

The Wolves of Kirkney  
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Chapter 3

The Galbraith family had retreated into Kirkney Hall to change after an early dinner, as the staff prepared for the nighttime hunt. Charlotte watched the eyes of Kirkney Hall's staff, playing a guessing game of who knew what the family really was, and who did not. She knew for a fact that Garrison, the family butler, was well informed of the situation, as was Mrs. McLeod, the Housekeeper. She assumed that the Earl's valet, Folsey, and Naughton, Duncan's valet, knew; a gentleman's gentleman knew more about the man they served than the man's wife, and certainly the situation was the same with the Countess' Lady's Maid.

"It seems awfully queer to me, my lady, a night-time hunt. It sounds terribly dangerous," Wolsey commented as she helped Charlotte into a new tweed jacket that she could easily slip out of. She had grown an inch, at least, and she had become stronger and more broad-shouldered since she had begun the Wilding, resulting in many of her favorite outfits requiring a tailor; it only slightly beggared belief to ascribe it to her pregnancy with James. "If you don't mind me saying so, ma'am, this jacket has never flattered your figure, it's far too open. Shall I get the one your mother sent...?"

"No, thank you, Wolsey," Charlotte replied. "It's dark out, no one will notice."

Wolsey frowned softly. She was a good Lady's Maid, and she had developed a certain rapport with Charlotte since she had been hired almost a year ago. She seemed terribly out of place in Kirkney Hall, being a somewhat plump and gentle woman with chestnut brown hair tied in a simple bun, and bright, round green eyes. There was something decidedly rabbit-like about her, which made her working for a family of werewolves all the more perilous in Charlotte's mind. "If I may say so, ma'am, you seem nervous. Should I get some of your tea...?"

"No! Heavens no," Charlotte gasped. "I am *done* with the Wolfsbane tea, Wolsey," she smiled with genuine relief. "In the future, I prefer darjeeling, with sugar."

Wolsey nodded. "Of course, ma'am. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, thank you. Remember, we won't be in until late the next morning. Apparently this night hunt goes until first light."

Wolsey shook her head as she collected a few odds and ends, tidying up the room. "Oh, it just doesn't sit right with me, ma'am, if you don't mind me saying so. It seems terribly improper for a lady of a great family to be out all night in the woods. And such an imposition on you! Are you sure you wouldn't like me to come along?"

Charlotte scoffed softly. The thought of Wolsey fainting at the sight of two dozen werewolves tearing their way out of nobles' finery all at once elicited a small bit of curiosity, but

she decided against it. "Thank you, but no. I must go now- I will see you in the morning. Have a good night."

"My lady," Wolsey curtsied softly as Charlotte left the room.

"Ah, there you are!" Duncan approached his wife as she closed the door behind her. Like Charlotte, he was dressed in a very plain tweed suit that would be easy to take off. "The rest of the family is ready- and you?" He placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're about to take the last step. After tonight, you'll carry our... peculiar state with you, forever."

Charlotte laughed sharply. "Careful, my darling, you're very close to making it sound as if I have a choice at this junction."

He smiled apologetically. "Well... do try to enjoy it. You may like it more than you think."

"Yes, what little girl doesn't dream of the day she turns into a creature out of penny dreadfuls?" Charlotte sighed. "About Wolsey- she will have to be told."

Duncan nodded slowly, leading Charlotte down the corridor, past portraits of Galbraith ancestors. For Duncan, the judgemental eyes of his lineage weighed heavy with expectation on his shoulders; for Charlotte, she only noticed how every single portrait managed to capture the inhuman, fiery amber eyes leaping from each and every portrait. "She will. There's no way you can hide your condition from the woman that dresses you for long after tonight."

Charlotte thought for a moment. "She's a wonderful Lady's Maid, but she's terribly nervous. What if she doesn't take to the notion?"

Her husband sighed. "Well, in that case, Mrs. McLeod and Garrison will speak with her. She will be given a very generous stipend, and a recommendation that will guarantee employment- all on the provision she never speaks of what she saw here. Then, we begin looking for a sturdier Lady's Maid."

"It seems terribly unfair to her," Charlotte said. "It's not at all what she was prepared for."

Duncan thinned his lips. "Well, she doesn't need to hide who she really is, does she?"

"I suppose not."

The conversation ended at that point. Mercifully, the two didn't have long to go before they reached the entry hall, and the twilight grounds of Kirkney Hall. Torches and lanterns were held by the servants who had proven their ability to handle the family's true nature, and the assembled werewolves had begun to gather, expectant eyes on Charlotte.

She stopped. All their eyes turned on her, and glinted like gold coins under firelight. Again, she could sense them tracking her scent- was she predator or prey? Charlotte hesitated and halted, but Duncan gently squeezed her hand. "It's alright," he whispered. "I'm with you every step of the way."

The two made their way through the crowd of werewolves, the assembled nobles parting to give them a path. At the end was Matthew Curzon, the white-haired noble smiling gently as he stood between two torches and a small stone plinth.

"Who approaches these assembled packs?" Matthew asked formally. The ceremony had begun.

Duncan gently nudged Charlotte, and she spoke. "I, Charlotte Galbraith, who seeks to hunt with you."

"And who speaks for you?"

"I," Duncan replied. "Duncan Galbraith, who has taken her to mate. She has provided me with a son, and she herself is strong."

"Do you believe yourself worthy to hunt with those who claim dominion over the forests and wild places of these lands?"

"I do," Charlotte replied.

Matthew nodded. "Then I will speak the words that have been spoken since the first time our kind gathered thus. Come, brothers and sisters, for we are called by the earth itself. All souls are born of God, but until we are called to our grave, we have another master- another charge. Those of us who are pious say we are Hounds of God- sent to chase devils back into the mouths of Hell. But the druids of ages past gave us this duty, before the Conqueror, Alfred the Great, or the Romans, we were given our charge- the night itself. Our domain is the hunt- the night and darkness bless us. Our quarry is all that is vicious, all that is evil, all that is unnatural. For the night belongs to us-

"And we belong to the earth," came a practiced cry from dozens of werewolves.

"Tonight we welcome Charlotte Galbraith into the fold, her mate speaks on her behalf, and the Galbraith clan has claimed her as one of her own." Matthew turned to her, presenting a silver medallion, stamped in the shape of a celtic knot. "Silver, that reflects the light of the moon. It will serve to temper this wild nature you have brought into your heart. Hold it fast, for it is your last, great link to the world of our good Christian neighbors." He tied the amulet around her, and Charlotte placed a hand on it, the metal cold to the touch.

"Who will now step forward, to give of their blood, and bind Charlotte Galbraith to us as sister and friend?" the old noble continued.

Duncan nodded. "In the name of the son I have sired through her and of the pack that has sired me, I will give of my blood."

The old man nodded in return. Holding out his hand, Robin, the fae servant, stepped out of the shadows to place an ornate dagger in his hand, the firelight reflected in its silver blade. Charlotte inhaled sharply, but then looked back to Duncan, who nodded reassuringly. They had rehearsed for this, and she braced herself for what would come next.

The dagger was passed into Duncan's hand, and he cut his palm, crimson blood flowing freely. The blade was then passed to Charlotte, and she caught her eyes in the metal. In the fire, her blue eyes glowed with a golden tint- like so many others gathered here.

"No backing out now," she muttered quietly. "Everyone's made such a fuss..." she cut her palm, the sting making her grind her teeth. Duncan grabbed her hand in his and gripped tightly, their blood mingling. This was the moment everyone had been waiting for, and polite applause rippled throughout the crowd. Matthew Curzon clamped his hand atop theirs.

"It is done! Charlotte Galbraith, mate of Duncan Galbraith, mother of James Galbraith, our sister, will hunt with us! May her kills be clean and many, may she run wild and free in

night's embrace, and may all that threaten this land fear her howl!" This earned a much more enthusiastic response; Richard Hopkins let out a loud howl, which the others soon imitated-Charlotte fought the compulsion to join in herself, half laughing as all these fine nobles, the cream of the crop of British society, howling and baying at the moon.

"Let the hunt begin!" the elder lord announced, letting go of Duncan and Charlotte's hands. "Well done, both of you," he said in a quieter voice, and Duncan and Charlotte returned to the crowd, now eagerly beginning to split off in preparation.

"My goodness, dinner and the theater all in one night." The two turned to see Samuel Levy-Johnson approaching, a small notebook in hand, his eyes glowing a reddish hue in the dusky gloom. "My congratulations, then- not at all what I was expecting from witnessing my first wilding."

Charlotte smiled demurely. "Are you sure you will not be more comfortable in the house, Mr. Levy-Johnson? The hunt is about to begin."

He grinned bracingly. "Oh, I'm not afraid of a few mad dogs, not at night."

"Is that so?" Duncan asked out of amusement, his brows arching.

"My Lord Duncan, werewolves are indeed the apex predators of the shadow world we walk in, but you cannot *fly*. Until one of you sprouts wings, I assure you, I will be quite safe."

"So you're one who can turn into a bat?" Duncan asked, folding his arms.

Samuel tapped his nose. "Now that would be telling. Still, my congratulations. Enjoy your hunt," the notary said airily. The vampire turned to leave, only to let out a startled hiss as he bumped into Richard Hopkins. The American werewolf loomed over him, growling low and bearing teeth that were slowly giving way to fangs. Samuel silently put space between him and Richard, retreating some distance away. Both Charlotte and Duncan quietly stifled faint giggles at the sight.

The American turned to Duncan and Charlotte, bowing his head. "Beg pardon, Lady Charlotte. The Earl asked me to grab this one so all the men can start getting ready."

"Of course, Mr. Hopkins." She turned to Duncan. "Well, here we part ways, then."

Duncan nodded. "For the night, yes. Don't worry- once we're all in the woods, we may run into each other. Follow your nose if you have need of me." Almost as an afterthought, and glancing at Mr. Hopkins, he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "Do have fun."

Charlotte grinned thinly. "Of course, dear. Oh!" She held up her cut hand. "Perhaps some linen, then, for the cut?"

Duncan took her hand, looking over her palm. "The cut is healed already, my dear." He exchanged a knowing look with Mr. Hopkins. "It worked, alright. You are one of us now, after all."

Charlotte drew back her hand, looking at her palm in amazement. The cut had neatly closed up, leaving not even a tingle of tenderness when she touched it. "Will wonders never cease..." she muttered.

She had little time to contemplate her miraculous healing, as Madeleine locked her arm around Charlotte's and dragged her away. "Come on, Charlotte, come on! The rest of the girls are all eager to meet you properly."

Charlotte blinked, looking at Duncan's spirited younger sister wearing an impish smile. "Meet me properly...?"

"Of course," Madeleine looked back, a flash in her eyes. "You're one of us, now. Completely."

"So I've heard."

Madeleine led Charlotte to a crowd made up entirely of the Galbraith women and all the female guests of the party. Attending them were Mrs. McLeod, the grim but fastidious housekeeper of Kirkney Hall, and Ankers, Lady's Maid to the Countess. The women were chatting amongst themselves as if it were high tea, Charlotte catching snippets of conversation about the latest London and Paris fashions, the most tempting novels, and other ephemera she had talked about thousands of times, as if changing into monsters and running naked through the forest were the most natural thing in the world.

"Ah! My dear, how very well done," Edith called out, the broad-shouldered Countess of Kirkney pushing herself to the forefront, with the elderly Dowager in tow. Edith was quick to embrace Charlotte, kissing her cheek, while Olivia bowed her grey head in a sign of approval.

"You presented yourself very well, Charlotte. Now, you know what is to happen next?"

Charlotte felt a flutter of anxiety, as already some of the ladies were removing their clothes. Diligently, McLeod and Ankers were neatly folding them and keeping all the Ladies' clothes sorted. "We... disrobe, and wait for the signal for the hunt to begin."

"Indeed. I will take precedence- poor Lord Curzon's wife is no longer with us, so as the eldest matriarch of the packs, I will lead the charge, as it were," Olivia said, already undoing her brooch. "Do try and keep up dear, I am not known for my patience."

"Of course, Lady Olivia," Charlotte said automatically, averting her eyes as the old woman began to undress. Madeleine giggled, pulling Charlotte away from the two older women.

"Never mind Granny," Madeleine said. "She likes to remind the new blood who's still in charge. But please, you must meet some of the others. Victoria! Ada! Come meet our new sister!"

Charlotte was quick to blush as two beautiful women close to her age approached, already having removed their tops. Both were athletically built, one taller and more classically beautiful, the other leaner and more nymph-like, but with a wild look in her eyes. She tried not to be drawn in to the other, more prominent features of their bodies.

"Oh, poor dear. I remember when you blushed like that during your first hunt, Ada," the taller one, presumably Victoria, clicked her tongue. "It's alright, darling, we don't bite. I'm Victoria, of the Ponsonby family. This is Ada Louise, Lord Abergavenny's daughter," she said, gesturing to the more nymph-like woman.

"Oh, you are *quite* lucky, Charlotte. Duncan Galbraith must be such a wonderful husband."

Charlotte laughed a little stronger than she intended. "Ah! Yes, well, we do get on."

"Your scent has also come in *very* nicely. You're not cheating by wearing anything, are you?" Victoria breathed in deeply. "If your natural scent is rose and lavender, I shall be *quite* cross with you. I would reek of oak and hops if I didn't apply my oils regularly."

"Oh? Rose and...?" Charlotte trailed off. Ever since her sense of smell had grown more powerful, she had eschewed perfume- the smell had quickly grown overwhelming. She hadn't given a thought to her own scent in months. "Yes," she began again, having recovered herself. "My mother and I are avid gardeners, and Clearview House is famous for its roses."

"Oh, you absolute little witch," Victoria pouted. She then stretched her toned arms above her head, and again, Charlotte felt the blush in her cheeks rise- the other woman did it with absolutely no sense of shame. "Well, I shall have to take solace in bagging the biggest game- no woman has been able to beat the Dowager Countess in years at the hunt, but among the younger generation, I *always* come back with the biggest kill."

"Victoria is still sitting on her laurels from two years ago, she brought down two elk at once," Madeleine explained.

"Only two? Well, then I will moderate myself accordingly," Charlotte replied, a small grin tugging at her lips as she tilted her chin up, speaking airily to Victoria. "I wouldn't want to outpace you so soon after meeting you, my dear."

Victoria responded with a clipped smile of her own. "Well, Lady Charlotte, we will either get along famously or tear each other's eyes out. I can't wait to see which it shall be." She undid her skirt with help from Ankers, and handed it off to her. Now nearly as naked as the day she was born, she gave Charlotte another smirk before turning on her heel.

Madeleine giggled again. "I thought you and Victoria would get on. She's a proud beauty, but a lovely person once you get to know her."

Charlotte caught herself staring after the tall and stunning werewolf, her gait becoming more powerful and predatory as she walked away. "Well, she certainly is impressive."

"Lady Charlotte? Do you require assistance?"

"Oh!" Charlotte turned to see Mrs. McLeod. "Of course, thank you." She glanced nervously at Madeleine as McLeod dutifully began undoing her jacket. "Have you done this for long, Mrs. McLeod?"

The housekeeper nodded gravely. "I've been present for ten great hunts, my Lady. I was there for young Lady Madeleine's wilding just three years ago. Worry not- you will get used to it, as all the others have."

"And you yourself are not a werewolf?"

Mrs. McLeod gave Charlotte a look as if she had asked her if she were a Hapsburg Princess. "Certainly not, my Lady! No, this is a blessing conferred on the great and good of the land. The staff that *do* know of this tradition are merely happy to serve such a worthy cause." The jacket was off, next came the waistcoat and blouse.

"A worthy cause..." she looked to Madeleine, who had turned away out of politeness. "Then the Marquess' speech was more than just self-aggrandizing? We're hunting monsters?"

"Oh, if only! There haven't been any monsters in Kirkney's woods since our grandfather's time, a band of wights. Oliver swears he saw a Nixie once, but I wouldn't believe him, were I you," Madeleine replied brightly.

Charlotte breathed in sharply as her blouse was removed and her corset undone, her arms instantly clapping over her chest out of instinct. She shivered slightly as the cool night air hit her bare body. "I see. Mrs. McLeod, what's to be done with my silver amulet?"

"Oh, you'll wait for the Dowager to announce the beginning of the hunt, and let the silver drop where you may, my Lady. Ankers and I will collect them- we have a catalog of every Lady's silver, so they may reclaim them come morning." She undid Charlotte's skirt. "Would you lift your arms up, my Lady, for your petticoat?" Charlotte obeyed, and was left in nothing but stockings and chemise. She thought of her mother- she would die of fright if she could see her now. "It is considered correct for the hunters to return from the woods before dawn- if you have trouble finding your way back, Mr. Garrison and Mr. Folsey will be burning sage. You should be able to follow the scent back to the house."

"Thank you, Mrs. McLeod, that's been very helpful," Charlotte shivered, hugging herself as her chemise came off, leaving her body entirely bare. She glanced nervously at the two dozen women just as naked, and waited. Thankfully, she did not have long to wait.

The stillness of the night was interrupted by a loud, echoing howl. "That's the Marquess- the hunt's begun! Oh, I *do* hope Granny doesn't take too long!" Madeleine said excitedly.

More howls cut through the night, and goosebumps pricked Charlotte's skin as they grew closer. In the dim light, she could make out shadowy, hulking figures darting towards the woods. Then, a new howl much closer, clear, crisp, and strong.

"That's Granny!" Madeleine said excitedly, tearing off her amulet. "Come on, Charlotte!"

Charlotte took a deep breath and unclasped her amulet, handing it off to a waiting Mrs. McLeod. As soon as she did, the servant retreated, giving the women space. At first, she didn't feel any different, but then her eyes were drawn into the inky black sky above her. Charlotte's heart began to pound in her chest, the goosebumps prickling her beginning to itch and ache. She could feel her toes curl and her fingers fidget and twitch restlessly, as if she had been struck by lightning. Then, the swelling of power from within her billowed out in waves. She could feel her form shifting, her bones snapping and reforming- it should have been unbearable, but the adrenaline flowing through her veins kept the pain at bay. She could think of nothing else to do but scream, but her scream morphed suddenly into a loud, wild howl. Her vision had altered, colors not what they once were, but everything was in sharp focus. She could see the forests, large figures darting in, her senses telling her these were friends- no, kin- no. They were her pack.

She began to run towards them, but her feet and legs had become so much larger and powerful, a single stride carried her farther than a leap. That rippling strength bubbled up, muscle bristling under a coat of rich, wheat-colored fur, so very much like her hair. Instinct subtly drove her to all fours. Yes, it was only logical, she could go much faster this way. And how fast! She bounded across the great lawn of Kirkney Hall, faster and faster, the wind whistling in her ears.

She leapt over the crumbling stone wall surrounding the main house, and howled in unabashed joy. She had never felt so powerful, so strong- so *free*. She felt she could swim the channel like this, and not stop running until she reached Paris. But then she reached the forest, the damp, rich earth beneath her feet, the tall trees enticing her closer. Her ears swiveled as she heard the cries and howls of her pack mates, her nose drinking in such tantalizing scents- rabbit was nearby. Deer, as well. Oh! Was that boar? She licked her lips at the thought. Hunger and sheer delight drove her on, as fear was abandoned in her wild chase- the hunt had finally, truly begun.