

The Wolves of Kirkney
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Chapter 4

Duncan's claws dug deep into the rich earth of the woods around Kirkney Hall, the scents of the forest filling his nostrils. As his powerful legs carried him deeper through the moonlit trees, over rocks and roots, he let out a howl, and his ears swiveled as he heard his brother return the call. Duncan caught the scent of deer, and he and Oliver would flank it, a favored tactic amongst their pack, so they may claim the first kill of the hunt. Though he was not quite as large as his father, nor did he have the Curzon's magnificent white coats, Duncan was an impressive specimen amongst the werewolves- the Galbraith's hereditary red fur covered his hulking, muscular frame, cutting the figure of a fierce and bloody predator; amongst his clan, his claws were the longest and the sharpest, and his jaws the strongest. It had long been understood that, if duels of honor were to ever be fought, Duncan would be the Galbraith pack's natural champion.

This, he didn't mind- he felt the same sense of freedom his wife must be feeling in this form. Out in the woods, in the wild places left in the world, it didn't matter who he loved- all that mattered was strength and cunning, two traits Duncan had in excess. His brother howled a warning- Oliver was the best tracker of his generation, and Duncan always trusted his judgement; another werewolf was on their quarry's path, and now it was a race for the first kill.

He kept his ears open, howling out to his brother again as they began to lope as fast as they could, claws kicking up dirt, his thick shoulders barrelling against trees, snapping low branches and knocking over saplings as he charged through the forest. He could smell the deer- it was close, but so was the competition. It didn't answer Oliver or his howls, but Duncan knew a brother when he smelled them. They were going fast; faster than Duncan, and closing the gap. Now he could smell the distinct musk of gunpowder- the American! Duncan let out two short howls, a greeting to all brothers and sisters in the area, and Richard Hopkins finally responded. Oliver howled as well, and Duncan barked back his orders- cross paths, then circle, surrounding their prey. He was counting on Hopkins' apparent lack of knowledge of Galbraith pack signals.

Oliver's leaner and swifter form darted across Duncan's field of view, already the size of a small horse. Duncan veered to the left and got his first glimpse at Richard's form. He was as thickly muscled as a bull and larger than a bear, with a mottled, shaggy coat of grey and brown. He was truly a monster, and cut an even more impressive figure than Duncan; he may very well be bigger than his father. Duncan snarled, claiming the deer as his own, but Richard responded in kind, growling low- a contest, then. Duncan wheeled on his hind legs and leapt forward, hoping that Richard's extra bulk would slow him down. Hopefully he didn't realize how close Oliver was; Duncan could use that. Again, he let out another series of barks- Duncan and Oliver would trade sides again, to confuse Richard as well as their prey. Building up speed until he was

charging as fast as he could, Duncan led Richard on a chase while Oliver closed in on the deer. Finally, he saw the animal, an impressive and princely stag; all the better. All three werewolves were closing in on their prize, and with one last bark to Oliver, Duncan made his move. He leapt not for the stag, but for Richard, throwing all his bulk against the American werewolf and knocking him to the ground. The two large beasts tumbled downward, and Oliver sunk his fangs into the stag, digging his claws into its hide, the stag crying out as its life was snatched away.

His muzzle coated in fresh blood, Oliver threw his head back and let out a triumphant howl- the first kill had been claimed by the Galbraith pack, with a litany of howls echoing throughout the forest as their packmates and guests recognized this point of honor. After hearing the howls, Duncan was launched off of Richard by a powerful kick. The American bared his massive, knife-sized fangs, growling angry at Duncan and snapping his jaws. He felt cheated, and was demanding satisfaction. Duncan felt his heart flutter- the threatening and angry stance enhanced Richard's magnificent form. His strength and power were not in doubt, and Duncan responded with a plaintive whine, showing deference to the elder of a pack, and adopted a playful stance. It would take too long to try and mangle out words with their elongated muzzles, thus they communicated as their fully animal kith.

Richard let out one last growl and an angry bark before relaxing his tone, closing the space between him and Duncan and nipping his ear. All was forgiven. Oliver, however, had caught another scent; boar. Duncan canted his head and barked once to Richard, inviting him to come with the brothers, implying this kill would be his. Richard grunted, nodding his head. With that settled, the brothers shared some of the stag's meat with Richard before rejoining the hunt. Soon, when the American caught the scent, he took the lead.

Duncan watched Richard move, his thick coat rippling in the wind, strong muscles pumping. He was one of the most impressive hunters he had ever seen, the rugged scars littering his broad back speaking to the victories he had seen on the hunt and the battlefield. The stories he must be able to tell... Duncan was pulled out of his reverie, however, by a new and pungent scent. Dry dust and fresh blood- vampire. He glanced up at the sky, as a winged creature flew overhead, its silhouette darting across the moon. Richard had stopped to smell as well, standing up straight as he sniffed the air, his claws digging into a nearby tree. He began to snarl, watching the vampire fly above them.

Duncan recognized Samuel, and moved to press his fist against Richard, another sign of deference. The American whipped his snarling head to Duncan, baring his fangs and eyes aglow, but Duncan canted his head, returning their attention to the scent of the boar. Richard grunted in agreement, and they began loping through the forest floor once more. Duncan heard the howls of more packmates, the boar drawing the attention of others, but Richard, Duncan, and Oliver were far ahead. The scent of vampire was still heavy- Duncan prayed Samuel kept high enough up in the air that he didn't antagonize Richard.

The boar was tantalizingly close now, that Duncan could hear the beast squeal. He stopped, however, when a new, yet oddly familiar scent caught his attention, roses and lavender.

He looked to the side, yelping as a lean and wiry werewolf with wheat-colored fur leapt through the air, skidding to a halt with a freshly caught rabbit in her mouth.

Duncan let out a bark of a laugh, even as Charlotte growled, warning him to keep away from her first kill. He playfully nipped after the rabbit, which raised Charlotte's ire more, and he was about to turn and let her enjoy the rest of the hunt- then, a sound echoed across the forest. Harsh, loud, fiery, and metallic- a gunshot, which was followed by a pained yelp. One of their own had been shot.

The Galbraith werewolf took off with a vengeance, the smell of blood sharp in his nose. His powerful legs carried him as fast as he could go, as soon, there were more sounds. Duncan's heart leapt into his throat as he heard another werewolf's pained howl turn into an all too familiar scream- Oliver.

Duncan burst through the underbrush into a small clearing, and beheld a gristly sight. His eyes immediately saw his brother, the teenaged werewolf stuck between his lycanthrope form and his human body, what fur remained matted and slick with blood, a gleaming knife shoved into Oliver's shoulder; the blade could only be made of silver. Writhing in pain, Oliver grit his teeth as he saw his brother looming over him. "D-duncan...! Behind you!"

The werewolf's heightened senses and reflexes served him well; a tall, gaunt creature with glowing red eyes and snow-white skin was standing at his back, cocking a pistol. Duncan roared, grabbing the assailant by his arm and jerking it upwards, the shot firing into the air. He threw back his opponent, the vampire's long black hair whipping around him as he fell to the ground. Duncan was ready to pounce, but stopped, looking just behind the vampire- a huge, felled beast lying curled up on the forest floor, its shaggy fur also slick with blood. Duncan's heart sank, as he looked down at the beastly features of Richard Hopkins, dead.

Other werewolves began swarming around the clearing. Duncan spotted the brilliant white fur of Lord Curzon rushing towards him, and winced as he heard his mother's pained howl as she scooped up her youngest son. Then, his father arrived- the pack leader of the Galbraith's descended upon the vampire with a vengeance, pouncing on him as fast as a panther, but as heavy as an avalanche. Angus looked startlingly like Duncan, with a thicker build and a notched right ear. He raised his hand, claws as large as daggers ready to come down on the vampire assassin's throat.

"Do it!" The vampire snarled, his voice thickly accented. "Take your best hit, *pricolici!* You had better hope it kills me!"

"*Wait!*" Duncan swerved around to see Samuel, the bespectacled vampire holding up his hands. "My Lords and Ladies, peace, please!"

Duncan roared in Samuel's face, his hand wrapping around the notary's neck before he knew what happened. Anger had seized him; this leech was a traitor! He should have never let him in! He hoisted Samuel into the air and slammed him against a tree trunk.

"Lord Duncan, please!" Samuel gasped, tugging against the werewolf's grip. "Listen! Do *not* kill that man!"

"*W-why?*" Duncan mangled the word as it was spat out of his snout.

"Do you want to know why that man attacked your brother or not?" Samuel snapped back, and Duncan paused. The vampire's luminescent eyes stared back into Duncan's, a steely resolve he had not expected from the put-upon government clerk shining clear. "I don't know this man or why this happened- I swear on my own honor. But he must answer to the law! Vampire or not, he is a man on British soil- and he has a right to trial." He cleared his throat nervously. If his heart could still beat, it would be loud enough for Duncan to hear- he could practically smell the fear radiating from the vampire in his grip, but Samuel maintained his composure. "If you kill him now, how will you learn why he committed this murder?"

Duncan, bearing his fangs, slowly loosened his grip on Samuel until the vampire dropped back to the ground, adjusting his glasses and straightening his cravat. "There's no time to lose. Lady Galbraith?" The vampire turned to Edith, still cradling Oliver, still slowly returning to his human body. Samuel received a nasty, protective snarl in response, but he continued nonetheless. "Take him back to the house, quickly. My manservant Charles was a surgeon in life. He can remove the silver blade safely, with no further damage to the boy. But only if we move quickly."

Duncan looked between his father, who still had the other vampire in his grasp, and back to his mother. Before Angus could give his consent, Edith clasped Oliver closer, and began carrying him back to the house, Samuel giving Duncan one last look before following after her. Angus was now flanked by other werewolves, keeping the other vampire in their claws. The pack growled dangerously as the murderer was carried off- one of their own had died tonight, and another had been seriously injured; the quarry of their hunt had just narrowed to a single target.