

Diplomacy of Wolves – Chapter 2

[By Holly Lisle](#)

The stone walls, rough-hewn and slime-coated, gleamed in the torchlight. The chill of the place, and the stink and the darkness and the skittering sounds of the rats, wore on Marcue's nerves even when all the cells were full and the men in them talked and quarreled and wondered about their futures. Now the dungeon was empty except for one prisoner, and that was a girl—a child, really—and she rarely spoke, but frequently cried. Her crying was worse than the rats.

She was crying at the moment.

“Your Family will ransom you,” he told her. He wasn't supposed to offer comfort to the enemy, but he had a hard time thinking of a little girl as an enemy, and an equally hard time understanding how his employers could justify treating her as one, to the point of locking her in the lowest dungeon in Sabir House for more than a month.

The girl said nothing for a few moments, but she did sniffle a bit and take a few slow, deep breaths, as if she were trying to get herself under control. Then she moved a little way out of the shadow that hid her and looked at him, “I thought I thought they w-w-would, too,” and started sobbing again.

Marcue winced. Poor girl. She was so young and pretty, and so very helpless. And she obviously didn't understand how these things worked. Families didn't hurt little girls.

He had no compunction about holding warriors and diplomats in the cells. He didn't lose sleep when he had to kill one for trying to escape, either; the warriors and diplomats of the world had chosen to be where they were, doing what they were

doing, and they knew the risks involved in their work. This girl, though, had been kidnapped from her bed while she slept, and had been dragged into this cell in the month of Brethwan, during the Festival of the Full Circle. And there she had languished while his employers and her Family bickered over the price of her return.

If I had such a daughter, the guard had thought more than once, I would pay any price for her safe return. But he had discovered long ago that the ways of the rich and powerful were not his ways. From everything he had heard, her Family was demanding not only her safe return, but also an exorbitant punitive payment to reimburse them for the anguish they had suffered from her kidnapping. He thought, though he hadn't dared to say it aloud, that her Family didn't know a damned thing about suffering if they could leave a daughter locked in a cell while they screamed for compensation.

The girl rose and came to the gate. Even dirty and unkempt, with the tattered blanket she'd been given wrapped around her delicate shoulders, she was impossibly beautiful. Dressed still in the silk pajamas she'd been wearing when she was kidnapped, she looked so fragile he wondered again how she had survived a month in the cold, dank, filthy cell.

"You could release me," she said to him. Her little-girl voice was soft and tentative, and tinged with hope.

Her voice could have broken the heart of a stone, and Marcue was no stone. He looked at her sadly, though, and told her, "That I cannot do, though if I dared, I'd do it in an instant."

She gripped the bars and glared at him. "Why can't you? You admit your employers have taken me wrongfully, and that their behavior is shameful."

He'd said those things to her a few days earlier, and now wished he hadn't. He'd meant them; he thought what he said was

completely true; but if she told any of the Sabir Family about his indiscretion, his head would be decorating a post at the west gate of Sabir House.

She leaned closer and her voice dropped to a whisper. "If you helped me, you could have anything you wanted from the Galweighs."

He moved toward her, though no closer than the line of the no-pass zone carved into the stone floor. He kept his voice low and prayed no one was listening. "I know I could, but I still can't release you. Not for fear of my own life, but for the lives of my parents. Both my mother and my father work in the Sabir kitchens. If I set you free, whether I stayed on or ran with you, both of my parents would be killed the moment my betrayal was discovered." He stopped and reconsidered. "No, that isn't true. The Sabirs would torture them first, then kill them."

She seemed to sag and shrink in front of his eyes. "That's it, then. You were my last hope. And you say exactly the same thing as the other five guards who have watched me—'I'd help you if I could, but they would kill my family or my wife or my sister'" She looked, for just an instant, furious. "I'd think, when the Sabirs told you what stories to tell your prisoners, that they would have told you to try to be a bit original."

He was startled. She thought he was lying to her? He shook his head and almost moved across the line to explain to her, but remembered himself in time and kept back of it. "Girl " he began.

She cut him off. "Danya. My name is Danya. I want you to remember it since you won't help me. Remember it, so that when they do whatever they're going to do to me, my face and my name will haunt you for the rest of your life." She flung herself away from the bars, face-down into the straw.

He winced. "Danya," he said, "you think we were all told to tell you a story but that isn't so. How do you suppose the Families ensure the loyalty of their guards? Eh? Have you ever thought about that? They choose only those of us who have something to lose someone, actually. And they make sure we know, from the day we don these uniforms, that our loved ones are the reason we were chosen to serve—and that they will be the price we pay if we fail."

Danya rolled over and sat up. She glared at him and brushed loose tangles of hair back from her face. "Perhaps that is how the Sabirs do it "

Marcue didn't let her finish. "Unless you have also spent time in the Galweigh dungeons, and have spoken to the Galweigh guards to be sure you know differently, assume the guard who watched over you was chosen the same way. Assume that when your Family discovered you stolen away, the person he once loved was murdered while he watched, and when she was dead, that he was killed too. Loyalty can be bought and sold, child, and even given away for free but fear can make the price of a man's loyalty higher than even the richest buyer could pay."

The girl stared at him for a moment, horrified. "My Family would never hurt Quintal. He has guarded me since I was born. And his wife and daughter his daughter was my companion until just last year, and his wife works for our seneschal. They are a part of the Family."

She leaned forward to hide her face against her thighs. She wrapped her thin arms under her legs and began to cry again. "No one would hurt them," he heard her insisting again and again.

"Oh, please," Marcue whispered. "Don't do that. I'm sure you're right. Your guardsman will be fine, and his family, too. Meanwhile, Danya, you're safe here. Your Family isn't going to let anything happen to you. They'll pay to get you

out—any day now, someone will come down the steps to release you.”

She didn't raise her head. The guard could barely make out her reply, muffled as it was. He thought she said, “It's Theramisdlay.”

And what did the fact that it was Naming Day have to do with anything? He asked her as much.

“Because,” she said, lifting her head, “the Sabir diplomat who came down and talked to me just after I got here gave Theramisdlay as the last day that my Family could come to an agreement on the terms of my release. If the Sabirs didn't get what they wanted then, they said they would take it by other means, and my life would be worth nothing to them.”

The guard tried to smile at her. “They always say things like that when they're dealing with each other. I can't even tell you how many threats I've heard the Sabirs giving and you have to know the stories I've heard of the Galweighs are no better.” He shook his head and his smile grew more confident. “But all those threats won't mean anything when it comes to you. What could they gain by hurting you?”

She gave him an eerie look, one that seemed to bite with knife-edged teeth straight through his skin and into his bones. That stare chilled him from the inside out, and made him wish that there were more people in the dungeon than just the two of them. Then she looked away and the awful feeling passed. She said, “You'd be surprised.”

Perhaps I would after all, he thought, but he said nothing.

From far above, he heard the first soft, rhythmic thuds of boots on the curving stairs that led down into the dungeon. The hour was far too early for his relief to be coming, and too late for someone from the kitchen to be bringing meals for him and the girl. So then, who came?

Danya moved into the furthest corner of her cell and pulled herself into a tiny bundle, huddled behind a little pile of straw. She said, "It's time for the bad news now. But perhaps you could still find a way to save me."

The child was determined to get him killed. He shook his head.

She watched him, eyes like those of a fox in a trap—terrified yet cunning, too. "I'd consent to marriage in my own right, if that's what you wanted. Even if you demanded both marriage and a name in the Galweigh Family, I could promise that, and you would have it. I will promise it. I do. If you'll just get me away from here."

Her hand in marriage? He smiled sadly at her and said, "How old are you, Danya? Not old enough to be thinking of marriage, I'll wager."

She said, "I'm eighteen. Old enough to give legal consent."

She was eighteen? He wouldn't have guessed her age at more than thirteen, and she wouldn't have made a particularly well-developed thirteen-year-old. If she were eighteen—and he wasn't sure he was willing to believe her about that—she might be in more trouble than he'd guessed. As a legal adult, she couldn't count on the safeguards promised to children by the Family treaties. As an adult, if her Family wouldn't ransom her and she couldn't offer her own ransom, the Sabirs really might do what they wanted with her.

But they would start a war if they hurt—or killed, but that was unthinkable—the daughter of a Galweigh. And none of the Families and subfamilies in Calimekka wanted a war.

Did they?

The footsteps grew louder. He thought he could discern three separate pairs of feet coming down the stone stairs.

"Save me. Anything it is within my power to give, you'll

have.”

He felt her fear as if it were a blanket wrapping itself around him, smothering him. “You can’t guarantee the safety of my parents,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry, girl, but I can’t help you.”

She screamed—fear and rage, in equal parts. She ripped handfuls of straw from the floor and flung them at him. He drew well back from the line and steeled his face to impassivity. Above him, the pace of feet on stairsteps quickened. He grew uneasy. Perhaps she had reason to fear. Perhaps. But so did he.

The first man appeared from around the curve of the staircase. His long cloak, which swirled against his riding boots and billowed behind him also effectively hooded his face from view, but Marcue knew him anyway from the ring on his right hand. A wolf’s-head ring, gold, with tourmaline cabochon eyes that glowed in the torchlight, with a mouth opened in a vicious snarl. The wearer of the ring was Crispin Sabir, one of the Sabir Wolves.

A wave of queasiness washed over Marcue. The girl had reason to fear. Crispin Sabir was mad. Evil. Cruel beyond words, beyond human comprehension. If even one one-hundredth of the stories Marcue had heard about him were true, the man kept corpses in his quarters and planted them in his private grounds the way gardeners planted roses. Marcue had seen him torture a man once; that memory would never leave him. If he had known the girl would end up with the Sabir’s Wolves instead of with their diplomats—

“Why is she screaming?” Crispin asked, and Marcue swallowed and said quickly, “She’s afraid. She heard you coming down the stairs and she said something about this being Theramisdlay.”

“Theramisdlay. Gregor said he told her about that. I’m glad she remembered,” Crispin said.

The second man appeared as he said it, and if Marcue had been sick at the sight of Crispin, with the arrival of Andrew Sabir, his heart sank, weighted with dread. Andrew Sabir. Better a visit from Zagtasht, god of the underworld. At least Zagtasht was sometimes known to show mercy. Andrew was a massive man, twice as broad through the shoulders as the leaner, taller Crispin, with a chest like a beer-barrel; he kept his head shaved in the manner of the Sloebene sailors, with a single braid above his left ear; and he was ugly as red-eyed evil. He grinned as he caught sight of the girl and said, "Do you want me to shut her up, Crispin?"

"Not at all. Let her sing a bit. I like the sound of it."

The third set of footsteps on the stairs approached slowly. Marcue heard a hissing slide, then a thud and a grunt, then the normal click of bootheel on stone. A pause. Then the sequence repeated. Over and over, louder and louder. And throughout, a curious scraping that he hadn't heard at all until the other two men were off the stairs.

Marcue shivered, and not from the chill and the damp. He'd heard stories of the creatures the Wolves kept hidden in their chambers. He'd heard, too, that they consorted with demons and monsters. And that shuffle-step on the stair (what was that scratching sound?) might just be a kindly old Family diplomat limping down to tell the girl her ransom had been met but Marcue didn't think so.

"We have news for you, little Wolf," Andrew said.

Crispin glared at him. "Wait until Anwyn gets here. He doesn't want to miss this."

Andrew laughed, a creepy high tittering giggle that made Marcue want to retch. "News," he repeated. "But maybe Anwyn will want to give it to you himself. We'll all want to give it to you." He giggled again.

The girl stood and faced the men. She wasn't screaming any longer, and Marcue could see no sign of tears. She'd drawn strength from someplace; she'd found a measure of courage from deep inside herself; now her chin went up and her shoulders came back and her body wrote defiance in the air with her every move. She glared at Andrew and said, "So what is your news, Wolf?"

Crispin and Andrew both grinned at each other. As they did, Anwyn slouched into the dungeon. Marcue had thought from his name that he would be human. Anwyn was a good Parmatian name, like Crispin or Marcue, for that matter. The thing that skulked into the dungeon wasn't human, though. He might have been one of the Scarred—one of the creatures from the poisoned lands whose ancestors, stories said, had once been men. If he was Scarred, however, he was from no realm that had ever traded in Calimekka. And if he wasn't one of the Scarred, then he was a demon from the lowest pit of Zagtasht's darkest hell. Long horns curled out from his forehead. His scaled brow beetled over eyes so deeply set they looked more like hollow sockets. His lips parted in a grin that revealed teeth long as a man's thumb and serrated like a shark's. He hunched forward, and Marcue could make out the ridge of huge spines that ran down the center of his back beneath his cloak. His hands were talons, though five-fingered, and while one of his feet fit in a man's boot and grew from a man-shaped leg, the other was a cloven hoof attached to a leg that, beneath a man's breeches, bent backward at the knee. That leg he dragged forward as he moved into the room.

Marcue longed to run. He kept himself where he was only by the fiercest exercise of will, and he knew that his terror showed plainly on his face.

The girl didn't flinch. She looked at the monster as if he were someone she had known and disliked all her life. Marcue couldn't even see fear in her eyes.

Well, he was afraid enough for both of them.

You should have helped her escape, a tiny voice in the back of his mind whispered. You are going to regret the fact that you didn't for the rest of your life. The name Danya Galweigh is going to ride with you into the dark halls of nightmare when you sleep, and perch on your shoulders when you wake.

The girl gripped the bars of her cell with slender, long-fingered hands, and in a voice that said without words that she was their superior, and beyond anything they might do to her, said, "You're all here now. Give me your news."

The monster Anwyn said, "Dear child, the diplomats still talk, and we will let them talk, of course—but they achieve nothing. Your Family is most unwilling to give us what we want." He shook his head and looked from Andrew to Crispin, then back to the girl. "And the work of Theramisday has come and gone, and no decision that we will accept has yet been reached."

She frowned. "But you said the diplomats are still talking."

Anwyn smiled, and those horrible teeth gleamed. "Well, of course. If we had given your people our actual deadline, they would know to be watching for our next move. As it is, they think we're still considering what they have to say, so they won't be prepared for our attack."

Danya paled, and Marcue, pressed against the wall, ached for her. Her Family still thought they had a chance to get her back alive, when in fact she had become the trick that would make them vulnerable.

Danya Galweigh didn't collapse into tears, nor did she beg for mercy. She glanced at Marcue, then back at the monster, and said, "So now I assume you have come to kill me."

All three visitors to the dungeon laughed. The demon said, "Lovely girl, we wouldn't dream of killing you. Yet. What a

stupid waste of valuable resources that would be. How would we bring ourselves to kill someone so young and beautiful, so strong and full of life? No. We have a place for you among our number.”

“Indeed,” Crispin said, “the central place of honor in the circle of the Wolves.”

That meant nothing to Marcue, but it meant something to Danya. Her facade of courage and impassivity crumbled, and tears filled her eyes. “No,” she whispered. “Please, no. Not that.”

Andrew tittered again. “Well, not that right away. After you have been the guest of the Wolves, you won’t be, well, you won’t be the same, and we hated the idea of wasting so much prettiness. So for the next few days, you’ll entertain the three of us. Just us.”

She backed away from the bars. “Don’t touch me.”

Crispin and the demon laughed, and Crispin said, “Well, brother, I don’t think she likes us.”

The demon said, “She’ll probably like you well enough. But I think I shall like her.”

Andrew said, “Guard, give me the key to her cell.”

Marcue shuddered.

I should have helped her. I should have I had the time. I could have made an opportunity. I could have done something. Maybe I still can. Maybe I can find a way to get her out and lock the three of them in there—I can run with her and my parents before anyone is the wiser. Galweigh House isn’t so far

“Let me open it for you,” he heard himself saying. “The lock is stiff and tricky, and won’t open if you haven’t practiced with it a great deal.” His voice shook when he spoke, but he

thought anyone's voice would shake on being confronted for the first time with a demon. And what he said about the lock was true, actually, though he took nearly three times as long unlocking it as he would have normally. His delay came partly because his hands were shaking from fear, but more than that, the whole time he was scraping the key back and forth, he was figuring out how he would get the men and the monster into the cell and the girl safely out. By the time the door screeched open, he thought he had found the way.

"There," he said, and stepped back, keeping himself beside the door, and leaving the key in the lock.

"Very good," Andrew said. "That did look very difficult."

Marcue nodded and took another step back. He tried to catch the girl's eye, but she was looking at Andrew, who stepped into the cell first. Crispin followed, and Marcue wished with all his heart the second one in had been the demon. Crispin would have been so much easier to shove.

He watched both men close on Danya, and backed up another half step, hoping to spot the demon, who had inexplicably vanished. He felt his fear in the tightening of his gut and his testicles, in the pounding of his heart, and he thought, Come on! Come on! Move in front of me, you bastard, before it's too late.

Then he felt the point of a needle at his throat.

"It probably would have worked," the demon said from behind him. He felt it rest one hand on his belly. The other tightened around his neck, and the monster picked him up, strangling him and dragging him backward at the same time. He kicked and struggled, trying to pull the hand away from his neck and finding that he might have bent the bars of one of the cells with his hands more easily. He couldn't breathe at all, couldn't make a sound. The demon took him to the stone wall directly across from the cell (to the rows of manacles,

why is he taking me to the manacles?) and released his throat just as the world was beginning to turn gray and his pulse was threatening to explode out the sides of his skull.

Marcue vomited and gasped in air, choking, his throat on fire, and the demon laughed. It grabbed one wrist and locked it into a manacle, then caught the other one. "You couldn't have saved her, but you might have gotten all three of us into the cell." The demon smiled at him (horrible smile) and added, "But you think too loudly, and with your whole body. Not a good survival trait, that."

Marcue became dimly aware that the girl was screaming. He looked past the demon to see her held between Crispin and Andrew. She was staring at him. Screaming for him.

The monster fitted his other wrist into the manacle, closed it. Locked it. Smiled at him.

Terrible, terrible teeth.

Terrible.

The girl, screaming, "Let him go! Let him go!"

"We were just going to take her up to our quarters," Crispin said from inside the cell. "Just going to go on our way and leave you to your job. But, naughty lad, you let yourself think of a prisoner as something besides a prisoner, and you are going to have to pay for that."

"I don't think," the demon said, "that he should leave life without at least a little entertainment, though. Do you, Crispin?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Killing him slowly," the demon said. "Letting him watch us with the girl as he dies. So that at least he dies amused."

Andrew giggled. "Do it," he said. "Do it."

The demon turned to face Marcue and said quietly, "A voice speaks to each of us in the still silent places—a voice that tells us to stand, to have courage, to do what is right." He smiled. "And if we're very, very clever, we hunt down the source of that voice, and kill it."

He dragged one dagger-tipped finger down Marcue's gut, and the fabric of his tunic fell away, and the link mail under it rattled. The demon clicked his tongue, and ripped the link mail in half from top to bottom. Sliced away the padded quilt shirt underneath. Exposed the bare skin of Marcue's chest and belly.

"Such smooth skin," he said. "Mine looked like that once. Enough so that I think I would have had to kill you anyway. I miss my old self."

"Don't," Marcue said. "Don't hurt me. I didn't do anything."

"You wanted to. Wanting to was enough."

"You don't know that. You can't know what a man thinks."

"I can. I do."

"Let me go."

"We're going to let you watch. The mating of Wolves—not a sight many men have ever seen." The demon laughed, and dragged its claw down his belly a final time.

white

red

pain agony pain

terror and blood and stink and

the incredible noise of screaming someone screaming inside his head and he wanted it to stop he called to the pain to kill him and it didn't

the weight of something hot and slick and stinking sliding away from him, landing on his feet

faintness, but faintness that abandoned him at the last instant and left him to the cruel ministrations of the waking world

he kept on living

and a voice that cut through his screaming like that claw had cut through his belly, and silenced him.

"We can do much, much more to you without killing you outright," Crispin Sabir said. "So unless you want us to prove that, shut your mouth and watch. We're doing this for your benefit."

Marcue opened his eyes. He didn't look down. He knew what he would see there, and he couldn't look. Couldn't. He couldn't keep his eyes from the scene in front of him, either. His supply of courage was gone. He hung in the shackles, his back against the wall and watched, wishing he could die quickly, wishing he could die right away. He watched the demon and the two men who were no better than demons, and he tried not to look at the girl. He tried not to hear her. Because he lived to know that they had killed him, that he was a breathing dead man, and that was terrible.

Terrible.

But the things they did to her were worse.

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