

The People's Ghost

by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting

VI.

There have been times when the signs were too obvious to see, when the Heavens themselves reached down to shake us from our witlessness.

On the morning of the sculpture's burial at sea, it rained. Blueshadow Bay was humid, heavy with Apollo's heat. The rain continued into the night, and Calliope hid behind her mourning veil of black starless sky. It rained through the next day and the next after that, abating at intervals but never coming to a stop.

It rained for seven and seventy days. There have been times.

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Lady O'Hennesy set out at once to make good on her vow. Her husband, claiming concern for her safety, tried to deny her leave, but she would hear nothing of it. She had sworn to lead her Liberty Guard to victory over the Red-Dove rebels, and she would see it done.

For his part, Count d'Garte could no longer sit idly on his throne. Word of Connor's brazen demonstration had already reached the Duke in Kilshannon, and the repercussions were immediate. Soldiers would be reassigned to the home front until order was restored, and the Count would command them personally, as was his right and duty.

And so Jean and Amanda rode out into the troubled countryside. They campaigned together, splitting off and rejoining strategically, doing their best to keep up the pretense of willing collaboration. Their rift had never been wider. That the bard had so audaciously visited her in the castle, and that the glass lovers had born much resemblance to she and he—these truths hung unspoken between husband and wife. How could they be spoken? To bring them forward would certainly rupture that tenuous bond on which the security of the realm now depended. For now, the Count and Countess held their tongues.

By the order of High Lord Darragh, hundreds of men marched back from the east—but as before, they did not all return as allies to the Crown. Some longed to be free from conscription at any

cost, and they took to banditry, robbing their former brothers-in-arms and hiding out in the wilds. Many of them soon found themselves joining the ranks of the Red-Doves, willingly or by capture.

The result was that the rebels were outnumbered but not overwhelmingly so. Their favored tactics—ambush, sabotage, hit-and-run, raiding—continued to serve them well, but Teagan now felt confident that they might hold their own in straightforward combat. He led them in a series of skirmishes that culminated in a battle—four hundred Red-Doves against seven hundred royalists under the command of Lady Amanda and her knights.

And how they clashed! Blades, spears, and arrows all struck home, kin to Kendrish kin. But Connor held his traitor's banner above it all, Burning Bright, and its shadow brooked no sorrow. Lady O'Hennessey, her lance flashing in the light of that joyous flame, said a prayer in her heart that could not go unheard. Through the cloud and the rain Strong Apollo sent his warming mercy, and every vanquished soldier was saved. Even those fearsome rivals Ser Lucas and Teagan who traded mortal blows more than once—like the others they never succumbed, limping away with wounds enough to have slain them seven times over, staring in wonder at how they had survived. Eleven hundred men at war, and not a one killed—another of those Many Miracles shared between patriots:

What earthly grave could hold That Love?

The olive hawk! The beat-red dove!

The fighting crawled to a standstill, both sides beaten and bloodied. Connor gave the call to retreat, and the Doves fled along the banks of the White River. They were making to cross a nearby bridge back into the hinterlands where the terrain would favor them. Anticipating this, Lady Amanda and Ser Lucas sent cavalry ahead to blockade the crossing. The rebels paused at the idea of trying to break through. Seeking cover in a thicket of trees, their backs against the water's edge, they found themselves pinned between the horsemen ahead and the infantry closing in from behind.

The Count was absent from all this, having taken a smaller contingent further north to put down a peasant uprising. A rider had been sent to bring him word, but Lady O’Hennessy would not wait for reinforcements—she had the numbers, and the enemy was cornered. Victory was at hand. Ser Lucas moved their soldiers into position.

Teagan and his sergeants deliberated how best to attack the bridge, for though it was a desperate gambit it seemed their only way forward. But Connor shook his head. Peering out at the advancing force, he smiled and said:

“Are they not still our brothers and sisters, Teagan? Did they not host us at the castle? Now they come to visit at our door! I will meet them at the threshold.”

And with a mad gleam in his eye, he pushed his way through the branches and stepped into view. Proudly he planted his Ash-Flag in the highest ground he could find, and its embers flared hotter as he took up his fiddle and began to play. The whipping winds gathered round to listen, inviting the willows to dance. The whole thicket was suddenly alive with movement, Sound and Fire.

The royalists beheld this display and hesitated, for they had all heard whispers of the bard’s dread sorcery. But they had their champion in Lady Amanda, and their courage did not fail. Ser Lucas readied the archers and, seeing no indication of surrender, gave the order to aim and loose.

Their arrows arced forth and fell like rain over the thicket—but Connor Campfire kept dry. The whole volley was swept up in the gale and scattered harmlessly, each feathered shaft settling like a hairpin in those willowy braids, or piling on the ground like flowers thrown from an adoring audience. The second volley produced the same result. The Red-Doves huddled beneath the shelter of their Bright-Banner, cheering and making rude gestures and firing their own arrows limply into the wind.

Ser Lucas frowned. He ordered the archers to stand down and prepared the spearmen to march forward with shields raised. Several knights bravely volunteered to ride out in front and draw counterfire—but their horses saw those windblown trees thrashing about like the limbs of angry giants,

and they were not so brave. And so the Liberty Guard led the way on foot, tramping heavily through the mud in their rain-slicked armor.

They braced for the intercepting attack...but none came. Connor kept fiddling and the winds kept whipping and the rebels went on mocking. The knights and their men crossed the field, approached the treeline, and began to climb the low hill.

And then Connor put down his fiddle, and the wind died, and the trees stood still.

And he blew his horn.

Those strong and surefooted warriors could not stand against that squall. It was a Grief-Siege upon their most unassailable ramparts, which were their devotion to kin and country. Such earnest mourning rendered their walls indefensible—it simply walked in. Mighty Ser Brian felt the weight of his plate mail hanging on him ninefold, and his shoulders sagged forward and he slid sinking into the mud. Ser Conall the Wolf, a man of great feeling, plunged backwards down the hill into misery, heaving with sobs and howling like the horn itself. Ser Declan of the Dew thrust the point of his saber into the earth to steady himself—and then fainted straightaway. All around them men went fluttering through the air like startled birds. Sweet Calliope sighed sadly and shook the rumbling sky, and somewhere Logan of Ironhill was penning that immortal verse:

An ending to wartime, as sure as the morn!

Come, Connor Kildenny, with Fiddle and Horn!

And the Fiddlehorn played and played. The archers fired and fired—and they missed and missed. Ser Lucas and the Guard led four more charges, but each time the fiddling stopped and the horn blared and they were sorry to have tried. Finally they relented and fell back to regroup, cursing the elf-magic that confounded them. Amanda bade them rest and bridle their anger. The bard could not play forever, and all resistance would collapse once his energies were spent—until then, they would wait.

But the Fiddlehorn played on and on. For a span of forty-five minutes he alternated between “Darling Pretty” and “Are We In Trouble Now,” and this fixation of his was the most grueling part of the battle for his foes and his allies alike, especially the Countess. Teagan asked if it might be less painful to stop the music and let the enemy shoot them full of holes, and Connor, looking hurt, moved on to a different tune.

Day gave way to long midnight. Over the next nine hours Connor performed, without intermission, the entire common canon. Every song ever written for love of the Kendrelands and its people—he sang them all. He sang against their doom until his throat rasped and his fingers bled and his strength began to fail him. Sweet Starry-Night heard him all the while, wringing her gown with rapture as she listened.

Another miracle was on the wind.

In the ever-burning light of the Campfire, Connor turned to his friends and said:

“Gather yourselves and go. Cross the river here and now. The waters will be proud to hold you up, for I am your bridge. Go now! Do not worry after me, comrades. You know they cannot hold me. They are the ones in chains, and we shall free them all!”

He trembled with mania as he spoke, eyes glowing like coals, arms never resting. None wished to leave him—they would have stayed and fought to the last man—but alas, they could not refuse him.

Hobbling with their injuries, they followed Teagan down the hill to the riverbank. The water was dark and restive, surging with the rain, and the far shore could not be seen.

Wild-eyed and war-haggard, drunk with music-magic, they looked to their fearless sergeant.

Teagan allowed himself a backward glance up the hill. Still the Ash-Flag was burning in the heart of those swaying boughs.

He nodded to them and said:

“You heard Connor—we cross here and now. For freedom, you bastards!”

He lifted his torch and walked like a dead man into the raging river.

Ser Lucas narrowed his eyes. Across the field he could see enemy shapes withdrawing from the firelight, disappearing further into the trees. The archers saw it too, and they called the rest of the men to attention. The Countess came forward to see for herself.

“They are on the move,” he reported. “Falling back a ways. Not that it will do them any good—they have nowhere to go.”

Amanda was quiet. She gazed steadily out into the night where Connor stood alone, silhouetted by that flame which the rain could not quench. Vaguely she heard Ser Lucas make a tired remark.

Then she saw the second flame. It flickered into view from behind the eastern edge of the thicket, venturing out into the darkness.

A third ember followed, then a fourth, and then suddenly dozens.

Ser Lucas stared, his mouth agape. The whole camp peered out, squinting to see.

The goddess, too, was watching—the black clouds above blushed with her white lightning, and for an instant the whole landscape was lit up, and every man saw what was revealed.

The Red-Doves had thrown themselves into the river and it was carrying them very swiftly downstream...and yet it must have been sturdy stone beneath their feet, for they were running along its surface like schoolboys at play. Held high, their torches glistened like faerie fire on the inky water. Pale in the flash of the thunderbolt, scarlet with their mortal wounds, they were floating away, restless spirits soon to rise once more. Thenceforth the Red River would never again be White.

Ser Lucas rushed to lead the archers forward, but Connor was still playing, and once more the wind made every arrow miss. The rebels had soon retreated out of range—even the horsemen on the bridge could not have given chase. Unbelievably, they had escaped to terrorize the realm another day.

The Duke’s soldiers surrounded that defiant hill. They pressed forward with difficulty, tucking their heads low against the gale and the flogging branches. Connor’s music was quieter now, labored and erratic, and at the pitiful sound of it they felt their own fatigue vibrating—hundreds fell upon the

hillside and slumbered like babes. The rest of them made the summit and saw the bard swaying where he stood. His fiddle and bow landed softly in the grass at his feet. He reached for his horn but he had not the strength to lift it. Shaking with exhaustion, he finally collapsed into the arms of his captors.

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Miles away, Teagan Red-Dove and his four hundred men suddenly felt the Red River give way beneath them. They struggled to the shore, splashing and cursing and dragging each other to safety.

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Ser Brian and Ser Declan held the traitor in restraint, although there was no need—Connor had reached his limit. With great effort he did still manage to offer a few courteous words to the approaching Ser Lucas.

“Hard to believe we all survived, eh, Ser Cockalorum? You especially—Teagan killed you a couple of times, fair and square.”

“I will not suffer you to live another minute, witch,” spat Ser Lucas. He raised his blade.

“I invoke my Right of Last Words.”

The knight-commander stopped and stared. “Come again?”

Connor was struggling to stay conscious, but his chin protruded insolently and there was no mistaking what he said when he repeated himself:

“I. Invoke. My Right of Last Words.”

Ser Lucas shook his head in disgust at the affront.

“That Right,” he growled, “is reserved for true sons and daughters of the realm. You lead insurrection against us. You think I will honor this request? You insult me even at death’s door.”

Glaring back at him evenly, the Ash-Flag said:

“I *know* you will honor it, Commander, for I am a truer Kendrish son than you or your men.”

Ser Lucas purpled with rage, but Connor continued:

“Besides, your lady will demand it, and your vow binds you—can you really forsake them both for the love of killing me? Lady O’Hennessy’s loyal knight does not hold his honor quite so cheaply.”

Ser Brian and Ser Declan were feeling a great deal of admiration for the depth of their commander’s self-restraint.

Through clenched teeth Ser Lucas said:

“We bear witness. What are your Last Words?”

“Very good of you. I have written them down, they are tucked here in my belt. You will have to retrieve them as I cannot use my arms.”

“No! No more tricks! If you have Words, speak them or forfeit your Right!”

“Alas,” Connor sighed, “my head is in such a haze, and I cannot remember them at all. If you will just take the parchment out of my belt and hold it up for me, I will read aloud. Or read it yourself, if you do not trust my tongue to wag. Once done, then you can slaughter me right away.”

There was a pause. Then Ser Lucas nodded reluctantly to his knights. While Ser Declan held the prisoner, mighty Ser Brian drew forth that scroll of parchment. Gingerly, as if he thought it might bite him, he faced it away from himself and unfurled it.

To the surprise of those brave knights, no terrible curse leapt from the page to ensnarl them. Warily Ser Brian turned it round and began reading. His eyebrow went up in apparent confusion. Ser Lucas stepped nearer to see for himself.

The page was filled with a long sequence of letters randomly clustered into meaningless pseudo-syllables—pure nonsense, it appeared to be.

“What the devil is this? It is illegible!”

“Ah.” Connor nodded somberly as if receiving tragic but long-awaited news. “That is unfortunate. You see, I have written those words for the satisfaction of Lady O’Hennessy. I thought that you and your righteous knights, devoted as you are to her, might be able to read them. But if they will not permit themselves to be read, well...” he trailed off with a shrug.

Ser Lucas ignored the insinuation. He was examining the parchment closely. The letters seemed to be moving furtively on the page. Some rotated very slowly—“d” to “b” or “w” to “m” and vice versa; others duplicated themselves when they thought he was not watching, or suddenly disappeared with a wink and rewrote themselves elsewhere. Altogether it was not unlike a hive of ants whose movements could here and there be glimpsed through a canopy of grass.

“Loathsome to the bitter end!” Ser Lucas shouted. “I ask for your Last Words, and you hand me this? Any fool can see it is enchanted! Shall I hold it up for you to recite, assuring our destruction? Or deliver its danger into the hands of my lady? What new poison have you mixed for us, Connor? Well, it does not matter—we will not drink! Damn you, you scheming rogue—damn you, I say! To hell with your letter!”

Ser Conall, having recovered at last from his crying spell, had rejoined them at the top of the hill, holding out a torch—Ser Lucas grabbed it from him and thrust Connor’s Last Words into the hungry fingers of the flame.

At once the torch was snuffed out. The sheet of parchment was unharmed—and it *laughed* mirthfully for all to hear. Ser Lucas felt it shudder in his grasp, and he threw it to the ground in horror.

And then Connor Campfire ignited. His chin and his chest were all kindling, and they Burned Without Burning. The knights shrank away from him and took up their shields against his heat. His whole body convulsed, then went rigid, held up by strength beyond his own, and he spoke thunder, hot blood flowing over his aching tongue, the back of his throat glowing like metal in the forge:

*I have poured out my heart upon that page,
and I defy the willful flame of hate
to burn my written word! Your torch is cold
beside my passion for this land of love,
and for its fairest, truest lady liege.*

*I never knew the sound of song or sonnet
before the name O’Hennessy I heard;
now all the music calls me, and I answer,
ready to reflect for her regard
the beauty I have seen behind her eyes.
What magic it can make! Hawks turn to doves,
stale ink and parchment shake with laughter sweet,
and wine like water fills the driest wells.
Her water is my fire overflowing,
rivers running red from sea to shore.
Put out that candle! Let her letter speak!
It is alight already by my love,
and may set you ablaze if you should dare
to chill it with your lukewarm loyalty.
Ser Lucas, hear it sing! And in exchange,
I welcome irons on my rebel wrists,
for if she holds my shackles, I am free.
So bind these hands, if binding them is best.
She has this heart already—take the rest.*

And having fully wrenched from the deepest parts of himself that plea which none who heard could forget, Connor pitched forward and dropped face-first into the sodden grass, spent and still. The embers that wreathed him sputtered and went out, and the burning tatters of his flagstaff went dark behind him, for the battle was over.

They stood there in the shadows and the misty rain, saying nothing. Ser Lucas slowly knelt, felt around for the parchment, and picked it up. Ser Brian and Ser Declan breathed quietly. Ser Conall was softly crying again.

Another light approached through the darkness—Lady Amanda, having seen to the rest of her injured soldiers, made her way up the hill.

“You heard all of that?” Ser Lucas asked as she came to stand beside him.

“How could I not? They heard it all the way in Montrais, I think. Those are his Last Words?”

“Supposedly.” He looked dubiously at the parchment. “It is indecipherable, and full of foul magic. I tried to destroy it, but it...laughed at me.”

Amanda nodded, then held out her hand for the scroll.

Ser Lucas hesitated, saying: “It is surely a dangerous thing even to handle, my lady. Will you not allow me to dispose of it on your behalf?”

She looked at him sternly. “It seems a thing not so easily disposed of. But really, what threat can it pose? The bard is defeated, Luc. What sort of danger do you mean to suggest? The sort to which I might be more susceptible than you?”

A very brief and tense pause—then the knight-commander replied:

“Of course not, my lady. Perish the thought! You are the greatest of our circle.”

“Then I shall confront the menace of this giggling sheet of paper.” She took it from him. “Let us remember that we are tested in many ways, lest we dishonor our forefathers in our prideful bearing. Let us not refuse our enemy his birthright. If his Last Words are addressed to me, I shall receive them.”

Ser Lucas inclined his head. “It is as you say, Lady O’Hennessy. Please read them out if you are able to make sense of them, and then we shall execute him on this spot.”

But again the Countess was not in agreement. She said grimly:

“My husband will want that honor for himself. Shall you and I deprive him of it? We must keep our heads, my friends, and uphold the law of the land even now. Connor rides with us to the castle; there he will meet his end, not here. Place him in chains.”

There was no objecting. Ser Brian and Ser Declan carried the prisoner down the hill and clapped him in irons. Ser Conall tarried behind, still looking rather forlorn.

“Chin up now, Ser Conall,” she said, laying a hand on the sniffling knight’s shoulder.

He straightened up at once. “Yes, my lady. I am sorry, I know not what has come over me.”

Thoughtfully she regarded the wet traces on his cheek.

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As her army prepared for the return march, Lady Amanda finished reading. There was a strange look on her face, Ser Lucas thought, as she rolled up the parchment and stowed it away.

“You are...ready and well for the journey home?” he ventured.

Her reply was assuring, if somewhat distant:

“I am well, Luc. With our victory, all is put right.”

They rode silently onward into the gray dawn.

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Three days’ trek through the rain and the mud brought them to the city gates. Briefly they paraded through the streets, then the larger army was dispersed and the Countess retired to Castle Blueshadow. Connor, still floating between wake and sleep, was thrown into the dungeon.

A messenger soon brought the news to Count d’Garte in the field, and it is said that upon hearing it he smiled for the first time in weeks. He wasted no time in marching his army home, eager to meet his moment of triumph. He was delayed, however, by a number of rebel ambushes that required proper punishing, and as such he did not return for over a week.

During Connor's ten days of imprisonment, there were no less than four separate attempts to break him out, each bolder and more ill-conceived than the last. Odessa and her agents responded efficiently—most of the conspirators were captured and joined their Ash-Flag in the dungeons. Connor led them in rowdy singing and other tomfoolery, keeping the guards busy and testing their sanity, and we wonder if men bound for death have ever been so merry as they.

It is known that after each incident the Temperhand, hoping to extract valuable intelligence from the prisoners, petitioned her Countess for permission to conduct interrogations. Each request was denied for reasons that were understood without being stated. Those two women, enemies from the first, were more suspicious than ever: Amanda of the spymaster's influence over the Count and her increasingly blatant ruthlessness, and Odessa of her lady's sympathetic nature and—this she observed with a special curiosity—a new sense of uneasiness about her.

For Amanda clearly *was* troubled. Resting idly at home had never agreed with her, but now it seemed particularly irksome. Driven by some inner agitation, she went about the castle in search of something to occupy her attention. She called her advisors and ministers to council, demanding the most up-to-date details regarding various matters of state. She watched over her knights and their squires at training, offering advice which, while not unwelcome, was quite unnecessary. She flirted with the idea of redecorating the grand hall and even refreshing her wardrobe—and at this she had to pause, for she was beginning to frighten herself!

None of this busyness satisfied her for very long, and although she was loath to admit it she could see that she was trying the patience of her subjects. For a change of pace she might have chosen to leave the castle and go down into the city—but as she weighed the idea it seemed oddly distasteful to her. Why was that? The threat of political violence? Such worries had never deterred her before. It was out among the common folk that she had always felt most at home, and they might bring her comfort now—and yet...

Her irritation grew, and she retreated to the solitude of her chambers. She spent some hours oscillating between states of introspection and mental distraction, finding very little peace in either. Her head ached. Unhappily she set down the novel she had been reading, reclined upon the sofa, and rested her eyes.

It was then she became aware of a familiar sensation—that old feeling of unworthiness. It had never fully left her, she knew, but for quite some time—years, she thought—it had merely loomed unobtrusively in the background without causing much disturbance. Yet here it was now, poking at her. Why? After all of her noble deeds, why should she be unworthy to face her people? Something was in the way...something...

Her eyes fluttered open, roamed about the room, and fell upon her writing desk. There sat the sheet of parchment looking back at her quizzically.

An impassioned phrase went through her mind: *For if she holds my shackles...*

She sighed and sat up.

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“What’s all this, Guard-Bastard?”

Connor Kildenny pressed his face between the bars to pose his question.

The thuggish guardsman was walking from cell to cell and handing out amenities: warm blankets and wineskins. He did not turn around—he refused to let the bard distract him from his duties, it had happened too many times already—but he answered:

“Pipe down. You’ll get yours last, if there’s any left. Lady’s orders.”

Connor smiled. “Lady O’Hennessy sent you down here to give us some comfort? Is that right?”

The guard shrugged and passed another blanket through the bars.

“And just when I thought my love for her could grow no further! You all hear that, lads? The Countess thinks of us in our misery! She sends us warmth and wine! We must be the luckiest men in the land to be her prisoners of war! Don’t be shy about it—take what is given you, and drink up!”

“Should we, Connor?” someone called out. “The wine could be poisoned, eh?”

Connor scratched his chin pensively. “Oh, I doubt that...though if it is, I might partake anyway! As poisons go, a lady’s kindness goes down smooth—what gentler way is there to die? What do you think, Dungeon-Bastard?”

The guard gave another shrug. “I just follow orders as I get ‘em, Song-Bastard. I haven’t got an opinion.” Then, offering an opinion, he added, “Seems like a lot of trouble to go to, I reckon, poisonin’ you lot, seein’ as you’re good as dead already. I hope it does kill you, though—would save me from havin’ to hear any more of your carryin’ on.”

The dead men all had a good laugh at the guard’s backchat. A few of them took the first sips of wine, and seeing that no one choked on it, each man drank deeply. Huddled there in the dark and damp, making merry as merry can be made, they all had to agree that prison was really not so bad.

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“Was the cabernet really necessary, my lady?”

The question had perhaps a bit more bite than Ser Lucas intended, but Amanda was not of a mind to bicker just now.

“No, not necessary,” she replied, “but it was ready to spoil, and we needed to make room in the cellars. Besides, I asked Odessa to poison it. She was so eager to see if any of them would survive. What is the matter, my noble knight? I thought you would be pleased.”

He was staring at her in horror. When he realized she was jesting, he shook his head, saying:

“You are in a strangely playful mood. You must know I am not enjoying myself any more than you with this...with *all* of this.”

“I know, Luc.”

They meandered through the markets for a while, exchanging hellos with merchants and shoppers and saying nothing to each other. The rain was falling gently. Then she asked:

“What do we think of grand old Montrais as it stands, Knight-Commander?”

He thought for a moment, studying the city around them. He wrinkled his nose and said:

“It smells foul today.”

“Yes, it does.”

Lady Amanda and her knight strolled onward through the dismal streets. The lines on her brow foretold the approach of that sphering shape, though none possessed the eyes to see it who greeted her that day—else in their prudence they would have turned round at once and thrown themselves open-mouthed into the sea.

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As the sun went down on that tenth day, Count d’Garte and his men finally arrived at the city gates. They entered with little fanfare, for the city was weary with wartime and none too excited by the lord’s return. He himself was presently in the highest of spirits, the long march evidently having left him none the worse for wear—he was practically prancing on his way up to the castle!

His wife and children were there to receive him. For the first time in recent memory he and Amanda were rather glad to see each other, relieved as they were to have returned from the battlefield safe and victorious. If her latest triumph aroused any of that old jealousy in him, it was overshadowed by the gratitude he now felt as he held her near.

He summoned his court to a feast, and while they sat at table together he made the expected proclamation: Connor Kildenny and his collaborators were guilty of seditious treason, and on the morrow they would hang from the neck until dead. There was a general murmur of agreement, for it was the only appropriate end to the matter—the Duke’s honor would be avenged, and the rebellion would be crushed.

Jean d’Garte fell asleep peacefully that night in his own bed, full of excellent food and secure in the knowledge that he had fulfilled his oath.

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Connor woke with a start and sat up in the darkness. His fellow inmates snuffled and snored in their cells, but that was not the sound that had awakened him—it was something else, something out of place. The night watchman making his rounds, maybe...but hadn't he already been by?

There was another echo in the distance—a heavy blow, and a stifled cry.

He stood up, his pulse quickening. Footfalls were approaching from the corridor beyond. Jangling keys and squealing iron hinges as one by one the doors were opened. Hurried talking between hushed voices. Then someone came into view. It was the guardsman who had delivered the wine.

“Sober enough to walk, are you?”

His voice quavered with the effort of remaining calm as he fumbled the key into the lock.

Connor stared in disbelief. “Have you lost your senses, man? They'll have your head for this.”

“I already told you,” said the guardsman as he swung the door open, “I just follow orders. So don't ask me nothin'. Whole world's gone mad, I swear it. Godspeed, Song-Bastard.”

And he hustled off without another word.

“W-what...whose orders?” Connor asked breathlessly, though part of him knew the answer.

Things moved quickly. Two hooded men entered, chained him by the wrists and ankles, and dragged him out into the passageway. He stumbled along past the emptied cells, wondering where his comrades had been taken, feeling as if it were all a dream.

The fresh night air and the cool rain on his skin felt real enough to him, and he drank them in gratefully. The guards in the courtyard were conveniently absent from their posts, he noticed, as the hooded men led him to the stables.

A large sturdy horse was waiting. They unchained Connor's legs, hoisted him up onto the front, and strapped him firmly to the front of the double saddle. One of them climbed into the rear seat, reaching around him to grab the reins. The other made a few adjustments to the bridle, then saluted to his companion and opened the gate.

They rode out unhindered into the night, away from the city and up the winding trails behind the castle. The path was dark and treacherous, but their steed kept steady footing as they climbed.

Invigorated and nervous, Connor jabbered the whole way, looking over his shoulder to be heard.

“Can you tell me, good fellow—is this horse carrying me to my freedom, or to my grave? Ah well, it’s all the same at this point, eh? A mercy either way. Give my thanks to the Countess, will you? She moves in secret to save us from the gallows, staining her honor on my account for the second time. Nothing I have to give could ever repay that which I have cost her, as she well knows. But you *will* give her my thanks at least?”

The hooded man gripped Connor’s hair firmly, forcing him to look forward.

They came to that lonely place where the salted cliffs reach out over the windy sea far below. The rider dismounted, heaved Connor roughly onto the ground, and began rummaging through one of the saddlebags.

“Am I annoying you with my babbling, dear sir? One lives up to one’s reputation, I’m sorry to say. You really ought to have gagged me.”

“I have spared you the gag as a final courtesy,” she said.

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Odessa lingered silently in the doorway. The light of her candle showed that the Countess’s chambers were empty. Over in the corner stood the writing desk, uncluttered and bare.

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Amanda thrust the sheet of parchment into his hands. Thunder rolled in the heavens above as she drew forth her blade and said:

“I bear witness to your Last Words. Say them aloud here and now, before the end.”