



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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## A GUEST OF THE COCKROACH CLUB

by M. Bennardo

By the time Senator Warren reached the sloping mud road that dropped through Funkstown to the Potomac shoreline, a deep winter night had fallen. Not a star was visible from the foggy river bottom, and even the bland white-washed faces of the houses and shops of the German immigrants were lost in the chilly folds of the night air.

Here and there, the freezing mist parted and a taper glowed dully in a window. At other times, the snuffling and fidgeting of cows drifted weirdly through the air—seeming first to come from one side of the road, and then from the other.

Miserable Funkstown! The darkest inhabited corner of the District of Columbia, far from both the pettifogging of President Monroe's White House and the honest bustle of Georgetown. And a fitting place, Warren thought grimly as he cinched his greatcoat tighter, for the home of the so-called Cockroach Club.

Ugh, the Cockroach Club!

*They* would pick a spot like this for their headquarters, as far as possible from Pennsylvania Avenue. *They* would like to

make a United States senator walk for miles through muck and worse on a freezing February night. And *they* wouldn't mind the foreign and sinister stink of the place—oh no! *They* would only make it worse.

Warren sighed. He wouldn't have come had he not been driven by necessity. A shiver went through him as he recalled Caxton's exhibition of shooting on the Capitol lawn that very afternoon. How coolly the braggart had stood with a pistol in one hand, sights leveled with his hate-filled eyes, as he methodically shot the pips off a playing card tacked to a tree.

Necessity? By God yes! Fatal necessity! Only a matter of life and death could have brought Warren this far again—to the black negative space that indicated the Funkstown Brewery, now looming amid the mist of the waterfront.

“Thank God,” he muttered, feeling not very thankful at all. But why should he feel thankful? To be driven like a frightened lamb from the jaws of one lion into the den of another—

The Potomac lapped audibly just under the steep riverbank as Warren hurried along the brewery wall. Dim lights peeked through the fog—barges bearing sandstone for the new Capitol rotunda. Warren suddenly wondered if he'd live to see it completed. Bah, better to ask if he'd live to see another night at all!

But this was no time to lose his nerve. For two weeks now, he'd been scornful enough of young Caxton—and scornful enough of the whole institution of dueling! If he'd wanted to lose his nerve, he ought to have done it when the affair could have been ended with an apology before the Senate assembly. But he had learned too late that Caxton was a crack shot, and that the duel would be a deadly serious thing after all.

Only one resource—only one man!—might save him now! And so Warren hastened toward the wan flame of the sole oil light that burned behind the brewery. It was fixed next to an unmarked door set in a blank brick wall. The Cockroach Club again, at last!

And before he could change his mind, Warren grasped the great brass knocker in his hand and left it fall against the door.

\* \* \*

The night porter who answered the knock was a great towering oval, his bulk barely contained by a uniform of club livery stretched nearly to the breaking point. He peered down through a broad white face with features that somehow seemed simultaneously both bright and dull, as though his eyes and mouth had been painted on eggshell.

Warren glared at him critically, stamping his feet and chafing his arms beneath the porter's shallow chin. Not a glint of intelligence or initiative was identifiable anywhere in the

man as he slowly turned and shuffled to the appointment book that lay open on the hallway table.

“I haven’t got an appointment,” said Warren, extracting a calling card from his pocket. Senator or not, the idiot servants never recognized him.

But the porter was already turning the pages of the book. Only after he had satisfied himself that there was no appointment—an appointment, here, an hour before midnight!—did the porter turn back to Warren and accept his card. Then waving his arm stiffly, he motioned for Warren to follow him into the anteroom.

Warren had never liked the house. The walls were uniformly dark, almost black. Walnut, perhaps, or something equally gloomy. The rugs and hangings were dark as well—blues and greys, with hardly a hint of gold or red. And God forbid a patch of white or untarnished silver should be seen anywhere.

There were no windows and no paintings—not even the colored woodcuts of Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe that seemed to hang in every other house in the District. Instead there were maps and charts and rows upon rows of blue-leather books enclosed inside dark wicker cabinets. The place felt like a burrow to Warren—or a dark and secret passage, entombing ancient royalty.

And dark and secret, at the least, it was. An open secret, perhaps, but thuggishly kept quiet enough that Warren had never heard a whisper of it back in Philadelphia. Since coming to Washington, he had learned that this was the heart of true power in the capital—this unassuming hovel stuck behind a riverside brewery, from which great waves of graft and patronage and threats of intimidation steadily pumped.

Yes, everyone in this city knew the Cockroach Club had feelers that reached to every state and half the territories in the union, but no one *there* suspected a thing. And why should they? Who would give the game away? Either you jumped to orders and accepted the proffered bribes, or you found yourself off the next ballot quick enough!

Warren clenched his fists as a blur of memories flooded his mind—former colleagues suddenly ousted from their seats. Or worse—suddenly gone spineless and simpering! At least when a monarch stretched the neck of an uncooperative vassal, the murdered man became conspicuous in his sudden disappearance. But when an elected man stood on principle and got himself turned out of his job, all evidence of corruption could be buried under the seal of a secret ballot.

Yes, it was an insidious system, and Warren had always chafed against it!

In private, though, he had to admit. Never had he railed too loudly, too openly... Years earlier, the damned Cockroach Club had permitted him and a few others to wriggle out from under the direct pressure of the corrupting thumb, with the tacit understanding that they wouldn't upset the apple cart...

Warren sighed. Yet here he was too at last, no better than all the others, come crawling back to beg a favor, and ready to do anything to get it.

The porter waved Warren toward a black silk divan, his arm making a motion like the limb of a swimming water beetle as he disappeared into a doorway barely large enough to contain him. A moment later he emerged once more and, ignoring Warren entirely, shuffled back to his post in the hallway.

"I suppose I'm to wait," muttered Warren, suddenly wishing he hadn't come at all. Just then, even the certain prospect of being shot through the breast seemed not much worse than spending another moment in a place that had always made his skin crawl. After all, his young secretary, Dardnell, who knew a thing or two about dueling, had assured him that the odds of escaping alive were good, so long as he wore a thick coat and made sure to present his right side forward instead of his left—

A grandfather clock in a dark corner of the room suddenly intoned a single clear chime. Eleven-fifteen. Six hours or fewer remaining until dawn. And of all the places to spend them!

Warren blew out his cheeks and eased back onto the divan in resignation as a black mood settled over him.

\* \* \*

The next thing he knew, he was sputtering awake, suddenly gripped in a panic. His body crawled in shuddering revulsion as his eyes popped wide and he pawed at his arms and legs. Ugh, those great wormy snuffling monstrosities! Warren leapt up, stamping his feet and letting out a cry of disgust.

He'd been dreaming the most awful dream—but dreaming with his eyes open, dreaming of the same dark room close around him and the same divan sagging under his weight. But then he'd watched in paralyzed horror as two grubby, waxen creatures had nosed around one of the open doorways—pushing, pulsing, creeping blindly forward into the room.

Grubby? No, they *were* grubs—but enormous! White, round, pale-eyed beasts, each as long as one of his legs and twice as fat. With delicate white mouthparts, ever opening and shutting, and impossibly long and fine antennae switching through the air in every direction, slithering close, brushing his face with moist coldness.

And legs—six of them each! But somehow half-formed and half-useless, dragged underneath their bloated carcasses. And their bodies—puffing and expanding, as if filling with air while they snuffled up close and laid their soft white heads against his knees—

“Nonsense!” hissed Warren to himself, balling his hands into fists and suppressing the shiver that threatened to run down his spine.

Some filthy insects, of course. No doubt he'd fallen asleep with his eyes open and had seen a couple of cockroach nymphs squirm up from the filthy floor, generated out of the muck and nastiness of the house. His dreaming and worried mind had supplied the monstrous size, of course, but the reality was disgusting enough.

the clock chimed again, twelve peals tolling out in quick succession, each one rolling into the next before it had time to fully fade away.

Midnight already! Warren had spent three-quarters of an hour dozing in the anteroom, and he suddenly felt he couldn't stand to waste a minute more. The devil take Caxtons and Cockroaches alike! Clearly it had been stupid to imagine that anyone could intervene in the affair at this late hour, madness to come back here and expose himself to indifference and ridicule after all these years!

No, there was nothing for it but to go face the duel with Caxton with as much manliness as he could, and to hope for some miraculous act of mercy. Warren looked in vain for a bell to ring, and was on the verge of showing himself out when suddenly a door on the other end of the anteroom clicked open.

And there stood the very man that Warren had come to see.

He was built on the same plan as the porter—round, bulky, high-shouldered to the point of looking almost hunch-backed but without any twist to his spine. Where the servant's expression had been dull and lifeless, this man had a face alive with intelligence and cunning, a powdered wig laid perfectly over his scalp in impeccable imitation of the old style that the greybeards of Washington still clung to.

And looking at him, Warren felt a second chill run up his spine. After having been away for so long, his old suspicions and revulsions all seemed to flock back again.

“What?” demanded the man querulously, raising Warren's calling card up to his eye. “Who is it? Warren, eh? A guest of the Cockroach Club again at last!”

No one knew his real name—this puppetmaster who pulled the strings of power. Senators, Justices, even the President—they all simply called him Roach, and seeing him framed in the doorway Warren suddenly remembered why.

The name, Warren knew, was partly a grim metaphor for Roach's uncanny ability to survive and thrive in dark corners of the government. And survive he did!

Indeed, those old-timers in their powdered wigs whispered that General Washington himself had waited on Roach in New York and Philadelphia a generation earlier. Still more fantastic rumors—fairy tales, really, not a shred of credibility about them!—held that Roach, or someone else with the same name, had bent the ears of Smith at Jamestown and Bradford at Plymouth Colony.

But no, it was more than just that. There was a physical resemblance too. Warren was sure of it. The creepy feeling he had always had about Roach—long since written off as a youthful fancy, an over-active imagination... But he hadn't imagined it! Something in Roach's posture *did* suggest thorax and abdomen, something in his cheeks and chin the mandibles

—

But then Roach moved and the light changed, and the illusion was lost.

Warren rubbed his eyes. Dammit, he was letting the hour and the stress get to him. As if there wasn't enough to despise about the Cockroach Club without bringing back those old fancies!

“Well, don’t waste time,” snapped Roach, a dull glint in his black eyes. “It’s past midnight, you know.”

And with that, Roach disappeared again, leaving the door ajar and Warren steeling himself to follow.

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If the hallway and anteroom comprised a burrow, then the office was a den. It had an earthy, acrid smell which Warren could never place. It wasn’t pipe smoke, nor book leather, nor the usual mustiness of dust and damp. It was a more like green wood and almonds, or the bitter tang of an apple seed.

No sooner had Warren closed the door behind him than Roach peered at him through slit eyes, leveling a bony finger in his direction. “We haven’t seen you in ages, Senator Warren. I very much hope you haven’t come here to argue with us.”

Warren sighed in annoyance. In his years in Congress, he’d seen countless of his bills and amendments quashed by Roach’s interests. How often had seemingly solid allies turned their backs on him, converted at the last moment by promises or threats? He would have had enough to complain about if he thought it would do any good.

“All my arguments are in the Congressional Record, sir.”

Roach threw up his hands in mock horror. “Preserve us! What we wouldn’t give if we could forgo reading that damnable Record week after week! You have no idea the tedium and

strain we endure.” Here, Roach pressed his palm to his forehead pathetically, a red silk handkerchief running across his brow. “Why, look at the hour! And still you people parade through the door. But come, come, let’s be quick about it!”

“If you really have been reading the Record,” said Warren testily, “then perhaps you read a speech of mine on the subject of Missouri statehood a fortnight ago.”

Roach shrugged and looked bored, slumping into a chair. “You were most passionately against slavery in the new state, if I recall, and against even the ultimate compromise. Against *our* compromise.” Roach tapped a finger against his desktop a moment, the nail making a sharp ticking sound. Then his face broke into a wicked grin. “Though I recall the speech contained some amusing and ill-advised personal remarks about a former governor of the Missouri Territory... Quite an entertaining aside. One hears such talk constantly in all the most respectable parlors in Washington, of course. But to encounter it in the Congressional Record in bare black and white! Tut, tut, Senator Warren!”

The blood rose to Warren’s cheeks. He hadn’t expected that Roach really would have noticed or remembered that speech, but of course the man had reasons to stay informed. “Yes,” he said stiffly.

“Such immoderate behavior, in a man of your age! And a sitting senator!” Roach chortled, evidently relishing his mocking lecture. Then his grin turned cold and cruel. “Particularly immoderate considering that the territorial delegate here in Washington is young Caxton, the maligned man’s son....” Roach raised an eyebrow and leaned darkly over the desk. “Perhaps you didn’t know that? But I suppose you do now. And does the young gentleman from Missouri also read the Senate debates in the Congressional Record, I wonder?”

“He, or someone he knows.” Warren reached under his coat, suddenly tired of talking, and flung a letter onto the desk. It was Caxton’s challenge to him, issued a week ago.

Roach snatched it up greedily, unfolding it and scanning the contents with evident interest.

“Yes...” he murmured. “Yes, indeed....”

After a moment, Warren cleared his throat. “It’s all arranged already. The duel is at dawn.”

Roach looked up in amazement. “What? At dawn, tomorrow? Today?”

“I hadn’t thought it was anyone’s business....” Suddenly, Warren remembered the shot-up playing card that had made him change his mind. “Until this afternoon,” he finished lamely.

“You fool!” hissed Roach, flinging the letter back. “You should have come here instantly! A chance such as this is no common thing! A chance—! A chance—!” A strangled sound came from Roach’s throat and Warren’s hairs suddenly rose at the gurgling half-words that followed, like some ancient brutal language.

“Silence!” thundered Roach, pounding the desk. Warren hadn’t even realized he had made a sound, but he shut his mouth all the same. “Let us think, let us think....” For a moment, Roach rolled his head from side to side, with an expression of physical pain on his face. Then he stopped and slowly raised his eyes again. “You don’t *want* to be killed, do you?”

Warren’s heart suddenly leapt. “No, by God. No, no, no.” He had begun to believe it was too late even for Roach to do anything, but perhaps there still was a chance—!

“Where is the duel? Who are the seconds? Pistols, of course?” Roach leapt to his feet, thrusting parchment and quill at Warren. “Write it! Write it all down.”

As Warren wrote, Roach paced on the other side of the desk, worrying the red handkerchief in his hands. No sooner had Warren finished writing than the sheet was ripped away and Roach held it up to the lamp with shaking hands.

“Yes, yes,” murmured Roach. “Yes, for you, we shall fix it. *This time*, despite your naughtiness in not attending to us... But first you must tell us—” Roach paused, dropping his voice again as it gained a conspiratorial edge. “You must tell us, Senator, what you plan to do when it is your turn to shoot.”

Warren trembled. He had not been physically this close to Roach in years, and the longer the audience went on, the more he felt some unnamable feeling of dread and terror building in his breast. Dread of—what? Terror of—what? Warren could no better explain it now than he ever could.

But here he was, and this man—this Roach! this whatever-he-was!—seemed to cradle his life in his hands. Might Warren truly survive beyond the morning light? If he did consent to reach across that desk and take Roach’s hand in his own—

“Well?” barked Roach. “I asked what you plan to do.”

Warren shuddered and turned half away, trying to press down the reasonless terror in his chest. “Delope, I suppose. Discharge into the mud. I’ve no desire to kill the boy.”

Roach sidled closer, scuttling crab-like around the side of the desk. Warren sucked his breath in sharply. The clicking—the chittering—the ticking of chitinous claws! How could anyone not hear it? How could anyone claim not to notice?

“But could you?” Roach’s voice now took on a sickening cajoling tone. A black light shone in his eyes, and Warren was

startled to realize that they had no color to them at all. They were voids of black, from the center of the pupil to the edge of the iris. “Could you shoot him if you chose?”

Warren’s face flushed. “You can’t be serious!”

“You needn’t kill him—so long as you can lodge the ball in him. You know these barbarian surgeons—” Roach waved a hand and grinned maliciously. “Infection, inflammation—if you can get the ball in him, we can finish the job.”

Blood pounded in Warren’s ears. So this was to be the cost of his favor! A dishonest vote would have been bad enough. But to shoot a man? Good God! Warren shook his head solemnly and silently.

Roach sneered, dropping back down into his chair once more as every hint of the beetle seemed to evaporate at once, leaving just an old, puffy, tired, hateful man. A man obsessed with power, obsessed with control. “Then you’ll die. I’ve no use for you if you won’t deal fairly.”

“Won’t deal fairly...?” Stars exploded behind Warren’s eyes and blood pounded in his temples. He had believed Roach when the man had said that he could be saved. And now—the chance snatched away again! Nothing felt real anymore. Not even the earth seemed solid under his feet. “But—but this is extraordinary! Perverse!”

Roach didn't even look up. Instead, he began sifting through a pile of correspondence on his desk. "Your request, Senator Warren, is extraordinary. *Perverse*, as you say. How to keep a ball fired from a pistol by a crack marksman from entering your breast? We know how to do it—we do, we do! But it's no easy thing, be assured."

Warren gritted his teeth. Revulsion and fear wrestled in his heart. Did Roach want him to beg? To debase himself? Warren trembled at the thought—and yet—and yet—

Neither could he yet bear to turn toward the door—and to death! How could he walk out while still any chance remained? He had to say something, if only to reclaim his dignity!

"I suppose I should have expected this," Warren sputtered. "This kind of *extortion* from a *slave-driver*."

"*Slave-driver!*" Roach's head jerked up, his eyes flared open—those dark black eyes! His mouth working nervously—not lips and cheeks, but mandibles again, grinding and churning above his chest. "If only it could be as simple as that!"

"Do you deny it?" Warren was desperate to extract something from Roach now, some human reaction. It didn't matter what—anger, doubt, contrition, hate. Anything to score any point, anything to leave his mark on Roach! "That's what your so-called Missouri Compromise is for, isn't it? To protect

the cotton and tobacco planters. But I suppose they pay you handsomely enough.”

“Pay?” screeched Roach, rising swiftly. Warren imagined he could see the underside of the thorax under Roach’s jacket and waistcoat now—the dappled underbelly, the coarse hairs studding the segmentation, the third pair of limbs straining and stretching to break free of the shirt and jacket that bound them to the body—

“They? Pay us!” Reaching down into the desk, Roach yanked open a drawer and pulled out a heaping handful of gold coins. “Pay us!” His claws dipped into the drawer, flinging the coins at Warren, pelting him with a shower of gold. “We could mint a million of these if we wished! A thousand million!”

Warren cringed before the hail of coins, but Roach was already reaching into the drawer for more ammunition. He hurled the coins with two hands, keeping up a steady and contemptuous pelting.

“Pay us! You’re more stupid than we guessed, if you haven’t realized yet—! You, a United States senator, privy to this very club, privy to our very person.” Roach stopped pitching coins at last and leaned over the desk. “Don’t you know yet it is *we* who pay, and *you* who grub for it?”

And the chill of death descended over Warren. All his pride, all his anger—it all dissolved into abject fear. He had

dared to provoke the monster and now it stood unmasked before him!

“Damn you,” whispered Warren. The floor was littered with coins now, and his arms and hands ached from where the heavy pieces had struck him.

“*You* do what *we* wish because we pay you.” Roach snorted. “Why do you think these trinkets exist? These useless tokens made of shiny metal. Idiot! Why should we bother to drive you as slaves when we can place a pile of *these* before you, and let you drive yourselves? And harder than we should ever dare!”

Roach slumped back into his chair again. He wiped his face with his red handkerchief, mopping up the spittle that flecked his lips and cheeks before he continued.

“If only you knew, oh if only you knew—! The heartbreak and the frustration of leading and coaxing and wheedling your stupid kind onward, upward, out of brutishness and into something half-resembling civilization—! The strain of *this*, these endless quibbling and negotiating over the smallest tactics, when so much more hangs in the balance!”

Warren pressed himself back against the wall, turning away, barely able to bear the sight of Roach any longer without shuddering in horror. Whether the man was what he seemed to be or not—it didn’t even matter anymore. He was power! He

was control! And Warren had always been too weak to stand up to that.

“What do *you* know of all our failed experiments? All that the greed and idiocy of your kind has ruined already? The effort gone, wasted! Egypt, Babylon, China. Greece and Rome. France and Spain and England!”

“Why not Atlantis too?” asked Warren acidly, unable to stop himself from jabbing back, so appalled was he at the sudden expansion of Roach’s ego.

“Yes,” hissed Roach. “And others you don’t even have names for.” He pounded the desk. “And *this* country, too, soon enough, if we permit you to have your way—permit you to tear it apart by passing whatever laws you like. If we permit you to throw the world back into war, back into another Dark Age!”

Roach writhed, as if reliving the accumulated agonies of history, his face still pale but his eyes burning. “Rise and fall, rise and fall—thousands of years of darkness. Those wasted, empty centuries! If only we were numerous enough yet, if only we could dispense with you at last! If only we could take our hand off the tiller for one moment of rest after all this time, without the ship dashing to pieces against the rocks—!”

At last, Warren found his voice. “What then?”

Roach merely looked back with empty staring eyes, his black irises dull and wistful now, the passion suddenly drained

out of them. “What then,” he whispered. “You have no inkling... You have no inkling how long we have worked, how long we have *yearned*. You have no idea how far we still are from the homes of our ancestors—! From bringing our brothers and sisters up here, into the light, with us—!”

Then Roach cut off in another strangled, inarticulate sound. He still rocked slowly in his chair, but soon his fury seemed to be spent. His face went slack and his body relaxed, his human qualities returning as his emotion dimmed. His eyes glazed over as he seemed to stare into the distance. Then, all at once, he snapped back to the present and said, “I must know immediately.”

Roach spoke dispassionately, mechanically. His voice was all coldness and hatred now, and Warren felt he would do anything the man said—anything to get out of that hole.

“Tell me now—will you shoot Caxton or will you die?”

\* \* \*

Dawn broke over the dueling grounds at Bladensburg Grove in successive waves of grey. Warren, unkempt and unshaved, stood alone in misery under a willow tree by the riverbank. He was numb, sick, exhausted. He hadn't slept all night, hadn't even been to his lodgings, preferring instead to walk numbly from Funkstown straight to assigned place.

With him, he had carried a bright ball of fear in his chest that had slowly hardened and congealed as the hills lightened imperceptibly around him. By the time Warren saw a cluster of figures crossing the field toward the dueling grounds, this fear had sunk deep into his very tissue and blood.

Those approaching were three in number. One was clearly Dardnell, Warren's own secretary and second. He carried a brace of pistols slung between himself and another man—no doubt Caxton's second. And the third figure? The small leather bag and portable table he carried suggested a surgeon.

But who could the surgeon be? The man did seem familiar, but Warren had thought that Dardnell would have insisted on Jenkins—an old, half-broken fellow who had seen mangled men beyond counting in the War of Independence and Madison's War alike. Jenkins was a safe enough choice—not one to tell tales, even when drinking, and able to handle anything from an emergency amputation on down, if he was sober enough to hold the saw steady.

But this fellow couldn't be Jenkins. He was too big, too heavy. His gait was too slow. His face—

Warren sucked in his breath as his stomach dropped. It wasn't Jenkins at all following the seconds. No, it was that great stupid porter from the Cockroach Club, dressed now in a badly tailored suit now instead of club livery.

And indeed, the porter was presented to Warren—incongruously! ridiculously!—in the character of assistant surgeon. The dullard set up his portable table under the willow tree and spread out his implements indifferently on its surface. Knives, lancets, saws, and vises all lay in a reckless jumble, while the false surgeon himself stood by, seemingly uninterested in everything around him, not even swatting the flies away from the instruments but merely daubing his pale face with a bright red silk handkerchief.

Roach's handkerchief! Or another just like it. But was that meant as some kind of signal to Warren? As if the porter himself weren't obvious enough! Or was it just the handkerchief that went with the livery of the Cockroach Club? An oversight—a forgotten element of the costume? Warren couldn't stop from staring at the spectacle the fool was making.

“Jenkins is sleeping off his brandy,” said Dardnell. “But I'm assured that his assistant is up to the task.”

Warren almost laughed aloud. What appalling artlessness! Good God, did Roach always operate so transparently? Or was it because Warren had given him so little time to prepare the scheme? Either way, the effect was blood-chilling. Years of getting his own way had evidently given Roach such contempt for the rest of the world that he barely felt it necessary to conceal his hand when tipping the scales.

But that porter, of all people! In the open, he air looked even more like a painted clown than ever. Or like a massive, doddering beetle perched on its hind legs!

Suddenly, Warren bit his own thumb, hard and sharp, images from his nightmare flashing unbidden before him. Those huge waxen grubs, sniffing and nosing about—but hundreds of them now. Thousands! Their pulsing bodies filling the halls of the Cockroach Club, then crowding the streets of Washington, overwhelming every house and shop, then finally, with Roach himself laughing bloodthirstily at their backs—

“No, no, no,” Warren muttered, shaking his head and pushing the image from his mind. That had merely been a dream. The real horror was different—and far worse in its way.

Yes, he had promised to Roach that he would shoot Caxton. And then, of course, that oafish false surgeon would step in and—

Warren shuddered. “It would be a mercy to kill him outright.”

“Pardon, Senator?” Dardnell was looking at him inquisitively.

Warren suddenly wondered whether Dardnell also knew that the outcome of the duel had been pre-determined. Had Roach gotten to him as well? Or had Roach always had him?

Was Dardnell following orders too, or was he an unwitting pawn in the game?

“I only said, let’s hope we won’t need the surgeon.”

Dardnell shook his head. “Or that we won’t need him much, you mean. I doubt Caxton will be satisfied until blood has been drawn on one side or another.”

“Is he here? Where is he?”

But Warren had already caught sight of a young man in an impeccable brown coat, a shock of thick black curls covering his head, standing alone a little farther down the riverbank. He had a handsome profile, a clear complexion, a serious brooding brow.

Yes, that was Caxton. His second had left him alone for a moment, gone to pace the field, stiffly measuring out the positions where the two of them would stand as they exchanged fire.

“Your pistol, Senator.” Warren was suddenly aware that Dardnell was handing him his weapon, which he grasped by the barrel, as he had been told to do. “It’s loaded and ready—careful not to discharge it. You won’t get another charge until after the first shot.”

“Is it time already?”

Caxton’s second had stopped his pacing, having plunged two stakes into the soft earth. Caxton was drifting easily out to

the field toward one of them, a pistol in his hand as well. Dardnell pushed Warren gently along in the same direction, away from the safety of the willow.

“Ten paces, is it?” asked Warren, eyeing the distance between himself and Caxton. “It looks a bit further than I expected.”

“You’ll find it close enough.”

Yes, Warren supposed he would. If only Caxton wouldn’t stand there, staring darkly like that, his brow knitted into a stormcloud over his eyes. Those eyes were too far away to read now, but no doubt they were still bright with anger and wounded pride.

Caxton shifted his pistol to his firing hand. Warren fumbled about and completed the same maneuver, feeling as he did so as if all the blood in his body poured from one side to the other, every nerve from his fingertips to his toes suddenly growing sensitive and heavy.

Next came the false surgeon up from under the tree, standing just out of the line of fire, still toying with that damned red handkerchief. Had that idiot been the one to arrange things? Or was he simply there to make sure that Warren held up his end of the bargain?

The bargain—oh God! Warren felt a surge of horror. He would have to do it. He would *truly* have to do it—or face the wrath of Roach.

“The parties will duel with pistols at ten paces,” Dardnell called out loudly. “The gentlemen shall wait for me to give the word ‘Fire’, upon which they will be at liberty to present their arms and fire one shot each.”

Warren’s hand twitched and he had a sudden impulse to drop his pistol, but he held it firm. Time itched on slowly, with no sound but the tinkling of the creek on the other side of the willow.

Blood Run, they called it—and blood red it had run before.

“Fire!”

For a moment, nothing happened. But Warren soon saw Caxton’s arm rising up smoothly, the barrel of his pistol leveling. At ten paces, the opening of the barrel ought to have been a mere speck—but to Warren it seemed a great hungering hole, immense in size.

Barely a half second had passed. Warren himself hadn’t even raised his hand yet. Stupidly, he had stood still, watching Caxton.

Warren opened his mouth—to speak, to protest, to apologize, something!

But before he could think of anything to say, the pistol in Caxton's hand barked, and a cloud of blue smoke erupted at the back of its breach. Warren gritted his teeth and shut his eyes, a line of sweat suddenly pricking his scalp. He waited for the pain or shock or whatever it was that people felt when they were struck by a ball. He imagined it would be like a white hot poker rammed home and the tip broken off inside—

“Are you hit, Senator?” asked Dardnell quietly.

Warren found his breath again and exhaled. The ball must have passed somehow, not touching him. But he hadn't heard it, hadn't felt it. Had Caxton really fired?

“I don't think so.” Warren shifted on his feet, feeling his body move under his clothes. Everything felt right. Everything felt in place. A heavy drop of sweat ran down the back of his neck, but there seemed to be no blood running anywhere. “Yes, I'm all right.”

“It looked like a misfire,” murmured Dardnell. “His main charge didn't go off, but his ignition charge might still be smoldering. Even now, a lingering spark might yet fire the ball.”

And sure enough, through the smoke at the other end of the field, Warren could see Caxton's hand still holding the pistol up—shaking in fury and frustration. And he himself, of course, was expected to stand there! To stand and wait until

either it was certain the gun wouldn't fire or until he put his own ball in Caxton instead. Anything else would be against form—an unmanly breach of conduct!

But surely this meant that Roach had kept his promise. The gun was dead, and would fire no balls—at least not on this charge. Warren would have time, all the time he would need. Slowly, he raised his own hand, half-surprised to find that it still clutched a pistol. He pointed the cocked flint somewhere in line with the center of the brown jacket, just under the pistol that was still pointed at him.

“Steady, Senator,” said Dardnell.

If he drew blood, the seconds would be bound to stop the duel. Even a non-fatal wound would do it. But no! With that false surgeon standing by, even the slightest nick on Caxton's body would prove eventually fatal. Any shot now would be a shot to kill.

Warren breathed deep and steadied his arm. His pistol had been jumping in all directions, but somehow he brought it under control. Meanwhile, Caxton stood like a statue, his face wreathed in drifting smoke, but his pistol still presented straight ahead, waiting in vain for the discharge that they all knew would never come.

Warren shifted his gaze, picking out the dumb-faced porter on the sidelines, the red handkerchief pressed against

his round mouth. There was no emotion on the man's face. His expression truly could have been painted on, like a doll or a puppet. And somewhere behind him, unseen in the shadows, as behind a hundred or a thousand other similar puppets all over the country, stood Roach, desperately tugging the strings and mouthing orders.

And every string pulling a man along with it, making him jump and dance as Roach saw fit. And Warren's own string? He knew now, after his ordeal last night, that Roach had measured him for a string of pure physical fear—

Warren closed his eyes. The moment had come.

His arm dropped and the trigger clicked, a terrific blast of fire and smoke sending his ball harmlessly into the mud.

A few seconds passed. It took Warren that long to be sure that he had really done it, hadn't just dreamed it. But yes, his gun was smoking and spent, yet Caxton still stood at the other side of the field.

Warren felt a wave of relief—and foolishness. He'd been a fool not to apologize to Caxton instantly—even if it had meant reading a retraction into the Congressional Record before the entire Senate assembly. What a prideful, selfish fool he had been to let things get so far!

So far? Yes! Even to the doorstep of murder! And he, a man of compassion and intelligence—a man of enlightened

ideals!—acting as a willing accomplice in the conspiracy. Driven by fear! Fear of death—and the mad, paralyzing fear he had felt in Roach’s office.

Only thank God that Roach had drawn the line just an inch too far. Only thank God that Warren had found the courage to balk at murder. But what if Roach had asked for a less drastic favor? What if Roach had merely asked for votes, for speeches, for information... How far would Warren have gone? How far would fear have driven him in step with Roach’s designs?

“Is the offended party satisfied?” called out Dardnell. The smoke on both sides of the field now made it impossible to see anyone clearly. If there was to be another exchange, they would have to wait until the wind blew the field clear again.

“The insult is a serious one,” called back Caxton’s second. “We demand further satisfaction.”

“Blast it,” muttered Warren, flinging his pistol to the ground in disgust. He was beyond this pettiness now. Beyond any caring about the consequences of breaching the protocol of this ridiculous pantomime.

“Senator!”

“Let go, man!” Warren shrugged off Dardnell’s hand and strode quickly through the smoke to Caxton’s side of the field. “Caxton!” he called, loudly and sharply. “Let’s end this nonsense.”

In no time at all, Warren found himself standing face to face with Caxton. How easy it had been to cross the distance! The seconds, white-faced and astounded, tried to slide between them.

“Did you fire into the ground?” demanded Caxton, his anger no longer confined to his eyes. His whole face was flamed and red, the veins of his temples throbbing under his black curls.

“Yes, by God—”

“Coward.”

Warren reeled back a step, his cheek burning and his eyes dancing with stars. Caxton had struck him across the face with his bare hand.

“I won’t fight you again,” said Warren, rubbing his jaw.

“You refuse to resent the blow?” asked Caxton, striking Warren a second time. Though decades younger than Warren, he cuffed him as one would strike a child, short and sharp, dispassionately and with his open palm. “You refuse to give satisfaction for your insults to my father?”

“Yes, I refuse it all!” returned Warren. “I’ll read an apology into the Congressional Record today, but I’ll not fight you again.”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” growled Caxton, curling his hand into a fist. “Consider the insult repaid.”

The next blow brought darkness down.

\* \* \*

When Warren regained his senses, the field was desolate. The little surgeon's table of unused implements still stood under the willow and the stream still tinkled by musically, but Caxton and his second were gone. That was only to be expected, however—the duel had ended dishonorably, and even Dardnell was bound to wash his hands of the matter if he cared for his reputation.

But Warren had no such cares anymore. It was incredible to him that the solution to his dilemma had been so simple. All he had needed to do was prove himself beneath contempt, and all that had required was to break from form. He could have stopped it simply by refusing to take the field! Or by standing with his arms crossed and his tongue sticking out! It was all ridiculous, this marching in lockstep by invisible rules towards senseless destruction.

To kill or be killed! God, what a choice!

Warren laughed bitterly, pushing himself up to his elbows, putting all thought for the future out of his mind—until he saw the false surgeon alone advancing slowly on him. The porter! Roach's agent! He, at least, remained.

Warren's eyes darted to the table under the willow again, but it was too far to see if anything was missing. Too

impossible to tell what the porter carried in his hand, whether saw or lancet or knife—

The mirthless laughter died on Warren's lips. He still couldn't read any expression on the porter's face—not anger, nor disappointment, nor menace. Nothing at all. But Warren had crossed Roach. He remembered that now. He had agreed to the bargain, and then he had failed to hold it up. Warren swallowed and closed his eyes.

A half-minute later, when he opened them again, Warren found that he was then utterly alone—unharméd and untouched, save for the red silk handkerchief spread open across his chest.

\* \* \*

It was almost two months until the full consequences of the day rattled down into place. Two months of colleagues ducking him in the halls of the Capitol. Two months of lonely dinners, leering waiters, missing invitations, veiled references, half-stifled snickers...

Two months of the bright stab of fear that Warren had felt slowly draining into a common, all-pervading dread. He could eat again, but he took no pleasure in it. He could lose himself temporarily in manic fits of work, and again in the troughs of exhaustion.

But wakefulness always came again, and it came now more often in the small hours of the night—attended by dark visions of snuffling, waxen monstrosities—

And then he received the letter from the state legislature back home in Pennsylvania, containing a unanimous request for his resignation, with no reason given.

Regretfully, Warren complied.

And now he crouched in the ruins of his office, feeding the last of his papers to the stove, watching them curl and disintegrate as he raked the coals, the fine hairs of packing string glowing and the red splotches of sealing wax erupting into bright white flame.

Then something in the air changed. Some primitive sense suddenly fired, alerting Warren that he was no longer alone. He looked up, half expecting to see Roach's porter in the doorway with his borrowed surgeon's saw.

Instead, this man was older, about Warren's own age. Slim, tall, dark. There was a weariness around his eyes but a brightness in them all the same. Certainly a stranger, but there was something familiar about him as well.

"Senator Warren?" he asked.

A job-seeker, perhaps. Or someone looking for a favor. Warren smirked to think what favors he could grant now, then

sadly shook his head. “You’re too late,” he answered. “There is no more Senator Warren.”

Turning back to the stove, Warren took up the next item from his pile of papers and mementos. It was the fateful red silk handkerchief, saved for some reason from the day of the duel. Why not feed it to the stove along with all the rest? And once it was reduced to ashes—what then?

His garden, he supposed. His grapes. He would finally have the time to try pressing them now. He ought to have started that thirty years ago, but responsibility always seemed to get in the way. Still, even at his age, he might just be able to taste a few vintages before...

Well, before it all began to feel pointless, he supposed. Before it began to feel like marking time.

“I’m just here to clean up,” sighed Warren, “which I suppose makes me more like the charwoman than a senator.”

The visitor stepped inside, undeterred. “Considering your own humility in the matter of titles, Senator, it feels overly officious to introduce myself as Governor Caxton, of the Missouri Territory.” He paused and smiled. “Former governor, that is.”

Warren closed his eyes, his body tensing at the name. Governor Caxton! Of course! He’d been too distracted, too preoccupied with Roach to recognize the family resemblance.

Was this then how it was to end instead? Would this stupid, childish persecution never end?

“Governor,” whispered Warren, “there is nothing I can say that I have not already said before my former colleagues in the Senate—”

But the elder Caxton stepped forward and put his hand on Warren’s shoulder. “Please, Senator, too much has already been said on some subjects.”

Warren opened his eyes and rose slowly. Somehow, the look on Caxton’s face seemed kindly. Warm, friendly. Warren felt more ashamed than ever. “How I have paid for my immoderate language....”

Caxton nodded. “I have heard from my son. I want to thank you—” He paused, seeming almost to flinch. It was just barely visible, a mere tic of the eye, as though he were reliving the memory of a missed blow that had very nearly fallen. “I don’t think he understands. I don’t think he knows that it was in your power all along to kill him.”

Warren felt his face go white. He might have flinched too, considering how close he had come to being felled by the same horrible blow. He opened his lips to reply, but he had no words.

Caxton trembled a moment, seemingly overcome in sympathy. Then he shook his head. “Pass it by,” he said. “For

both our sakes, Senator, pass it by. I've come for another reason."

Warren shook his head. "I don't understand."

Caxton gripped Warren's arm. "It took courage to cross Roach, as I know you did. Regardless of what may have come before that moment, it took courage to master your fear at the last moment and—and to do what you did."

Warren sat heavily on the desk, looking up at Caxton in amazement. "Excuse me, Governor. This is a bewildering interview."

Caxton smiled. "I know Roach well. I've known him here in Washington, and have seen his handiwork in the territories. Out there, he has a rather weaker grasp on things... His methods are somewhat clumsier and more obvious—much like this duel."

"It started honestly enough," murmured Warren. "And stupidly enough."

That brought another kind smile to Caxton's lips. "I've rarely met a man so willing to heap blame on his own head. Don't you care what society says about you?"

Warren laughed. "I don't give a fig for society now! Good God, society would have marched either me or your son to the undertaker, if it had its way. Society! Barbarism, more like!"

Caxton nodded and stood straight, carefully smoothing down the front of his frock coat. It was the motion of a man, Warren suddenly thought, who was about to come to the real point.

“In that case,” continued Caxton, “I wonder if I might induce you to come out west with me—out to the territories. You see, we mean to keep Roach out of there, by hook or crook. I want clean government in Missouri—and in all the rest of the states they carve up. If we can do it, perhaps we’ll even outnumber Roach *here* someday as well.”

Warren shook his head. “Oh no, Governor. I’m an old man—older than I thought I was. And my grapes—”

Caxton snorted. “Grapes! Senator, we need men who aren’t afraid to defy this so-called Cockroach Club—or convention, or society, or notions of honor—no matter the consequences.” He frowned thoughtfully. “My own son is still too young—too bound up in learning his place in society, that is. Later, he’ll grow out of it, just as I have. Just as, it seems, you have too. But for now, he cares a little too much about the shine of his shoes.” Caxton was silent a moment longer. “That’s the other thing, Senator. We need men who are willing to pay the cost. Roach thought nothing of attempting to sacrifice my son to score a point against me—”

Warren stood stunned. “You don’t make it sound very appealing,” he said weakly.

“Appealing? No, Senator, it is certainly not appealing. But you simply need ask yourself what will happen if no one is willing to act.”

Warren nodded slowly. Roach’s red silk handkerchief still lay next to him on the desk. He picked it up, holding it with something like amazement. What would happen? He had only the vaguest suspicions regarding Roach—but those were bad enough. Imagine if those half-guessed plans were to come to fruition—if Warren’s worst nightmares about the man were to chase him out of his sleeping subconscious, and into the street, into his very home and the homes of those he loved—

Or perhaps it wouldn’t happen for another hundred years or more. Perhaps they were safe enough for now, and he could retire in quiet, confident he would die before any such horrors visited the earth.

Warren crushed the handkerchief in his hand and stuffed it into his pocket. He wouldn’t burn that—no, not today at least. “Where do I find you,” he asked quietly, “if I do decide to join you?”

Caxton laughed and clapped Warren on the shoulder. He, at least, seemed confident somehow. “Missouri, of course. A man like you—you’ll find the way.”

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## THE STREETKING

by Peter Hickman

Always chuckle to think how it began.

I were finished with the nightwork, taking my fresh stolen shine through the channels back to an ale. The sun scaring the last of us streetmen away, when I near knocked her over. Defiant child, shivering and spitting at me, awkward in the morning. Me, a man thrice the width and twice the height. I were blade shining ready for a teaching when those flashing green eyes caught mine.

Thank the Gods none played witness. Few in the city would have faced me and not been quick bleeding for it. There I was, melted down like spring ice by a bone-built slip of a thing. I first figured her for a madling. Bad omens in killing the mad. Their mind meeting yours as the life leaves. Else the child were one more drop of waste for the Sweepers. Then I noticed her clothes. If she were madling, she were a rich one. I'd prised into enough bedrooms and whistled away enough finery to know Arimean goldtrim when I saw it. Nine silvers a bolt, if you lay it clever in the right claws.

“The alleys of Tel Elenor make poor playground,” I warned her, gruff despite the smile that bred inside me.

“I walk where I please,” she says, chin steady as a bench.

That birthed the laugh out of me. I sheathed my blade and bent like a windreed. “Walk back then, little lady,” I says, “where the sun shines a mite brighter.”

I stretched a hand out, only to take a cats’ rake cross the knuckles for the chance. And laughed all the more. Rose and bowed. Gods’ eyes upon it I did. Rose and bowed and walked away. Even sent a streetman back later, though without the tale of what to look for. The alley clear. And me relieved no harm had found the child.

\* \* \*

A season after I found her again. High summer and a warm day, lazy as Tel Elenor ever saw, and me with it, taking it light, resting on the circled stones of the Fountain, under the Spire. A different girl, beside the fountain in her finery. I would have passed, but the eyes caught me again. She ran a hand through the waters and flicked gem drops at me. And some impulse, like I was a lovelorn fool, found me beside her on the fountain’s edge, though my back was bared and I little liked the expanse of the square.

“And where’s your mother, little girl?” A petty venge, but sport enough. Gave me a daggerish look, she did.

“I get the veil next festival,” she said, angry, telling me she wasn’t called girl much longer. Nor was she, small breasts pushing out. But bones enough still.

Always was a poor man at such talk. Kept some chatter when I was plenty aled, for those women who needed none. I felt foolish before this one, the fountain making pale green ripples down her back.

She held a hand out. Skinny soft thing, with a braided silver ring. Nice little piece. And what to do? Kiss it?

“How many silvers?” she asks, sweet as a summer rain.

That had me smiling. Safer ground. Unexpected, but I played ‘praiser. “Three.”

Snorted a little breath, good as any House trader. “Eight my mother paid! I know. The servants told me. *Three?!?*” Breathly little snort again.

“Eight at some Darius stall. Three in the street.” Another piece of madness in the tale. To let this sliplet hear a little streettalk. All she needed was to raise that quiet voice of hers, and every noble wandering nearby would have hauled me to the Robes and the end of daylight for this streetman.

“Four then.”

Before I knew it myself I’d slid the silvers over. If you made me walk all the way to an answer as to why I done something foolish as that, well, I’d be trudging along still.

When she'd pursed the coin she held out her hand, prim. That was a sweaty moment. Taking a ring from a noble child in the Testerris square at highsun. But I was playing a game I couldn't leave. Slipped it over the knuckle and quick away. And she caught it all, the shoulder glance, the flash of a frown on my face. Had her smiling prettier than ever.

"I sit here on market days," she says, earnest as a lover. Another flick of fountain over me, like she were some Pentarch priestess and me the dirt-dry farmer. She laughed and trickled away, leaving me with half a smile and half a frown and a silver ring.

\* \* \*

It's a scattered life, being a streetman. I were grown to Quarter Leader, and whispered for greater, though I never sought such things. Three seasons mongst the shipping crews in the Dock Quarter and didn't trouble on her. Must have been a full turn and summer again when I next eyed her in the red veil and she was angry. "Good wares I've had," she says, "and what door locked on you?" She was rank insulted.

And me again, what did I do? Mumbled regrets to her like a wayward husband. She had good wares, and me without the silvers for the goldstone brooch and the copper pins she offered.

Settled myself that a trade were a trade and kept an eye for her after that. Could have commanded another to such petty dealings, but wanted her a secret. Hard to find the tongue for why. Shine I had enough, but she were a tryst all my own. A thin surprise in her finery just for me, in a world where surprises got you dragged to the Spire.

Found her down by the Kaltan corner next, and switched well. And better the next meeting, and more beyond. Wondered what her parents thought, her losing bits of shine like that, 'til I realized she was lifting them. I tried to tell her care, but she was paces ahead. "I take them in the gardens," she laughs like a trinket, "and the groomsmen search through the beds after, and the ladies shout around the hedges. 'Where's my necklace? Where's my anklet?'"

They were better knacks than the street brought, and good profit. So I switched regular with her as the seasons nudged each other and the greys spread over my head 'til they all called me *Dustrabbit*. She were past ready for the blue veil when I found her crying along the *Holdann* way. Seems she had fended well, but no dancing round the marriage they wanted her tied to. This time she called it gift—chased gold with river stones inlaid and worth more than a season's takings. Though it were a strange price she wanted.

"Take me with you."

To where? Back to my shifting world, and hardly a bed the same for more than a nineday? And what meaning else? Were we to share one now? Me twice her summers easy? I snorted hopeless, and she countered with that cutting green stare.

“Take me with you. I can bring you more. Better than this. Find me a room somewhere.”

\* \* \*

Sometimes you’ve got to cast an eye over your memory careful, as if some filching God has stolen the truth of things and set some glass bead instead. But no, it were true shining enough. I took her in. Not to my bed mind, never did know whether... anyway, I took her and stashed her with Yag. She was softish with the young ones.

“Care well on her,” was all I had to tell.

Yag sniffed at it all but she played her colors right. “Kingly raise a brow.”

“Nothing that’s worth the music,” I lied.

Yag pushed her mouth sideways. “Long as no leaves get in my gutter,” she muttered.

And what to tell the old man before he heard whisper? That the ‘Rabbit had taken to rich Elenorian girls. Or worse, that the ‘Rabbit was softening. Taking in strays for a few tears and a brooch. So I went to the tanner’s yard with my hand

cross my nose, eyes watering, and stood amongst the pigshit and talked through the faded curtain to the Streetking.

“I took a new streetman. From good family. She knows the ways of the Hill Streets and the High Quarter. Windows and sly servants and more. I’ll pay her keep and take the Knives’ share.”

Liked it little, hoarse coughing old goat that he was. Suggested she was best sent back. I laid the shine out for him, though. He never could set his eyes much past the glint of things.

He must have thought the ‘Rabbit was playing at muscle. But who’d want that hidden life? The unease of it. The tickle on your shoulder. Like you should be glancing, waiting for the blade. He could have it, and let the Gods piss gold on him.

\* \* \*

I were never one for teasing out knots. Know a little, know enough. Mother telt me that, and I stood for it. Liked a little comfort, a little respect in the right places. All I ever needed. Happy enough with the night games, to hear the sleeper breathing easy while I snatched a little shine. The ales in the early daylight, sifting through the coppers for the silvers. Paid my share, always paid my share.

Little wanted the part of the ‘King’s Voice, but it came to me. I thought it strange I were chosen and telt her so. “You big

fool, ‘Rabbit,’ she says, jingling a laugh at me. No-one called me ‘Rabbit. It were Dustrabbit or master, them that dared utter a word before me. Only her, saying it soft as fur lining. “That’s exactly why you were chosen. ‘Ever the ‘King expects the knife.’ You know the saying. He chose you because he knows you do not wish his crown. You are his castellan. You are his inner keep. Whoever comes for him now, comes through you.”

Sense enough, when she laid the tiles of it out for me, but it left me squirmish. Knew enough to know I were raised up beyond my promise. I knew the streets. I were a quick strike and a wary eye, but this... this were a murky world I had never learned the mapping of. I wanted out of it. Told her I’d give it away, but she shook her head, smiling her half-mouth smile. “The ‘King will have you killed if you do.”

“And the Quarters will if I don’t.” I don’t know why I played argument with that one. Never won that battle in all the seasons I’d tilted with her. Like a knife against a Dharian longsword.

“I’ll help you,” she says.

\* \* \*

And help she did, soon enough. Sitting one evening, on the wall that circles the Grovan hill where they scribe the names of the noble dead, wet sun bringing winter. I were tying up the

market business with her, she drumming her heels on the founders of the city.

She put a hand on my arm. And me jolted like a beestung packmule. She never touched. Least not any streetman I'd heard tell of, girded nor gowned. Streetboys called her Lady Chaste when they were nicest of it. Never stopped 'em following her, running tricks and watches for her though. Still, jolted me, and wouldn't like to think all the way to why.

"Don't go," she says, earnest as a priest.

"Where?" I asks.

"The Darius taking. Don't do it."

"And who will? You plying for the job?" Tried the jest of it.

"They'll try your back tomorrow. The Quarter Leaders gathered last night. If you must go, go guarded." And off the wall she drops, quick as a midnight tickle, and gone.

I watched her walk away. She never looked back. Something I always shared with her. Ply the window and get through. Never straddle the sill. Still, her warning twisted, but I were proud-built and knew the slope fear will slide you down. If I were to shy from this, were I to cower from the next taking, and the next beyond?

I twisted with it all day. Still, I went that night but double armed and third-eyed. And well, well warned too. They sent me

in first, said I were better tempered for finding trading house steel. That's when I knew it were dismal.

I remember it sharp as a Dharian edge. A dark warren of rooms. I held the shadows in the doorway 'til they flared the tinder to the torch. A hand of guards waiting, grinning in the shadows. I tried the door, but it were barred behind me. Trapped, as she gleaned I would be. But not bleeding yet, this 'Rabbit.

I flicked away two of the throwing knives I'd brought. Caught the one with the torch. No kill strike—I were never one for throwing—but enough to drop her, and her torch too. In the half dark I tumbled and flicked again, and was up the wall and in the rafters fore their bolts found the wood.

I'd taken a little care. Knew the place were nothing but converted stables. Walls below but clear roof above. I played acrobat on the beams and were long past them before they figured the play. Prised some shingles in the far corner, and I were gone.

\* \* \*

There were blades out for me after that. I had friends enough, but few want to knock knives with a Streetking, so I hid careful, though I couldn't hide forever. But she found me. Sent the half-child with his messed-up mouth. He dribbled out a meeting place and hunched off.

So there's me, wrapped dark, under the Watergate where the Sweepers push waste into the river, sitting a poor tile in this game, sweating on her like a waiting lover. She came in her blue coat, folding out a plan like an Arnor mapweaver. Here and here, and who to sign to, and who would look away, and what needed done.

"The Streetking must die," she says, simple as a finger.

"And me the blade for it?"

"That, or feel the other end." She smiles.

So two days later, there's me crawling down the Diarn passage, back glancing, fearful on the pavements of my own city. A breath and a word at the side of the smithworkings, where rooms and rooms of dull-faced silver shiners play their part spreading Elenor brightwares to the world. Every watcher turned their face, every door opened quiet, and I were nodded through.

None see the Streetking, that's the rule of it. Even the Voice talks to the 'King only through a door or a curtain. Takes the word to the street, who to hit and who to leave, what guards are lazy for a coin or two. But we've always known, 'til now, who the 'King was. Forgotten the lines of the face a little, but the next 'King were always the old Voice or one of the Quarter Leaders.

He was older than I remembered him, when I tickled the lock and came for him, blade sharp and hungry. Old and glaze-eyed so that even fear never reached his face when I sunk the blade under his cage and the old goat knew the dark blood for death. Gave a grimace like relief, he did. I knew for certain then. I never wanted that. Lonely, grey dying. The knife no more than easy escape. When I go, I want life bleeding hard and sad out of me. Swore that to myself.

But it raised a beggar for the asking. Which Quarter Leader the next 'King? Fool I ever was. The King's killer it were now, and me rather with the Robes dragging me to the Spire than that. They made the Kingsign to me, all the way back through the silver sprinkled rooms. Dazed all the way.

She were there, in the stables behind the stonehaulers where the Corsarian greathorses mused on their oats and waited for the yoking. I threw the blade down angry at it all, at the workings of things.

"Never wanted this," I says. "Never more than what I had. And what now?"

She touched me gentle on my cheek ragged with beard. Kissed me like a tickle. "I'll play 'King for a time," she says.

\* \* \*

And there you have it all. There it's been for nine summers and a few. Half the streetmen think me Streetking still, and the

others... well it matters small. She's full woman now, and where she stays and who she is with, I couldn't say if you took a flail to me. Every meeting place is different, and I never know when the sign will come. She leaves me with the daily grub of things. Only calls when something glints under the straw.

And I'd lay my life for this girl in a moment. For those green eyes and that mineshaft mind. That little scratchling waif. Bones and brave and beautiful. They would muddle their eyes and look again, were the world to know it.

I am Dustrabbit still, but she has become the Streetking.

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## COVER ART

“Golden Age,” by Juan Carlos Barquet



*Juan Carlos Barquet is an artist from Mexico City. He has done illustrations for books, album covers and tabletop games for clients such as Fantasy Flight Games; concept art and matte paintings for short films supervised by DreamWorks Animation and ILM, and exhibitions at Art Takes Times Square (New York, 2013), Parallax Art Fair (London, 2012), Euskal Exhibition Center (Bilbao, 2012) and more. View more of his work at [jcbarquet.com](http://jcbarquet.com).*

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