

Diplomacy of Wolves: Chapter 1

By Holly Lisle

Men forge swords of steel and fire;
gods forge swords of flesh and blood and tragedy.

Vincalis the Agitator
from *The Last Hero of Maestwauld*

For more than a thousand years, the Mirror of Souls waited for the return of magic that would awaken it and allow it to finish its work. It waited in a closed-off room on the side of a hill in a long-forgotten city, its existence forgotten on a continent where men had been replaced by the monsters spawned of a hellish war. It slept, oblivious to the passage of time, oblivious to the change that went on all around it, oblivious to the destruction of an old order and to the chaos that followed, and to the new world that rose on the ashes of the old. For more than a thousand years, the Mirror had waited in vain. Now, though, it glowed softly, as the faint currents of distant magic began to wash against it, and within the shimmering depths of its central well, shadows stirred. That far-off spellcasting—still too weak to rouse the lost Artifact to wakefulness—sufficed to permit it to dream.

Within the reborn stream of magical energy, the Mirror began to dream of the past that remained its present. It dreamed of the ghosts of the great men and women held within its memory. It dreamed of a world lost and forgotten, of wonders no longer imaginable, of secrets buried in the rubble of a world that no longer existed. It dreamed of the task that it had left undone for a thousand years.

Undone. But not forgotten.

The Mirror yearned to waken, and to complete the task for which it had been created.

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“Your job will be to keep her away from the men, Kait. Just until after the wedding. You know how Tippa is—and with the Sabirs getting a firm foothold into the Kairn territories, we need this alliance.”

She had acknowledged her cousin’s fascination with all things male, and the senior diplomat had smiled at her and patted her shoulder. “This is your chance to prove yourself,” he’d said. “Do well here, and the Family will place you in a regular diplomatic position. You’ll have other assignments.”

He hadn’t said, Fail and you’ll go back to your life as a decoration in Galweigh House. He hadn’t needed to. That was a given.

She would be secondary, of course. Tippa would have professional chaperones from the Galweigh Family, and others from the Dokteerak Family; Kait would be a “companion,” as far as anyone outside the Galweigh diplomatic corps knew. She would act as a failsafe, nothing more, and while her chances of failing were slim, her chances of winning any recognition for competent performance—and with that recognition, a chance at a real diplomatic job—were even slimmer.

But this was her beginning. Her opportunity to serve her Family, and perhaps to win a place in the diplomatic corps. This was the opportunity she’d thought she would never—could never—have. Under no circumstances would she allow herself to fail, or even to consider failure. Though she stood in the breezeway with her head aching and her eyes throbbing, her pain meant nothing; the fact that her skin crawled and her gut insisted that something evil lurked in the party meant only that she needed to focus her attention, that she needed to work harder. She had her assignment and her chance. She would

make it count.

So Kait Galweigh stood off in one corner at the Dokteerak Naming Day party and scanned the crowd while she pretended to sip a drink. The Dokteerak Family women in their gauzy net finery clustered beneath the broad palms in the central garden, chatting about nothing of consequence. Torchlight cast an amber gleam on their sleek skins and pale hair and made the heavy gold at their throats and wrists seem to glow. They were decorative—Kait's Family had such women, too, and theirs was the fate she so desperately wished to escape. The senior diplomats from both Families, Galweigh and Dokteerak, gathered in the breezeway that surrounded the courtyard, leaning along the food-laden tables, nibbling from finger servings of yearling duck and broiled monkey and wild pig and papaya-stuffed python, telling each other amusing stories and watching, watching, their eyes never still. Concubines flirted and primped, tempting their way into berths in the beds of the high-ranking or the beautiful. Dokteerak guardsmen in gold and blue propped themselves against doorways, swapping racy stories and tales of bravado with Galweigh guardsmen in red and black. Outland princes and the parats of other Families and their cadet branches drifted from group to group, assessing available women the way hunting wolves assessed a herd of deer.

In the salon beside the breezeway, dancing couples moved in and out of Kait's view. Tippa and her future father-in-law stamped and swirled among them, performing one of the traditional bride's dances, with, perhaps, a bit more than necessary enthusiasm. Kait watched the older man and wondered if the Dokteerak paraglese would be a threat to his future daughter-in-law's virtue. If he would, he wouldn't be a threat on the dance floor in front of his son and subjects, but Kait wondered at the wisdom of an alliance with a man who eyed his son's future wife with such blatant lust.

Both Tippa's Galweigh chaperone and her Dokteerak one watching

from the sidelines, and Calmet Dokteerak, the future bridegroom, danced with a series of gaudily-dressed paratas. Things there remained under control.

The people she needed to watch were the parats. Like the one approaching her at that moment.

“Beautiful parata,” he said, “please dance with me and be my flower of the evening. You are so beautiful, I cannot continue to breathe unless my air has first been kissed by you.”

Kait had heard variations on the same line half a dozen times already. As the night wore on, the protestations would become more passionate and more vehement. Also, she mused, more desperate. The concubines flocked to the older men and women—those with wealth and power, who could be expected to give fine gifts or even offer permanent positions in their Houses. The younger men, who had less to offer, could only seduce others among the partygoers if they hoped to round out their night with sexual amusements. Kait, young, unmarried, and acceptably attractive, had come in for a complete range of attempted seductions, and her patience began to wear thin.

“You’ll have to find another flower,” she said. “I’m afraid I’ve promised myself that I would bloom alone tonight.” She didn’t even waste time on a smile. The parat, who wore the silk of one of the lesser branches of the Dokteerak House, blanched and nodded stiffly and walked away, the anger evident in his stride and the set of his shoulders. He hadn’t been the sort who would interest her cousin Tippa, but there were plenty of others roaming the party who were.

Kait discovered that while the parat had distracted her, Tippa had moved out of view. Kait stepped closer to the arches, and almost tripped over the Dokteerak head artist, Kastos Miellen, who was demonstrating the workings of a charming mechanical playhouse to a pair of admiring Galweigh women. Kait apologized, backed away, and caught sight of Tippa, now

dancing with her future husband.

She relaxed, almost amused by her paranoia. From a quiet place under the arches, she alternately watched the artist's tiny mechanical men and women moving across the miniature stage, and her cousin spinning and leaping on the crowded dance floor.

A plump hand settled on her shoulder and she jumped. She turned to the sun-browned, grinning man who'd come up behind her, and for an instant didn't recognize him. His scent tipped her off before she placed his face.

"Uncle Dghall?"

"My Kait-cha. You haven't forgotten me."

"It is you!" She hugged him hard, and laughing a little at her own confusion, stepped back to look at him. "You've changed."

He smiled. "Age and women, Kait. Age and women—the first gives you wrinkles and the second makes you fat. Whereas you are more beautiful than ever."

"So I've been told," Kait murmured.

"I'm sure you have. The lads are out in droves tonight. But you're still alone. Haven't found one you fancy yet?"

Kait lowered her voice. "Can't even look. I'm working." She grinned then—her uncle was the reason she had any diplomatic assignment at all, however minor it might be. He had recommended her do the diplomatic services when she turned thirteen, and had insisted she be trained by the best teachers in the best classes, and had shipped her final tutors to Calimekka from his post on the Imumbarra Isles himself.

He gave her shoulder a quick squeeze and leaned in close enough to whisper in her ear, "Then you have an assignment."

“Minor,” she said. “But important to me.” She glanced in to be sure that Tippa was still behaving herself, then turned to her uncle. “What are you doing here? I thought you couldn’t get away from the islands for this that some holiday interfered.” She tried to remember the name of the holiday her mother had mentioned when reading Dghall’s letter to her, but failed.

“There are advantages to being considered a minor deity back home. I changed the date of the holiday, boarded a fast ship, and here I am.”

She hugged him again, and started to effuse about how happy she was to see him. But Kastos Miellen’s miniature had caught his attention.

“Impressive toy, isn’t it?” he asked her, nodding at the mechanical stage.

“Ingenious. And everyone seems to like it.”

He held up a finger, the way he always had when he was about to impart some tidbit of wisdom. “Dokteerak hasn’t forgotten the immortal advice of Vincalis.”

Kait raised an eyebrow.

Her uncle grinned at her. “All your studies of diplomacy and you haven’t read Vincalis the Agitator yet? That’s criminal.”

“I don’t think I’ve even heard of Vincalis,” Kait admitted, hoping that he was one of Dghall’s island diplomats, or someone obscure, so that she might have an excuse for not knowing his works.

“One of the Ancients. A troublemaker of the first water, by all accounts, which is probably why you haven’t read him. I hear you have some talents in the direction of trouble yourself.” Dghall didn’t look at her when he spoke—he squinted instead at the artist and his mechanical marvel. He said, “Vincalis said, and I quote, ‘To the man of wealth who would

be great, remember this—an artist is a better investment than a diplomat for three reasons: first, an artist, once bought, stays bought; second, you screw the artist instead of the other way round; and third, if you should find it essential to permanently dispose of your artist, the value of his works will increase, which no one will say of a diplomat.'” He paused for just an instant, so that he could be sure she had chance to let the words sink in, then guffawed.

Kait laughed with him, but even to her own ears her laughter sounded nervous.

Dghall studied her face and his smile grew mischievous. “I believe I’ve shocked you.”

“At first, I suppose. But Vincalis wasn’t serious, was he?”

Dghall shrugged. “My dear, in the best humor lies the deepest truth, and Vincalis is as true now as he was more than a thousand years ago.” He smiled at her, and then stiffened as his gaze moved past her and fixed on something in the courtyard. Suddenly he was as intent as a jaguar who’d spotted a fawn. The expression vanished as quickly as it had appeared, so quickly that Kait couldn’t begin to guess what had caught his eye, but when he returned his attention to her again, his smile was apologetic. “And now, sadly, I must move on. I see an old friend out in the courtyard, and if I don’t hurry, she’s sure to vanish.”

And before she could even give him another hug, or tell him how glad she was to see him, he was gone.

She glanced into the salon to check on Tippa. She didn’t see either of the chaperones. Tippa’s future father-in-law had vanished. Her future husband stood in the center of a circle of admiring women, none of whom was Tippa.

Tippa...

Kait felt her stomach knot. This was her chance to prove she could serve the Family's interests, and Tippa was nowhere in the salon.

Kait looked around the breezeway and out into the courtyard, and a cluster of men parted, and revealed Tippa spinning in a circle on the arm of a tall, handsome young outlander dressed in Gyru-nalle finery, while two others, similarly dressed, looked on.

The couple stopped spinning and Tippa flung herself down onto a seat beside a fountain in one shadowed corner of the courtyard. Her companion said something too softly for Kait to catch over the crowd noise, and Tippa squealed with laughter. She took a tall goblet from one of the men who'd been watching her impromptu dance with his associate, and swallowed the contents in two hard pulls. As some point she had opened the outer blouse of her silk dress and pulled it back, revealing the filmy silk underblouse, which was tugged so low that Kait could see a new-moon sliver of one rouged nipple peeking over the scalloped hem. Very stylish but not appropriate for a woman who was to marry within the week. Tippa's hair had come loose from its netting and hung around her face in wild tendrils. Her eyes were too bright and her laugh too loud. All three men clustered around her as if she were one of the party concubines, and not the bride-to-be of Branard Dokteerak's second son, Calmet.

And that would be an incident, wouldn't it? The drunken bride-to-be and three Gyru "princes" caught together in some back room or stable stall a week before the wedding? Kait set her goblet on a marble rail and pushed through the crowd, abruptly and totally furious.

She caught her cousin just as the girl had begun to run her fingers along the lacings of the tallest man's shirt. "Isn't he lovely?" Tippa asked as Kait's hand clamped around her wrist, and the man, who didn't look in the least drunk, said,

“Unless you want to join our party, little parata, just move on. But don’t be spoiling our fun.”

The anger that was always in her, anger that sought to break free from the tight chains of self-control with which she bound it, slipped toward the surface. She turned from the Gyrus with difficulty. “Tippa, we have to leave early. The Naming news from Calimekka will be arriving soon, and we need to be there for our devotions. The carriage is waiting.”

It was a lie, but it was at least a plausible lie.

Tippa, oblivious to the scene she was about to cause, leaned forward further, and whispered in Kait’s ear loudly enough that Kait, the Gyrus, and probably most of the guests could hear, “Then go back without me, Kait. I’m having a good a good time, and I’ve made some some nice friends. Aren’t they cute?” Her smile when she leaned back spoke of too much wine as loudly as her whisper. “They’re Prince Mira—... um, Ersti, and Prince Keera... er, Meerki, and Prince... Prince... I can’t remember. Ah, Prince Latti.” She smiled hazily. “Right?”

“I’m sure they are,” Kait growled. “But you will have to visit with these... royals... another time.” How could Tippa have gotten so drunk? The chaperones should have prevented that. And where were they, anyway? She hated sloppiness, but this suggested more to her than that.

And a prince’s hand suddenly gripping her shoulder, too rough and insistent to be mistaken for anything but a threat, screamed to her that the incident had been planned. Somewhere. By someone. The man said, “Leave her alone. We’re having a good time. Just go back to your Family, where you belong, girl.” He spit out the word “Family” as if it meant “garbage.”

Kait’s anger broke half of its chains, and she twisted out of the man’s grip and turned to face him, and her fury (or am I slipping have I lost control?) sent him a step back wearing shock on his pale freckled face. “Don’t press me,” she said,

so softly that only the three Gyrus could hear her. She heard in her voice the dark timbre of that second self that begged to be set free. Her skin grew hot; it tingled over muscles that longed to shift and slip, over bones that yearned for violent force and violent change. She stood fast, permitting no flash of teeth, no growl, no tensing of muscle. She forced her anger to whisper, knowing that she dared not let it shout.

She stared, and all three Gyrus glared back at her. She felt the growl starting in the back of her throat, and the last of the chains weakened. But the men saw something in her, something that warned them. All three backed away.

Furious, Kait turned on her cousin. She pulled Tippa's outer blouse closed, then grabbed her wrist and yanked her to her feet.

"But I don't want " Tippa started to say, but stopped herself when the edge of Kait's anger seeped through the wine haze. Her eyes went round and her mouth clamped shut. She followed, unprotesting, as Kait pulled her toward the breezeway that led into the House, and eventually toward the grounds where the carriages waited.

Kait glanced back to be sure the Gyrus weren't following them. She didn't want to cause an incident; wanted no one dead, no difficult questions, not now when she was finally, finally on her own and working as a productive member of the Family. The three of them were huddled together, faces flushed and tight with anger. She tried to listen to what they were saying while still moving toward the door, and she told herself that was the reason she ran right into the short young man who stood near the archway. She hit him hard, but she was the one who staggered back—he was solid as a tree, and seemed to be as thoroughly rooted to the earth. She caught her balance; Tippa wasn't so fortunate. She tripped and went down. Both Kait and the stranger moved to help her. Kait took Tippa's arm but the man planted one hand on either side of Tippa's waist and

lifted her to her feet. "I'm so sorry," he said, loudly enough that anyone who had seen the girl go down could hear him. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Kait started to smile at him, appreciative that he'd made an attempt to cover her cousin's drunkenness to preserve her reputation, when she became aware of something noticeable only by its absence.

The ache in her head and behind her eyeballs was gone. The crawling sensation of her skin was gone. More, the pervasive sense of stalking evil that Kait had felt all night had been lifted and removed, like someone pulling a heavy counterpane off a bed. She felt better. Safer. Her volatile emotions, fed by the aura of danger that had surrounded her, calmed. She took a slow breath, and smiled at the man, and had the presence of mind to thank him for helping her cousin.

"Think nothing of it," he said. He had a pleasant voice. A nondescript face, an ordinary smile, kind eyes; when Kait turned away from him, she was halfway to forgetting him already.

Then, three or four strides away from the place where she'd run into him, with Tippa dragging along in her wake, Kait felt the full brunt of crawling nighttime evil drop onto her shoulders again. The headache grabbed her; her skin prickled and she shuddered involuntarily, and she gasped from the pain. She wasn't prepared. Not prepared at all. The change caught her in the gut like the kick of a streetfighter, and for just an instant she almost couldn't think.

Her first thought when she could breathe again was that the helpful stranger was the cause of the aura of evil that filled the night. Her second and more logical thought was that he was somehow immune to it—or somehow protected from it. She stopped, turned slowly, and stared at him. He looked back at her, and she could no longer understand why she'd thought him

nondescript. She could still see that outer shell of inoffensiveness, but underneath she could see a man as complicated and fascinating as that mechanical marvel the Dokterak artist had unveiled for the Naming Day party. Her expression told him something he didn't like, for the 'I'm no one of consequence' smile gave way to an expression of fear in his eyes, and a look of understanding that unnerved her. The fact that she had looked twice at him told him something about her. He knew. She didn't know what he knew, but she had to find out. If her secrets got out, they would kill her.

"Who are you?" she asked.

His eyes tracked from one corner of the courtyard to the other. "No one of importance. Just a guest."

"Tell me. I'll find out one way or another." She didn't mean for that remark to sound like a threat, but the second the words were out of her mouth, she knew it did.

"You probably will."

She moved back toward him, and seemed to step through a wall when she did. On the outside, her nerves screamed that something terrible waited to attack. Inside, the evil vanished as if it had never been. "How do you do that?" She kept her voice low; she sensed that, whatever his secret was, it probably wasn't one that he wanted bruited about to the world.

That weak smile again, and eyes that darted left, right, left, checking to see if anyone was listening. Or watching. He said nothing.

She had to know. She said, "The wall around you. The one that keeps out the foulness of this place. How do you do it?"

His face went slack with fear then. A man with a knife held to his throat by a madman could not have looked more frightened. "Not here," he said. "By all the gods, not here."

"Your name, then. And where I can find you." She narrowed her eyes. "Don't lie to me. I can smell lies."

He nodded. "I have a shop in the west quarter. Hasmal's Curiosities. It's near the wall, on Stonecutter Street."

"You're Hasmal?"

"The Third. I work for my father."

Sons of shopkeepers rarely found themselves invited into the Houses of the Five Families. And if they did, they would be there as workers, not guests. Yet Hasmal the son of Hasmal, sipping at his wine, dressed in his Naming Day finery, certainly looked like a guest.

She tightened her grip on Tippa's wrist and said, "I'll be by to talk with you tomorrow. Then she turned, braced herself against the malevolent night, stepped out of his circle of sanctuary, and dragged Tippa out of the courtyard.

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The Paraglese of Dokteerak House, Branard Dokteerak, balanced the tip of his dagger on the corner of his desk. With his index finger pressing against the emerald in the pommel, he rocked it slowly back and forth, gouging a tiny scar into the wood. Across from him, standing next to the chairs because Branard had not bidden him sit, the Sabir messenger stared at the rocking knife as if he were a chick in its nest watching the approaching snake. The paraglese was aware of the Sabir's attention. He kept his own eyes fixed on the tiny chips of wood that he worked loose from the desk. He was waiting for the messenger to fidget, or sigh, or in any way express his impatience, but the man had been well trained. He gave away nothing. At last, Dokteerak, still watching his knife rocking back and forth, said, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

The messenger said, "My Family sends off the troops you

requested; they will depart at the first light of dawn tomorrow, and the pigeon must have time to reach them if you have any last message you will send. They require any final information that you can give—anything that has happened that might change the number of troops required, or the route they must take, or the necessary supplies.”

The paraglese, disgusted, said, “Anything that might change the number of troops required, eh? Well, what about this, then? My house is full to the rafters with Galweighs getting ready to celebrate the marriage of their damned daughter to my son. As host of this farce, my place is out there with them, acting the part of doting father and eager ally. Instead I’m in here with you, and you cannot think for a moment that one of their number hasn’t noticed that. Further, if you’re seen here and recognized, all our work will be for nothing. They’ll call off the wedding, get their people back to Calimekka, and go on the defensive. If they do that, neither your people nor my people nor the rest of the countryside combined will route them out of that House of theirs, and we will lose this fine opportunity—which the senior members of your Family and I have been planning for three years—to take it. Your presence here, and your demand for my presence here, could be the tiny breeze that topples our tower down upon us.”

The Sabir envoy spread his hands wide. “My people required a final reassurance. My paraglese asks me to remind you that we risk more than you do, Paraglese Dokteerak—if we fail at this, retaliation against us will be easier for the Galweighs than retaliation against you. You don’t share Calimekka with them, whereas our House lies inside the same walls as theirs.”

“Indeed. But when this is over, we will share the city with you, and I ask you to remind Grasmir that he and I will get along better if I haven’t lost the best of my fighters and my sons needlessly, through his carelessness or his impatience or his pointless worrying.” He felt his anger getting the better of him. He shoved harder on the knife, and it dug itself

deeply into the wood—he allowed himself no other display of temper. “Nothing has changed. Nothing. Now leave before you give us all away.”

The envoy bowed gracefully, and said, “Enjoy your party, Paraglese.”

And then he was gone.

The paraglese sat staring at the closed door for a moment, and wondered if that hint of irony he heard in the Sabir envoy’s last words was in the envoy’s voice, or in his own mind.

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