

The People's Ghost

by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting

IV.

His name was Connor Kildenny. He earned many other names, too, in his time: Fiddlehorn, Red-Dove, and Ash-Flag, most renowned among them. He hailed from...well, the matter of his ancestry has always been hotly contested. Every little-known hamlet in Kilshannon has claimed to be the bard's humble birthplace. Many of those hamlets, at various times and for various reasons, have also retracted their claims, only to later reassert them, and then to retract them again, and then to assert them once more, and so on and so forth—a baffling phenomenon, one that many scholars have worked doggedly to better understand, ultimately without success. But the mysteries of his exact origins need not confound us if we view them as merely one manifestation of a larger truth, which is this: moderate, consistent opinions of Connor have always been uncommon, and the passions stirred by his memory tend to distort reality more often than not. He was a figure whose chaotic and radicalizing effect on the heart and mind could make each forget the other—and when they forgot, much of beauty and of terror did abound. And yet, we historians, ever intrepid, must strive for authenticity even when speaking of one so incredible as he. So let us boldly review the facts—possessed and half-possessed—of the man.

And he *was* a man, Connor—in largest part, at least, and in every way that mattered. There were those who said—sometimes benignly, but usually not—that he must have been born to an elven mother. The rumor took root because of the boy's beauty, a flower whose splendor could be glimpsed in its earliest blooming. His golden mane and angular features were the envy, no doubt, of those who called him Elf-Child, Elf-Lover, Elf-Bastard, Man-Bastard, and other uninspired variations. As Connor grew, the rumors of his elf-blood grew with him—not solely because of his allure, but also because he carried within him that most rare and feared spark of sorcery. He often played at poetry and fiddling, and his listeners found themselves spellbound by his songs. The stories he told seemed to play out before their eyes, breathing with the life of his words. His fellow bards, who toiled endlessly in the hopes of learning to create such enchanting spectacle themselves, stood in awe of his blended music-magic, unequaled in its ease of manner.

Alas, jealousy is never long away from love, especially when a fellow is both handsome and talented, with many other virtues besides, and shares them all freely, thinking nothing of how his warmth might bruise the colder hearts around him. Wherever he went, the folk could not bear to see so much of life's joy embodied by one young man—they always welcomed Connor to stay, sometimes for weeks or months on end, but inevitably they came to resent him. Often they accused him of having committed some illicit act—gambling fraud, perhaps, or petty theft, or the tempting of an impressionable maiden away from purity—and under such pretense (for it *was* pretense, usually) they would chase him out.

Now, let us bear in mind that behind the pomp and bravado of an artist's performance is hidden a soft soul, sincere in its desire to share itself with the world, a desire that renders it especially sensitive to the criticisms of the crowd. Connor was an artist through and through, and it wounded him deeply to receive hostility from the people when he thought he had won their adoration. This cycle repeated as he wandered from place to place, and there were lonely nights when, bedding down in the wilderness after fleeing from yet another angry village, he wondered if the hurt of it all might destroy him. In his misery, he prayed to Calliope, Sweet Starry-Night, she who holds the fickle whims of men in her silken sway and whispers their dreams. He besought her in the favored way, which is the making of music and drama and other beauteous expressions, hoping that he might stir her to pity on his behalf. She never appeared before him in answer, but it is said that nightingales gathered in the branches above while he sang to the stars, and that wild roses grew in the bushes beside him to keep watch while he slept. Reasonable minds may discount these tales as mere flowery exaggerations (from Connor himself, perhaps), but their grandiosity has made a lasting impact on the popular imagination, and it is commonly believed that the goddess was listening to the bard when he most needed an audience—indeed, who among us would reasonably choose to believe the alternative, given the unutterable sadness of it? Consider:

*Would that we need not perish twice,
laid low by the lifelong haunting!
Would that a god's love could suffice
when the love of men is wanting!*

And it could not suffice for Connor, not forever. Traveling onward, he became resigned to his exclusion, such that whenever he found himself somewhere new, he knew he would soon have to leave it behind. Expectation led him to be vigilant with those he met, for any one of them might later lead the mob against him. He was disadvantaged by his friendly tendencies; they drew him closer to his future enemies, made the sting of their betrayal more brutal. A curated image served him better, circumstantially malleable, a suit of mail pieced together from half-truth and convenience that hid his gentle self away. He wore it shrewdly in all his dealings—a shadow even in the light of day, that surely as folk laid eyes on him and spoke with him, they verily never once saw nor heard him.

To the idea of himself as a criminal or deviant, he became quite inured. With growing indifference, he weighed the merits of proactively violating the rights of others. If he was likely to be presumed guilty regardless, then why not reap the benefits of crime, however scant or fleeting? Thinking thusly, he took to swindling the people he met, fading like a wraith from their lives when they came to confront him. He went on like this for some time, and by the age of twenty-four he had spent some seven or eight years lying and cheating his way across the realm, leaving empty coin-purses and broken hearts in his wake.

By the time the floods and the war had come, Connor's itinerant life was well and truly wearing on him. His misdeeds had earned him some notoriety, and although he knew the Crown could not afford for anyone to claim the bounty on his head, the visibility was becoming difficult to manage. Even so, he might have evaded the law forever, for he had learned to employ his illusions and charms with a finer touch—and yet the thought of it seemed more and more bothersome to him by the day. The

devastation of the countryside further discouraged him—camping in the wilds was more uncomfortable and dangerous than ever, and there was very little gratification or profit in stealing from people while they struggled to survive. How could he rid himself of his reputation and start fresh? For the longest time, he could not work out an answer.

And then one day, while he loitered about the common room of a dingy Ironhill tavern, it came to him. It whispered so subtly that he might have missed it altogether, for we often fail to hear the sudden plucking of fated strings, music meant for our ears. But Connor did hear it—an offhanded exchange of news and gossip between two elderly patrons hunched over their mugs at a nearby table. Straight away he went and sat with them, and he asked if it were true. Was the Crown really offering pardons for deserters? They told him that yes, it was true, that several dozen young men from Ironhill had already been exonerated by decree of the Countess of Montrais, who was said to always serve her people as they served her. An idea, quiet and crafty, began to curl in the corner of Connor’s mind, and as the old fellows sat there talking of the strangeness of the times, he smiled, for he saw that the way was opening before him. He shot up like an arrow, slapped a few ill-gotten coins on the table, and hurried out into the street.

The tavern stood just beside the northern gate, and Connor wasted no time in approaching the two guardsmen stationed there. He gestured extravagantly for their attention, and when he had it, he promptly and very loudly identified himself as a criminal at large. The guards were quite stunned, and when they did not move to arrest him at once, he is reputed to have said the following:

“I swear it to you, sure as the morn—I am the rogue Connor Kildenny, or Elf-Bastard, if you like, or Man-Bastard, or howsoever else I might be known by small and silly men who watch the walls and gates of tired towns like Ironhill. I hereby cast myself before the law, for I am guilty of my wrongs, each and all. Now then, Gate-Bastards, foolish Wall-Bastards—look alive! Detain me!”

The guards frowned at each other, annoyed by his words but unwilling to believe them. How often did thieves turn themselves in, unless under duress or otherwise desperate? They warned him to stop disturbing the peace and waved him away.

In response, Connor heaved a sigh, took up his fiddle, and disturbed the peace in tremendous fashion. Magic sang as his bowed those strings, and the townsfolk stopped and stared to see it warp the air like a marbling flame. The stomping of his foot on the stones was like the beating of a great-bellied drum. Color ribboned in his hair and pooled in his eyes. His breath was glittering birdsong. For three or four minutes he chased the melody higher and faster, swelling to a ferocious crescendo, and in the ringing silence that followed, he spoke in a voice that echoed through the town, rhyming spontaneously:

I stand before you, thief true, liar lark,

my music-magic mastered.

Gods, have I ever fleeced an easier mark

than the dull and daft Guard-Bastard?

And having sung thusly, he gently lay down his fiddle and his short-blade, one more potent than the other, and held out his wrists for the irons. His performance left no doubt that Connor was the man he claimed to be, and so the Guard-Bastards, fumbling to regain their senses, did take him simpering into lawful custody on that autumn afternoon to the sound of scattered and confused applause. And just like that, the bard's felonious seven-year spree came to an end.

He did not have long to wait for a trial, nor was he tried very rigorously or extensively, for the local magistrate was rather familiar with Connor's career, and he was intent on a swift and harsh sentence. Connor waited placidly, almost patiently, half-listening while the court went through its motions and arrived at the obvious verdict. But when the magistrate asked for closing remarks, the bard

stood to speak, and the court could not rightly deny him the chance. His statement has been lifted from the dutiful transcriptions of the court scribe and has been reproduced here to the letter, in all of its unlikely eloquence:

Yes, sir, I must declare my objection to this verdict here and now, moved as I am by the spirit of forthright contrition, which possessed me from the first to surrender myself peaceably to the law and submit my modest petition before this court. If those assembled and presiding here today are at all concerned with the precision of their judgment, let this same spirit move them while they listen.

You have ruled that my crimes do not warrant an allowance of any kind, but you must see that you have disregarded my most severe offense—indeed, your ruling absolves me of it entirely! If I were that which I am not, which is to say, a law-abiding citizen of the realm, then my name would surely have been called for armed service before today. I promise you—and I trust any thinking man to believe the truth of what I say—I promise you that if I had been given the chance to desert, I certainly would have seized it. Alas, by virtue of my many lesser crimes, I was never afforded the opportunity to commit the greater. In light of this flimsy technicality, the honorable magistrate cannot possibly be convinced to grant leniency—he must not! Direct service to one’s king is the most solemn civic duty—its dereliction is not so lightly pardoned, and for good reason!

I therefore implore you, sir, to please add desertion to the charges arrayed against me. Correct the record, and if, in the course of correcting it, the litany of my many milder misdoings is overshadowed, let the victims take some comfort in the knowledge that I shall serve a crueler sentence than their vengeance could fairly demand. I once scandalized this kingdom—now, I shall fight and die in its defense. All that has been

loaned to me, I repay with this life of mine—and if the usurer is savvy, he will say it exceeds the interest due, and he will gladly pocket the difference. It is no mercy to march a man to war.

If you are the king's hand, sir, then you will turn me towards his elven foe and have us kill each other. Seal their fate and mine—a good deed done double with a single stroke, justice in triumph twice at once. In this spirit do I appeal to you.

Wise were the men who said: “He who permits a bard to speak has already agreed with him.” It is possible, of course, that Connor's words did actually ensorcell the magistrate; it is just as likely, on the other hand, that the court was quite pleased by the idea of Connor struggling to survive in battle, and that no magical influence was needed to sway the ruling. In any case, the order was signed and executed without delay. It seemed that for all his crimes and confessions, the castle dungeons would not hold Connor—he had traded imprisonment for a death sentence. Perhaps he would even die honorably, if such luck could betide soldiers at war.

Or, perhaps, war itself would soon know the long reach of death.

~

To produce a definitive account of Connor's armed service seems a futile aim. The tale has already been thoroughly twisted by jingoes and rebels alike, keen to legitimize their own creeds and causes—they may as well thrash about in a still pond, believing the ripples to be a clear reflection of the sky above (an image borrowed with humility from the writings of a great poet whose name escapes us). In their thrashing, they lose sight of the disquieting truth, which is that every hero of war, no matter how beloved, is a villain. The vigorous conqueror always flies the wan banner of cowardice, and the freedom-fighter's wrathful courage rises against the oppressor and the oppressed, sparing neither. This is no less true where Connor Kildenny is concerned, though most would riot to hear it said. Therefore, because elaboration will satisfy no one, brevity will be best.

It might have annoyed the magistrate to know that Connor's early days as a man-at-arms were not especially arduous. He endured basic training capably enough, for his life on the road had made him hardy. After six weeks, he was bound for the front lines—but thanks to a last-minute reassignment (prompted, perhaps, by a well-placed bribe or two), he instead found himself patrolling the back ranks along the eastern border. He was stationed there for the next five months, watching for elven forces at a comfortable distance from the fighting.

Connor tried to keep his talents quiet, hoping to preserve his new anonymity. Even so, his fellow recruits suspected there was something peculiar about him, and when his magic inevitably began to reveal itself, they became quite convinced. They were afraid and irate to learn that a witch had been allowed to enlist among them in secret. The floods had been caused by elf-sorcery, after all, and Connor seemed to overflow with it. Was the kingdom really so desperate for soldiers? It was more than many in the camp could bear, and they made known their scorn, which was so venomous that the bard might have been killed before he ever reached the battlefield.

Violence was averted thanks to the intervention of one particular warrior—a mercenary, in fact. His name was Teagan, and he hailed from Chaconne, one of the many fishing villages that had been wiped out by the flooding of the White River. And he *was* a particular warrior, to be sure. He was a smallfolk, and at three feet tall he was more fearsome in his swordsmanship than many a six-foot fighter—indeed, he could best two or three men at once, and often did. He was also one of those unlucky souls who are born into the wrong body, a destiny which leads them to be poorly received by their brothers and sisters. In most discernible ways, he appearance was that of a woman, but his heart and mind were those of a man—he knew this to be true, and whenever the world claimed to know better, he held to himself and his friends and he turned the world aside, as any man would.

Teagan of Chaconne was famously vocal in the aftermath of it all, especially on the subject of his bond with Connor. The interview conducted by Sean Jayce Haemey, former counselor to the court of Montrais, offers the most memorable description—in Teagan's own colorful words, of course (it

should be noted that Haemey was an amateur historian, and on the whole his chronicle is woefully inadequate—though he did try admirably, mortal a man as he was):

Why did I save him? The first time, you mean? You're kidding, right? Sean, we spent *months* in that camp sat on our asses, watching the valley for elves, just waiting for something to happen. Couldn't get drunk, couldn't brawl, couldn't play a goddamn hand of cards. No women for miles, unless you count me, which no one did 'cause either they knew better or they learned quick. We sang songs, sure, but that got old fast since none of us could carry a tune sober. It was fucking boring, is what I'm saying.

But then Connor showed up, and it was just...he was different, you know? I guess that's probably why I stuck my neck out for him, if you really get down to it. But back then? All I was thinking was, he was the first interesting thing to happen to us since we shipped out. He could actually sing. And he was the prettiest thing we had to look at, by far. And what did those idiots want to do? Burn him at the stake! So many of them thought we were crazy to protect him, but *they* were the lunatics. I'll tell you something, Sean. It didn't come down to it then and there, but I swear we would've killed every last one of those bastards if they'd pushed us. And it would've been worth it. Make sure you write that down. It would've been worth it.

Praise of their friendship could fill volumes, and songs of their derring-do would span the years. And it began when Teagan and his mercenaries stood in Connor's defense against the other soldiers, daring them to spend their lifeblood cheaply.

Now, the officer in command of the camp was a poltroonish fellow, averse to conflict as a rule. He was fond of the security afforded by his assignment, and he was wary of anything that might sow discord among his men—and Connor was, naturally, a sower. The commander would have transferred

him immediately if it would not have meant owing sizable favors to a handful of difficult people. He hoped instead that the issue would work itself out, and he was prepared to turn a blind eye if the bard happened to go missing while out on patrol or suffer a tragic accident during sparring drills. But thanks to Teagan's unexpected show of solidarity, there were suddenly two armies in camp instead of one. The schism, tense and hateful, was ready to spiral out of control at the slightest provocation.

The commander's solution was to promote Connor to the rank of bugler. It seems an odd decision, certainly, attempting to defuse tensions by elevating the bard above his fellows. Consider, however, that the bugler is also responsible for carrying his regiment's colors into the fray, and that a flag bearer is often targeted by enemy forces. Connor would be safe for the time being, but in battle he was essentially guaranteed to die in a hail of elven arrows and spellfire. All the men in the camp knew this, and it was enough to stay their hands—they were content to wait for the day when they would see the bard marched off to the front.

That day, as it turned out, was not long away.

Some weeks later, it is said, Connor and Teagan were patrolling together, as they often did. They sat to rest awhile, watching the horizon and talking of this and that. And while they sat, a red collared dove fluttered down from a nearby tree and began to bathe itself in a small rain-puddle, tossing its head furiously in the still water. The late-afternoon sun was low and ruddy in the sky, and the light of it playing upon the dove's wet plumage produced a ghastly impression—the creature appeared to be stained with blood. Dripping silently, it fixed a beady eye upon Connor and Teagan—and then it took flight, disappearing into the east. Both men felt destiny clutching at their throats, for they had seen the sacred bird of Apollo soaked in gore, and they knew it to be a grave sign. They swore an oath to each other on that spot, that they would stand together and prevail against the doom to come. Solemnly they took up the name Red-Dove and shared it between themselves—brothers in arms, never to forget.

The next day, a messenger arrived. He brought word that the elves were launching another series of attacks, and reinforcements were needed to meet the threat. The commander, of course, knew just who to send.

They were fifty-two in all—the two dozen mercenaries, and the handful of soldiers who had sympathized with them. Teagan led them out into the eastern wilds, his face a stoic mask. Connor marched beside him, his fiddle and his brand new horn in tow. While the rest of the camp gathered gleefully to watch them go, the bard raised his voice high in song, defiant and lively with his magic. As it rolled out over the valley, his comrades felt a lightening in their hearts to hear it. Conversely, the commander and his men were suddenly possessed by an inexplicable sense of disquiet. We wonder what they must have been thinking, standing there with Connor echoing in their ears, staring at the backs of those fellows who, despite the danger, were departing in good cheer, as if they knew all would be well and were glad to leave their worries behind with men more damned than they.

And what a remarkable campaign was theirs! Under Knight-Commander MacSumner, Red-Dove Company fought in a total of seven battles, each one a bloodbath—and yet, though many among their number were wounded, nary a one was slain. On the eve of combat, straining to sleep, they would say their prayers and ready themselves to die—but come the morrow, the luck of the bard always saved their skins. When slaughter closed in around them, Connor's voice and horn called clarion through the carnage, bracing their spears and hoisting their courage up from the mud. Elf-arrows stung like wasps at their shields and skin, yet never fatally hit their marks. Bolts of Al'cani magefire, ruthless and unyielding, streaked furiously into their ranks, and once during their very first battle did a blast collide with Connor, threading a path through his comrades as if it were drawn to him. Teagan and the others looked on in horror as the blue-hot flames crashed over his chest and swallowed his face—but miraculously they did not burn him. In the next moment, they retreated sheepishly along the length of his arm, blushing shades of fuchsia and wisteria, and curled around the flagstaff in his left hand.

Sensing, perhaps, the presence of a more proper object to destroy, they scampered ten feet up the pole and exploded across the hated banner of Count d’Garte, blazing bold for all to see.

Some said it was a sign from the gods. Whether it was or not, from that day forward the elven war-flares were uniquely fascinated by Connor’s flag. Time after time, the missiles would veer up and away from his allies, preferring to aim themselves instead at the colors he held aloft (“like flames to a moth,” as Teagan once said). And in their errant coursing, they would invariably strike true—Connor always entered the fray with a fresh silk standard, and always he carried it away from the battleground in cinders.

His critics complained of his insolence, suggesting that he used his witchcraft to burn the flag intentionally—in protest of his position, maybe, or as a show of sympathy for the enemy, Elf-Child that he was. Their accusations were asinine, of course. Connor may have had the spark, but he was no master wizard, and it is too much to think that a lone fiddler could have controlled the misbehaving flames when a whole brigade of elven battlemages could not. Moreover, if he was at fault, then they ought to have blamed him with praise, for the flag really was more useful when it was alight—it was easily visible to the rest of the battalion even through rain and fog, and it always burned through to the end, dying out only when the fighting was done. The Red-Doves gathered beneath it and kept close, sheltered there in the eye of the deathly storm, defending their bugler with great bravery. They called him Ash-Flag, and Bright-Banner, and Connor Campfire, too, and camaraderie did beat in their chests, for they knew the Elf-Bastard was a steadfast friend of men.

But their days of glory in the field would not last. Their seventh battle, later to be known as MacSumner’s Stand, decisively halted the elven advance. With heavy losses on both sides, the conflict slowed, and a series of smaller skirmishes followed, each army prodding intermittently at the other’s defenses while they waited for reserves to arrive. During this time, Red-Dove Company was transferred to the command of an ambitious lieutenant, and they ranged far into elven territory, the bulk of their allies long behind them and danger all around.

For Connor and his compatriots, the real hardship now began. The winter was harsh, the wilds desolate and unwelcoming. Frost numbed their limbs and soaked their boots. Food was meager. Nights were often sleepless, and they kept so still, afraid to breathe or tense against the quiet of the forest, lest it betray them to lurking ears. Connor did not sing.

On the battlefield, they had somehow been shielded from the worst of the horrors. Now, attacking from stealth in fewer numbers, combat weighed upon them with an intimacy that even bardic magic could not lighten. Lying in wait, they had plenty of time to study their enemy, to observe and commit to undying memory the individual traits that distinguished him—as they had distinguished him throughout his life—in his final moments. They were reminded time and again that they may have been fighting elves, but they were killing people—and people were killing them. Connor did his best to protect himself and the men around him, weaving falsehoods out of the air to help conceal them, as the old song goes:

*He hid in Clever-Cloud and made no sound,
and none could find him, would he not be found.*

But he could not hide them all. Several engagements later, the once-invincible Red-Doves counted their casualties. In the frigid gloom of that elf-haunted wood, far from Apollo's warming arms, their courage waned with every friend they buried. They felt mortality in their bones, an intolerable sobering that left their victories empty.

And then, one morning, the company lost its way. No landmarks could be spied through the snow-pines, and they could not reorient. The lieutenant stubbornly pressed them onward, approximating their course, but it was to no avail. They wandered for a fortnight, and their troubles multiplied. Despite the strictest of rationing, their food supply dwindled, and the menace of starvation

began to gnaw at them. The cold chapped them raw. In the mounting desperation, sword-brothers eyed their daggers, and order stood balanced on their knife-edges.

But they stayed their hands, for deliverance suddenly appeared before them—thin trails of smoke, blue-grey against the pale, beckoned to them over the treetops. They had stumbled upon an Al’cani village, and they knew they must have roamed far indeed from the fighting to find it unspoiled and still inhabited. The lieutenant was anxious not to alert his enemy, and so he called on Connor to use his illusions to enter the village undetected and assess its defenses. The bard was fatigued as much as any other soldier in the company, and the effort of spellcraft seemed entirely excessive for the task at hand—but he followed his orders and vanished into the snow.

Drifting closer, Connor soon discovered that it was hardly a village at all. There were nine or ten huts huddled about the cramped clearing, with room to house maybe thirty or forty people in close quarters. There were certainly no walls or fortifications, no martial presence at all except for the half-dozen aging farmers serving as militia. The rest were women, children, and a few sick or infirm.

Connor watched pensively for a while, and then returned to give his report. He said plainly that the elf-villagers posed no threat, that it would be a simple matter to force their surrender and plunder their food stores without bloodshed.

In response, the lieutenant and his patriots stared silently at Connor. Some crossed their arms or shook their heads slowly. In that moment, they say, he saw all the devils of war grinning in their eyes.

The lieutenant allowed his men one hour to ready themselves for the attack. Connor, Teagan, and the other remaining Red-Doves spent that hour contemplating. They felt the phantoms of the slain, friend and foe alike, watching them knowingly. The heavy memory of blood stained their blades and spattered their faces. And so they wondered—to themselves, at first, and then aloud.

As the time drew near, the lieutenant presided over his soldiers as they made their preparations. Connor approached and stood beside him, shoulder to shoulder, saying nothing. A minute passed before the lieutenant cleared his throat and, not looking at the bard, thanked him for his earlier report. His

recommendation had been creditable in a certain light, but too softhearted, too risky. Better to treat the enemy as the enemy, regrettable though it was. Any capable officer would have chosen the same course of action.

Fury churned in Connor's chest, but he stifled it and turned to acknowledge his commander, for he did understand that the risks were too great. And then he carried out the duty to which he was sworn.

He blew his horn.

The howl of it was wretched and mournful like so many shrill flutes, hot like fire-water flowing over his tongue. It struck the lieutenant with ungodly force, a battering ram that burst his ears and crushed him dead against the frozen ground. Those nearby recoiled from the deafening roar, clutching desperately at the sides of their heads to drown it out. As the blast subsided, some managed to steady themselves and reach for their weapons—but Teagan and the Red-Doves stepped forward to defend the Ash-Flag. A brief struggle ensued, but the surprise attack gave the bard and his allies the upper hand, and the lieutenant's men soon yielded.

Connor was taken aback by the intensity of his own magic, his Anger Sung into Siege. He had not planned to murder his commander on the spot, although it could not have been avoided, practically speaking—it was mutiny, after all. Better to treat the enemy as the enemy, regrettable though it was. The lieutenant had been killed by elf-sorcery during a raid, it was decided—those who were present agreed that it was true, and they swore never to speak a lying word to the contrary. Those who would not take the oath would be put to the sword. None volunteered.

The Red-Doves went into the village and found it deserted. As intended, the wail of the bugle had frightened the elves and sent them fleeing into the forest. Greedily the men gathered what food and furs had been left behind, for they were still hungry and desperate, and a long march back to the battlefield lay ahead of them.

Thence onward, their luck seemed to turn for the better. They found their bearings and moved through the wood, managing to evade any hostile entanglements. Three weeks later, they were drawing

close to friendly territory. But on the final night of their journey, disaster struck. Among the soldiers who had reluctantly surrendered to Connor and his comrades, there were a handful who had been eyeing their captors and biding their time. Now, seeing an opportunity to escape, they seized upon it and stole away in the silent dark, hurrying to reach the safety of the allied camps and tell of the treachery they had seen. By the time Red-Dove Company realized what had happened, the runaways were already hours ahead, and there was no hope of overtaking them.

During their interview, Haemey posed the question to Teagan: just why did those men run? Their failure to suppress a mutiny was—and still is today—punishable by hanging. Perhaps they would earn pardon by reporting the crime, but such clemency was not guaranteed. Faced with the risk, why did they hurry to confess? Why not hold their tongues and preserve themselves? Teagan's response:

Why didn't they just keep their mouths shut? Seriously? Sean, you don't fucking get it. You don't understand how much they hated us. They would've been glad to swing if it meant getting to watch us go first. And it wasn't because we saved those elves, or because of Connor's magic, or whatever. I mean, sure, that's all part of it, but that's not really it. They hated us because we were stronger than them. We proved it. And then we showed them mercy. They were going to slaughter women, children, cripples—but we slapped their wrists and let them live. You really think they could forgive us for that?

Ruin baying at their heels, the Red-Doves made haste back through the winter wood. They had less than half a day's lead, and though they wondered how many men MacSumner could spare for the chase, they dared not wait to find out. They turned away from the elven lands and headed west, intending to lose their pursuers in the familiar hills of Kilshannon. Four days and nights they hurried homeward, snatching rest where they could, until finally, road-weary and weather-beaten, they came upon the same back-rank outpost where they had first been stationed together—where Connor had been

made a bugler, and the bloody bird of Strong Apollo had foretold of the trials which now had found them.

Connor still carried his battle-standard, and he hoisted it high as he led his fellows into camp. Many among the reserve were fresh-faced recruits, newly arrived—but there were some who recognized them. The poltroonish officer who remained in command of the base, he certainly remembered. His face fell as the Red-Doves stood before him once again, grim and war-haunted.

He spoke tersely, asking what news they had brought from the front. Connor told him the fighting was as ruthless as ever, and in all likelihood it would soon be pushing westward, perhaps to this very camp. He went on to say that he and his company had been honorably discharged under dishonorable circumstances, and the outpost was meant to furnish them with supplies for their journey home. It was an order, Connor added, from a highly esteemed flag-bearer who had more than earned his rank.

The officer blanched with the insinuation. Steadying his breath, he refused to abet them.

And so, Connor blew his horn.

When MacSumner's men reached the scene several hours later, no one greeted them—the grounds were littered with the corpses of those who had opted not to follow Red-Dove Company on their way out. They found the commanding officer in an especially sorry state, having apparently been thrown head over heels into his broken tent, red streaking from his ruptured ears, the flesh stretched far from his face.

Planted firmly in the bone-cold earth, a flagstaff stood straight and tall. It held aloft the hated banner of Count d'Garte, burning long and bright.

~

Open insurrection was not, at the time, an entirely radical notion. The state of the realm was dire, and violent revolt would have reared its head already were it not for Lady Amanda and her Liberty

Guard, whose heroics did much to quell discontent. Yet even so, the unhappy few, those who could not be satisfied by merciful forbearance, were now galvanized into action.

Connor and Teagan led their band of defectors into the Kendrish wilds where the armies of the Duke and the Count could not easily reach them. Food and shelter were scarce, and the other deserters hiding in those hills were reluctant to share. Red-Dove Company squashed them handily, and many chose to pledge their loyalty rather than die fighting. After six weeks, there were two hundred men fighting beneath the Bright-Banner.

As their numbers grew, so did their recklessness. Looking out on their homeland, they beat at their chests in anger, for their sovereigns had clearly failed them, yet for defying those sovereigns they had been branded as criminals. Descending into the valley, they lashed out against the law, stealing tax shipments and raiding military supply trains. Several villages, desperate for protection that the Crown could not provide, sought arrangements with the Red-Doves. In the boondocks and borderlands, they began to gain ground.

But even as they strengthened their position, they ran afoul of an enemy with whom they could not ably contend. The Liberty Guard were true heroes, gracious and just—to take up arms against them was to become a villain in the eyes of the people. Yet, in their pride and their passionate rage, the renegades could not bring themselves to surrender. And so Lady O’Hennessy and her knights, bristling with virtue, rode out to meet them in battle. The Red-Doves retreated at every turn, and it seemed that the warm summer wind would soon blow them clear out of the country.

They looked to their Ash-Flag for an answer, and after much thought, he devised a plan. He went out to Ironhill, bringing with him enough of his men-at-arms to occupy the town. He demanded entry, and when the Wall-Bastards would not admit him, Connor opened the gates himself by the blaring of his thunderous horn. The militia, unable to resist, quickly surrendered.

Once they had seized control, Connor and Teagan met with the local reeve. They informed him politely that his town was under attack, and they recommended sending for aid immediately. The

Liberty Guard were half a day's ride away in a nearby village; he might start by sending a messenger there. The reeve was utterly baffled, but seeing that he had little choice, he called for a courier and a horse. The townsfolk watched nervously, afraid that the invaders might maim or even kill the boy as a warning—but Connor just walked him to the gates and sent him merrily on his way.

The courier moved swiftly until he reached the village where Lady Amanda and her knights were lodged. He told them of what had happened, of how he had been given leave to bring the news, and ire quaked in the arms of every good warrior who was there to hear him. Faithful Ser Lucas, ever vigilant, warned that it must be a trap, and Amanda knew that her knight-commander spoke rightly—yet the challenge could not go unanswered. And so they rode straight on for Ironhill with no delay, trusting that the gods would favor their cause and guard them against the crooked cunning of their foe.

It was dusk when they arrived and found the gates wide open. The ducal banners had been torched, their smoking remains left to hang like traitors from the walls. From somewhere just inside, the sound of a lone fiddle lilted out to meet their ears. Steeling themselves, Lady Amanda and Ser Lucas led their knights into the town.

The entryway opened before them into a small plaza with a modest fountain. A life-size statue of Logan the sword-poet had once stood atop the fountain in triumph, but it had toppled from its perch and now lay cracked against the lip of the basin at an undignified angle. Connor Kildenny sat in its place, swaying rhythmically as he bowed the strings beneath his chin. Three or four dozen Red-Doves were scattered about the space in loose groups, seated on blankets and cushions and surrounded by half-empty wine bottles, apparently none too distressed by the approaching horsemen. The Liberty Guard readied their blades and lances, and Ser Lucas shouted over the music, calling for Connor and his men to yield. The bard acknowledged him with a nod and a smirk, and then he went on playing. Needing no further provocation, the knights moved forward and began taking the insurgents into custody. They complained loudly, even pleading, and some tried to flee, causing commotion to erupt across the plaza—but none among them raised a hand to fight back.

And then Amanda felt the chill of clarity possess her, and she cried out in dismay, and all the bedlam became still at the sound of her voice. Connor brought his playing to a halt, unraveling his illusion. The lady had discerned the truth, and now it was revealed to her knights, who immediately released their captives and looked around in befuddlement—for the reeve and the townsfolk had been disguised as Red-Doves by the bard’s magic, but now Connor was the only outlaw to be seen. He wagged his bow disapprovingly at the men below, and they stiffened, expecting him to cast another nefarious spell. Instead, he ridiculed them.

“For shame! The heroes of the Liberty Guard, manhandling their own countrymen! And for what offense? Attending a concert? Are you really so hungry for violence, you brutes?”

“Your foul sorcery is to blame for this, you cowardly rogue!” Ser Lucas pointed his blade up at Connor. “Your mockery means nothing! Our brothers and sisters are safe on our watch—but the same cannot be said for you and your men! Tell them to come out of hiding and surrender, and once you have done that, come down from there and give yourself up as well!”

Connor shook his head. “As if my men are not your brothers and sisters.” He set down his bow and fiddle and crossed his arms. “The point is evidently lost on you, you miserable stooge. If the Countess had not been here, you might have started lopping off heads.

“The people of Ironhill will thank you, Lady O’Hennessy, for questioning your senses in the presence of an infamous enchanter. They say the gods work their wisdom through you—maybe they are right. I am the one they call Connor Kildenny, and I am pleased that we can finally be acquainted.” He leaned forward in a shallow bow where he sat.

She eyed him sternly. “You may dispense with the flattery, Connor. You are clever with your charms, but we have set our resolve against them. Ser Lucas has ordered you to surrender; you had best comply. Blood need not be shed this day. Will you not see reason?”

“Reason,” Connor repeated thoughtfully, lingering over the word. “Yes, I suppose I could cooperate with your knight—and yet there is something about him that disinclines me to do so. The

way he scowls at me so presumptuously, maybe? Always a shame to see a handsome exterior soiled by inner ugliness.

“All the same, it is irrelevant—even if I wanted to comply with his order, I could not. My friends cannot surrender to you because they are not here; I sent them away from this place long before you arrived. And as for me...well, I worry that you might wrongly take me for some kind of criminal. I mean, is it really so deplorable for a man to love his kin and country, to defend them as I have?”

Refusing to be provoked, she measured her response. “You are a patriot, then?”

“Is it beyond belief?”

“Far beyond,” said Ser Lucas with no small savor of scorn.

“Fair enough. But I have my own doubts, you know. You and your Liberty Guard are renowned for your devotion to the people—but I am not convinced.”

“As if the opinion of an adulterous knave matters at all where honor is concerned!”

Connor’s mouth curled with mischief. “Yes, clearly my words matter very little to you, good Ser Lucas. But in all seriousness—if the common folk are of such importance to you, why do you not aim to depose the Duke and his council? This war he wages, it compounds our suffering.”

“How casually you speak treason! Have you no fear of the gallows?”

“I will fear them when I hang, my noble knight, and I will not hang today. But be assured—I do not speak lightly. There was a time when you would have been right to dismiss me out of hand, when I thought of no one but myself, robbing and defrauding without care. My time at war has left me changed. I have known and buried many brothers, man and elf alike. I have followed my orders until I could follow them no longer. One so worthy as you, Ser Lucas—would you slay children if it was demanded of you? Would you stand by and let them be slain? Or would you and your fellows risk your lives to save them, as we have done? Mark me now, and know the iron temper of my will. I steal your taxes because I have counted their spending. I seize your weapons because I have spilled the blood that will stain them. But please, carry on huffing and heckling if you still think me casually seditious.

“Lady O’Hennessy, I know you must feel as I do. Five years ago, when every other noble house toed the line, you raised your voice in dissent. Even now, you choose to lead your men here at home, giving aid to our people instead of slaughtering elves. Why not go further? Why not strike off the serpent’s head, instead of merely sucking its venom from the wound?”

“You speak with much zeal, bard,” Amanda said in reply, “and I will not dispute the hardships you have endured. But you must weigh your words. I am opposed to the war, it is true, but I have no desire to force the High Lord from his throne. Further division will not deliver us from strife. Surely you agree?”

“I wish that I could, dear Lady. Alas, it seems we must differ in our opinions. But tell me, would you at least consider killing that husband of yours? No one likes him, after all, and if you were to make an example of him, then His Grace might rethink his hawkish ways.”

She tried not to smile at his dark humor. “Perhaps no one else likes my husband, Connor, but I am rather fond of him. I may disagree with him politically, as with the Duke, but I do not intend to be rid of him. Is it truly your goal to persuade me to such an act?”

“No, no, of course not. On the contrary, I am quite glad to know that you would spare them both. If you can tolerate them, then there is reason to hope you might tolerate me, extremist that I am. No need to murder anybody over a political disagreement, as you said. It bodes well for our talks.”

She frowned. “Do not mistake my patience for lenience. I have come here to bring you to justice, not to tolerate you. There will be no talks.”

“Will there not?” Connor grinned, the breeze running its fingers through his golden hair. “We have been talking easily enough already, wouldn’t you say?”

“It ends now,” Ser Lucas declared, gripping the hilt of his saber. “You are a traitor to the realm! Submit, and face your death with some dignity!”

“Ser Lucas, if you get any more hot air in you, I worry you might float away.” Connor got to his feet, stretching comfortably. “Are you really going to try and apprehend me? How much time do you

have for wasting? You must know I will evade you for as long as I like. The law has never laid its hands on me, except with my consent and choosing. Have you heard the story of how I surrendered once? It was here on this very spot, in fact. Perhaps...perhaps I would surrender again.” He locked eyes meaningfully with Amanda. “Let us parley, yes? But I will treat only with you, Countess. I trust none but the noblest and fairest of lady lieges to stay her hand and keep her word with a scoundrel such as I.”

Lady O’Hennessey merely lifted an eyebrow at his suggestion. Ser Lucas, however, was all fluster. “Outrageous! The Crown does not haggle with mutineers! You will be executed regardless of what is said here today. What concessions could you possibly seek?”

“It is as you say, Ser Windbag—the die is cast, and my lot is written in stone. But as I mentioned earlier, I am concerned with fates beyond my own. Let us discuss what is to become of my comrades, and a few other matters besides. If we can reach an accord, then I shall disband the Red-Doves and come quietly. I swear it to you, good Lady, on my fiddle and my horn, both of which, as you know, are much more precious to me than my integrity. What say you? Shall we take a stroll?”

Ser Lucas objected in the strongest possible terms, but to his astonishment, Amanda agreed. She would speak with the bard but briefly, and if it turned out to be another trick, he would lose his head on the spot. The commander deferred to his lady, but he insisted on remaining close at hand. She granted his request, but she bade the rest of her knights wait behind. And so the three of them went out of the town, ambling awhile along the birch-shaded road just outside the walls—Connor and Amanda walking together, Ser Lucas trailing warily behind.

Connor chuckled inwardly as they went, for his plan was unfolding perfectly. From the first meeting of their eyes, the troublemaker had placed a powerful and subtle enchantment upon Lady Amanda, allowing it to silently settle over her during their chat in the plaza. That she was here with him now was proof enough that the spell had taken effect. Ensnared by his perfidious designs, she might find herself acquiescing to a variety of compromising conditions. Her word, once given, was binding, all the more so if witnessed by her honorable knight-commander. If she agreed to pardon the

Red-Doves for the unpardonable crime of mutiny, she would have to hold to it. She would not be able to renege without admitting to having been seduced by elf-magic. For a noblewoman, it was political suicide in either case—she would ultimately be blamed, not he, as is always the way. Despite its immaculacy, or perhaps because of it, her reputation would not endure—a fallen champion who had gone too far in the name of mercy, or was given too easily to temptation. Painted in such colors, opposing the Liberty Guard might seem much more palatable than before to the public at large. Connor steered the conversation calmly, slowly but surely nearing his goal.

Long afterwards, Amanda would wonder whence had come this willingness on her part to negotiate. Connor's sorcery could be held responsible, and probably should—but did the working of bardic magic actually beguile that stalwart woman, whose surety knew no equal? More likely she was moved by his concern for his followers, and the glint in his almond eyes blew new life into her benevolent wish—to somehow absolve and redeem them, though reason told her this could not be. And yet the honest truth of her motivations, hidden down deep in her searching spirit, would not fully occur to her until much later, when it was almost too late.

For him, the epiphany came not soon enough. She was prepared to agree to the terms that would ruin her, and he made ready to overpower her remaining defenses, but instead he stumbled headlong into his own undoing—for though he hid himself even in plain sight, she had the eyes to see. Looking into them as he fixed his glamour upon her, he was astounded by the gentle fondness gazing back at him. In that moment, Connor realized she might have given willingly that which he was taking by force, for she adored him without jealousy, and thus she became instantly and intensely beautiful to him, as if a modest veil had been lifted to reveal a vision of Sweet Calliope herself. Hot shame spread across the back of his neck at what he had done, regret taking root.

Stunned as he was, his concentration slipped, and the spell was suddenly broken. She had been leaning in, and his spirit sank as he watched her infatuation—both genuine and fabricated—flicker and

fade. Confusion rushed in to replace it, and then righteous fury. He braced himself as Lady O’Hennessey slammed her mailed fist into the side of his jaw, collapsing him to the ground in a groaning heap.

She took a step back, gathering herself. Her mind was awirl with winnowing magic, the brash mingling of his desires with her own. She stood there in the daze of feelings she could not put to words, vaguely aware of Ser Lucas as he rushed to attend to her. He asked what had happened, and when she made no answer, he turned on Connor, hoisting him up by the collar and commanding him to release Amanda from his vile enchantment. The bard shook his head, swearing through his swelling lips that she was freed already, but Ser Lucas was hardly convinced, and he beat him roughly about the head two or three times more, pressing for the truth.

He might have done much worse had it not been for Teagan Red-Dove, who, knowing better than to leave Connor wholly unsupervised, had remained nearby in secret, and now leapt forth to intervene. He stood half as tall as his opponent, as he often did, yet he lunged up and struck a bleeding gash across the knight-commander’s cheek with the tip of his rapier. Ser Lucas recoiled, tossing Connor aside and reaching for his own blade. There was a brief exchange, some ten or twelve strokes between them, deft and deadly—but before either side could gain the edge, Lady Amanda called for her knight to stand down. With much incredulity, Ser Lucas lowered his sword. Teagan was quite ready to continue anyway, for no chivalrous oath obliged him to stop—but Connor lay a hand on his shoulder and urged him away from the fight, for they had to escape before the rest of the Guard came running. He breathed a magic verse, and the two of them disappeared, retreating like a zephyr through the high grass.

Amanda and Ser Lucas blindly watched them go. Silence filled the space left behind, and he waited for her to break it—but she could only let it hang there. She was beside herself, astride herself.

Her heart danced, dinning like a doomed drum, and the stars shuddered with the wyrd of it.