

The Ivory Maiden

by Esther Davis

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Lyrics from "I Heard Bells on Christmas Day" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.



*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

“You will not change my answer.”

“Why?”

Morgan turned toward the ceiling-high window, letting her red hair fall like a fiery wall between her and her sister. “I do what’s best for the city.”

“You can’t stop the townsfolk, you know,” Glenda said. “Barring her from the city means nothing. We’ll seek out the Ivory Maiden and present our wishes.”

“We?”

“Yes, Colwyn and I, and anyone else who wishes to join.”

Morgan kept her back turned, her gaze on the snow-coated courtyard outside. Frost crystals obscured the view, as if the horse drawn sleighs and ice coated Ever-Bearing Tree belonged on some moth-eaten tapestry. “I’ll have you arrested.”

“And break your nephew’s heart?” Glenda demanded.

“Better to crush his dreams while he’s young, before they’ve had time to embed themselves. This selfish wish-asking needs to end.” The words came out numb, as if they’d sat in the chilly air all morning before marching through Morgan’s mouth.

“Selfish? He’s asking the Maiden to heal his sick kitten!”

Morgan didn’t reply. Her lips felt heavy, frozen shut. Silence drafted through the room, its stillness broken only by the ticking of the grandfather clock. When she spoke, her voice seemed too loud, echoing off the vaulted ceiling. “The royal ambassador comes tomorrow. If we are to gain the king’s favor, his representative is to hear nothing of the Maiden or this wish making.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you better keep your visit to the witch silent enough that I have no grounds to order your arrest.”

Morgan felt her sister’s gaze laying siege on the fiery wall of hair flowing down her back. She needn’t look to see the vast room separating her and Glenda nor the oaken desk barricading them from one another.

“Ever since you took father’s place...” Glenda’s voice drifted off. The doorknob turned—groaning. “I don’t recognize you anymore.”

Morgan watched the fluttering snowfall long after the study door thudded shut. Through the window she watched Glenda, wrapped in a thick overcoat, exit the manor into the snowy courtyard. Colwyn, Glenda’s seven-year-old son, clung to her arm, trotting to keep up with his mother’s stride. He looked upward, saying something to his mother. Glenda shook her head.

Glenda handed money to a sleigh driver, then she and Colwyn boarded and disappear into the clutter of huts and brick-built businesses beyond the manor’s outer hedge.

A militiaman entered the room. “You called for a horse rider, ma’am?”

“Follow my sister’s sleigh from afar,” Morgan said. “Don’t let her spot you, and tell no one what you see. No arrests are to be made. Just keep her safe from the bandits, and send a messenger to me once they’ve returned safely home.”



Throughout the day, a steady stream of advisors visited her study—reports of preparations for the ambassador’s arrival, the Winter Festival, and the parade. A scrawny boy wearing an oversized coat with more holes than buttons delivered a bouquet of flowers for the royal visitor’s suite and a small, freshly stocked vase for Morgan’s desk.

Morgan couldn't focus on any of it, not until the militiaman announced Glenda's safe return.

The militiaman never came.

Sunset neared. A glint of sunlight caught the tip of her quill, found its way to the edge of her desk, and fell to the floor. It traveled to the portrait of her father—the late Mervyn Maddox, Duke of Caerwyn—that hung on the far wall. His dark hair lay flat on the canvas. His blue eyes, mirror images of Colwyn's, stared into nothingness.

Father had loved the Ivory Maiden, visited her every year—always scheming up his next wish.

Little good it did him.

Morgan stood, shoved the chair beneath the desk, and straightened out the few papers scattered across the tabletop. She paused at the vase a moment to finger the violet petals of an anemone—delicate, fleshy silk. The flower that had come from the royal greenhouse—a structure that her child-self wished from the Ivory Maiden so long ago.

Morgan pushed her thoughts of the Maiden aside. Time to retire for the night.

Before she could reach the doorknob, the door flung itself open.

“Madam!” A militiaman stood in the hallway, tufts of fur poking out of the collar of his bulging overcoat. He saluted with one hand. The other he placed on his sword—a weapon that had served Caerwyn's militia well. That is, until the bandits got rifles.

“The marshal requests your presence.”

A draft entered the room. Morgan pulled her cardigan tighter around her shoulders. “After sunset? The day's ended.”

The man's already scarlet cheeks brightened. “Yes, ma'am. He said it was urgent.”

Morgan scowled. “I suppose it is cold out?”

“Quite brisk, ma'am.”

“Fetch me a coat and make it quick.”

Morgan followed the militiaman down the hallway and to the grand staircase of the manor. With night fallen, the sentries had illuminated the Dai Crystals mounted beside the double doorway. Father had asked the Dai Crystals as a gift from the Maiden nearly two decades ago.

The guards cracked the manor door just enough for the two to exit. Stinging air burst in. Morgan pulled her scarf tighter, welcoming the protection even though the itchy wool irritated her face.

In the courtyard, blanketed in a thick layer of snow, stood the Ever-Bearing Tree—red, scaly fruit hanging from its branches. Another of the Maiden’s gifts.

Father used to leave the manor gate open from dawn ‘til dusk so the poorer citizens could harvest the fruit. As children, Morgan and Glenda had spent many evenings beneath the Ever-Bearing Tree, licking out the sweet juices from the last remaining fruit. Yet the next morning, the boughs were so heavily laden that they threatened to snap.

With tension rising among the townsfolk and the bandits’ presence growing in the surrounding forest, Morgan couldn’t risk leaving the gate open anymore. Instead, she filled the courtyard with guards the last day of that week and let the common folk enter in small groups to harvest whatever they could scrounge from the tree.

The short walk to the guardhouse left Morgan’s fingers feeling numb from cold. The marshal, a man with a straight nose and round cheeks, saluted as she entered. “Ma’am, we have a question regarding an arrest.”

Morgan rubbed her gloved hands together. Though the guardhouse protected from the wind, it offered little extra warmth. “Have I not given you jurisdiction to arrest any who seem a threat?”

“Sorry, ma’am. I meant to say we have a question regarding a release.”

“We? Is there a council involved?”

The marshal stood a little straight. It didn’t counter the cowering tone of his voice. “Apologies. *I* have a question.”

“Then ask it.”

The marshal’s neck contracted uncomfortably, as if he were trying not to choke on his own tongue. He unlatched the door to the jail room. “This way, ma’am.

Several jail cells lined the small room. A single, dangling Dai Crystal offered light from the ceiling. A huddle of figures sat at the edge of its light.

At first, Morgan saw only the woman—her hair, long and dark, just like Glenda’s. Morgan’s breath caught in her throat until she realized it wasn’t her sister.

A husband, wife, and four small children sat on chairs just outside an unlocked cell. Dirt smeared their faces, holes riddled their shoes and mothwing-thin clothing. Yet each child wore an unsoiled, thick woolen coat and hats made from some foreign creature’s pelt. The youngest boy held a beautifully carved horse. When he noticed Morgan, he shoved it inside his coat.

“They’ve been shivering in here since this morning, and I was hoping we could pardon them,” the marshal said. “In the spirit of the Winter Festival.”

“They seem rather warm in their *new* coats,” Morgan remarked.

“Christmas is only two days away, ma’am.”

Morgan studied the family—their bony faces, the boys’ dark tufts of hair poking from their hats. “I see only two reasons why such a lovely family would be here. Both, sadly, unpardonable.” Each child looked to the ground, refusing to make eye contact. Except for the little boy who’d hidden his horse.

Morgan crouched until her face met his. “Did you steal that horse?” she asked.

“No, the Maiden gived it to me.”

“Arthur!” his mother hissed.

“And what about that fancy new coat and cap of yours?”

The boy looked away, refusing to answer Morgan. His whole frame trembled.

Morgan stood. “As I said, both unpardonable.”

The marshal stopped her at the door. “But ma’am! The Festival—It’s almost Christmas.”

“Do you care about the safety of the city? With the Festival comes the royal ambassador, who must not be disappointed. After Christmas, they can have a hearing with a judge to decide their fate.”

Morgan returned to a silent manor unaccompanied. Two militiamen stood sentry at the locked gate, their breath rising in wispy clouds. One of the guards slid aside the frostbitten bar that held the gate shut—metal grating across ice.

Morgan strolled past the Every-Bearing Tree atop the courtyard’s packed snow. The gate creaked closed behind her, leaving her to enter the manor alone.

In her bedroom, Morgan stoked the fireplace and hung a kettle above the flames. She didn’t bother with illuminating a Dai Crystal, but instead opted to sit on a cushioned stool, huddled inside a bearskin blanket beside the hearth. The carpet covered floors and tapestry hung walls—a luxury few had in Caerwyn—would hold in the coals’ heat. Once the cold air stopped biting Morgan’s face, she’d crawl into bed. Then she could sleep.

If she could take her worries off Glenda.

How could Glenda be so careless? An illegal journey through a bandit-infested forest? If the guards had caught her, even with her no-arrest order to the militiaman, Morgan would have had no choice but to lock her and Colwyn up. And on the last days of the Winter Festival, too!

Why couldn’t her sister let the Ivory Maiden nonsense go?

The kettle’s faint hiss broke into a whistle. Using a knitted glove, Morgan poured the hot water over a mug of dried fruit. She set the kettle on the stone beside her fireplace and

settled back on her stool, mug cupped between her hands, watching the dried fruit bob atop the water and soak in the moisture.

Morgan sipped at the mug, waiting for the room to warm. But with every passing minute, the air seemed colder. Her face stung with the chill. Her fingers, despite the hot mug clutched between them, felt numb. Her foggy breath mingled with the mug's steam.

Had a maid left the shutters cracked? Morgan set the mug beside the kettle and stepped toward the window on the shadowed edge of the room. The metal latch held the shutters tight. The lock hadn't moved recently, judging by the layer of ice coating it.

She stared a moment, thinking for an insane instant that she could actually see the ice growing, thickening, inching towards the wood that the screws clung too.

Morgan turned back towards the fire.

The fire glowed green.

The emerald fire snapped, sending up icy blue sparks. A bitter cold filled the air, seeping through even the bearskin blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

Groaning from behind made Morgan spin on her heels toward the window. A swirling lace of ice coated the shutters. It crept outward, spreading from the shutters to the walls, crawling behind the tapestries and then blooming on the corners of the draping fabric.

"Begone!" Morgan shouted. "Witch or demon or whoever you maybe, begone!" She pulled the blanket closer, trying to fight off the cold. Instead icy shards, covering the inside of the blanket, pricked her skin. Her very blood felt as if it were turning to ice.

"Cease!" Morgan ordered. Her voice scratch through her stinging throat, hardly loud enough for her own ears to hear. She fell to her knees, landing in a carpet of snow.

"Stop!"

The air swirled with snow. Morgan's vision became nothing but white.

"Please," she whispered.

The blizzard fell silent. Sunlight glared off the snowy ground. Morgan squinted at landscape. She knelt in a forest clearing, surrounded by frosted spruce and pines. A stump poked out of the snow beside her, the top jagged, as if some careless giant-child had ripped the tree from its base to add to a bouquet of conifers. Puffs of snow sat in its pockets of rough bark.

Her blanket had vanished, leaving nothing but her nightgown to fend off the cold. Yet the air no longer held a deathly chill. Just enough cold to keep her alert, but not to sting.

A voice drifted through the clearing, almost too quiet to hear. "Morgan."

She stood and spun a slow circle, searching the border of trees for the speaker. No one called her by her given name. She was Lady Maddox, the Duchess of Caerwyn—unless...

“Glenda?” Panic flooded her blood. Morgan took a step forward, but the ragged stump caught the edge of her nightgown and jerked her back.

“Morgan, what have you done with my city?”

No, not Glenda. She recognized the voice rumbling through the clearing. She’d almost forgotten what it sounded like without the constant wheezing. “Father?”

Father’s voice came again, louder, stronger. “Morgan, what have you done with my city?”

“Father! Where are you?” Oh, how she longed to wrap her arms around him again, to look into his eyes, to see his face.

Again, his voice sounded, this time a boom, echoing through the clearing like a herald’s trump. “What have you done to my city?”

Morgan fell back, snow crunching beneath her as she landed beside the stump.

“I’ve taken care of it—good care,” Morgan stuttered. “Just as you asked.”

“What have you done to my city?”

“I’ve protected it. The king’s ambassador comes tomorrow. I—”

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY CITY?”

The air spun, abrasive snowflakes battering Morgan’s face. She threw hands to her ears to block out the deafening winds. Her own screams joined the elemental barrage.

In the blizzard, a single figure appeared. The Ivory Maiden, draped in a white, silken robe, stood before her.

Hatred—pure, simple hatred blazed in Morgan’s heart.

Morgan stared at the monster, other emotions fighting their way to the surface—childhood memories of anticipation and joy. From a time before she tasted betrayal.

“Morgan Maddox, may I grant you a wish?”

If she had a spear or dagger, she would have thrown it, right through the Maiden’s wretched heart. But Morgan had only words, so she tossed each with force, aimed to kill. “I wish nothing but that you leave. Take your witchcraft from Caerwyn and never return.”

The Maiden gave no response. If it weren’t for her robe’s long folds of fabric whipping in the blizzard, Morgan would have thought her a statute.

“Do you not hear me, Wish Giver? I banish you from my city!”

The blizzard intensified, obscuring her view of even the Maiden.

“Very well, Morgan Maddox. By Christmas morn, your wish shall be granted.”



Morgan gasped, sucking in warm air. She lay on carpet, beneath her bearskin blanket. Her mug and kettle still sat beside the dying coals.

A dream? No, not even nightmares threatened frostbite and freezing suffocation. It felt too real.

Morgan stayed on the carpet, her limbs trembling. Half-formed, unanswerable questions wrestled for attention in her mind until someone knocked.

“Your breakfast is ready, ma’am,” a maid called from outside the door. “And I’m supposed to tell you—somebody sent a messenger late last night saying Missus Glenda got back safe.”

The tension evaporated from Morgan’s clenched shoulders. Safe? Thank heavens.

Morgan stood and surprised herself with a laugh. She could handle meeting the ambassador today and sort out the strange dream later.

“Coming,” Morgan called.

“Coming.” The words came like an echo, her voice, yet half a moment too late.

The bed groaned behind her.

Morgan turned. She faced a perfect mirror image of herself. Same fiery hair, disheveled from sleep. Same green eyes squinting at the dim room. Same floor length nightgown.

“Who...?” Morgan began. Her mirror image didn’t react. It simply walked past her and toward the door.

“Wait!” Morgan called. The imposter didn’t answer. Morgan ran after her and grabbed her shoulder. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, but today of all days I will not—” Morgan cut short. Her hand, which had seemed to make contact with the imposter’s shoulder for a moment, fell through, feeling only air where flesh and bones should have been.

The imposter opened the door. A serving girl, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, entered with a glass of juice and an omelet atop a tray. If the girl noticed the second “duchess”, she didn’t react.

“Will you need anything else this morning, ma’am?” the girl asked. She looked at the second woman, not Morgan, as she spoke.

“Just have my dress ready after I bathe. The green one,” the woman said. Not only did she speak with Morgan’s voice, but she spoke the same words Morgan would have—if she weren’t too stunned to speak.

Morgan let herself fall to the fireside stool. She pressed a hand to her forehead where she could feel the blood pounding through a vein in her temple.

Invisible. She’d become invisible and replaced with—who?

Some magic. Some curse. What demon would do such a thing, and why?

Glenda.

Her sister never approved of Morgan’s ruling. But now it looked like she’d taken matters into her own hands.

Morgan’s fists clenched. The dead coals in the fireplace seemed to reignite themselves within her chest.

“Bring me my sister!” Morgan shouted for the whole manor to hear. She stormed from the room, leaving the stranger to eat her favorite breakfast, and grabbed the shirt of the first servant that passed her in the hall. “Bring me my sister!” she yelled into the elderly man’s face. The servant didn’t acknowledge her. He kept walking, his shirt slipping from Morgan’s grasp like mist.

Morgan’s fist fell limp at her side.

No one could see her. No one would hear.

The imposter ate Morgan’s breakfast, bathed in her tub. She wore Morgan’s shamrock green gown sewn with emeralds that she’d had prepared especially for the ambassador’s visit. Morgan tried dressing herself, but every piece of clothing phased through her fingers like wisps of fog. Not even her cosmetics or comb would stay solid long enough for her to lift them.

An hour before noon, while the imposter sat with regal poise behind Morgan’s desk, Morgan hunched in the corner of the room—still in her nightgown—with the bearskin blanket wrapped tight around her shoulders and her red hair puffed out in a royal, tangled mess.

After two sharp knocks, a militiaman stepped through the office door. “Announcing the Renowned Sir Driscoll, Fifth Heir to the Driscoll Manor, and Secondary Ambassador to The King.”

Secondary Ambassador? They were to arrange the delivery of firearms! For such an important deal Morgan had assumed the king would send someone a bit more... important.

“Mervyn Driscoll, His Highness’s Humble Servant, will do, thank you,” said a rather unappreciative voice.

Morgan started at his given name. Mervyn—the same as her father’s.

A man in dark robes laced with a glittering thread pushed his way past the militiaman. Royal guards followed behind. Sir Driscoll stared down a hawkish nose at the “duchess” seated behind the desk. Morgan’s replica smirked back.

Morgan couldn’t decide who looked more conceited.

“Miss Maddox, I presume.”

“Duchess. I have my own estate.”

Driscoll’s reddened cheeks didn’t come from the cold.

Royal representative or not, this man didn’t deserve to share her father’s name. Morgan would make this quick—take Driscoll on the prepared parade, secure the delivery of the firearms, and send the rat from her city. Within twelve hours, Caerwyn would be prepared to defend itself and would shelter one less swine.

Morgan stepped forward. “Shall we tour the city?” she asked, momentarily forgetting she stood in the corner, not behind the desk.

Despite the tangled hair, or the fact that only a bearskin blanket hid her nightgown from the king’s appointee, she silently begged he’d see her. Of all days, this was the one when the outcome mattered—not just for her, but for all the citizens of Caerwyn.

Driscoll didn’t even flinch.

“Shall we tour the city?” the imposter asked as she rose from Morgan’s chair.

“Of course. My pleasure,” Driscoll replied. He sounded prepared to eat a spoiled trout stew.

Glenda. Glenda had done this to her. Her own sister, preventing her from making the most important deal of Caerwyn’s history, all over a petty grudge.

Driscoll and the imposter left the room. Morgan hurried after them, bumping the sentry on the way. Morgan paused, waiting to for the sentry to acknowledge her. He gave no reaction, simply turned and followed the others out.

Glenda! Morgan would find the selfish brat before the day ended and make her break this wretched curse.

It turned out being invisible didn’t stop collisions from being painful. Morgan bumped into several servants as she chased after Sir Driscoll and her duplicate. Glenda lived on

the other side of town. Morgan offered a place in the manor, but Glenda had refused to leave her husband's home, even five years after his death. With the crowds bound to form from the parade, the only way to get to her sister's home would be to hitch a ride on the parade itself.

Once Morgan found her, would Glenda even see her? Hear her? Morgan didn't know, but there were no other options.

Morgan climbed into the sleigh's glass-covered compartment right before a servant shut the door. She pressed herself against the far wall, hunched over at an odd angle, while Driscoll and the imposter sat on the bench, as far from one another as possible. Sir Driscoll sat nearest Morgan, his crossed legs brushing her knees.

Morgan slid along the glass and pressed herself farther into the corner.

The courtyard gates swung wide. The driver flicked the reins to spur the horses forward. Cavalry trotted behind, their green and white banners held aloft.

Townfolk lined the streets. A few children clapped, but most onlookers watched quietly, there more out of obligation than choice. Or perhaps they only came to see the marching band and street jugglers that would trail behind the sleigh and military show.

If they could see their duchess, hunched over inside a glass box, parading before her citizens in nothing but a nightgown and blanket—Morgan couldn't stop the blood from rushing to her face.

Militiamen stomped to the drumbeat. Horse hooves crunched through the snow.

Driscoll adjusted, bringing his face closer to Morgan's and breathing garlic on her. She scooted along the wall to get away.

Morgan watched the crowd to distract herself. Every street they turned, Dai Crystal's were mounted on shop doors, a few left shining from the night before. A child cuddled close to her mother, a split Ever-Bearing fruit dripping juice at her feet. Mixed in with the winter clothing of rabbit-pelt and fox fur were hats and scarves of foreign make. Ask, and the wearer would claim it came as a present from a distant relative or a friend. They always did. But Morgan knew their origin.

The Ivory Maiden—that wretched Winter Witch.

“How quickly will the arms arrive,” Morgan's replica asked, as if she had the same thought and wanted to push it from her mind.

Driscoll raised his hand—decorated with gemmed rings fat as acorns—to wave at the onlookers. The gesture was so stiff that he may have just been blocking the glare of the sun. He nearly smacked Morgan's face in the process. “That depends on whether I approve Caerwyn to receive the shipment.”

Morgan and the imposter pursed their lips at the same moment. “What deems ‘approval?’”

“A city loyal to the king—not some other strange entity—for one. The governor also must be competent. Caerwyn has a history of neither.” Driscoll shifted, bringing his face uncomfortably close to Morgan’s again. She hoped he could smell her unwashed breath at least half as well as she could taste the garlic.

“I don’t know where you got such a notion from,” the imposter said.

Driscoll snorted. “Thirdly, the governess must be capable of training her militia in proper use of firearms. Have you ever held a rifle, Miss Maddox?” Even though he spoke to the woman seated beside him, Morgan felt each insult aimed at her.

“My marshal is more than capable with both the sword and bow.”

“Then I suppose he hasn’t handled a rifle before, either. Firearms are quite dangerous, Miss Maddox.”

The imposter gave no reply. Morgan, however, had a few choice words she wished she could share.

The parade looped into the Spring Square, lined with brick shops shut up for the parade. Most of the shop signs were peeling or had broken loose of a rusted chain, now dangling by a single clasp. One sign boasted a vibrant, freshly painted picture of a boot with *Cobbler’s Shop* in blocky lettering.

In the center of Spring Square stood the city’s lone fountain. Carved conifer trees and deer lined its marble basin while a single jet of water spraying from the middle. The common folk, the governor’s household, and all who visited Caerwyn drank water fetched from the Fountain of Wynn Morwen—the Ivory Maiden.

“The fountain is no longer a source of worship, I hope?” Driscoll asked.

“We never worshipped it.”

“If you’d like those firearms, I’d watch you’re tone, Miss Maddox.”

Glenda’s rooftop came into view—a peaked roof with a chimney, just beyond Spring Square. But the parade wouldn’t take that route. Morgan would have to leave imposter with Driscoll, unobserved.

Clenching her teeth, Morgan slid along the wall of the glass compartment, twisting at strange angles to avoid bumping into the two oblivious occupants. She reached for the handle and—thankfully—her hand made contact long enough for the latch to open.

Both Driscoll and the imposter started when the door swung open. The imposter’s knee knocked Morgan on the side, throwing her off balance.

Sir Driscoll’s hand went to his waist. A metallic gleam flashed from beneath his coat.

Morgan toppled head first into the snow.

Once Morgan recovered, the sleigh had already turned a corner, out of sight.

Morgan pushed her way through the crowd and ran straight into the parade, bouncing off a juggler and making him drop his balls all over the street. After fighting her way through the ocean of parade watchers, Morgan broke free into an empty alley.

Down the alleyway and around the corner stood Glenda's house. Two-stories with a widow's balcony on the top floor—rather large for this part of the neighborhood, but still pathetic compared to the sweeping halls of the governor's manor. Morgan didn't understand why her sister refused to move home. "Colwyn doesn't need to be surrounded by the politics," Glenda always said.

"If you lived in the manor, you could interest a new suitor. You could remarry, find another father for Colwyn!"

"I don't want a husband only interested in my wealth."

Morgan couldn't argue. Too many men had proposed to marry the duchess, always with ill intentions.

Just like the alley, Glenda's street was empty—except for a muscular man seated on a porch across the street. He leaned over the railing, a machete in hand, witling a branch tall enough to be a walking stick.

Morgan shuddered, grateful he couldn't see her. She'd need to hide some guards around Glenda's home with neighbors like that. Her sister never had common sense.

At Glenda's doorstep, she paused. What if Glenda was gone? She probably took Colwyn to see the parade.

Then she would wait for her inside. Morgan pushed the worry aside and grasped for the door handle. At the first attempt, her hand passed through the metal, but with a second try, Morgan managed to grab hold and turn the knob.

The front door opened into a living room, couches and chairs circling a wooden floor. Family portraits hung from bare walls. Most citizens gawked at the wealth. But Morgan, comparing the home to the manor's luxuries, saw only poverty.

Glenda sat in a rocking chair near the fireplace. At the sound of the door, she jerked upright and clutched the arms of the chair. "What do you want?"

Good, the traitor could see her after all. "What do you think? You wish a curse on your own sister, and you expect me to like it?"

Glenda stared right through Morgan at the opened door.

No, she was still invisible, even to her sister.

“Blast it! Can’t you hear me?” Morgan shouted. She reached for a glass lamp encasing a Dai Crystal that stand beside a velvet couch. If she smashed it to the ground, that would make a noticeable noise.

But her hand phased through the lamp. Morgan tried again, then again. With each attempt, she felt nothing but air.

“No!”

Morgan searched the room for anything that could help. Her search cut short when she finally saw the expression of terror on Glenda’s face, accented by the dark circles around her eyes.

Silence filled the home—a silence that could not occupy the same house as a child.

Where was Colwyn?

A bulky figure darkened the open doorway. The man with the machete. “I said to keep the door shut.”

Glenda didn’t leave the rocking chair. Her fingers clutched its arms as if they were an anchor, latched to the ocean rocks moments before the approaching hurricane.

The man brandished his knife. He smiled, then returned to witting, chipping shavings off his walking stick onto Glenda’s floor. On the third stroke, the machete slipped, burying itself into the doorframe with a smack.

“Oops.” The man looked straight through Morgan and sneered at Glenda. “No leaving the house until the duchess is married, missus, or next time—it’s your son’s neck.”

*And in despair I bowed my head:
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”*

Morgan found herself in an armchair, wet, salty hair plastered to her cheeks. Uncontrollable sobs shook her shoulders.

She didn’t remember crying, but she must have. Her nose was runny, her chest aching—empty, like a rotten apple core had replaced her heart.

“Morgan?”

Glenda stood in front of her.

She saw her?

Glenda reached out a hand.

“Don’t touch me!” Morgan said. If Glenda’s hand passed through her—the last thing Morgan want to talk about was Maidens and curses right now.

Glenda pulled back. Her hurt expression made Morgan ache just that much more. “How’d you get in? Did... did they bring you here?”

Morgan shook her head. “Where’s Colwyn?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happened?” Morgan asked.

“Last night—after we saw the Maiden—it was dark. I didn’t see them. And then they frightened the horses and—there were bodies—the sleigh driver—they...and they took Colwyn—said they won’t give him back until...”

“Until I agree to marry Mervyn Driscoll.” Morgan had already put the pieces together.

If only she’d seen the danger sooner.

“If we could just find the Maiden—she could fix this,” Glenda said.

“Why do you always turn to the Maiden?” The words exploded from Morgan without thought. Her sister stumbled back, as if pushed by their force.

“Why do you not?” Glenda whispered.

“*Why?* I’m not losing someone else to blind faith.” Morgan intended to spit venom with her words, but she didn’t anticipate how sour they would taste until they left her tongue.

“Morgan...”

“No! Every year—*every cursed year!*—I asked the Maiden to heal him. She could’ve saved him. But she didn’t. She let him die.” Morgan head dropped into her hands. “Father’s gone.”

Glenda said nothing. Morgan’s eyes moistened, tears forming then dripping down her cheeks. She clenched her jaw in a vain attempt to dam the salty stream. “The Maiden brings nothing but ruin and heartache.”

“No,” Glenda said. “She brings hope.”

“How can you say that?” Morgan snapped. “Look at you, a hostage in your own home!”

“Do you know what *I* ask every year?” Glenda asked. “Despite your ridiculous rulings, despite the winter cold and the forest’s dangers? I have one wish, the same one I ask

every year. I ask the Ivory Maiden for the blessing of safety—for me, for Colwyn, and for *you*.”

Glenda stood up a little straighter. The sunset’s colors streamed through the window, lighting the wall behind her where Father’s portrait hung.

“I got to the Maiden before they took Colwyn. I asked that same blessing of safety,” Glenda said.

“And it did no good,” Morgan said.

“No, it did plenty good, and it will still do us good. The Maiden will keep Colwyn safe until we can rescue him.”

Morgan shook her head. She had a fool for a sister.

“Do you not remember when we were young? You loved the Maiden as much as me.”

That snowy hollow, miles beyond the city. Wrapped in coats and mufflers, they’d ride the sleigh along the bumpy road—her and Glenda and Father. Mother too, when they were young.

The Maid stood among the people, listening to each request in turn.

I need a new ax for chopping firewood.

Can we have a plump turkey this year, just like they eat in the manor?

Just help the baby arrive safely. My wife wants a daughter so badly.

Morgan stared past Glenda at the portrait on the wall—at Father. Maybe it was the artist’s skill, or maybe the dusk colors illuminating his countenance, but she’d never seen his painting look so alive.

“How?” Morgan asked—not a skeptical comment, but a sincere question. “How do we save Colwyn?”

Glenda smiled, her eyes bright despite the dark circles. “I’ll sneak you out the back,” she said. “If the guard doesn’t know you’re here, he won’t notice. Once you’re to the manor, you can find the marshal.”

“Alright,” Morgan said.

“Don’t worry about me until after you’ve found Colwyn, alright?”

“Okay, but I’ll send the entire militia to your house first chance I get.”

Glenda started to laugh, but then her mouth dropped open. “Morgan? You’re—”

Morgan looked down. Her body had turned transparent. First her fingertips faded to nothingness, then it traveled up her arms. Her vision darkened, blackened.

For what seemed an eternity, Morgan stood in an empty universe.

Morgan opened her eyes to a spread of turkey, potatoes, rolls, and a dozen other dishes in the manor's great dining hall—scattered poinsettias as centerpieces. Green and white banners hung from the ceiling. Guests and waiters filled the room with conversation, while guards—both Caerwyn's militiamen and Driscoll's royal guard—lined the walls. The Maiden's Dai Crystal lanterns illuminated every corner.

The Sir Mervyn Driscoll sat at her side. In a hand hidden beneath the table, he clasped metallic barrel, pointed at Morgan.

"I must thank you, Miss Maddox," Driscoll said. "Today has been quite enjoyable, and I am sure the King will be pleased with our arrangement."

Morgan stared at the ambassador's hawkish nose, still gathering her bearings. Her head ached, as if someone had smacked her in the temple earlier that day.

"Would you like to make the announcement, or shall I?" asked Driscoll.

"Announcement?" Her own words, come at her beckon. Morgan stared down at her sleeve—the shamrock green sleeve of the dress the imposter had worn that morning.

She'd returned to her body. The curse—gone!

Why did victory feel like moist tentacles sliding down her spine?

Driscoll's voice dropped to a whisper. "You saw the child," he hissed. "The new duke of Caerwyn will have his wedding announcement tonight."

With his free hand, Driscoll tapped his goblet with a fork. The clinking brought silence to the party. All eyes turned to the duchess and her guest. "Citizens of Caerwyn, I must thank you for your hospitality," Sir Driscoll began. While he spoke, Morgan's gaze drifted under the table again, trying to place the round object Driscoll held in his lap.

"I've greatly enjoyed touring the city. Your duchess has made the most lovely hostess."

Recognition hit. A rifle! Expect smaller. But most definitely a firearm.

Aimed at her.

What had happened while Morgan was gone?

"Before we end the evening, I have a wonderful announcement. Your duchess and I are to be married."

At that moment, the room went black.

The hall filled with scream. Morgan instantly dropped from her chair and rolled beneath the table. Metal shrilled as militiamen and royal guards unsheathed their blades. A deafening explosion sounded from behind.

A panicked stampede fled the room. Driscoll shouted from a scuffle where Morgan had been moments before. “Unhand me, fools!”

Amidst the confusion, Morgan had only one thought—

She could not stay in this room.

On hands and knees, trying not to catch her bulky dress on anything, Morgan crawled to the far wall. Half by memory, half by touch, she found a tapestry that, in a brighter setting, would have displayed a flock of exotic birds. Behind the fabric, she found the hidden door handle. She cracked the entrance open and slid inside.

The passageway proved just as dark. Morgan grabbed the Dai Crystal mounted on the wall and rubbed its tip between her fingers to illuminate it.

No light came.

She rubbed it again. Nothing.

Dai Crystals in the dining hall had died too, she realize.

Never mind. She needed to find Colwyn.

Morgan hurried down the secret passageway, feeling the along wall until finding a distinct bump. She grasped the protruding handle and pulled back the cupboard door. She searched for the string inside then jerked it several times. If anyone was still in the basement guardroom, they’d meet Morgan in her office.

Further down, the secret passageway opened up into her office. Moonlight filtered through drapes that hung before the great glass window. Morgan flung the drapes aside.

A few torches flickered in Caerwyn’s streets, but no Dai Crystal glowed.

In the courtyard below stood the remains of the Ever-Bearing Tree—once as mighty as an oak—now, a shriveled fern.

Morgan forgot how to breath. The Ever-Bearing Tree, more constant then the mountains, more ancient then the forest—dead.

By Christmas morn, your wish shall be granted.

The vision from last night—the cold, the blizzard, the Maiden—all came flooding back. Morgan had made her wish. The Maiden kept her promise.

The Ivory Maiden was gone.

Morgan could only imagine the fountain in Spring Square, Caerwyn's one source of life, the Maiden's ancient gift, now ruined—nothing but a hollow, cracked basin.

What had she done?

Her office door flew open and three militiamen ran in. "Ma'am! You called?"

Before Morgan could speak, an explosion sounded.

Then another

And another.

One by one, militiamen toppled to the ground.

"Impressive trick of the lights, Miss Maddox, though I'm afraid it didn't do much good."

Mervyn Driscoll walked through the doorway, his small firearm in his hands, smoke rising from its tip.

Morgan's lip trembled. She tore her eyes from the corpses on the floor and forced herself to look Driscoll in the eye. "You're a slimy, gutless rat."

"Oh, feisty! Where has that been all day?" Driscoll signaled to someone behind him. "Bring in the boy."

Several royal guards filed into the room, one of them holding Colwyn by the scruff of his neck. Colwyn squirmed. "That hurts, stupid turkey-face!"

Driscoll let out a mocking laugh. "You are related, aren't you?"

He patted Colwyn's head. Colwyn spit on his shoe.

"I've already declared my threats. Don't make me repeat them," Sir Driscoll said, cleaning off his shoe on the carpeted floor. He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a folded parchment. "Since you don't seem to want a proper wedding ceremony, Miss Maddox, lets get this over with now."

A guard on either side, Driscoll approached the oak desk. Morgan stepped back until the window's glass touched her shoulder blades.

Driscoll unfolded the parchment—a wedding contract—and spread it on her desk. "Just sign here."

"I can give you gold," Morgan said. "All the gold in the treasury."

"I don't want gold, dear. I want land. The fifth son of the fifth son won't get that by inheritance. Though, once I'm Duke of Caerwyn, I would love to see its treasury."

“I’ll send a recommendation to the king,” Morgan offered, though she hated the very thought. “I’ll tell him of your astute performance and ask that he reward you with a stewardship.”

“Please. You really think you hold that much sway with the king? There’s nothing to barter, Miss Maddox, other than how long I keep you and your family alive.” Driscoll snatched Morgan’s quill from her desk top, dipped in her inkwell, and offered it to her. “Sign.”

Morgan could stall. More militia would come, prepared for danger this time.

They could fight.

They could escape.

But where would that leave Caerwyn?

Driscoll’s word controlled the king’s favor—not just whether the city received firearms, but any aid the king sent. With the lights dark, the fountain dry, and all the Maiden’s magic gone, Caerwyn couldn’t last the winter.

Before, they needed the king’s aid for security. But now, the city’s very survival depended upon it.

Which meant Morgan must doom her city to ruin, or marry the murderer standing in her doorway.

“I hope your soul rots in the inferno,” Morgan said as she took the quill.

Driscoll smirked. “And may yours freeze for an eternity.”

Quill touched parchment. Ink bled onto the contract. Two swooping M’s, each followed by tiny scribbles.

Driscoll snatched the paper as soon as Morgan finished. He held it up to the moonbeam shining through the window. “I hope you don’t mind keeping your maiden name. I figured it would be more fitting if I changed my own. Mervyn Maddox, Duke of Caerwyn—has a pleasant ring, doesn’t it?”

His words stabbed like a needle through her heart. Morgan lunged forward, ready to tear the contract from his grasp. “You will not have my father’s name, you filthy snake!”

A guard caught Morgan mid-air and threw her to the ground. Another smacked a rifle butt her across her head.

“Escort Mrs. Maddox to the boy’s room. The two can keep each other company until morning.”

Rough hands pulled Morgan to her feet and shoved her down the hall.

“Don’t worry dear,” Driscoll called after her. “I’ll send the king our marriage announcement first thing in the morning.

Morgan doubted he’d let her live much longer than that.



“Auntie!” Colwyn rushed forward, wrapping his arms around Morgan’s knees.

She sank to the ground, nausea setting in.

Colwyn held her face. “Auntie, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Morgan squeezed her eyes shut to block out her swimming vision. “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

The guards snickered and slammed the door. One stay inside, his uniform rustling as it brushed the stone wall.

Colwyn leaned in close, his breath warm on Morgan’s cheek. “You wanna hear what I wished for, Auntie?” he whispered.

“Wished for?” Morgan asked.

“Yeah, what I asked the Maiden,” Colwyn said.

Morgan had to fight her foggy brain to find the memory of Glenda’s words last night. The sick kitten—Colwyn had planned to ask the Maiden to heal it.

Morgan’s stomach lurched. She put a hand on the ground to catch herself before she fell.

She’d been wrong—so, so wrong. A mother wishing for her family’s safety. A little boy asking for the health a helpless animal. Those children in the guard house, who’d requested simple toys after their parents wished for clothing to fight off the winter chill.

Why had she been so foolish?

“You wanna know, Auntie?” Colwyn asked again. He didn’t wait for a reply. “I asked the Maiden to make you get better so that next time, you could visit the Maiden with us, too.”

Morgan forced her eyes open. The boy grinned at her with a set of mismatch teeth.

“Get better?”

“Yeah. Momma told me you couldn’t see the Maiden with us ‘cause you were sick.”

Morgan gave a weak laugh before her face fell. “Of course she did.” She sank to the stone floor. It felt icy, even through her bulging dress. She held her nephew’s shoulders, brushed a finger along his cheek. “Why’d you give up your wish for me?”

Colwyn shrugged.

“Are you hungry? Have they fed you?”

The guard rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, we gave the kid some bread.”

“It was gross,” Colwyn whispered.

Morgan scanned the room, searching for any escape. The walls hung bare. The floor—naked stone. Driscoll had obviously thought of secret exits when picking a hostage room.

“Auntie, why are they being mean?”

Morgan sighed. “Sometimes, when people grow up, they forget how to be nice.”

The guard grunted and rolled his eyes again.

“Don’t worry Auntie, I’ll remember how to be nice.”

She pulled her nephew onto her lap. Colwyn cradled his head in Morgan’s arm. His eyelids closed and breathing slowed.

Morgan forced her eyes to stay open, taking controlled breaths to keep the nauseous at bay.

The guard gave no sign of dozing. Morgan watched him from across the room, studying his uniform, the royal lion sewn on his chest, the golden tassels dangling from his shoulders. She watched his faces, waiting for him to look back.

“What?” the guard finally snapped.

“Have you ever heard of the Ivory Maiden?” Morgan asked.

The guard gave a noncommittal grunt.

“She visits Caerwyn every year for the Winter Festival—from the solstice until Christmas.”

He leaned back and let his eyes roll to the back of his head.

“Some call her the Winter Witch. Others prefer Wynn Morwen. No one knows where she came from or where she goes. But she’ll always grant each seeker a wish.”

“Fantastic. I don’t care.”

“Some wish for objects, some for events, some for magic. Most wishes are pure, well-intentioned.” Morgan stroked her nephew’s forehead. “But some are selfish. Mine was the latter, I’m afraid.”

“Look lady, this ain’t a confession box.”

“I didn’t really believe the Maiden would grant a selfish wish. But I suppose, if you ask enough times...” Morgan stared at the cracks in the stone floor.

“Life sucks, and then you die. Great. Now shut up and fall asleep like the kid.”

Colwyn shifted in her lap, then he lay still again, breathing deeply. Morgan rubbed a lock of his dark curls between her fingers.

Had she been so innocent once?

“Maiden,” Morgan spoke so quietly she could hardly make out her own voice. “If you can hear me, I ask only one thing. Rescue Colwyn and the city from this dreadful mess. I deserve nothing, but Caerwyn—your city—it needs your help.”

Morgan sat in silence.

No answer came.

The cold room grew colder.

The darkness darkened.

Nothing.

Her last hope vanquished, Morgan drifted into sleep.



When she awoke, Colwyn was gone.

Morgan leapt to her feet, scanning every corner of the room for her nephew. The same guard still sat by the door side, but no sign of her Colwyn.

“Where is he?” Morgan demanded.

The guard stared into space, unmoving, unblinking. Frozen.

The air prickled Morgan’s bare hands. Nearly imperceptible snowflakes seemed to hover in the empty chamber.

Morgan looked down. Something lay at her feet.

She picked it up by its golden base. A crystalline globe sat on top.

A shadow flicked passed the snow globe and, for a second, she thought she saw an image of Colwyn, laying safe on the chamber floor. The picture vanished, and Morgan beheld the tiny city nestled inside the globe.

Huts and brick buildings. A couple horse sleighs. A large manor, surrounded by a hedge, with a fruit laden tree planted in front—all surrounded by snow.

Caerwyn.

The guard still hadn't moved. Nor did he react when Morgan opened the door beside him and stepped into the hall.

The couple guards outside stood frozen, mid-conversation. Snow globe cupped in her hand, Morgan walked passed them. She passed her chamber, where Driscoll held a quill aloft, still as a frozen waterfall.

Morgan left the manor for the falling snow and empty streets. A few royal guards—frozen like the others—occupied the courtyard, but nothing else. As she navigated Caerwyn's roads, she saw no townsfolk, no horses or sleighs, not even a stray cat.

With each step the snow deepened. It rose to her knees, then her waist.

At the edge of the city, she stepped out of the piling snow into boot-high powder. Behind her, the empty Caerwyn lay buried in a frozen mountain of ice.

She stopped at the edge of the forest—a dead Caerwyn behind her, a living one clasped in her hands.

Morgan didn't startle when the figure appeared beside her. She'd expected the Ivory Maiden to come.

The Maiden pointed to a forest pathway, pearly ribbons streaming from her extended arm. "Go. Take Caerwyn to safety."

Morgan nodded and carried the snow globe city into the trees.

"Auntie, the guard's gone."

Morgan squinted at the morning light. Colwyn crouched above her, shaking her shoulder. "Gone?" Her voice scratched her dry throat.

"Uh-huh. All of them."

The door hung agape, showing an empty hallway.

Colwyn grinned. "That means I can finally go potty," he said, and took off down the hall.

Morgan walked into the hallway in a daze. A servant wandered around the corner and nearly crashed into her. "Sorry ma'am! I didn't—I just woke up—I must have passed out on the kitchen floor last night while cooking. I'll have your breakfast ready in—"

Morgan held up a hand. "It's fine. Take the day off. It's Christmas."

"Are you sure? I can do breakfast. I really can."

“No. But do stop by the guardhouse on your way home,” Morgan said. “Tell the marshal the family is free to go.”

The servant hesitated a moment, confused, before leaving with a “yes, ma’am.”

Morgan found her office door open, her quill fallen on the floor. A half-written letter lay on her desk addressed to *His Majesty*, followed by details of her marriage arrangement to Sir Mervyn Driscoll.

Morgan tore the parchment in half.

She turned toward the window and stared.

“Morgan! Morgan, where are you?” Glenda ran in and embraced her from behind.

Morgan clasped her sister’s hand, still staring out the window.

“The tree,” Morgan said. “It’s back.”

Outside the frosted glass, the Ever-Bearing Tree stood tall and proud, red fruit hanging from its boughs. Beyond it, Caerwyn’s streets bustled with life. A strange mountain rose at the city’s edge and a lake shimmered where the forest should have been.

“They’re gone, aren’t they?” Glenda asked.

Morgan nodded. “The Maiden...” She couldn’t finish.

Her sister pulled her in tighter. “I think Father would be proud.”

*Till, ringing, singing, on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men!*