

The People's Ghost

by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting

V.

One does not need to be an expert cartographer to know that the town of Ironhill does not exist. No doubt this simple fact will cause considerable confusion for those reading this history some time hence—unless Ironhill does begin to exist between then and now, improbable as that may be. It will upset my contemporaries, I am certain, to observe such a glaring error in this otherwise painstakingly accurate record. They will say I am mad, or stupid, or both. “Ironhill?” they will exclaim. “I’ve never heard of such a place! Everyone knows that Connor and Amanda first met at Ardee! And who on earth is this Logan fellow he keeps talking about?”

To the dismissive and incredulous among us, I will say this: if a history is so excellent that you can find reason to doubt only one or two of its many thousand details, does the fault truly lie with the history, or does it more likely lie with you? We must pause and reflect.

Everyone knows that Connor and Amanda first met at Ardee. Everyone also knows that the first steading at Ardee was raised no less than thirteen years after the end of the Flood War. So what does everyone really know, then, if they cannot remember these two things together?

Logan of Ironhill is a name entirely unfamiliar to most of us. His “Unforested” verse (cited in the first chapter) was actually written, we might allege, by Lord Hugon d’Garte in his account of the battle against the dread green wyrm. But the dragon slew Lord Hugon in that battle—his death is referenced with much feeling in the personal writings of his friend Fionn Kilshane, the first High Lord of Kilshannon, whose word cannot be impugned. So who would dare say there was no Logan the sword-poet, and, therefore, no statue of him?

The statue stood, fell, and lay cracked in the town of Ironhill, which does not exist. Everyone knows that. Just as everyone knows that Connor and Amanda met for the first time fifteen years after they first met, or that a dead warrior survived the battle that killed him and wrote a poem about it.

Ironhill cannot be found on any map, old or new. No traveler knows the way, and if he did happen upon the spot where it once stood, he would find only a barren hillside. And yet, a town did

stand there. It had walls and bastards and birch trees and dingy taverns and torched banners and fountains and magistrates and music and violence and dreams and love. And here is the truth, I swear it: That Love was so beautiful, so rough and bestial, that within the very hour of its birth it was flung out of the world—and Ironhill with it.

They will say I am mad, or stupid, or both. Let us carry on.

~

Logan earned the named “sword-poet” not through any appreciable skill with a blade, but through the elegant concision with which he put pen to paper, his well-ordered words cutting clean to the core of his meaning. He once wrote of the nature of all-consuming passion:

Unquiet hearts make aching heads!

The fever starts! The fire spreads!

How better to describe those days that followed the clash of Connor Kildenny and Amanda O’Hennessy? All the realm seemed chance-crossed, as if fervor might at any moment strike like a careless spark in a dry wood, finding tinder everywhere it touched.

The Red-Dove mutiny had grown into a full-fledged rebellion, and there would be no turning back. A letter arrived at the court of Count Jean d’Garte. In it, Connor condemned the Flood War in no uncertain terms, promising to continue his campaign against the Crown until every Kendrish soldier was brought home. Tragically, the letter was not preserved, and so it cannot be quoted here. Its pages are thought to have contained the first appearance of a poem which would soon become a popular protest anthem. A lord should enjoy the finest of things before his subjects partake, and so Connor made sure to share the original with Count Jean before the masses helped themselves:

*For all free men must live through war
except the dead and dying!
And all free men must pay the price
except the blackguards buying!*

The Red-Doves struck and struck again as promised, and the people, embittered by five years of wartime hardship, looked on the aggression and felt themselves more and more disjoined from their neighbors, separated into one camp or the other. Unity frayed like cheap cloth, and the limits of civility were tested round hearth and table.

In the greatest houses, contempt and blame were most thinly veiled. High Lord Darragh wrote frequently to the Count of Montrais, chiding his inability to suppress the rebellion in his lands. The effort, His Grace emphasized, needed to be redoubled. Jean, coached by Odessa, replied with all the even-tempered restraint he could muster, suggesting that the redoubling might proceed successfully if a few more capable men could be spared to assist. Grudgingly, the Duke gave leave for a platoon of four dozen soldiers to be reassigned from the elven front.

Fewer than twenty arrived. They had been waylaid on the road by the Red-Dove traitors and forced to surrender, stripped of their arms and rations. Some had chosen to abandon their oaths and join the insurgency. Hanging his head in disgrace, the ranking lieutenant presented another letter from Connor, this time congratulating Count d'Garte for being first among the nobility to bring soldiers home from this senseless war.

The bard's mocking words took careful aim at the Count's pride and depth of feeling. Black rage etched new lines into his heavy brow. He took to quarreling viciously with his wife, cursing her failure as the Duke had criticized his. Often she retaliated sharply, even if part of her was keen to accept responsibility. It could not be disputed that Connor and his brigands had evaded her at Ironhill. That she had been tempted, however briefly, remained a secret known only to her, and to Ser Lucas,

who in his loyalty never spoke of it—but she knew for herself how her will had faltered. The memory of it never left her for long, and whenever she noticed its absence it would instantly return, and she would grit her teeth through the inrush of guilt. More driven than ever, Amanda swore to herself that she would find the enchanter and see justice done.

Little did the Countess suspect how badly Connor might have liked to be found! He wanted more than anything to beg her forgiveness for their ill-fated encounter at Ironhill. His remorse was fervent, almost sublime in its power over him. He felt it not only for his tarnishing of Lady O’Hennessy’s honor, but for every time he had ever charmed and abused his Kendrish brothers and sisters. They had treated him unfairly and unkindly throughout his life, yes, but he now rightly saw the best of them in her, and he knew he had done them much wrong. Could he not find a way to make amends for his offenses, one and all? Would she truly deny the goodness in him, the greatness of their shared cause? Pushing down his more vulgar wishes, he pondered how he might secure an audience alone with Amanda.

And then, as if on cue, came the birthday party.

~

Odessa Temperhand was not a woman easily rattled. Nothing significant ever happened in County Montrais that was not within the bounds of her scheming. The rise of the Red-Doves was a development she had foreseen. The intensity with which they had sprung up was surprising to her, but not unpleasantly so—indeed, the violence of their methods was, in some ways, an asset. For every sympathizer they inspired, they made royalists out of just as many merchants, wealthy metropolities, and other proper citizens. How long could Connor Campfire defy the powers entrenched against him before he burned out? Odessa smiled at the thought.

Satisfied for the moment, she turned her attention to another project which she expected would further shift outcomes in her lord’s favor. Reviving the Summerwinds Festival had been a success—as intended, it had helped to keep people passive enough, even during wartime. Another celebration, she

mused, might now be in order—food and games for the commoners, a military parade to show strength, a private gala for the elites with dancing and perhaps some pretty art exhibit to give them something to chatter about. The Count’s upcoming birthday would provide the perfect occasion. As expected, Jean objected to the idea, but Odessa assured him of the merits in her usual way, and wearily he acquiesced.

And what a day it was in Montrais! Crowds and vendors thronged the streets from dawn to dusk, and the jubilation carried on long into the night. High on the hill, the nobles and their retinues gathered in Castle Blueshadow where the brooding halls had never been so gaily decked. The grand ballroom, festooned and garnished with care, was the picture of luxury. Musicians led by the flaxen-haired Gisella Gladdensigh, songstress of no small fame, filled the air with ambient sweetness. On proud display were various sculptures, paintings, ceramics, and other works, a collection representing the labor of the city’s finest artists and artisans. The centerpiece, everyone said, was a masterful creation—molded from one solid piece of ethereal turquoise glass, it depicted a life-sized Kendrish knight on horseback trampling a snarling elf-monster underfoot.

Amanda regarded the sculpture—and the festivities as a whole—with a mixture of disgust and frustration. Custom dictated that she should be here to celebrate with her husband, but her mind was far away. All she could think of was getting back to work. The Kendrelands needed their Liberty Guard more than ever—they had the best chance of putting a stop to Connor’s rebellion, even if Jean thought otherwise. But instead they had been summoned home to parade through the streets, drink champagne, and appreciate this ugly statue. She scowled up at the glass horseman, trying to shatter him into a thousand pieces.

“It really is something, isn’t it?”

The remark came from Ser Lucas as he approached through the crowd. The gold epaulets and burnished buttons of his dress uniform were hard to miss.

“It is certainly something,” she replied dryly.

“All from one piece of glass, I hear. The guild-master only mentioned it five or six times. It is beautiful, though.”

“Is it?”

The frost in her voice made him reconsider.

Quietly she continued, “I wonder how many peasants we might have fed and clothed with the money spent on this...beauty.”

With anyone else, Ser Lucas might have tried to lighten the mood or change the subject—but he knew better, and was silent.

She said nothing more, but allowed her gaze to wander vacantly around the ballroom. She came to rest on the smiling face of Gisella Gladdensigh as she was leading her band through a merry folk tune. Here, Amanda thought, there was at least something of genuine beauty. The singer herself was fair, yes, so at ease in her elegance—but it was the music that Amanda found so lovely. It was real Kendrish music, songs well-known and oft-sung by the people, songs of love, labor, and loss.

As she listened, the flutist began to blow a familiar melody, and the band followed into the opening bars of “Darling Pretty.” Standing there, Lady O’Hennessy was swept up in that secret power music has to turn back the years. She relived in those few minutes the many collected memories of her life—memories of her boyish girlhood, her romantic frustrations, her long loneliness, her eventual marriage, her growing distance from her husband, her knightly questing. Thinking of the war and the future of her country, with mist gathering in her eyes, she mouthed along with the final verse, those words of stubborn hope:

*There will come a day, darling pretty,
there will come a day when hearts can fly...*

The song came to a end, and Amanda applauded somewhat overzealously. Gisella smiled appreciatively at her. Was there a knowing look on her face? A sense of intuitive acknowledgment? It was that peculiar effect, no doubt, produced upon us by those who strum our pain and sing our lives.

But then she struck up the pleading strains of “Are We in Trouble Now,” that beloved ballad:

*It wasn't just the music,
it wasn't just the wine.
Some other kind of magic
was sending shivers up my spine...*

A more recent memory recalled itself to Amanda—an enchanting encounter at Ironhill. It was more than she could bear. Emotion welled up in her, and she quickly stole away to a private side-chamber where she might compose herself. Glances of false concern flicked out at her as she went, but the vipers held their tongues at least until she had gone.

Ser Lucas followed at a brisk pace, deflecting the other guests with his polite smile. But when he reached the door of her chamber he was turned away, for the Lady O’Hennessy wished to be alone and would not admit even her most trusted confidant. He was utterly at a loss—Amanda was hardly one for emotional displays, and such an outburst as this was unheard of. He understood her less and less these days, and it worried him. He suspected that the bard’s treasonous spell was still affecting her mood, but he dared not say it aloud, for the subject was sore and he did not wish to further aggravate it. Shaking his head, cursing Connor’s name, he stood guard outside the chamber and waited for Amanda to emerge.

Moments later, a pair of visitors approached his post—none other than the lovely Gisella herself, accompanied by her bodyguard, a reliable-looking halfling fellow. Ser Lucas, ever the gallant, inclined his head and offered a gentle hand in greeting, and she pressed it coyly. She had seen Amanda

fleeing the hall, she explained, and she wished to offer apologies for her displeasing performance. Ser Lucas assured her that the Countess could not possibly have been displeased—more likely she was moved deeply—but he promised to relay the message.

To his surprise, this did not seem to put Gisella at ease—color came up in her cheeks, and she fretted nervously with the sleeve of her scarlet dress. Clearing his throat, somewhat flustered himself, Ser Lucas asked if there might be something more on her mind.

“Oh, well...if I am honest, Ser, I must profess myself a true admirer of Lady O’Hennessy. The thought that my music has affected her so, it—well, it is incredibly gratifying, but so very distressing to me! I hardly know what to do about it, and so I thought...well, all I could think to do was to come to her and apologize. But I can see now that I am being very selfish, thinking only of my own comfort and not hers. Oh, I feel such a fool!”

The woman’s voice grew louder and more frantic as she spoke. Ser Lucas feared she might work herself into a fit. Instinctively he consoled her:

“I should not think your selfishness is to blame, Miss Gladdensigh, not at all. I have seldom known Lady O’Hennessy to be so tempestuous, and so I sympathize with your alarm. But you must not trouble yourself. She is made of stronger stuff, stronger than I and all her knights! She will regain herself before too long. Meanwhile, let us stand watch here together, you and I, and your man there, and we will receive her when she is ready for us.”

She was somewhat taken aback by his lack of reservedness, but she took his arm thankfully, apologizing overmuch. She began talking effusively about the party and her travels and many other things besides, and he listened with more tolerance than could be fairly expected of him, and her spirits seemed to brighten. The conversation continued with no sign of slowing, and at a considerable volume, such that Amanda, overhearing most of it through the closed door, eventually poked her head out and said with some annoyance that if Gisella needed so badly to talk, she may as well come in and do so.

This prompted a fresh deluge of apologies from the younger woman—but the Countess merely held up a quieting hand.

“It is I who should beg *your* forgiveness, Miss Gladdensigh,” she said, adopting a more gracious tone. “You are a guest in my home, and I see that I have been a discourteous host to make you worry. I do not quite know what came over me—current events must have me stretched thin—but I am alright now, and I wish you would join me for a time. I shall be pleased to hear what you have to say.”

Gisella accepted the offer with a respectful curtsy and followed Lady Amanda awkwardly into the side-chamber. Her bodyguard nodded to her and remained outside, as did Ser Lucas, both of them sharing a moment of relief.

Gisella closed the door gently behind her and stood in the entryway, blinking anxiously around at the small room. It was cozy, well-appointed but less luxurious than the adjoining ballroom, a quality which seemed to agree with the Countess. She stood beside a round table in the far corner, pouring wine from a plain-looking decanter into a pair of goblets. Twin candles burned softly on the windowsill nearby, and moonlight twinkled through the frosted glass.

“You *will* take wine, I hope?” she asked, filling the second cup. “If not, I shall have no choice but to drain both of these. Such is the occasion.”

Gisella crossed the room, smiling uncertainly. “I am a traveling performer, Lady O’Hennessy—I take wine whenever I can.” She paused, then ventured, “Do you...enjoy it much yourself?”

Amanda, her pale cheeks already tinged with the grape, stared back blankly. Then she laughed. “I am in rare form this evening, it would seem. A few sappy songs and I go to pieces. Drunk and disorderly on my husband’s birthday.” She sat down heavily in one of the chairs, slouching improperly. “It’s a scandal. What will my dear uncle Aymer say?”

“Nothing worth hearing or repeating?” Gisella suggested. “I believe I spied him out there stumbling around with an overfilled cup of his own.”

Amanda rolled her eyes knowingly.

“Even if you were sober, my lady,” she continued, “your eyes would still give you up. You are too honest—it is why people love you.”

Amanda laughed again, wiping at her eyes and waving away the flattery. “You are a much more accommodating guest than I am a host.”

Gisella said nothing but seated herself in the opposite chair. After a moment, she asked:

“Were my songs really very disagreeable to you?”

“I daresay you know that is not the case.”

Gisella raised her hands in a gesture of modesty. “I like to believe that my performances are beloved by all. I wish I could say it were true. But if I am honest, there have been a handful of well-bred ladies over the years who were...vocal about their dislike for me. It frightened me, you know, to think that you might be one of them, Countess.”

“I am sure I could name every one of those highborn ladies,” Amanda said with disdain. “Pay no attention to their well-bred opinions. They forget their own forefathers came from humble beginnings, singing the songs you sing so well.”

Gisella nodded sagely. “Well, if my music reminds them, then their disapproval is understandable. The past is difficult—so full of painful memories.”

A sad and faraway look returned to Amanda’s face, but she said nothing. Gisella pressed:

“If it would relieve you at all to speak your mind, my lady, please do not hesitate. I talk too much when a listening ear might be best.”

And so the Countess did speak her mind—slowly to start, as it is no easy task to lay down one’s burdens. Encouraged by the wine and the privacy, she admitted the shame she felt for her failure at Ironhill—how Connor’s wicked spell had led her astray, how it echoed in her ear and plucked at her heart even now. Angry tears came and went in waves, dampening her eyes but never quite flooding forth. Gisella did her best to sympathize gently and tactfully, though it was upsetting to see her champion in such a state.

“The worst of it all,” said Amanda in a moment of calm, “is that he really does believe in his cause. He may speak falsely on all other matters, but his love for the realm is sincere. How much good he and his Red-Doves might do for the Kendrelands! Instead we lose so much to this infighting, this violent rebellion. If he were not such a reckless fool!”

Gisella nodded. “He is a fool, certainly, or has been one. And he may be a true patriot, as you say. People are rarely ever what they seem—we never know what we might see with a closer look. Behind all of his swagger, he may even be sorry for his mistreatment of you.”

“You are too kind to him, I think, though you sound wise.”

“‘Who is a man who does not regret himself?’ Logan said that, if I remember.”

Amanda poured more wine. “Perhaps he regrets, perhaps not. He is a liar, so who knows? Whatever the case, he will regret much when next I lay my hands upon him.”

“Do you think so? I should say he is looking forward to it.”

“I do not take your meaning.”

Gisella twirled her hair impishly and went on, brushing past the Countess’s remark:

“One thing confuses me, and it is this: I have never heard of bardic magic persisting for so long, especially upon someone as...resistant as yourself. I wonder if even the greatest elf-mages could weave such a potent enchantment. And I am only half an elf, after all, so the spell could not possibly still be influencing you, my lady.”

The candlelight flickered.

~

Ser Lucas stood stoically to one side of the door. Periodically he glanced over at Miss Gladdensigh’s bodyguard. The quiet had been all well and good to start, but now several minutes had elapsed and the man had not said one word. He just stood there, arms folded, looking alert but vaguely bored. Eventually Ser Lucas was forced to break the silence.

“I am terribly sorry, my friend, that we have been standing here for some time now and I have not even thought to ask your name.”

The smallfolk lad blinked, then smiled and offered up a hand. “Oh, no, you ought to pardon *my* manners, Ser. They call me Ted. Very pleased to meet you, Ser, very pleased.”

The knight-commander had not expected quite so friendly a reply. He shook the hand that was offered, though it was a bit informal for the occasion.

“Very pleased, Ted. That’s a fine name. Short for Tedmund, mayhap? Or Theyodor?”

“Just Ted, Ser. Short name for a short fellow, as you say. I reckon that’s alright.”

“Oh, of course. No, I didn’t mean to—”

“Course not, Ser.”

“Right then.”

They returned to silence, staring ahead at the corridor wall. Ser Lucas coughed. Then he risked another try:

“If you will not think it overly rude of me, Ted—I notice that brogue of yours. Very charming, I’ve always thought, whenever I’ve heard it. You must not be from Montrais. Further south?”

Again the smaller man was polite and chatty. “Quite right, Ser, that’s quite right. I only ever come so far north when I’m on guard for Miss Gladdensigh. The riverlands proper are my home, Ser, down Kilshannon way. Beautiful country—well, it were more beautiful before the floods, but still lovely. Ah, but I do miss it when I’m away, Ser, yes I do.”

Ser Lucas smiled. “Yes, you must, of course. ‘A home is home forever, wherever we may be.’ That was a song, wasn’t it? Which one was that?”

“Can’t help you there, Ser. I’m useless for remembering such things. Miss would know, she would, but I’ve never had a head for music—I just keep them safe who make it.”

Ser Lucas nodded approvingly. “Well, that’s fine, Ted, it’s noble work. Your mistress is in good hands, I have no doubt.”

Ted tried not to puff up too proudly. “That’s very gracious of you to say, Ser, very gracious. Gosh, how do you like that? Lady Amanda’s own brave knight calling me noble! My mates back home will think I’m telling tales! But they always think that, anyway, Ser, so it’s just as well.”

Their conversation went along in this way, and Ser Lucas found himself taking a shine to the southerner. He was barely even annoyed when Ted asked:

“Do you think you would mind telling me about that scar on your cheek, Ser? I wager there’s a story behind it, and I do love a good story, especially if there’s a battle involved.” He paused, then added, “I’m sorry if I offend, Ser, I don’t mean to be impotent.”

“Impertinent is the word you want, I think,” said Ser Lucas, touching the discolored streak beneath his eye. “No need to worry. I am not so easily offended.”

“Must have been while you were dueling in a tourney, I reckon, with another famous knight.”

Ser Lucas scoffed. “Nothing of the sort, my friend. No, this wound was given to me by a Red-Dove terrorist, a scoundrel of a woman who attacked me unawares.”

Ted was wide-eyed. “Truly? Gods, she must have been fierce to cross swords with you, Ser.”

“Fierce, yes—like a wild dog. These rebels, they fight like cornered animals. Every swing is desperate, and so one out of twenty is bound to land.”

Ted looked thoughtful. “And a woman, you say. My stars...well, I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised, Ser. Truth be told, I’d say the best of men are usually women—like your lady, there’s a fine example. But that’s just my opinion, Ser, for all it’s worth.”

There was a pause. Then Ser Lucas said slowly:

“Ted...have we met before?”

Ted cocked his head to one side. “Have we, Ser? If we have, it weren’t recent, or I’d surely recall it, I would. Unless you suspect me for one of those murderous dog-women terrorists you’ve been chasing around? I hope not, Ser—I’d not like to have to cut you on your other cheek.”

Ser Lucas stared. Ted gave him a queer smile.

They were interrupted by a loud crash from behind the chamber door.

~

“Deceiver!”

Amanda sprung to her feet, storming with fury.

Gisella smiled apologetically. “Is now a good time to tell you how ravishing you look in that dress, Lady O’Hennessy?”

Amanda lunged across the table, sending the pitcher and glasses spilling onto the stone floor. Gisella rocked backward and tumbled from her chair. As she gathered herself up, the illusion fell away around her to reveal none other than Connor Kildenny. He wore rouge and eyeliner in generous portions, and his golden curls were effeminately arranged—but it was undoubtedly him standing there in Gisella’s scarlet gown.

The Countess rushed round the table and over the shattered glassware. Connor scurried away to the other side of a plush sofa, keeping it between himself and the lady.

“You are mad to have come here, utterly mad!” Amanda seethed. “Was it not enough to dishonor me at Ironhill? Now you hide your face and infiltrate my home? To gain my confidence, to mock me further? How dare you!”

She snatched at him, but he backpedaled out of reach. He spoke rapidly:

“Of your confidence I know I am unworthy, and in making light of you I have already done more than my share of harm. I come to you against the advice of my compatriots, risking life and limb and lofty cause, because my heart demands that I set things right. I throw myself upon your mercy, gentle lady!”

She picked up a nearby vase of begonias and hurled it at him. Reflexively he caught it, and as he bobbed and stumbled, she vaulted over the couch and tackled him to the ground. Flowers went flying.

“What I am trying to say,” said Connor, his words muffled by the rug pressing into his painted face, “is—I’m sorry.”

She hesitated as she knelt over him, pinning his arms behind his back. Then she said:

“Mercy is not mine to give today. I swore that you would be brought to justice. If you are penitent, then come quietly. No more mischief. No more foolishness.”

Connor strained to look back at her over his shoulder. “Face the music, eh? Is that really what you want, dear lady? For all of us?”

Before she could answer, there was a knock at the door. Ser Lucas could be heard just outside:

“My lady, are you alright? I heard a terrible racket. Permission to enter?”

“No,” Amanda replied, not quite knowing why. “No, stay there, Luc.”

“Forgive me, my lady, but I must insist. It sounded rather serious, and I must make sure that you and our guests are unharmed.”

There was, she perceived, something alarming in his voice—a note of scorn as he lingered over the word ‘guests.’ Or was it fear?

She looked down at Connor. He batted innocent eyelashes at her.

“Come in, then,” she called.

He opened the door and stepped into the room. The smallfolk bodyguard entered as well, latching the door behind them. Gisella’s man now appeared to be a woman—the same woman, Amanda observed, who had interfered at Ironhill. Connor’s magic no longer concealed her, though some traces of her disguise remained—her red hair was cut short, and the stubble on her face was some sort of charcoal-ochre maquillage. She gripped a sharp-looking dagger in one hand, holding it dangerously close to Ser Lucas’s gut.

“Let him go, please and thank you, Lady O’Hennessy,” said Teagan. “More fighting would be bad for everybody.”

No one moved. Wine dripped audibly from the edge of the corner table.

“My lady,” said Ser Lucas grimly, “now that I see you are safe and sound, I implore you—do not release him. Alert the guards at once. Think nothing of my life. I will fulfill my oath to the realm. Do not bargain with these villains for my sake.”

Connor chuckled into the rug. “Never change, Ser Windbag.”

The Countess eyed Teagan. Teagan met her gaze evenly. She sighed and released her grip on Connor’s wrists, saying:

“Your trickery saves you once again, Ash-Flag. May your ancestors hang their heads in shame.”

“They’ve been hanging for a while already, I’m afraid,” said Connor, picking himself up, “but they might yet be proud of me before we are done here today.”

Ser Lucas glared. “What are you plotting, you traitorous scum?”

“Shut up.” Teagan pressed the blade closer.

“Surely you know the answer to that question, Ser Vainglory.” Connor gathered up a few flower petals, turning them over in his fingers. “Wickedness! Lowborn treachery! What else would I be plotting?”

Ser Lucas and Lady Amanda watched him in grave silence. He rolled his eyes.

“I wish you both would lighten up,” he complained. “We are living through history right now. Why not try to appreciate the moment while it lasts?”

Ser Lucas decidedly did not lighten up. “This is the end for you. You have wormed your way into the castle, but you will not escape so easily. You have overextended yourself. Your little rebellion is finished.”

Connor scattered the petals with a wave of his hand. “Yes, yes, I am doomed—for real and for true this time, no doubt. Hmm, but who knows? If the gods are not yet bored of my antics, I may walk free. But before the matter is settled either way, we will see what good we can do for our country.”

Amanda gave him a look that could make house cats of lions. “You must know, Connor,” she said firmly, “that if you mean to harm the innocent who are assembled here, then I will lay down my own life to defend them. Ser Lucas does not speak frivolously of the oath we have sworn:

*If the river must run red,
to the river we shall run.”*

Though soft, her voice was that of a paragon, and it shook him in his soul. He endeavored not to show it, saying:

“There are few innocents here tonight, dear lady. This is a noble’s soirée, not an elven village. But I would never question the solemnity of your vow. I trust, above all else, your volition, and I know that you trust in mine, though I have been undeserving. Worry not—I consider myself forbidden from spilling blood in your halls.

“Ah, but we might still do a righteous deed or two before we take our leave, even without slaughtering your very wealthy guests. I do hope that I have at least atoned for my most egregious sin, which was the the swindling of the purest heart in all the land. I often find that if one apology is not enough, then no number will do—but I will offer you a thousand, fairest lady, before I admit defeat.”

He lifted her hand in his own. She slapped it away.

Then there was another voice outside the door—a male voice, irritable and insistent, calling out:

“Amanda? Amanda, are you in there?”

Connor perked up. “Is that the birthday boy I hear?”

“Have you quite composed yourself?” asked the Count. “I know it’s a miserable affair, but I do wish you would hurry up and return to the festivities. The gossiping hogs are already fat, we hardly need give them more slop, gods know.”

Before anyone else could act, Connor waltzed across the room, unlatched the door, and welcomed Count d’Garte into the side-chamber, taking him by the arm.

“Ah, Miss Gladdensigh,” said Jean, not immediately perceiving her changed appearance in the dim candlelight. “Have you and my wife been hiding out together? The two most wonderful people at the party having a pleasant time without the rest of us? I confess my jealousy.”

“No need for jealous feelings, my lord,” Gisella replied. “I could not steal her away from you for long—she is too loyal. Won’t you join us in our hideaway for a spell? Or are you worried the hogs might notice?”

Jean chuckled, feeling a sense of ease come over him. “You will forgive and forget that remark of mine, I trust. Not that it was at all untrue. Perhaps Lord Aymer will keep their attention while we are gone. You saw him, I imagine—hard to miss. Oh, Ser Lucas is here as well! And your bodyguard, yes, of course. How has the evening been treating you both?”

“Not well, my lord,” said Ser Lucas, glancing down at the dagger. “The enemy has invaded the castle. We are all in terrible danger.”

Count Jean blinked uncomprehendingly. “Invaded? Danger? Oh! Oh I see, you are jesting. How unlike you, Ser Lucas! It caught me rather off guard. He has always been humorless, you see,” he explained to Gisella. “An excellent knight, though. One of the very best.”

Ser Lucas stared in disbelief. “What have you done?”

Amanda realized it at the same time. “Connor, this is too far. Release him at once, or there will be no hope for peace!”

Connor shook his head. “I am not the one who chose war. The Kendrelands cry out for justice and truth—now your husband will finally provide.” He smiled like a devilish faerie. “What a wonderful thing it is when prayers are answered.”

“Hmm, yes, a wonderful thing,” the Count said cheerfully.

“You have no sense of what you are doing,” said Ser Lucas. His face was pale.

Connor laughed aloud, then turned to Count d’Garte. “My lord, the air in this chamber has grown stale, don’t you think? Shall we return to the hall? I shall play some more rousing songs.”

The Count nodded. “That sounds most agreeable. Come and join us, will you, darling?” he said to the Countess. “I know how you love the music. You, too, Ser Lucas! And you, dear bodyguard! Let us all go together and see if we can find some joy amid the awful company that awaits us.” And with that, he strode off in the direction of the ballroom, arm in arm with the pretty songstress.

“Connor, please!” Amanda shouted after them. “This can end only in disaster!”

Her request made him hesitate, but only for a breath.

“It has already begun, sweet lady!” Gisella called back. “This storm has been blown to our shores by winds beyond us—I have no more the power to quell it than you! We must all play our parts, and shelter through!” She and Count Jean disappeared around the corner.

“He is determined to destroy us all,” Ser Lucas said with finality.

Ted pressed him forward, adjusting his grip on the knife. “Try not to go to pieces on me, Knight-Commander. If you get too jittery, you might cut yourself.”

Ser Lucas shot him a withering look. “Relish your advantage while you can, scum. You and the bard will not leave the castle alive.”

Teagan shrugged. “Yeah, maybe. Look, this wasn’t my idea, chest puffer.”

What could they do but follow?

~

Count Jean and Gisella reentered the grand hall. She smiled and waved demurely as they made their way to the center of the room. The guests watched and whispered, and the perceptive few among them wondered if there was not something different about the lovely Miss Gladdensigh.

They came to a stop before the sculpture of turquoise glass, at which Gisella frowned and gave a child-like huff of displeasure.

The Count was all sympathy. “What is the matter, dear miss?” he inquired. “You have not changed your mind about playing some more music for us?”

“Oh, no, my lord, not at all,” she replied, though a note of despondency could be heard in her tone. “Nothing pleases me more than to perform. It’s just...um...well, I would not want to be rude...”

Count d’Garte waved his hand reassuringly. “You need not fear offending me. I am your host. Your presence here has been most gratifying, and we are on friendly terms. Tell me plainly what is troubling you, and if I have the means to unburden you, I certainly shall.”

Gisella smiled gratefully. “I should not have doubted your hospitality. Very well, my lord—if I am honest, it is the centerpiece that oppresses me.”

Jean blinked. “Really? The centerpiece? But it’s a true marvel! ‘An absolute triumph of technique,’ someone told me earlier tonight—although that may have been the master of the glassblowers’ guild, come to think of it. He is not celebrated for his humility. But I am amazed, Miss Gladdensigh! I had thought an artist like yourself would appreciate such an ambitious piece.”

“And you were right to think so, my lord,” said Gisella, wringing her hands. “The technique and scope are breathtaking. But as an artist, it is the heart of a work that moves me most, and this one’s heart is empty. To bend such beauty into this violent shape, it...oh, it just seems so crass!”

Count d’Garte studied the sculpture, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “Yes, you may be right,” he said. “I have no love for elves, mind you, but yes...yes, the whole thing is a bit much, now that I really look at it.”

Odessa Temperhand stood not so far away, glaring suspiciously in their direction. Gisella nodded cordially to her, then drew a little closer to Jean, whispering:

“If it would please the audience, my dear Count, I would be delighted to...reinterpret the sculpture. As part of my performance, you understand. I know a little magic that would make a dazzling display.”

Count d’Garte looked worried. “Magic, you say? Hmm...not witchery, I take it? Witchery is expressly prohibited in Montrais—for good reason!”

“Oh, it is nothing so dangerous, my lord! Just a minor illusion, a harmless trick of the eye.”

“Oh, a harmless trick, I see,” the Count said, nodding agreeably. “Well, how could anyone really take issue? Just a bit of fun at a party. Alright, yes, you may enchant us.”

She curtsied. “Thank you. I shall go and fetch my fiddle. I would be honored if you would reintroduce me to the room.”

“Hmm, that would be proper, I suppose...though you must know that I prefer to avoid addressing these people as much as possible.” He looked weary.

“All these repressed feelings, they are bad for you, my lord—and your health is the health of Montrais. Why not take this moment to be candid? You may anger your subjects, true, but they already do not like you, and anyway it is more important to be respected than beloved. You are their leader, so they must listen.”

“You know, that is really a wise suggestion,” said the Count as if experiencing an epiphany. “I wonder that it has never seriously occurred to me before. Why in the world do I keep all of these feelings shut up inside? It serves no one. Thank you, Miss Gladdensigh—I shall assert myself presently, and then I shall announce you.”

As Gisella went off to prepare, Count d’Garte turned to face the crowd, his hands raised in a theatrical gesture. By this time Lady Amanda and Ser Lucas had returned, and they looked on anxiously. Ted stood smiling beside them.

The room settled as the Count spoke:

“Everyone! Everyone, your attention, please! The talented Miss Gisella Gladdensigh will now entertain us with another excellent performance! Are we not the most fortunate of audiences?”

There was a polite smattering of applause, then he continued:

“She will begin shortly! But first, allow your host to thank you once again for attending our celebration this evening! And let me also thank you in advance for leaving! Most of you are unforgivably dull, and I eagerly anticipate your departure!”

The guests laughed uncomfortably at the clumsy joke—but Odessa now felt certain that something was amiss. Scanning the hall, she saw the Countess and Knight-Commander standing near the entryway. The Countess met her eyes with a dire look. Then she spied the dagger. A multitude of emotions passed over her, fierce but rapidly suppressed. After a quick calculation, she turned and began weaving her way through the crowd. Count d’Garte went on with his speech:

“On the other hand, a few of us could use an extra dose of dullness! Aymer, my uncle by marriage, set down that goblet! For the sake of all that is decent, you must curb your drinking! Your brother looks down from the heavens and tears out his hair to see you so besotted!”

There was less laughter to go around after this commentary, for the Count had hit his mark too accurately, and his tone quavered with emotion that could not be mistaken for comedy. Lord Aymer sat speechless, stupefied, cradling his mostly empty goblet in his hand and thinking, perhaps, that he was having a very strange nightmare.

The Count went even further:

“I know, it is ill-natured of me to speak freely of the dead, but we must do more than drink to their memory! Gods, I miss my wife terribly! Each night I dream of her, and each morning I die a little more to wake in our bed and find her gone! No doubt many of you vipers are pleased to hear it! Her love was my surest defense against the spears and arrows of your company! I know not how I have endured the onslaught for so long without her!”

Lady Hannah came running to him, holding back tears of horror. “Father, stop this, please! What has come over you?”

“There, there, little one,” he said to her sadly, as if she were a child once more. “I know it hurts to hear me talking of her. You must stop blaming yourself for her death. She loved your sister and your

brother, and she would have loved you too. Just the way it is with Amanda, my dear—she is the mother Beryl would have been to you, and I cherish her for it.”

Hannah stared helplessly at him. He returned to addressing the room:

“To love Lady O’Hennessy is to love all that is good and worthy in this world! Alas, like all of you, my spirit is small and brittle! She is the best of us, and her virtues illuminate my many faults! She is a better liege lord than I shall ever be—and it shames me!”

He paused to catch his breath. Gisella rejoined him at the base of the glass sculpture, tuning up her fiddle in the deafening silence. The look on her face suggested that she had underestimated the Count’s penchant for honesty.

Then, speaking deliberately such that none could question his meaning, the Count began to say:

“Indeed, it is no secret that she would make a better ruler than even our own H-”

“Jean, no!” Amanda screamed. She rushed forward.

Ser Lucas made a grab for the dagger.

Odessa signaled, and the guards moved in.

And then Connor dragged his bow over the strings. Two long, high notes blared out—a hideous, squealing tritone, rising like the sea in a storm. It flooded the air, and many fell weeping to their knees. Champagne flutes vibrated one by one, then burst apart. The vaulted windows splintered and caved in, and the night chill hurried to enter, setting the firelight aflutter. Chaos reigned.

As Connor’s bow came to rest, the horseman and his elf-monster, shaking with tension, exploded. But the centerpiece did not crumble into piles on the floor—it hung suspended overhead in a thousand pieces that twinkled like turquoise stars.

Then the bard began again, a quickening bariolage. As he levered his arm, the hovering shards followed along in a sprightly dance. In the music and the movement, they seemed to swim and blend, running together in a swirling watercolor river. The guests rose to their feet and watched, blanched of cheek and trembling with awe, as the sundered sculpture recombined and remade itself in a new image:

*A human woman, an elf-eared man,
joyfully walking hand in hand.*

The final note rang out, and Connor pointed up at the sculpture with his fiddlestick. “Now this is much better, don’t you think?” he asked of the room. “If you must squander our taxes, at least spend them on something decent to look at!”

As the audience returned to their senses, he shook them a second time with a voice that sent broken glass rattling:

“Listen well to my warning, for there will not be another! Petition your High Lord! End this foolish war! Bring every soldier home! If you will not, then I swear before the gods—so long as this heart beats in my chest, there will be no peace in the Kendrelands!”

His words echoed ominously. Odessa Temperhand was first to answer:

“Arrest him at once!”

Somewhat unsteadily the guards moved to carry out her order—but as their halberds closed in, Connor vanished with a smirk, fading like a wraith into his Clever-Cloud.

Ser Lucas turned to seize his enemy—but Teagan drove the pommel of the dagger into his nether regions, and his knees buckled beneath him. As he sagged to the ground in pain, Teagan pinned the blade against the side of his throat, daring Lady Amanda and the guardsmen to come closer.

Then Connor reappeared beside Teagan, his elf-magic flowering around them both.

“Farewell, dearest Lady O’Hennessy,” he said with a bow. “You too, Ser Bumptious. We will see you again soon, I hope?”

With steel resolve and eyes of flame she regarded him. “There is no repairing what you have destroyed here tonight. Justice must be served. The Liberty Guard will find you. *I* will find you.”

“I can hardly wait,” he smiled back at her. “And I really am sorry.”

He placed a hand on Teagan's shoulder, and the Red-Doves disappeared on the night wind.

Count d'Garte stood in a daze. The enchantment was departing from him now, leaving behind the realization of what he had been made to do. He looked over to his wife. She softened with concern for him, but he could see only pity on her face. He looked away, his pride in shambles. The scandalous murmurings of the crowd buzzed in his ears, but he could scarcely hear them—in his anger he was lost within himself.

He raised his head towards the turquoise man and woman standing over him. A fresh wave of apoplexy washed over him. He snatched a halberd out of the hands of a nearby guardsman and swung with all of his might, roaring like a wounded beast.

There was a terrible crunching sound—but it was not the sculpture that shattered. The deadly axe-head popped like a swollen grape against the glass. The Count was left holding an ineffectual wooden haft. He and his many guests stared aghast, for though the statue had been broken and rebuilt from a thousand splinters, the fragile cracks along its surface somehow stood stronger, Adamant against all assault.

Removing it from the ballroom proved to be an ordeal. A dozen able men struggled to lift it, and in doing so they discovered that the magical transformation had somehow adhered the base of the statue to the floor. A great deal of awkward maneuvering was required to cut it free, and in the end the lovers made their exit with a seven-foot square of lavish red carpet still stuck to their underside.

In the days that followed, many hammers and chisels were ruined in vain upon the statue. Fire cooled harmlessly in its presence and retreated from its touch. It proved indestructible by all available means. Stymied, Odessa sent it to be hidden away in storage while she considered other options.

But it did not remain hidden. Several days later, a guardsman patrolling the castle halls peered through the open doors of the ballroom and nearly jumped out of his boots. The sculpture was standing right where it had stood before. It had even reattached itself to the new carpet, which would need to be

torn up and replaced again. Some residuum of Connor's magic was no doubt still at work, and word quickly spread through Castle Blueshadow and beyond that the statue was deeply cursed.

It was obdurate and undeniable, a thing of Many Miracles. Odessa and the Count had no further patience for miracles. They had it loaded onto a ship and carried out to the middle of the bay. With much effort, the laborers heaved it over the side, and it sank beneath the churning tides—a restless casket settling into a watery grave.