

The Wolves of Kirkney
Renard De Fleureaux

Chapter 5

Duncan was pacing back and forth, several members of the family in various states of undress as they waited outside the drawing room. His mother Edith was inside with Charlotte, who was aiding Samuel's manservant tend to Oliver's stab wound.

"Stop pacing, boy," Angus snarled softly. "It won't do any good."

The young lord turned to his father, looking intensely at him. "I was there, father. I was *right there*, I was so close by and yet, this still happened."

"Do you feel responsible? Good. You're the one who let that cadaver into our home."

"You mean the one who is currently saving the life of your youngest son?" Duncan snapped back at Angus.

The Earl rose from his chair. "None of that! If that leech hadn't been lurking about in the first place, we would have been alerted to another vampire trespassing in our home. I *warned* you, boy."

"Enough, Angus," Olivia snapped, thumping the floor with her cane for emphasis. "You know as well as anyone that we couldn't turn away the government notary, vampire or not. It's not as if we could have had him assassinated- perhaps someone already tried that."

"Mother, I am master of this house, and I will not-"

Olivia managed to silence the Earl with a wave of her hand. "*Enough*. Our youngest nearly died from a silver wound, and a guest was killed while in our care. Yelling at Duncan solves neither of those problems. If you feel as though he must do something, send *him* to talk to the person responsible for maiming our Oliver and killing Mr. Hopkins."

"I would gladly do so, but I'll wait until Mr. Levy-Johnson can attend- I think we can get more out of this villain with one of his own against him," Duncan replied.

"You would put yourself in a room alone with two vampires?" Angus asked incredulously.

The young lord turned to his father. "I'm not afraid of two bloodsuckers, father. Are you?" He fought a grim little smile as Angus turned a shade of deep red.

"Duncan," Olivia said gently, but sternly. "You are not Alexander Pope, do not draw a sharp wit needlessly."

The door to the drawing room opened, and Samuel stepped out, the front of his shirt stained with flecks of blood. "The wound is sealed. The boy will be fine- he's resting now, but I would urge you to send for the village doctor, or whoever tends to the family under normal circumstances."

Angus brusquely moved to the door, shoving Samuel aside.

"Angus!" Olivia cried out. She shook her head, approaching the vampire with a curt nod. "Mr. Levy-Johnson, the Earl is a protective father. You will forgive his abrasive manner; it's been a trying night for us all. The Galbraith family is indebted to you."

The vampire smiled bleakly. "It's preferable to the previous treatment, Lady Olivia, but I thank you all the same."

Duncan held out his hand to Samuel, and they shook. "Wait here for a moment, Mr. Levy-Johnson. I would ask another favor of you."

The family was now surrounding Oliver, the teenaged werewolf seated on a divan, his shirt rolled down away from his shoulder, dried blood staining his well-wound linen bandages. Charles stared blankly ahead, his skin a deathly pallor, tinged with rotted grey in the early morning light.

"How're you feeling?" Duncan asked his brother softly, before nodding to Charlotte, who was washing her hands in a nearby basin.

Oliver smiled crookedly. "Better. The vampire was nice enough."

Angus grit his teeth, and Edith wrapped her arms around him. "Of course you're better, my darling boy," the Countess cooed. "You were *so* brave, facing down that murderous monster."

"Murderous?" Oliver frowned. "So... Mr. Hopkins really is dead?"

Duncan exchanged a quick glance with his father. Angus nodded gravely. "He is. But we won't let this stand- that leech will face justice- either hung by Her Majesty's government, or torn apart by the clans."

"Angus, please. He doesn't need to hear this," Edith said softly.

"I'm going to interrogate the vampire," Duncan announced to the rest of the family. "And when I get back, you better have your appetite ready, do you hear me?" He grinned at his brother.

Oliver nodded softly. "I feel like I could eat a horse."

"Will you be alright, alone with this creature?" Charlotte asked, walking to join the rest of the family.

"He apparently doesn't fear vampires," Angus said bluntly, eyes boring into Duncan.

Duncan returned Angus' stare. "I don't- especially one in chains, in the full light of day."

"Be careful, sweetheart," Edith said, squeezing Duncan's arm. "Do let Dr. Ferguson know about Oliver... use the usual story."

"Of course, mother," Duncan kissed Edith on the forehead, and nodded to the rest of his family before rejoining Samuel.

"Are you alright, Lord Duncan?" the vampire asked.

Duncan nodded. "I want you to join me in the interrogation. I was hoping one of his comrades being present would make him more cooperative."

Samuel arched his brow. "I am a notary for the government, Lord Duncan. I don't associate myself with criminals." He paused. "Well, not *violent* criminals. By my blood, there are as many crooks in Parliament as there are stars in the sky."

Duncan smirked bleakly. "You don't answer to the Red Lady's Court in London, then?"

The vampire adjusted his pince-nez as they began moving out of Kirkney Hall. "I consider myself an Englishman first and foremost. My loyalty is primarily to the Crown. Whatever hold the Red Lady has over me is a very distant second priority."

The two moved out into the morning sun. Samuel winced, screwing his eyes shut until he unfurled a parasol to shade him. The sweeping lawn of Kirkney Hall was spotted with the lordly werewolf guests of the Galbraith's hunt, many of them wandering uneasily or gathering in hushed whispers and tight circles as Galbraith servants handed out drinks and food on silver platters. Standing nearby was a man dressed in a police officer's uniform, not a thread out of place. His face was weathered and craggy, with thick grey sideburns and a well-groomed walrus mustache crowning it.

"Lieutenant Dalton," Duncan nodded. "Thank you for stopping by."

"Not a problem, Your Lordship," the officer nodded respectfully. "How is young Oliver?"

"He'll survive, thanks in no small part to Mr. Levy-Johnson, here," he gestured to Samuel. "He was present for our celebration last night, and took decisive action. The murderer's main target seems to have been our American guest, a Mr. Richard Hopkins."

The Lieutenant pursed his lips. "What little we've managed to squeeze out of this miscreant seems to lead to that conclusion as well, m'lord."

"I was hoping that I might speak to this prisoner," Duncan continued. "It concerns, well, the old business."

The officer's brow furrowed, but he nodded gravely. "Understood, sir. It is highly irregular... but then, Lothmaddy tends towards the irregular. Shall I walk you and Mr. Levy-Johnson to the jail?"

"Thank you Dalton," Duncan grinned tightly. The officer was some pace ahead of Duncan and Samuel, giving them space to talk.

"He moves with precise and heavy steps- a veteran?" Samuel asked, nodding towards Dalton.

Duncan nodded. "He served in Crimea. Loaded the guns at Sevastopol. He's a good man, Dalton- as one of the leading men of the village, he knows about our ways."

"Yes, I did notice. Who else knows in Kirkney?" the notary asked.

"Reverend Calvert and Father McPherson, for starters. We try to keep our religious leaders on the family's side. Our old doctor knew, but he has since retired- we've yet to bring Dr. Ferguson into the fold, but his head nurse, Lakeley, I believe, is our main contact in the village hospital until we feel we can trust the good doctor with the secret," Duncan explained.

Samuel nodded slowly. "No one else, then? You Galbraiths aren't exactly subtle- the three wolves on your coat of arms, for example."

Duncan gave the vampire a steady look. "That coat of arms was awarded to the family by Robert Bruce after the Battle of Bannockburn, thank you. But our family has always done our best to keep the people happy- *noblesse oblige*, as they say. Villages tend to be less suspicious when their patrons are generous and don't give them reason to complain. My grandfather was a decent landlord- and my grandmother ensures father remains so."

"Lord Galbraith isn't a shining example of liberal ideals, then?" the vampire replied drily.

The young lord laughed bitterly. "Hah, no. Father believes the clans are the best of the best- he taught me there are two types of people; predators, and prey. Predators need not worry what prey think of them; you can guess which one he considered himself and the family. He doesn't actively go out of his way to be cruel- not to the village, at least- but were it not for my grandmother reining him in, Kirkney village would be a much more dismal place."

"Which does he consider vampires, dare I ask?" Samuel met Duncan's gaze.

"Scavengers," the werewolf replied quickly. "Not honorable enough to accept their place as prey, not strong enough to face the real hunters head on." He glanced at the vampire apologetically. "His words, not mine."

Samuel smiled tightly. "I've heard worse. Do you think like your father?"

The young lord was quiet for a moment. "No. No, I don't think I'm much like him at all, really."

"For the better, I'm sure," the vampire said.

"Mm."

The village of Kirkney was as quaint and quiet as any other village along the Scottish lowlands; a few dozen houses and cottages with grey slate or white washed walls huddled around an old stone bridge crossing the River Irvine, the bell tower of a grand old church looming large over the rest of the thatched and shingled roofs. The village was nestled in a valley, ringed by a patchwork quilt of tilled fields and hedges, until the forest reasserted itself on the furthest edges of the village.

Samuel arched his brow upon seeing the local pub. "'The Drunken Wolf,' really?"

Duncan smirked softly. "My great-grandfather, the third earl, was fond of his drink. It... inspired some local stories."

"You're having me on."

The werewolf chuckled. "One story goes a farmer found him in his barn, having knocked out half the wall at the end of a great hunt, still clutching his quarry- a keg of whiskey."

Kirkney's police station was a stout, white washed building at the end of a road north of the churchyard. Besides a neatly painted blue and white sign reading "Police," it looked like any other storefront in the village.

Lieutenant Dalton opened the door for Duncan and Samuel, leading them into a small office with a wooden panel separating the desks of a few constables and a seating area for visitors. "The prisoner is in our holding cell. He'll be transferred to Glasgow in the morning, sir."

"That should do, thank you, Lieutenant," the young lord nodded as the Lieutenant led them down a hallway towards the jail. When they arrived, Dalton wordlessly motioned for an on-duty constable to step away from the cell, and Duncan and Samuel slipped in after the iron grate groaned open.

The black-haired vampire sneered at Duncan and Samuel, spitting on the floor. "*Trădător*," he hissed. His hair was rumpled and unkempt, long strands lazily tumbled over his forehead. His right eye was swollen shut, and there were a few other bruises besides, his clothes

torn- Duncan glanced over to Samuel, frowning. Vampires healed as quickly as werewolves, which meant that these wounds were not inflicted last night- Dalton's constables must have roughed him up.

"Oi!" Dalton rapped his truncheon against the wall. "You will speak when you're spoken to, in the presence of your betters!"

The vampire's sneer intensified, his pearly white fangs glinting in the dim light. "I was not speaking to the wolf lord, *iobag*."

Samuel sighed, cleaning his spectacles. "He was speaking to me. He called me a traitor."

"There is much worse I could call you, brother, for siding with the likes of the *pricolici*."

Dalton glowered. "I apologize for this display, m'lord. I *thought* we had impressed upon him the value of good manners."

Duncan raised his hand. "It's alright." He looked down at the vampire, his eyes glowing softly. "What is your name?"

The vampire turned away, refusing to talk.

"His name is Vladimir Albescu," the Lieutenant supplied in a brisk tone. Samuel's eyes widened. "He comes from London. That's all we've been able to get out of him, m'lord."

"My colleague and I will take it from here, Dalton, thank you," Duncan said with a note of finality.

The officer frowned. "But, Lord Duncan-"

"I'll be perfectly safe, Dalton." Duncan patted the officer's shoulder, grinning tightly. "I've faced worse than him."

Vlad scoffed, but Dalton nodded. "As you say, m'lord." He moved to leave the cell.

"That's right, dog!" Vlad called after him. "Your master will call when he needs you again!"

Duncan glowered at the vampire. "You don't seem to know how serious your situation is, Mr. Albescu. You were very nearly torn to shreds by the foremost werewolves in the realm last night, and the only reason you continue to *exist* is because Mr. Levy-Johnson convinced me that you would talk, and tell us why you attacked my brother and killed Mr. Hopkins."

Vlad narrowed his eyes, glaring at Samuel. "Then Mr. Levy-Johnson has miscalculated. But you can rest easy, I didn't care about the little mongrel. He was in the way, and I removed him. As for killing that beast? Tch." Vlad leaned back, folding his arms. "If God judges my soul fairly, then he will forgive me. I cut a savage monster from his mortal coil."

Duncan snarled, anger flashing in his eyes. He almost grabbed for his silver amulet, but thought better of it. "My brother was fighting for his life all *night*. He is just a *boy*. As for Richard Hopkins? He was a finer man than you could ever hope to be. He was a war hero and a fine werewolf."

Vlad laughed bitterly. "Is *that* what you think? Well, of course- look who I am talking to. Richard Hopkins killed my cousin, slaughtered him like a pig!"

"He killed monsters and slave owners," Duncan replied, folding his arms.

"Ah, you have read his little journals. Mr. Hopkins, friend of the dispossessed and slayer of monsters- unless the dispossessed do not speak english, or come from fine, Anglo-Saxon stock. Do you think he killed his ten vampires out of a sense of justice for American slaves? Two of them were plantation owners- the rest came from far less privileged lines. My cousin Adrian was fresh off the boat in New York. He was a surgeon with the Union Army, and yet that butcher cut him down all the same!"

"So is *that* why you killed him? Revenge?" Duncan demanded.

"It was a job. Does not mean it was not a pleasure," Vlad replied.

Duncan exchanged a look with Samuel. "A job? For whom?"

Vlad opened his mouth to speak, but then, his face became placid, stroking his chin. "You know, it is a funny thing. I cannot remember."

The werewolf growled low, ready to snap his silver amulet off. Samuel stepped between him and Vlad. "Mr. Albescu, please. You will be tried and found guilty of murder, and the Red Lady will not lift a finger to protect you- they *will* tell the authorities how to kill vampires, if they don't already know. If you cooperate, you may yet serve a life sentence."

Vlad chuckled mirthlessly. "I am not afraid to die; I have done it once before. A noose may be cleaner than a jannisary's blade. Besides, I doubt Her Majesty's Prison is any great improvement over the Sultan's dungeon in Constantinople. If this is the price I pay for ridding the world of a murderer, I am willing to pay it."

"And what about my brother? What price are you ready to pay for mutilating an innocent boy?" Duncan growled, nearly knocking Samuel down as he pushed forward.

"As I said, it was not personal. If he is alive, then fine, there is one more beast in the world. Perhaps he will learn not to interfere with a professional."

Duncan roared, and his silver amulet snapped off his neck with one swift movement of his arm. Vlad stared at the werewolf beginning to transform with grim, stoic determination, and Samuel grabbed Duncan's arms, trying to hold the much larger man back.

"Duncan, *please*, restrain yourself! Killing him now won't do anything!"

"Lord Duncan!" Dalton burst into the room, and the werewolf swerved around, his face misshapen as his jaw was shifting to accommodate several dagger-like fangs. The Lieutenant, to his credit, did not flinch. "M'lord, please, your father sent word. You're wanted back at Kirkney Hall immediately. It concerns Mr. Hopkins' murder- I was told to tell you that the Earl has called a moot."

The werewolf retained just enough of his senses to heed Dalton's words. Before his frayed clothes burst apart, he pressed his amulet against his chest, slowly returning to his mortal form. His amber eyes flicked back to Vlad as he tied the silver strand of his amulet back together. "I will want to continue this conversation, Mr. Albescu. Think hard about how you want to answer my questions."