

LtA Dracken's House

Lieutenant Admiral Dracken ran past his house in the concealing rain. He didn't miss it; he knew where it hid. Rain covered the flat thing like a high tide over shoals. One story and spread out over four plots, it could have been four houses for four families that could climb stairs. It was a great, broad rich house for Admirals with money, titles, and broken hips. Dracken ran away from it.

Uphill where the poor people lived he dashed up roads his feet knew without conscious thought. His feet leaped between wide flat circles of water over sinking pavestones without needing his attention, the way they had years ago before Sir Dracken had become LtA Dracken, before he was Old Broke. Before Sarise left. The old house.

Sarise wouldn't admit she had needs because women who needed to get laid are sluts. But she needed to get laid after a good, long float, and Sarise didn't get laid because—

Dracken's feet kept running while his head was thirty years ago.

Sarise didn't get laid because he was Old Broke then.

She liked being a Lady. If he divorced her with cause, she'd lose her title. If they got divorced without cause, the city and Navy held she never really had a title. But if she divorced him with cause, she would keep her title. She would be a peer, an Aristocrat, and welcome in the Castle among the sons of Oberon. But only, only, if she divorced him with cause. Only if it was his fault.

So it had been something else. He didn't put the dishes away right, and that was something. He came home tired and that boiled into a fight, and that was something and it wasn't really anyone's fault. Everyone gets into fight. But they couldn't make up like they used to, because Old Broke was broken in bed, so they made up with words neither of them believed. She said she understood, but he knew the truth.

If you go looking for a fight with someone, you can always find one. Sarise wanted a fight bad enough, and next time the old infantryman in Dracken rose to the occasion.

He'd been out with his old company, and she was mad he went out, and she twisted the screws and he got mad and twisted them right back. She rose, he rose, and in yelling he'd told her she was jealous because she'd like to service a company herself. That was enough, but it wasn't the first time he'd crossed that bridge.

The Separation Arbiter, amazing name for a divorce judge, asked Dracken under oath if he'd ever said that before. He had. He'd spoken about the tension, the building fights between them, and the Arbiter asked why a history of fighting was an argument that Sarise shouldn't be granted a divorce.

"Because it was her fault!" he'd yelled in arbitration.

And that was something the Arbiter had heard before.

"Then I'm going to spare you from her, Sir," said the Separation Arbiter, and he separated them.

Old Broke kept a house with too many stairs, and he left it up a hillside because he hated Sarise and he hated the fact that he couldn't live there. He moved closer to work, made rank like he had nothing else in his life, and bought a spreading blot of a house with no stairs to climb. He'd passed it just now, on the left, going uphill as his legs ran like they remembered how to do, like he hadn't ran in thirty years— since five days ago.

The ring had just fallen onto his hand.

God, Armist had been in a bad way. Dracken knew it, knew the way knife-work looked. She should have died, but maybe she was lucky or maybe some kind power was on her, but she'd lived until he yelled for help.

His Majesty's Fourth Dragoons had heard their old boss. They were good lads. They were the right kind of stupid. They got into problems they could have avoided because half of them had been stabbed at least once, and too drunk to care, too wired to sleep, they'd carried Captain Armist on their shoulders at a run, while Old Broke had tried to keep up.

But he had kept up. He was drunk too, so maybe he just didn't notice the pain. But examining her before yelling for his old company, a ring had just fallen onto his hand while he took her pulse. And he ran after his men and meant to give it back, but hospitals are chaos, and he hadn't had the time. So he decided to check on her the next day, or every day thereafter to see when she woke up, and give her back the ring. And he had. Checked in one her.

The next day he woke up as he hadn't for thirty years. Morning blessed him as infantrymen salute the dawn, as morning hadn't since the lance broke his pelvis.

That day Dracken had visited Armist in her coma, as he'd promised himself, but kept the ring since there was no sense in leaving it with her if she was asleep.

And the next morning he woke up like old again, and he could run though his legs ached with disuse. Armist still slept. The next day was even better, and on a lark the LtA had flirted with girls in bars and a few flirted back. Dracken could have taken one home. His body told him it was ready, but his head wasn't. So he winked and danced, and in the slow Sa Sa Sa-Ra of Amber's dance halls, a pretty girl had stroked him with her hip, and he felt it.

So he forgot about the ring when Armist finally woke up. He wore gloves.

And that thing in the hospital that had been a man recognized it instantly. And Dracken was scared.

His little chicken-legs ran up the foothills of a mountain, throwing his big body with his big belly upwards and never flagging. He didn't recall if he had run like that when he was young, but he bet he had. He leaped between the flats, stepping only in the regular puddles that marked the flagstones. His feet never lost their footing, and his leaps never missed. He ran like a gazelle, like a young man, like he used to, but he ran because he was terrified as he never had been before. Up the foot of Kolvir to the tall rowhouses ran Dracken, sweating with fear that turned to icy water in the cold, heavy rain.

Dracken's townhouse hadn't been occupied in thirty years, but he had a couple people from the Home Harbor Office come every now and then. They dusted, cleaned a bit, and replaced any windows that needed it. The house faced the street on two thick stone legs separated by an arch. There was no door in front. The arch had an ornate gate, but it only opened into the courtyard in the back. Dracken hadn't needed his key in twenty years, and the Home Harbor Office copy got more use than his. But he kept the key on his ring, and the lock opened quickly in the rain. He locked the gate behind him and passed under the legs of his old house.

On either side of Dracken's house, occupied townhouses with bright windows and crackling fires breathed piney woodsmoke into the air. Some of their gates stood open, welcomingly.

#

Central Navy's veranda looked into rain like submerged portholes looked underwater. The heavens waged war on dry land, and their armies fell on the hospital. An inch past the veranda railing the downpour was a curtain. Obrecht's nurse left him in his wheelchair for his Navy Mandated Sunshine (1 hour every 12,

Regulation #670-1) and left him. Obrecht looked like death. They didn't bother to buckle him in. He was the only one out there.

His skin hung from his frame, green in the thin hospital light. His limbs were unnaturally thin; his joints bulged. His gums had receded from his teeth, and a few mere hours ago, he'd had broken bones in his legs.

But Obrecht stood up. He crawled upright, clutching the railings of the empty veranda. He squirmed his torso over his legs, slithered his legs out of the chair's stirrups, and crept up the roof-pillars until the line between his head and feet was vertical.

His body arched, his wrists turned unnaturally. When he walked to the edge of the veranda, he didn't step. His feet slid, his toes dragged. He lurched.

Against the railing the thief put his hand into the curtain of water, and at full extension, even bent as his arm was, he couldn't see his fingers. The water was just too thick, the rain too heavy. He sniffed.

Obrecht wormed over the railing and vanished from Central Navy Receiving Hospital.

#

Around back of Dracken's townhouse the courtyard merged with the back yard, and beyond the back fence the ground remembered it was up a mountain. The bluff fell four hundred feet not far off vertical into river and rapids. Spiky grass, thorns, and gorse overgrew the bluff to the knee-high fence that marked the edge of the yard. Thorn-bushes climbed the restraining wall and had taken ten yards of the yard in the year since the Home Harbor people had been here. Dracken didn't inspect, because no human was going to creep through that without flensing his skin. Dracken thought of Obrecht and wished the thorns grew longer.

Tall walls separated the yards of the row, and the two on either side of Dracken's yard were both fifteen feet high. His easterly neighbors had a stables in the back, and their property was twice the width of his. On the west, towards high Kolvir and Castle Amber, Dracken's neighbor had been a hatter. He was quite mad. Now he kept dogs.

The two legs of the house were small rooms. The one on the north, to the left as one faced the house from the road, was nothing more than a storage area. Back when Dracken had ridden he'd kept his tack in there and thought it might still remain. The other room was a rain-foyer. It had a big formal door with metal studs forming a grid on the timbers. In old days Dracken had left it unlocked. Now the Home Harbor people drew the small bolt, which could be jimmed with a knife. Dracken entered, shut the door, ran the small bolt, the large, the bar, and then took a bench from the wall and shoved it between the latch and the Tir Nog Stoop.

This little rain room was big enough for a bench and a few people to shuck their coats. It smelled of feet. Pegs and hooks stuck out from the walls, and holes under metal grates drained the floor. Dracken heard rushing water underground. Most of the room was dominated by the stairway up to the body of the house. The lower three stairs were one block of granite and part of the floor, what Amber called a Tir Nog Stoop, but the rest were timber. In total they rose fourteen feet to the floor of the next level.

One room dominated the next level, one half the kitchen and one half the common area. The tack room on the level below only occupied half of that part of the house, and the rest was a solid rock pedestal. The oven was built on his, and by intricate work of stonecraft had air-intakes in the arch below. A great bay window faced the street at the midpoint of the house, and another one matched it one each of the two floors above. All had hoisting poles. Dracken locked the door to the foyer and ran the bolt. Again he braced the door with a bench, and his wet hands turned dust to mud. He closed the shutters and latched them, then double and triple checked every window. His fingers shook in the cold, for there was no firewood and the rain was not letting up.

Dracken stopped to listen. It sounded like the rain was getting worse. Up here it had been a little dryer than down by the harbor, but the beat of rain on the shutters had begun a slow crescendo.

It was probably just the acoustics of the shutters taking the rain instead of the window-panes, Dracken lied to himself, and told himself he believed it.

Another door, small as a closet, opened into a stairway stacked on top of the entrance stair, and it led to the next floor, the floor of offices, spare bedrooms, and a room Dracken and Sarise agreed would be their first child's bedroom. They didn't have enough stuff to use it for storage, so it collected dust. Dracken rushed up and set to checking windows and shutters. By then the rain was inarguably louder.

#

In his head Dracken labelled the first floor the kitchen level. Below that was the outside, even inside the two little rooms. The second floor contained the spare rooms and unused bedroom. All those windows were shuttered tight, even the hoisting window. The third floor held a master bedroom, a necessary room, and what would be a servant's room if Dracken had ever gotten servants. Through the conjoined ceiling ran the pipes of the row. Amber had running water, dropped from cisterns high on Kolvir's sides, that ran clean and cold as the peaks. A tap in the unused servant's room fed a boiling cauldron. Every floor had fireplaces on either side, backing the fireplaces of their neighbors. None of them had firewood.

Rain falling through the open third-floor hoisting window as Dracken wrestled the shutters against the wind drenched him and the floor behind. The wind picked up, banging shutters into his face. They smashed like fists. Dracken fought, got one shut, and the wind changed, yanking the shutter wide to slam against the outside wall. The LtA had nothing to latch the one he'd caught closed with, and stood for a moment, looking into the teeth of the gale as rain beat him and left welts on his face. Outside the window he could see for perhaps ten feet. When he'd arrived he'd been able to see across the road, and even his ten feet was dropping fast.

The rain turned cold. Slithering up the long street in the pouring rain crawled a bent, twisted figure, sniffing at each door. Dracken saw it. Somehow his ring burned, and his eyes pierced the weather, seeing nothing but shadows and this one creeping thing. Lights in far houses were nothing but gray on black. Rain beat him and tried to claw into his mouth. Dracken looked at the slithering thing in hospital clothes, turned black with mud, and on the ground, in the terrible storm, the figure looked up at him. There was no possible way it could have seen him through the weather. The winds should have blown rain straight into Obrecht's face. But Dracken knew it was Obrecht, and the thing on the ground hissed. It scuttled to the arch under Dracken's house and vanished under the overhang.

Fear emasculated Dracken, and soaked by rain he didn't know if he wet himself or the sky did it for him. Terrified he grabbed the useless shutter and almost fell to the street. He slammed them together and dropped the hooks into eye-holes. With the windows shut, the rain should have quieted. But it rained harder.

Dracken sprinted down to the first floor and peered through the slats of the front shutters. He didn't see Obrecht. He peered out the back. He saw nothing. Over the rain suddenly he heard dogs barking like they were tortured, howling in madness.

"Hello, thief," hissed a twisted voice, and Dracken screamed as he turned.

Obrecht smiled from within the oven and slithered into the kitchen, spilling black ash mud.