am there, molding you to fit my purposes. No more wicked or sinister than any run-of-the-mill MP, you'll agree." The vampire's mouth flickered into a smirk.

"So that is what Albescu did to me, with just a look?" Charlotte clarified.

"Yes. His will and powers have been honed over centuries, so with just a look, he penetrated you to the core, like Medusa turning people to stone." Samuel carried himself with a sudden, dominant air, a commanding presence that turned the werewolves' heads. He spoke in a measured tone, his voice smooth as silk, a subtle flicker drawing Charlotte into his eyes. "But it is a power all vampires hold. Do your best to push back against my will. I cannot make you strike your husband, but... turn to your left, pick up that vase, and smash it on the floor."

"Why on earth would I do that?" Charlotte asked.

"I said, *do* it." Samuel said. "It's a hideous thing, anyways. Smash it."

Charlotte grunted, as she felt her joints lock up. With jerking motions, she lurched to her left.

"Fight it, Charlotte," Duncan stood up. "That vase was a wedding present from my great-aunt."

"Heaven forfend," Charlotte hissed through gritted teeth. Still, she stepped forward, her hands hovering over the vase.

"Go on, send it back to the gaudy Hell from whence it came," Samuel said.

"Charlotte, focus. Push back with something— anything. Pick a song, a poem, anything."

"Thank you, my dear," Charlotte snapped. "I can... I can manage." Her hands gripped the vase, and her heart was racing. She closed her eyes, and she could hear Samuel's words ringing in her head, like echoes off a cave wall that never quite faded away. She fought the compulsion, plucking a verse from memories of Clearview, and her childhood parish, one that had always resonated with her. *Strength and honor are her clothing; She shall rejoice in time to come.* She repeated that in her head, over and over, doing battle with Samuel's voice.

"*Break it.*"

"Agh!" Charlotte snarled in frustration, throwing the vase down to the floor, porcelain bits scattering.

"*Damn!*" Duncan shouted.

Samuel nodded patiently. "You put up a decent fight. Did you take your husband's advice?"

"I did, I picked a favorite verse of mine, from Proverbs," Charlotte explained, pressing a hand against her forehead; she had developed a headache. "I repeated it in my head over and over."

The vampire nodded. "Yes, that's very suitable. Use something like that as a mantra, to reassert yourself. It won't be as easy with Albescu, but you have a basis for training now." He turned to Duncan. "Your Lordship?"

The werewolf stood to his full height, looking down to meet Samuel's eyes. "What on earth do you intend on trying to make me do?"

"I'm not sure." Samuel again spoke in the same measured tone, keeping eyes on Duncan, circling the werewolf. Two hunters were now in the room, unsure if the other was prey. "Do as Charlotte did. Think of a verse or a quote, something that resonates with you. Do you have it?"

Duncan nodded, drawn into Samuel's gaze. "I believe I do."

"I suppose I could ask you to do something beneath your dignity... start undressing, perhaps." He lingered on that thought, nearly breaking eyes with Duncan. "No. Go on and give us a show, Duncan. Do a somersault for us. Give us a trick, like a good dog."

Duncan growled, but was compelled to lurch forward. He stood fast, his strong limbs locking in place. *Lay the proud Usurpers low! Tyrants fall in every foe! Liberty's in every blow!- Let us Do or Die!* He pushed back Samuel's echoing commands, even as he drove down on bended knee.

"*Do it.*"

Duncan clumsily rolled over backwards, his leg knocking over an end table on his way down.

"Some of that was unnecessary." Duncan said bluntly as Samuel offered a hand to pull him up.

Samuel smiled wryly. "I wanted to get under your skin, needle you. Mr. Albescu has done it to you enough times, he will try it again." He glanced at Duncan. "What did you choose?"

"A few lines from Robert Burns, *March To Bannockburn.*"

"Ah," Samuel nodded. "How patriotic of you. Well, let us see you make Robert the Bruce proud— let's try it again."

Over the next few hours, both Charlotte and Duncan were exposed to Samuel's hypnotic gaze. It was like he was taking a hammer and chisel to their skulls with his penetrating sight and surprisingly steely voice. Soon, however, they managed to push back. Charlotte was spared the indignity of dancing a jig, and Duncan stayed resolutely silent when commanded to bark. By the

time Samuel called for luncheon, however, both werewolves felt drained. Their heads were pounding, and Mrs. Green was quick with some calming tea, to soothe their pains.

"You must remember, Mr. Albescu will hit you much harder than I can." Samuel said.

"Avoid direct eye contact. If it does happen, shout. Howl, roar if you must— you can't be made to do anything if you can't hear the orders."

"What about the transformation? What if he changes into that hideous creature again?" Charlotte asked.

"I doubt he will, not in London. A werewolf is easier to hide in the city- people can be convinced they saw a particularly large dog, or even a horse. But for Mr. Albescu's form? A flying monster is a lot harder to rationalize for the average man. Even if he does, I daresay you will be on much more even ground, one monstrous creature against another." Samuel said.

"What about your form, the mist?" Duncan asked. "Can Albescu do that as well?"

The vampire shook his head. "No, we each only have one. It depends on our sires, and where those forms originally came from is a matter of academic debate."

"At least he can't surprise us," Charlotte replied. She pushed back her plate, leaving half of the food there.

Duncan looked to her. "Charlotte, you should eat more. We'll need to keep up our strength."

She sighed, shaking her head. "It's hard to have an appetite." She stood, and gasped softly, a spell of dizziness striking her before she turned to the window. "I think I will wait in the garden. The roses are in bloom."

Samuel and Duncan watched her leave, the vampire looking to Duncan questioningly. He waved it off. "The smell helps her concentrate."

"She's done well with this exercise." Samuel commented.

Duncan nodded. "I do admire her. She's strong; I think she wears the mantle of our kin well." There was a tense pause between the two. "Would you mind indulging a curiosity?"

"I'll do what I can to sate it."

The werewolf turned to face Samuel head on. "Why *did* you tease making me undress? It seemed terribly specific."

Samuel smirked softly, drinking the last sips of a cordial. "Curiosity. I didn't get a good look at you at the hunt, but you do seem exceedingly well built."

The werewolf gave him a level look. "Vulgarity is no substitute for wit, Samuel."

"If you consider that vulgar, my lord, you're going to have a very rough time of it in the dredges of Whitechapel."

"It's another hunting ground," Duncan growled. "I don't have to like it." His level look became harsh and steely. "I may be acting coolly, but don't think I miss my son any less than Charlotte does."

"I didn't mean to suggest that," the vampire said, fiddling with his spectacles. "It's how I treat tense situations. A good joke or teasing comment, a few witty retorts— a little levity to keep your head above water."

Duncan stared at the vampire, his gaze still hard, then stood, walking to the door. "I think I shall take a walk at the nearest park, clear my head. Before I leave, how do we intend to deal with Detective Lester?"

"He's one police officer." Duncan frowned at Samuel's answer, but the vampire waved him off. "He's a little spitfire and a martinet, but he may yet come in handy. What harm could he do?"

"Famous last words," the werewolf muttered, before heading out.

Duncan kept a protective hand on Charlotte's shoulder, the gentleman in him reflexively trying to shield his lady wife from the filth of Whitechapel, fruitless though it was. Their group stood across from Saint Mary Matfelon, staring up at a skeletal mass of scaffolding and canvas, stretched over an unfinished brick steeple. The last bits of twilight sun and the glow of gas lamps were reflected in stained glass panes, throwing dark colors across the already hazy streets.

All three werewolves were fighting their senses; Whitechapel reeked of mud, spoiled meat, and the most desperate elements of humanity. Samuel watched them all with a sharp eye, thinking Duncan and Charlotte never looked so snobbish as they did now.

"The people here can't help it, you know."

Duncan, holding a handkerchief to his nose, glanced over to Samuel with an arched brow. "Beg pardon?"

The vampire waved his hand. "Never mind. Here comes Detective Lester." The small man was dressed in his official policeman's uniform, brass buttons polished, not a thread out of place.

"M'lord, m'lady," Lester tipped his helmet to Duncan and Charlotte. "I trust you're ready for the task at hand?"

"We are, Detective," Charlotte said.

"Good, excellent. Now, I will take point, and perhaps your man there and Mr. Levy-Johnson's... worryingly large fellow. No need to put your noble person in the line of fire, m'lord, not when this is already quite the story to tell your little John—"

"James."

"Right, yes, James when he's older," Lester said.

"As for me and Mrs. Green, Detective?" Charlotte asked.

"Well, there's a public house that is safe and reputable on the corner there, the Black Fox. You and Mrs. Green will be comfortable there, I'm sure," the Detective said with a reassuring smile. "It is enough that you and Mrs. Green have come to wish us luck."

There was a subtle shift between Charlotte and Mrs. Green. Mrs. Green stepped forward, hands folded, her luminescent eyes like daggers. "Detective Lester, I think we need to make something clear to you. Lady Charlotte and myself are both capable women. In my youth, I worked with Mary Seacole at her British Hotel in Balaclava. If I am not to be scared off by the Russian Imperial Army, I'm not going to be thrown off the scent by *you*." She took a step towards Lester. Despite being of similar height, she looked fit to swallow the detective whole. "As for Lady Charlotte, she is a mother out to save her only child, and will *not* be stopped. What force can you call upon to make either of us go to that public house?"

The detective blanched, taking a step back as Mrs. Green jabbed her finger in his chest. "Well..." Lester began, his voice quiet. "If you think it best, two extra pairs of eyes would be most helpful..."

"I'm glad we're in agreement," Charlotte said, her voice clipped. She exchanged a quick look with Duncan, who nodded in support. The werewolves, alongside Detective Lester, took the lead, sniffing the air for anything out of place. Naughton kept a wary eye on Charles, however, as the hulking valet's glassy, dead eyes stared aimlessly ahead, only following Samuel's lead. The group was sticking close to the church, the heavy timbers and half-finished walls grasping at the night sky. Duncan breathed in deeply, holding out his arm to stop the others.

"Do you smell that?" he muttered.

"I do— like a bolt of lightning," Mrs. Green responded.

Lester clicked his tongue. "I don't know what you're on about— it's a perfectly clear night."

The others looked at each other with urgency. Even Charles seemed to notice the shift in the air. Only the fae had such a sharp and clear scent. Samuel felt a tremor run down his spine. He didn't need a werewolf's nose to smell dried blood on the air. He studied the skyline closely, and then let his instincts guide him. There was a crack of stone, and preternaturally, Samuel leapt, lunging for Duncan and knocking the werewolf back. A hunk of masonry roughly as large as the nobleman struck the street a second later, making the others leap back.

"There it is!" Naughton cried out, cocking his pistol and taking aim at the top of the church, as a shadowy figure darted between the masses of scaffolding covering the steeple.

"It can't be Albescu," Samuel commented.

"It must be! The fiend!" Lester shouted, firing his pistol as the shifting shadow melted into the night gloom, his bullet embedding itself in a piece of moulding along the church's apse. "We must give chase!"

"Detective, wait!" Duncan shouted as Samuel pulled him to his feet. The policeman took off at a gallop, rushing towards the church. The second he crossed the threshold, a leg stuck out, and Lester hit the unfinished stone floor as a man stepped into the doorway, clicking his tongue.

"For shame, sir, for shame— bringing weapons into a house of God." He kicked Lester's pistol away, kneeling down to get a better look at him. He was, in every way, a brute of a man. Shirt sleeves were rolled up over thickly roped limbs, buttons undone over the top of a broad, muscular chest, a tattoo of a snake spread across it. The features of his face were squat and heavy, with a nose broken several times over and a gash of a scar across his cheek.

"Blow me down," the large man chuckled, his voice like bits of broken brick. "Detective Lester, innit? Ol' Mum told you not to come sniffin' around here anymore— this is Viper territory." He growled, lowering his boot on top of Lester's hand, the detective sucking in breath and trying not to scream. "Now what does ol' Tom have to do to make sure you remember that?"

"Let him up, for starters," Naughton said briskly, leveling his pistol at Tom. "My employer has need of that man."

"Oh, well," Tom grinned toothily at Naughton. The valet met the thug for height, but he looked as if he had at least fifty pounds of muscle over Naughton. "Apologies, mate, but Mr. Lester here's made trouble with us before— it ain't personal with you fine, upstanding folk." He brought his fingers to his teeth and whistled sharply. Stepping out of dark corners of the church and street came four other men, all armed with blades and clubs. "Unless you want to make it personal."

Duncan, Charlotte, and Mrs. Green took stock of the situation. They weren't dealing with vampires; the stench of the grave traveled no further than Charles and Samuel, while the five Vipers smelled of tar, stale beer, and grime. Still, there was something else— the electric smell had vanished, but the Vipers carried a distinctly inhuman scent, something bestial. Duncan and Mrs. Green knew, if Charlotte did not— they were marked, claimed by another.

Duncan placed a hand on Samuel's shoulder as he stepped forward aside Naughton, his eyes locking with Tom. In truth, the clans were the only wolves left in Britain; all the same, Duncan had been trained on how to deal with his animal brethren, should he ever encounter them. Those whose souls were no longer entirely their own worked very similarly to wild animals; an appropriate display of aggression would be enough to get them to back down.

The large werewolf was able to very nearly match Tom for sheer brawn. He took slow, deliberate steps as he walked closer, never losing eye contact. "You are on the cusp of making a very bad decision. Think carefully about your next move."

Tom scoffed, pulling out a knife tucked at his side. "And who are *you* supposed to be, the Prince of Wales? I'll give you one last chance, chum— leave the bobby to us, and act like you didn't see nothing."

Duncan moved with fierce speed, reaching Tom before the brute knew what was happening. His fists clenched around the other man's shirt, and he hoisted him off his feet. In truth, on consecrated ground, Duncan's strength diminished— but he didn't let any strain or struggle show on his stony face. "Look at me, man. *Look at me.*" He hissed through gritted teeth. "You know *exactly* what I am."

The color drained from Tom's face, the man shrinking in fear as he was let down. With terrible realization, he looked from Duncan's amber eyes to those of Charlotte and Mrs. Green, then to Samuel's red eyes, glittering like embers.

"Leave the detective," Duncan growled. "And don't cross my path ever again."

Tom instantly eased away from Lester, backing away and motioning for the others to do so as well. With looks of apprehension and confusion, the other Vipers began slithering back into their holes. Tom turned back to face Duncan.

"You haven't heard the last of us— you stay clear of Viper territory, chum! Ol' Mum's got the numbers, even for the likes of you!" Tom then jogged after the others, disappearing into the darkness.

Naughton lowered his pistol, and moved to help Lester up. The detective patted dirt off himself, sighing in relief. "M'lord, I had no idea you possessed such a... hearty constitution. You have my thanks."

Duncan waved it off curtly. "Never mind. Take us to Albescu's flat— let us not give them a chance to regroup."

Lester raised a finger. "Ah, m'lord, if you don't mind my curiosity, what did he mean, by the likes of you?" Duncan didn't answer, instead going to rejoin the others. "M'lord— ?"

Naughton held out his arm, stopping Lester from following after Duncan. "Discretion, Detective Lester, is the better part of valor. Why don't you tell us about the Vipers? Who is Ol' Mum that the large fellow was talking about?"

"Oh," Lester shuddered. "She is the Vipers' patroness— or leader, I'm not certain. I've yet to lay eyes on her, but she bears some sort of grudge against me. I haven't the foggiest what it could be; I helped unravel one of their plots down by a house of ill repute, the Nunnery, and perhaps she's never quite forgiven me."

The group made their way to the tenement with no further incident. The electric smell of the fae was long gone, but one of the Vipers was trailing them— Mrs. Green kept her eyes and nose on him, never letting on that they knew. Lester, having recovered himself, had some frank words with the building's landlady, flashed her his badge, then led them inside. Past the dingy hallways and crowded, murky rooms, Charlotte inhaled sharply as Lester stopped in front of a door. She could smell the vampire, and her heart leapt into her throat— she smelled James, as well.

"Pistols at the ready," Lester whispered, Samuel and Naughton taking aim. Duncan gripped Charlotte's hand, while Charles and Mrs. Green watched the corridors.

Lester kicked the door open, charging in. "Vladimir Albescu, in the name of Her Majesty's law, you are under arrest!" He announced grandly.

The first tense seconds passed in dreadful silence as everyone stared into the dark flat. It had been utterly ravaged; furniture had been smashed or overturned, bits of pottery and glass were scattered on the floor, and torn bits of paper festooned the rest of it. Samuel looked on grimly as he picked up a piece of legible writing; more correspondence from the Brotherhood of Strix.

Lester stared, mouth agape. "I— I don't understand! My informant swore that he had returned to London, and that he was here!"

"Duncan." Charlotte uttered in a leaden voice. She was kneeling on the dirty floor, clutching something close to her breast. Duncan knelt down beside her, and spotted a lovingly embroidered baby's bonnet. "It's James'."

Duncan sighed heavily, running his finger over the soft fabric— it was still warm. He felt a hand rest on his shoulder, glancing up to see Samuel. "We missed him. We just missed him."