

The Wolves of Kirkney
Renard De Fleureaux

Chapter 8

The train station sat just at the edge of Kirkney, strangely crowded at such an early hour. The gathered villagers who stood there and saw the imposing Earl and Countess of Lochmaddy instinctively backed away, even more so at the peculiar, pale gentleman hiding under his umbrella and his large, blank-eyed servitor conversing with Lord Duncan and Lady Charlotte.

The two they didn't pay attention to, a pair of sensibly dressed servants handling the effects of their employers, glanced at the scene.

"I never understood why the villagers react to the Galbraiths as they do," Wolsey said, softly shaking her head. "Don't mistake me, they're good employers— Lady Charlotte is especially kind— but half the villagers act like the Earl will swallow them whole, and the other half act as if they're... I don't know what, King Arthur come around again?"

Naughton, valet to Lord Duncan, chuckled softly. He was a study in contrast with Wolsey, tall and wiry, with an angular face and an angry look about him, yet Wolsey found him to be unfailingly polite. "You're in an old part of Scotland, Miss Wolsey. The people here are superstitious, even about their landlords."

"How long have you been with the Galbraiths? I feel like we never get a chance to talk," Wolsey asked.

"Oh, about ten years, now. Lord Duncan was still a boy when I arrived, but then, I was only a young footman in my first job. Lord Duncan took a shine to me, and when he started taking on responsibilities and was fully a man, he chose me as his valet," Naughton explained.

"So, would you say that you know the family well?" Wolsey asked.

"As well as anyone can, I suppose. Mr. Garrison and Mrs. McLeod probably know more," the valet replied with a casual air.

"If I may, Mr. Naughton, this whole business with the Hunt, Mr. Hopkins' death, and now young James' kidnapping... I need to know something." Wolsey glanced nervously towards the Galbraiths, and then lowered her voice before she continued. "I know I heard these great, terrible dogs barking and howling in the house, and when I asked Lady Charlotte about it, she did the most queer thing and *laughed*. She said she wanted to tell me a secret, but she never got a chance." She looked up to meet Naughton's eyes. "Please, do you know anything about all that?"

Naughton was silent for a moment, giving Wolsey a studied look. "I would say that I do, yes, Ms. Wolsey." He glanced over his shoulder. Duncan and Charlotte were saying their goodbyes still. He then leaned closer to Wolsey. "It's not my place to say. They will tell you, in their own time. You're not mad, though, I promise."

Wolsey furrowed her brow. "Mr. Naughton, you make me quite nervous. Isn't there anything else—?"

"Naughton!" Duncan called, his barking voice cutting off Wolsey. "Do you have my traveling bag? I can't seem to find my gloves."

The valet snapped to attention, a model of professionalism, and completely disregarding Wolsey. "Right here, sir. Given your habit of misplacing gloves, I thought I'd save us both some time and keep them out of your sight until you did need them," Naughton replied.

"Hah, how clever," Duncan replied drily as he approached. "Give me the gloves, Naughton."

"Sir." Naughton bowed his head, handing a pair to Duncan.

The noble turned to the Lady's Maid. "Wolsey, are you quite alright? You seem very far away."

She inhaled sharply, starting to squirm under Duncan's gaze. "Yes, sir— I'm sorry, sir. Only, I was thinking about poor little James. It's a horrible thing, and I'm very sad for you and Lady Charlotte."

Duncan smiled wanly. "Thank you. You're a kind soul. I'm glad you're the one tending to Charlotte." He looked to Naughton. "Come, we're about to board."

"Sir," Naughton nodded, giving Wolsey one last knowing look.

"Be safe, my darling boy," Edith cooed, cupping her son's face in her hands and kissing him on each cheek. "And you as well, dear Charlotte." She kissed her as well. "You let us know the moment you've heard anything— or if you need any help. God bless you both."

"They're off to London, Edith, not the trenches of Sevestapol." Angus growled. He held out his hand to Duncan. "Be smart, boy. Bring James back safe and whole— don't do anything stupid."

Duncan's mouth thinned as he shook his father's hand. "Of course, sir." The conductor's whistle cut off their goodbyes; Duncan and Charlotte bid Edith farewell, and hopped on board after Samuel, Charles following Naughton and Wolsey to second class.

The Lord and Lady took a compartment for themselves and their erstwhile companion, and immediately, began to plan. The train lurched to life beneath their feet, the churning of the engine pistons matching the urgency of their plight. "We should be in London a little after eleven," Samuel said, promptly pulling the curtains to the window. "Who will be meeting us at the station?"

"Our woman, Mrs. Green, will have a coach to take us to Lothmaddy House, in Belgrave Square," Charlotte explained. "From there, we'll be relying on you, Mr. Levy-Johnson."

Samuel stroked his chin. "We should check in with my office. I have a cousin in parliament, and should be able to help us grease some wheels if we need it. Do your people have anyone in government they trust?"

"The Home Office, in general, has handled our affairs. Father is a member of the House of Lords, as are most of the clans leaders, but we should speak with Mr. Oak," Duncan said, earning him a raised brow from Samuel.

"Mr. Oak is one of the fair folk. He has been a friend of the clans for as long as anyone can remember," the noble explained. "He's known London since it was Londinium, so he claims."

"Which means he would have his finger to the pulse of the Red Lady's court," Charlotte supplied.

Samuel furrowed his brow. "I have never heard of this Mr. Oak."

Duncan exchanged looks with Charlotte. "Mr. Oak has no love for vampires. He is a creature borne of nature and life, and finds anything unnatural to be anathema."

The vampire grimaced. "Of course."

There was a tense pause, ended by Charlotte. "If my understanding is correct, it will take a few days to properly address Mr. Oak, so let us turn our focus to more immediate topics. What should we know about the Red Lady's Court?"

"I suppose I should start where the Court is located. Are you familiar with the Limehouse District in the city?" Samuel watched both his companions nod. "There's an old Palladian house, built about a century and a half ago, named Westenra House. That is where the Red Lady holds

court. It's just a short walk from Strangers' Home, a residence for sailors from Africa and Asia. The Red Lady has built her Court from a good number of such... far flung elements of London."

"What about the Red Lady herself?"

"Ah," Samuel nodded. "Well, she is a force to be reckoned with. She keeps her people on a tight leash, and has been in charge of the London court since Napoleon. Her code is 'discretion is the better part of valor.' She wants the court out of sight, out of mind. Her most major network is with butchers and the street gangs around Whitechapel— deals for animal blood and people on their way out."

Charlotte frowned. "On their way out?"

"The very old and the very sick. She presents it as a... community service. A quick, clean death for people who are already lingering at the edge of oblivion," Samuel explained. "She sends in members of the court to bedlam houses and hospitals, and takes those who are marked as, so I said, on their way out."

Duncan folded his arms. "I can't imagine anything less dignified— I would rather go down fighting death, to the very last."

"I shall let the Red Lady know to keep you off her lists then, Lord Duncan," Samuel said drily, adjusting his pince-nez. "My point in telling you all this is that I rather doubt she has any love for this Brotherhood of Strix. The *last* thing she would want is any further trouble with the werewolf clans, and she is not one to hold grudges. We have a good case for her to help us; aiding the Galbraith clan in finding James keeps werewolves from sniffing around London, and if Mr. Albescu has taken refuge in her court, she will scarcely be pleased that one of the clans has come knocking on her door over it."

"What is your standing, exactly, in the court?" Charlotte asked. "How far will your word take us?"

Samuel sighed. "Vampires trace their rank through lineage— who they are sired by, who their sires were sired by, and so on. When the Red Lady took over in 1802, she established her own bloodlines quickly. By vampire standards, I'm young. I was turned in '37, my sire, well." He grinned ruefully. "He would end me permanently if I revealed his name, but you may know him as Spring-heeled Jack. He is what we call a Seigneur, a ranking member of the Court and one of the Red Lady's captains."

Duncan arched his brow. "Spring-heeled Jack himself? God in heaven. We've entered a penny dreadful."

"Being sired by a Siegneur means I am well-regarded, and I have performed services for the court to stay on their good side. I'm confident we can find young James between your resources and mine," Samuel concluded.

Charlotte nodded. "We thank you for your help, Mr. Levy-Johnson, truly." She rose from her seat. "I'm going to see if I can't find something to eat. I haven't had anything since..." she trailed off, staring out into the distance. Duncan reached out to comfort her.

"We'll find him, Charlotte."

She gave a brief, sad smile to Duncan, and then moved out of the compartment. For a few minutes, the two men were silent. "Lord Duncan..."

The other man held up his hand. "Please, just Duncan. After everything you're doing to help us find James, we can use Christian names."

Samuel smirked lightly. "Well, as I told you yesterday, mine is not a Christian name. Still, Duncan, if we're to work together, I wanted to make sure we were on the same page. Your wife asked me to teach her all I know about dealing with vampires."

"With everything that's happened, I don't blame her. I wouldn't mind a refresher myself. I wasn't old enough to take part in the last bout between our kinds," Duncan said.

"A blessed relief for me, then." He sighed. "What do you intend to do with Mr. Albescu, when we find him?"

Duncan was silent for a moment. "If James is unharmed, I will leave him unharmed, provided he tells us where this Brotherhood may be found." He leaned forward in his seat, the broad-shouldered noble appearing all the larger. "If he's hurt my son in any way, however, I'll make him wish he had never risen from his grave."

The vampire nodded. "An understandable approach for any father in your situation. Do you have any thoughts on how you'll want to track him down? I don't know if you want to get the police involved."

"We've always handled these things ourselves, though I am not so proud as to turn down practical help from Scotland Yard. Carefully packed away in my bags are a few of his effects, confiscated from him when he was first captured. His scent is still on them. If you can take us to where the Red Lady's court meets, we can pick up his trail."

"Your enhanced senses paying off, I see," Samuel commented.

Duncan grinned tightly. "We don't take on the gift merely as a matter of tradition."

"What do you want to happen, after you've found your son?"

The werewolf grunted. "I'll take him home, of course. We'll see Albescu face justice, and then I go on with my life."

"And what is that sort of life?"

Duncan arched his brow.

Samuel smiled. "Humor me. Something to get your mind off the circumstances."

He thought for a moment, blowing air out of his cheeks. "Well. I'll watch my son grow up. I look forward to being a father; I like to think I won't make the same mistakes mine did. One day, I will take my place as Earl of Lothmaddy. It will be my sworn duty to protect the land from supernatural threats— of course, there are hardly any threats around Kirkney, not anymore."

"You almost sound disappointed."

Duncan rolled his hand. "I'm a warrior without a war. I love the thrill of the hunt, and I was trained to fight. I feel as if I were never tested— not like my vaunted ancestors, beating back hordes of undead and things that go bump in the night."

"Vampires aren't included in either of those categories for you?" Samuel asked. "I only ask because, as gun ho as you appear to be, you and Lady Charlotte were far and away the most temperate people amongst the clans."

The large man leaned back, brushing aside the curtain to look out the window. "Well, your kind aren't that much different from us, are they? We were both born fully human, at least. I have always strived to be more open-minded than my peers, in a vain hope that will make others more open-minded towards me."

The vampire adjusted his spectacles again, studying him intently. "We're not talking about your lycanthropy anymore, are we, Duncan?"

The noble's face fell flat as he looked to Samuel sharply. "You will excuse me. I'm going to find some breakfast for myself." He rose to leave the compartment.

"I beg your pardon." The vampire spoke softly, placing his hand on the werewolf's shoulder. "I'm not trying to be clever or suss you out. It's not a bad thing to find a... kindred spirit."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." He said brusquely.

"Duncan, you've had a proper education on the shadow world, unlike your dear wife. You know better than to try and lie to a vampire. I can hear your heart beating a mile a minute."

The werewolf turned to face Samuel with a defeated look in his eye.

"How many people know?" the vampire asked quietly.

Duncan looked like a cornered animal. Samuel braced himself; for a brief moment, it looked as if he might strike the vampire, but the larger man shook his head, sinking back into his seat. "Mother pretends not to— with a wife and child of my own, it is easy enough to pretend. Father found me out with an old lover of mine. My brother and sister are blissfully unaware, but I would not be surprised if Granny knew. Charlotte knows— she knew before we even met. She is... similarly afflicted," he explained, grimacing softly. "We're quite the matching set."

"I don't know if I would call it an affliction," Samuel said quickly. "I'm quite sure I wouldn't, in fact."

The werewolf paused, furrowing his brow as realization set in. "You as well, then?"

The vampire smiled gently. "I personally prefer the term Achillean. It adds a poetic lilt to our situation, and better than... other names that come to mind."

"I would remind you of Achilles and Patroclus' fate by the end, but I wouldn't want to attract bad luck." Duncan turned to leave. "I am truly hungry, however. Will you want anything?"

The vampire shook his head. "I intend to keep the curtains drawn and get some much needed sleep. Wake me when we're nearing King's Cross." He sprawled out on the couch, shrugging off his jacket to pass as a pillow.

Duncan nodded. "Oh, and Samuel?" He grinned as the other man rose his head. "Thank you."