

The People's Ghost

by Arthur Ogilvy Hasting

VIII.

We are challenged in this life to suffer those bereavements for which all words fall short.

In memory of Lady Amanda O’Hennessy and her brave knights, our fallen champions, the remainder of this page and the next are left blank; in this emptiness, let us observe the immensity of that which was lost to us at the hour of their demise.

By morning, the news was already spreading to every quarter of the city—Connor Kildenny had tried for another midnight escape, and the Countess had died preventing it. Some believed what they were told, others doubted, and they gathered by the thousand outside the castle walls to see what justice would be dispensed.

From his post, Ser Lucas gazed out over the multitudes. He looked pallid and tense. To his left stood the gallows. Buttressed against the southeast tower, they rose to a height almost flush with the battlements, looming patiently in the corner of his vision. He swallowed.

Soon Connor was brought out. Stumbling, his limbs heavy with grief, he was dragged to the bottom of the steps leading up to the execution platform. Odessa stood at the top, reading out the long list of his crimes to the massing crowd. He stared off into the middle distance, his eyes red and swollen.

Ser Lucas stepped across the gangway and began his final inspection of the prisoner's bindings.

"Well, here we are, witch-thief," he said bitterly. "You have robbed us of so much, but now it is over. Still no fear of the gallows?"

Though Ser Lucas had only just secured the gag, it somehow slipped from between Connor's teeth, and he answered, speaking softly:

"My noble knight, I tell you once again—I will not hang today. Take heart, and be not afraid."

"Damn you!" Ser Lucas hurried to replace the gag. "She was the best of us! How could you?"

"It's not too late, Luc."

The knight-commander paused, choking back feeling—then, firmly but gently, he set the gag back where it belonged. He nodded to the guardsmen and stepped aside as they led Connor up.

Count d'Garte stood on the ramparts above and behind the execution platform, watching the proceedings expectantly. His stony countenance betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

While they were tightening the noose around Connor's throat, Odessa proclaimed the last and most terrible of his crimes, which was the wielding of elf-sorcery to murder the beloved Countess of Montrais and her Liberty Guard. The crowd jeered and moaned.

Odessa smiled up to her lord. Then she nodded to the executioner. The lever was thrown, and the trapdoor dropped out beneath Connor's feet.

And he stayed just where he was, standing on the air, the rope hanging slack.

The crowd erupted. Some shrieked to behold such witchcraft, or averted their gaze and knelt in prayer. Many shouted themselves hoarse in anger and fear. More than a few openly rejoiced. Jean d'Garte merely stared.

The gag somehow came undone once more. Connor looked down on the little Temperhand with a warm smile, and she shrank away from him. She gave another order, and the guardsmen thrust their halberds into him, one on each side. Verily the spearheads pierced him, and he cried out in agony—but fire-water bled from his wounds, Red-Grief streaming down. At its touch the weapons burned like flagstaffs and crumbled away, dross and cinder, and he did not die.

Then he spoke, still smiling at Odessa but addressing the Count, and like the blare of a trumpet his voice rang out above the din:

“All this spectacle for the hanging of a corpse, my lord? I am dead already—when you murdered your wife, you slew me too! But she will not let me fall! Can you not see her, even now?”

Those standing nearest Count d'Garte—his three children, and several trusted advisors—saw him turn pale. He leaned forward, pressing his knuckles white against the merlon.

On the ground below, Ser Lucas felt his limbs begin to tremble. He steadied himself against the gallows with one hand and held his pounding heart with the other. There was a tightness in his throat, and his breath came quick and shallow.

The bard went on speaking for all to hear:

“You loved her, Jean...and so did I...and she loved us both...and if you and I had not forgotten to love each other, she might still draw breath! Ah, Lady Amanda, my Moon-and-Star! If fate had only made you a gentleman’s wife!”

From among the Count’s advisors Lord Aymer O’Hennessy stepped forward, his face flushed with rage. He petitioned his liege to allow him to personally carry out the execution. The Count, unable to look away from the gallows, nodded his assent. Lord Aymer took up his axe without delay and began his descent from the ramparts.

Meanwhile, Connor spoke out again:

“Montrais, be not afraid! I shall wage war against your fainthearted lords no longer! I have already surrendered to the true ruler of this realm—if ruin must fall on your houses, let it be brought by her hand! I leave it to my lady, and to the gods!”

And he began to sing, his airway free and clear in the clutch of that flaccid noose. The verses of “Darling Pretty” came through with ease, and it was such rapturous defiance that many who had gathered could not help singing along.

Lord Aymer emerged from the castle gates and made his way to the execution platform. Ser Lucas tried to dissuade him, but he could barely choke out a word, and his warning went unheeded.

Lord Aymer ascended the stairs. There was Connor, still floating above that deadly gap, concerted and Glad-Reaching with the music. As he was wrenched from his perch and forced to his knees, he made a sound like a plaintive sigh, saying:

“These violent times are at an end! Lay down your weapon, for its name is O’Hennessy and it will never harm me! Think of her, Uncle, and of your own children who still live—let them command you, for your sake and theirs!”

Lord Aymer spat, full of scorn and disbelief. He gripped his heavy axe with both hands, aimed for the neck, and swung down.

And he fell from the gallows in twain, his own head tumbling away from the rest of him. The front scaffolding was streaked with gore as he crashed to the stones below, and much terror did abound.

Connor slumped forward, pressing his brow against the wooden floor, and screamed—not only for Lord Aymer, but for the widows and the orphans, for the maimed and the tortured, of whom many were assembled there and could hear how he wept for them, and they wept for him in kind. Others fainted by the score, so unbearable was the sound—it grew louder by the second, keening in every ear, the jaws of pandemonium hinging open to untether everything.

With tremendous effort, Ser Lucas crawled to the top of the stairs. He reached out a hand toward Connor, shouted something that was lost in the cacophony, and then collapsed.

As the knight-commander fell, Odessa fought forward and wrapped her arms around the Bright-Banner's neck, desperate to stifle him. Summoning all of her strength, she slammed his head brutally against the floor—once, twice, again and again, until at last his wretched voice went quiet and he slept. Wild-eyed, panting, she passed the gag over his mouth and fastened it double, and all was safe.

Up on the ramparts, Count d'Garte remembered to breathe.

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The soldiers hurried to disperse the masses, but it was not easily done. Many were still stupor-dreaming, and there was no rousing them—they had to be carried down the hillside by the able among them. They made their way slowly, resenting the soldiers who did not help but ordered them to move faster. Some of the children raced ahead, eager to be first to spread the news.

Several guardsmen brought out an extra length of heavy chain and began wrapping it around the unconscious prisoner. Jean d'Garte watched from above, swaying ever so slightly on his feet. Distantly he heard Odessa speaking to him, advising his next move...what was she saying? She was so quiet, almost a whisper...

His gaze lingered on the headless remains of Aymer O'Hennessy. They lay at the bottom of the gallows where none of the soldiers had approached to remove them, fearful of risking the death-curse

on their own heads. The indignity of it turned the Count's stomach such that a choleric temper overtook him, and he loudly berated his men until finally two of them draped a sheet over the body, then scurried off to fetch a priest.

As he stood there steaming, Jean felt a hand press into his own. Odessa was looking excitedly up at him, wiping bloody streaks from the side of her face. She had come much too close to Connor's roaring mouth—her right ear had been obliterated, and the left was partly deaf. Her voice was not quiet, in fact, but louder than usual:

“Can you hear me, my lord? The witch's foul magic has blasted my hearing—but no matter! We must proceed at once, before he wakes! He is too dangerous for us to keep! A ship waits in the harbor, loaded with the bodies of the traitor-knights to be thrown into the bay—let him join them! Let the sea fill his lungs and drown him out for good!”

All eyes turned to the Count, waiting for his decision. He cast another glance down at the crimson blots seeping through Lord Aymer's sheet.

The rain had stopped, he noticed. It had stopped last night...

“My lord, please!”

“Yes.” His reply came mechanically. “See it done...for the good of the realm.”

She nodded and immediately moved off to carry out his order. Her smile failed to disguise that deep satisfaction one feels when one's ambitions are finally realized.

The soldiers followed their new directive efficiently. They placed Connor in an iron cage and hefted him onto the back of a sturdy wagon. Footmen and horsemen lined up to escort the wagon as it descended to the city streets, making for the docks.

As they approached the center of town, they met with unexpected resistance. The way was blocked by a throng of outraged citizens, many of whom had just returned from the execution to tell of what they had seen, so that now their friends and loved ones were also full of fire and had joined them in the streets. An opposing mob, smaller but more radical, had formed out of those who still obeyed,

who cursed and spat at the people for their righteous anger and tried to goad them into violence—but the people would not be so easily baited, nor would they disperse and be silent.

Unable to advance through the tumult, the soldiers looked to their Temperhand for instruction. Her eye twitched furiously. To be halted by this horde of peasants was one indignity too many. She gave the order to clear a path for the wagon—by deadly force, if necessary.

Some of the men refused to maim and kill, but there were others who thirsted for blood even during the best of times, and those savages eagerly stepped forward, swinging their cudgels and pole-arms with reckless abandon. The loyalist rabble, seeing a chance to indulge their worst impulses, were quick to assist with the beating and brutalizing. The people rallied to defend themselves against their former countrymen, and a riot broke out.

Odessa observed the mayhem with detached interest as the wagon trundled through the square, carrying her and her prisoner down to the harbor.

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Teagan of Chaconne and his Red-Doves crested the hills overlooking Montrais. The march had been slow and difficult, but along the way they had won several small battles and recruited more men, and they were now five hundred strong. Alas, those storied walls now stood tall before them, and without proper siege engines they could do little more than harass the enemy sentries with their arrows.

Teagan gripped his sword-hilt in frustration, gritting his teeth at the city. He had led the men on this charge to save Connor, for they would never have left him to the fate he had chosen...but now that they had arrived, what could they do? Attack in vain? Stand by and bear witness?

As he wrestled with the impossible choice before him, in the back of his mind he was trying to pin down an evasive feeling. Something was...not right, not quite as it should be. The source of this feeling did not yet reveal itself, but from a high roof in Ironhill he might have seen it clearly—that second sign in Logan's second line:

The Day, he dimmed! The Night, she cried!

Red Rivers rose, and sea-wind died!

~

Odessa leaned against the taffrail, her lips parted in disbelief. During her lengthy career of service to the Crown, she had always taken pride in remaining self-possessed and decisive when others faltered. Never—before today—had she been so completely flummoxed.

The prisoner had been loaded onto the galley without incident, and all had seemed well—but when they hoisted her anchor, she scarcely moved at all. The sails were fresh and whole, yet they caught no wind. The men double- and triple-checked the rigging, but they found no faults. Everyone scratched their heads and did their best to avoid the Temperhand as she paced the deck, ballooning with aggravation.

Was it elf-magic? She looked askance at Connor. Was he still conjuring somehow? He lay unmoving in his cage with the corpses of the Liberty Guard, their squires, and their steeds piled under old tarpaulins around him. His eyelids fluttered as he dreamed, and the fluttering further incensed her. Her ears still throbbed painfully.

“Wake the prisoner,” she snapped. “Use the bucket.”

The men exchanged uncertain looks, but they did as they were told and dragged him out. They brought out a bucket brimming with seawater, placed it before him, and held his head beneath the surface until his limbs began to spasm, at which point they pulled him up and threw him down hard, coughing and spluttering. Odessa watched him choke on the wet gag for a few moments before tearing it from his mouth. She noticed with displeasure how the soldiers took an involuntary step back—how they feared the words he might say. And he seemed as eager to talk as ever, saying to them as soon as the gag came free:

“Not trying to drown me, are you, lads? Don’t you know witches float? Wasting your time.

“Ah!” He smiled puckishly at Odessa. “Hello, gentle mistress. Can you hear me alright? I shall try to speak up for you, just let me catch my breath.”

She fitted her knee under his chin and knelt down to crush his throat.

“You seem to be breathing easily enough,” she said, watching the eyes bulge in his reddening face. After an uncomfortable length, she stood and let off.

“Heavier than I thought,” he said between gasps. “Must be all those sins weighing you down. But forgive my rudeness.”

“Why is the ship not moving, Connor?”

He blinked at her.

“The ship,” she repeated. “The one we are standing on. She is ready to sail, yet here we sit. The wind does not move us. It is as if we are hexed.”

“And you thought I must be responsible?”

She stared at him silently. He brightened a little.

“What flattering ideas you must have about me! No, I am not the one holding us up. It does sound like a bad omen, though, doesn’t it? Yes, very bad. If I were a sailor, I would think the gods were warning me to stay in port—rightly so, perhaps! But what do *you* think, Captain Capable? Want to press your luck anyway?”

When she answered, her voice was low and icy:

“Not your doing, is it? Let us just make sure of that.”

She issued the order to her two cruelest soldiers. One of them took hold of Connor and forced him to press his shackled arms flat against the deck. The other lifted a massive hammer overhead and brought it down several times. When it was finished, those hands and wrists that had played so beautifully were broken beyond repair. The Ash-Flag thrashed and howled, and many looked away.

His fiddle was brought out. Odessa set it down next to him and asked if he would care to play one last time. Holding his mangled hands, he said through the torment:

“The Symphony goes on, little spymaster, and the next movement is the sound of your tower falling. You have been allowed to keep one of your ears—will you use it to finally listen, here on the threshold of your doom?”

She frowned. “Belligerent to the bitter end. I should not be surprised.”

They smashed his fiddle into pieces. Still he smiled, his teeth all providence and knowing.

Next they went to destroy his infamous horn—which, he pointed out respectfully, he could still play if they would only hold it to his lips—but as they were carrying it out, it slipped from their grasp and clattered about on the deck. When they tried to pick it up, it rolled out of reach. The smasher swung his hammer, but he merely splintered the deck in one or two places as the horn turned coyly from his blows. Then, as if tugged by an unseen fishing line, it suddenly flung itself overboard and disappeared below the surf—and the men were all jinx-frightened of the bard, and he laughed and laughed with a Joy-Song that rattled every pillar of their miserable power!

Half-seized by fury and half by fear, Odessa stood over him and leaned down with dagger drawn, desperate to cut out that cunning tongue from which all schism sprang. He presented it willingly, mouth open wide to show how it had been refashioned Red-Diamond, and it spake fire that slashed her knife into ribbons, and hot blood did chasten the Temperhand’s own mouth and curl down from her lips though she tried to conceal it.

“Enough!” She jammed the soaked gag back into his mouth. “Enough of your damned tricks! It ends now!” She rounded on the men. “These waters will be deep enough! Put him back in the cage and throw it over!”

There was another moment of hesitation—but they saw the vein twitching in her forehead, and they kept their misgivings to themselves. In frantic silence they locked him back inside, took up the heavy ropes, and pulled all together so that the cage was slowly lifted up from the deck and hung out over the starboard side. With broken hands Connor still managed to form several rude gestures as they sank him into the brine.

Odessa watched his head go under. The bodies of the traitor-knights would be next. Enjoying the cheers of her soldiers, she gave a contented sigh and looked out at the harbor in the distance.

...In the distance?

When had they left the shoreline so far behind? How...?

She became aware, as did her men, that the wind had abruptly and completely stopped blowing. The ship was no longer rocking beneath their feet. They were floating far out on an endless ocean so calm and quiet, almost motionless...

In that horrible quiet they could hear the cage sinking.

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Ser Lucas sat up in bed with a start. His brow was damp and tingling with fever. The crack of the thunderbolt had jolted him awake, although it would not arrive for another minute or two.

Blairily he rolled out from under the covers and onto his feet. He looked around for his sword and found it hung on a wall-hook near the bedpost. Surely he was not too late? They had all heard it, so there must be some small hope...

At that moment the nurse returned with fresh water and, seeing him up and about, began making a fuss, pleading with him to lie back down. He had had a terrible nervous shock, she said, and he really shouldn't be up and moving so soon and wouldn't he please think of his health and all the poor folks worrying after him and—

He snatched up the washbowl she had brought and plunged his face into the cool water, bellowing like a dying stag. When he ran out of air he let the basin fall to the floor where it clanged and splashed everywhere. He wiped the dripping hair out of his wild eyes, his breath ragged and steaming. Then he took the startled woman by the shoulders and sat her down on the bed, and he told her not to move from the spot, for it was on high ground and she would likely be safe. He said a quick prayer for her, and for her loved ones and all the good people of the realm, and he placed a fearful kiss on her forehead, and she felt how his lips were burning.

Then he turned and went, stumbling through the open door and down the hallway as fast as his legs would carry him. She watched him go, her cheeks flushed with amazement.

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Connor sank lower and lower into the deathly waters, watching the underside of the ship growing smaller against the gray light above. It was not such a bad tomb after all, rather peaceful...

In the deepening darkness, he felt more than saw the door of his cage swinging open. It drifted in and pushed something into his palm. His fingers closed around the familiar shape of his mighty horn. Then It embraced him and pressed something cold and hard against his lips.

He took a deep breath and smiled into Its kiss.

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Out in the field, the Red-Doves watched the clouded sky turn black as night. Teagan of Chaconne recognized the feeling that had evaded him—it was deliverance, and it came riding in off the sea, two dozen strong.

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No man dared move who stood on the deck of that ship. The umbra had swept over them in an instant, and they could see nothing. The grave waters of the bay idled beneath them, still as a swamp-pond. Their breathing seemed an affront to the quiet—oh gods, the *quiet*...

Then another sound made its way to their ears, and it chilled their bowels. The ropes between the ship and the sinking cage were being pulled taut, and the creaking pulleys moaned louder and louder under the strain.

As they listened, their vessel very slowly begin tilting to one side.

Odessa began to stammer out a half-formed command—but the Heavens would not abide, and they loosed the wrath which their calm had held too long in forbearance.

It was a downburst of unbridled furor. How it came storming down from on high, lashing and scouring! On that midnight sea, alone with their wretchedness, what hope could preserve those souls?

They rolled hard to starboard and capsized. The galley was quickly flooded. The mainmast snapped like a twig. As they scrambled and flailed in the darkness, the wind shear splintered everything around them, dragging them down, down...and when they were crushed dead against the bottom of the bay, their screams carried over the water to Montrais, rushing into the harbor where they shredded the sails and buckled the moorings and tore at the roofs—and by this gnashing of their ghost-teeth they left their only legacy, doomed for all the living folk to hear.

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When the screams reached Count d’Garte, he was lifting a silver snifter of brandy to his lips, and it promptly went spilling across his lap.

He bolted up from his seat, looking about frantically for the source of the horrible sound. It had gone as quickly as it had come—had it even been real?

There was a muffled commotion out in the hall. The servants had had a fright as well—they were huddled together, whispering to one another. So he had not imagined it! He leaned out of the doorway and asked them who had been screaming, as if they should know any better than he. The sight of him—pale-faced, eyes darting in his head, wet-stained from the waist down—did little to soothe their fears. They could tell him nothing, and he dismissed them in a huff. Then he strode off down the corridor in search of someone else to interrogate. The wind was high, he noticed. It was whipping hard against the castle walls—

Someone suddenly collided with him—it was Ser Lucas, emerging from a passageway on the left. There were a number of startled, awkward noises as they disentangled.

“What! What the devil?”

“A-apologies, my lord! I was making such haste that I could not stop in time.”

“You heard it as well, then? Who was raising that terrible racket? Have any of your men reported in?”

“Racket...? Do you mean the thunder, my lord?”

“Thunder? What—no, the screaming, Ser Lucas, the screaming! Did you not hear it?”

“I...no, my lord, I-I have just come from my chambers. Who was screaming?”

“That is what I want to know, Knight-Commander!”

“Screaming...am I too late, then...?”

“Ser Lucas, would you please get hold of yourself! There may well be more trickery afoot! Go and order your men to sweep the castle! Go at once!”

“B-Begging your pardon, my lord, but I have no time to spare! I must go down to the city! If I do not, the people—they will all be drowned! Everything will be drowned!”

“Drowned? What in the world...? It is just a rainstorm! You must still be quite delirious, my friend—the bard’s magic knocked you about something fierce. Disregard my previous order and return to your quarters. I shall command the men.”

As the Count was saying these things, he saw that Ser Lucas was looking at him strangely. There was something inappropriate in his gaze—pity, perhaps, or queer amusement.

“Have you still not realized what is happening, my lord? What you have wrought?”

The question was impertinent—but there was a soft chill in the younger man’s voice that gave the Count pause.

Ser Lucas took his lord by the shirtsleeves and stared him dead in the eye.

“It is not too late. There must still be a chance for us. I feel it—burning in my chest, I-I feel it! Does it not move in you? You stand before me and ask who is screaming, as if you do not know. I say to you: they are *all* screaming, my lord! Screaming for mercy that may never come, for justice that has all but arrived! They have been crying out to us for years, and she alone was the one to hear them—yes, she, and I shall not refuse to speak of her! Thank the gods that you have finally heard them today! We have a chance to change our charted course! We can cut out this canker! Come, ride with me! We must go down to the city, before all is lost!”

So impassioned, and such urgency! Fever fogged his breath, his eyes almost glinting through the heat of it. The Count recoiled, yanking his arm away. His heart was racing, and he was helpless to form a reply.

Ser Lucas gave him such a look as if he were a leper, saying:

“I cannot follow you to Hell, my lord. I shall go alone, down to the river. Pray, let it be enough.”

With one hand on the hilt of his saber, Ser Lucas turned on his heel and hurried off as fast as his feet could fly. Count d’Garte stood on the spot, grasping for an explanation. Insubordination had become unthinkable commonplace of late, he reflected. Connor was to blame, of course, and as he would soon be eliminated, order would at last be restored. A good soldier like Ser Lucas, obedient under any ordinary circumstances, could still be salvaged. He would need to be reprimanded severely, which was unpleasant, but it would be best for everybody...

It so happened that the Count had been conversing with Ser Lucas in the hallway just outside the grand ballroom. A nearby pair of doors, usually kept closed, had been left ajar, and the gray light coming dimly through the windows showed silhouettes of the space within. As he lingered there in the entryway, Jean d’Garte became aware of a tall shape standing in its place on the carpet—glassy, tempest-tossed, slick with seaweed.

He was alone with it, he realized. He could hear it dripping.

The cold hand of fear seized him, and he ran, fighting off the ruinous urge to look back. Along the way he encountered several of his guards, and at his command they escorted him safely to the throne room, followed him in, and barred the doors behind them.

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Down on the waterfront, people were picking themselves up from the street, or peeking timidly out of their broken windows. At the sudden advance of silent darkness they were too frightened to flee for their lives, and so they were the first poor souls to see It.

It drifted up out of the unmoving tide and stepped ashore. Beneath the wrinkled bloat of Its skin a pink-red radiance was flickering, pulsing with life-rhythm and the shimmer of birth-heat. It was the only light in that pitch-blackness, and when it flared the thing's nightmare features became all too visible, such that the dimmer intervals between were a kindness.

It reached back with Its right arm—the kelp strands dangling from Its frame made a moist swishing sound—took hold of a thick rope, and lurched forward with it as if hurling a spear. At the other end of the tangled cord was the drowned corpse of Odessa Temperhand—it sailed up out of the water in a two-story arc, briefly resembling a gruesome sort of kite, and landed on the hard sand where it was smashed to smithereens.

It reached back with Its left arm, grabbed another fistful of rigging, and hauled a much larger object out of the bay—the broken mainmast, a hundred-foot tower disappearing up into the darkness. With impossible strength, It lifted the entire structure over Its head and slammed it down, planting it with a force that nearly shattered the coastline. A furious bolt of blue-white lightning burst from the black sky, with thunder like Calliope beating her breast. It struck the top of the mast, exploding across, and the sodden wood and tattered sails were dry kindling at its touch, erupting with proud flames even as the downpour began, flames painted zinnia- and orchid-hue, flames that drank up the rain, guzzling it like wine, filling up with it and belching it out all smoke-laughter. The surging heat sent the waters below into a steaming broil.

As It took Its first slouching steps toward the city, It blew Its horn clear and strong, and a dread host did surface through the mist—nay, they were *of* the mist, borrowing their breath and shape from the rain and the firelight passing through them. Under that Banner Burning Bright they came riding on slaughtered horses, time-armored, bearing arms beyond death to cleave off the many heads of bloodlust and fraud. At a full gallop, treading on air as easily as on earth, they carved their vengeance into Montrais. None were slain who had not wronged their brothers and sisters through fealty to an illegitimate crown: but those who had pledged themselves to the war-maker, singing his praises in

servile chorus, celebrating cruelty and poverty, preaching their empty piety, as well as those who stomach such rot without a word, turning their heads and holding their tongues, who sat comfortably and never stood, pleading innocence in their ignorance, professing wisdom in their apathy, pretending integrity in the fashionable way—to them no quarter was given, and the sea-ghosts ran them down like rabid dogs, for this was the defense of Liberty to which they had sworn. And Logan of Ironhill sang:

What shield could save them on those sands?

Their lawful lord? Their feeble faith?

All evil perished at those hands!

The wrathful wronged! The Righteous Wraith!

And how the waters around them were growing! As the dripping thing strode through the massacre, the sea came crawling with It, dragging behind like a monarch train, a frothing river into which all others flowed. Many were swept up in the stream and boiled to the bone, their skin red-rinsed away. They died reaching backward, wishing they had instead been impaled or beheaded.

It soon approached the center of town where chauvinists were abusing the people. At a wave of Its hand the square was underwater, and the wicked choked and squirmed in the scalding depths while the just and peaceful floated to the surface unharmed. Some tried to flee, but the death-knights came swinging and thrusting, and the cowards tasted for themselves the violence they so craved. How readily they pleaded for the mercy they had so gleefully withheld from others!

Ser Lucas came riding down from the castle with all possible speed, but the lightning flashed and showed him how every street was flooded, and his heart sank. Still he rode on, knowing there must be lives to save. Surely not all was lost...

When he reached the bottom of the hill, he realized with horror that what he had thought to be the flicker of lightning was actually the ghost of Ser Conall the Wolf cantering over the rooftops—

hooves stomping on the sky, glistening with wrath-fire, traitors dangling and falling from the tip of its lance. It grave-wailed, and suddenly Ser Lucas was on his back in the mud, his horse having thrown him and bolted.

He lay there a minute, struggling to catch his wind. By the time he recovered and got to his feet, the ghost had gone elsewhere—there was no sign of it. Steeling himself, sword in hand, he staggered toward the gatehouse. The iron portcullis was down across the archway. Peering through the square gaps, he was brought to his knees.

A ghastly procession was advancing, drowning the thoroughfare in its wake. The Grief-Singer led the way, floating more than walking. Behind It the pale riders were following two by two, treading on the river of sea-foam, red-gilded with the entrails and face-pieces of war-lovers who could no longer love anything. Those living who had been spared, the truly noble among the everymen, marched on foot in no small number alongside the dead.

The Wraith spoke—perhaps to the knight-commander, perhaps not—saying in a two-throated voice that would not be denied:

“ALL MY WALLS ARE DOORS.”

And they say the portcullis, not wishing to argue, hurried to get out of Its way—that it winched itself up to allow passage, or that it unwove and spread open its lattice like the petals of an flower. Some even say it shook the whole gatehouse with fear and cracked it in twain so that it fell to either side of the road, and some of the stones scooped each other up and ran home to the safety of the earth from which they had been taken. It may have been so.

As It drew near, he heard the wind whistling through the gash in Its chest, and above that, the face that watched him with knowing—he dared not look, lest his mind be lost. He bent his gaze fixedly toward the ground and wept. Apologies fell from his lips, half-formed, incomprehensible, their meaning throttled by their own passion.

It stopped beside him where he knelt, and the whole procession drew to a halt. In the terrible closeness he felt the warmth of the Campfire settling into him, chasing out the chill where the rain and mud clung to his clothes. Her skinless hand, broken, burned clean by rosy blood-heat, came to rest on his shoulder. At once he felt his fever breaking. Sweat poured from his brow, and the world swam before his eyes. Beneath the grace of it all, he could hold himself up no longer—he fell down dead-like, his sword sinking into the muck.

The Wraith turned and began to ascend the hill. The Liberty Guard followed with their great commander in tow, the rising tide bearing him along in gentle repose, taking care that much of his mud-filth was washed away.

~

From across the battlefield, Teagan and his Red-Doves heard the sound of the city gates heaving themselves open. They went forward through the darkness and, finding that the battle had been resolved without them, simply walked in unopposed.

In the near distance they saw the line of glowing men climbing toward the castle. They watched in breathless silence. Then their hearts took flight, and they rose up as one voice with a cheer of triumph and made ready to follow.

~

The immovable stone walls of Castle Blueshadow swung inward as if on poorly oiled hinges. Or they shrieked and became ghosts themselves, incorporeal and admissive. Or, like cheap glass thrown to the floor, they exploded.

Whatever happened, Count d’Garte in his cloistered throne room heard the roar of it very clearly. He scarcely noticed how it made his soldiers jump, so deeply into himself had he withdrawn. A kind of catatonia had overtaken him—he did naught but stare dumbly at the barricaded doors.

Out in the hallway, servants were running past. Some were banging on the doors, begging to be let in. The Count said nothing, and the entrance remained barred. The poor souls soon gave up, and the sound of their fleeing footsteps could be heard.

There was another sound—that of a great volume of rushing water. Presently it began to trickle through the gap beneath the doors. Then, with a shudder, the drawbar levitated up out of its pocket and threw itself against the far wall, and the doors burst open with a groan. The river that was flowing through the corridor came pouring into the throne room, reeking of brine, pooling around the pillars that held up the high-arched ceiling.

As the water streamed in, so did the dead men—shoulder to shoulder, Love-Legion, their spears adorned with the skewered remains of councilors, courtiers, bureaucrats, merchants, usurers, landlords, clergymen, weaponsmiths, and various other sycophants and leeches. They were hero-phantoms, the greatest knights ever slain in service to the Kendrelands, against whom all blades perished, and yet some of the Count’s soldiers—they are not remembered—were so foolhardy as to stand and fight them. The rest thought better of it, choosing instead to kneel in prayer before they were swept aside. Ser Lucas, floating on his back in the doorway, resembled a bit of driftwood snagged in a shallow bend.

The Wraith came forth at the head of the company, so that Count d’Garte beheld the obscene contours of his nemesis, un-sleeping, smiling with Twice-Life:

Fire tearing through the face!

Blacken-bleached the bone beneath!

What madness staring in its place!

The grinning skull! The breathing teeth!

It wore his wife’s raven hair, the long battle-braid matted with ocean slime. Its lipless mouth did repeat her Last Words:

“I LOVED YOU, TRAITOR.”

And Jean d’Garte, believing that she was addressing him and no other, flew once and for all into hysteria. He ran to her and struck her through the heart, but his rapier passed through the wound he had left there the night before, and it did no harm that had not been done already. Pain seized him in kind, and a sucking wound opened on his own chest, sickness and health.

They say he was chased out of his body and dragged down to Hell by the weight of sin, that he cavorts and jockeys with devil-kings to this day. They also say his soul was snake-swallowed like a quail’s egg by grinning jaws that did not move.

And they agree that the Wraith looked to the south where High Lord Darragh and his council sat at table, and with Its gaze It made sudden neighbors of them across the long miles between. They saw how Its eyes burned, how It took one step toward them and then walked out of the world, and each man paid with seven or nine years of his life for the seeing—and the Flood War was at an end.