Ashes to Ashes

Roger Zelazny

The radio spat static. Croyd Crenson reached out, switched it off, and threw it across the room toward the wastebasket beside the dresser. He took it as a good omen that it went in.

He stretched then, flipped back the covers, and regarded his pale nude body. Everything seemed to be in place and normally proportioned. He willed himself to levitate and nothing happened, so he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. He ran his hand through his hair, pleased to find that he possessed hair. Waking up was always an adventure.

He tried to make himself invisible, to melt the wastebasket with a thought and to cause sparks to arc between his fingertips. None of these things occurred.

He rose and made his way to the bathroom. As he drank glass after glass of water he studied himself in the mirror. Light hair and eyes this time, regular features; fairly good-looking, actually. He judged himself to be a little over six feet in height. Well-muscled, too. There ought to be something in the closet that would fit. He’d been about this height and build before.

It was a gray day beyond the window with patches of slushy-looking snow lining the sidewalk across the street. Water trickled in the gutter. Croyd halted on his way to the closet to withdraw a heavy steel rod from a crate beneath his writing table. Almost casually, he bent the rod in half and then twisted it. The strength had carried over yet again, he reflected, as the metal pretzel joined the radio in the wastebasket. He located a shirt and trousers that fit him well, and a tweed jacket only slightly tight in the shoulders. He turned his attention then to his large collection of shoes, and after a time he came up with a comfortable pair.

It was a little after eight o’clock according to his Rolex, and this being winter and daylight it meant morning. His stomach rumbled. Time for breakfast and orientation. He checked his cash cache and withdrew a couple of hundred dollars. Getting low, he mused. Have to visit the bank later. Or maybe rob one. The stocks were taking a beating, too, the last time around. Later…

He equipped himself with a handkerchief, a comb, his keys, and a small plastic bottle of pills. He did not like to carry identification of any sort. No need for an overcoat. Temperature extremes seldom bothered him.

He locked the door behind him, negotiated the hall and descended the stairs. He turned left when he reached the street, facing into a sharp wind, and he began walking down the Bowery. Leaving a dollar in the outstretched hand of a tall, cadaverous-looking joker with a nose like an icicle⁠—who stood as still as a totem pole in the doorway of a closed mask shop⁠—Croyd asked the man what month it was.

“December,” the figure said without moving its lips. “Merry Christmas.”

“Yeah,” Croyd said.

He tried a few more simple tests as he headed for his first stop, but he could not break the empty whisky bottles in the gutter with a thought, nor set fire to any of the piles of trash. He attempted to utter ultrasounds but only produced squeaks.

He hiked down to the newsstand at Hester Street where short, fat Jube Benson sat reading one of his own papers. Benson had on a yellow and orange Hawaiian shirt beneath a light-blue summer suit; bristles of red hair protruded from beneath his porkpie hat. The temperature seemed to bother him no more than it did Croyd. He raised his dark, blubbery, pocked face and displayed a pair of short, curving tusks as Croyd stopped before the stand.

“Paper?” he asked.

“One of each,” Croyd said, “as usual.”

Jube’s eyes narrowed slightly as he studied the man before him. Then, “Croyd?” he asked.

Croyd nodded.

“It’s me, Walrus. How’re they hanging?”

“Can’t complain, fella. Got yourself a pretty one this time.”

“Still test-driving it,” Croyd said, gathering a stack of papers.

Jube showed more tusk.

“What’s the most dangerous job in Jokertown?” he asked.

“I give up.”

“Riding shotgun on the garbage truck,” he said. “Hear what happened to the gal who won the Miss Jokertown contest?”

“What?”

“Lost her title when they learned she’d posed nude for Poultry Breeder’s Gazette.”

“That’s sick, Jube,” said Croyd, quirking a smile.

“I know. We got hit by a hurricane while you were asleep. Know what it did?”

“What?”

“Four million dollars’ worth of civic improvement.”

“All right, already!” Croyd said. “What do I owe you?”

Jube put down his paper, rose, and waddled to the side of the kiosk.

“Nothin’,” he said. “I want to talk to you.”

“I’ve got to eat, Jube. When I wake up I need a lot of food in a hurry. I’ll come back later, all right?”

“Is it okay if I join you?”

“Sure. But you’ll lose business.”

Jube began closing the stand.

“That’s okay,” he said. “This is business.”

Croyd waited for him to secure the stand, and they walked two blocks to Hairy’s Kitchen.

“Let’s take that booth in the back,” Jube said.

“Fine. No business till after my first round of food, though, okay? I can’t concentrate with low blood sugar, funny hormones and lots of transaminases. Let me get something else inside first.”

“I understand. Take your time.”

When the waiter came by, Jube said that he had already eaten and ordered only a cup of coffee which he never touched. Croyd started with a double order of steak and eggs and a pitcher of orange juice.

Ten minutes later when the pancakes arrived, Jube cleared his throat.

“Yeah,” Croyd said. “That’s better. So what’s bothering you, Jube?”

“Hard to begin,” said the other.

“Start anywhere. Life is brighter for me now.”

“It isn’t always healthy to get too curious about other people’s business around here…”

“True,” Croyd agreed.

“On the other hand, people love to gossip, to speculate.”

Croyd nodded, kept eating.

“It’s no secret about the way you sleep, and that’s got to keep you from holding a regular job. Now, you seem more of an ace than a joker, overall. I mean, usually you look normal but you’ve got some special talent.”

“I haven’t got a handle on it yet, this time around.”

“Whatever. You dress well, you pay your bills, you like to eat at Aces High, and that ain’t a Timex you’re wearing. You’ve got to do something to stay on top⁠—unless you inherited a bundle.”

Croyd smiled.

“I’m afraid to look at the Wall Street Journal,” he said, touching the stack of papers at his side. “I may have to do something I haven’t done in a while if it says what I think it’s going to say.”

“May I assume then that when you work your employment is sometimes somewhat less than legal?”

Croyd raised his head, and when their eyes met Jube flinched. It was the first time Croyd realized that the man was nervous. He laughed.

“Hell, Jube,” he said. “I’ve known you long enough to know you’re no cop. You want something done, is that it? If it involves stealing something, I’m good at that. I learned from an expert. If someone’s being blackmailed I’ll be glad to get the evidence back and scare the living shit out of the person doing it. If you want something removed, destroyed, transported, I’m your man. On the other hand, if you want somebody killed I don’t like to do that. But I could give you the names of a couple of people it wouldn’t bother.”

Jube shook his head.

“I don’t want anybody killed, Croyd. I do want something stolen, though.”

“Before you go into any details, I’d better tell you that I come high.”

Jube showed his tusks.

“The⁠—uh⁠—interests I represent are prepared to make it worth your while.”

Croyd finished the pancakes, drank coffee, and ate a Danish while he waited for the waffles.

“It’s a body, Croyd,” Jube said at last.

“What?”

“A corpse.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There was a guy who died over the weekend. Body was found in a dumpster. No ID. It’s a John Doe. Over at the morgue.”

“Jeez, Jube! A body? I never stole a body before. What good is it to anybody?”

Jube shrugged.

“They’re willing to pay real well for it⁠—and for whatever possessions the guy had with him. That’s all they wanted said.”

“I guess it’s their business what they want it for. But what kind of money are they talking?”

“It’s worth fifty grand to them.”

“Fifty grand? For a stiff ?” Croyd stopped eating and stared. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nope. I can give you ten now and forty when you deliver.”

“And if I can’t pull it off ?”

“You get to keep the ten, for trying. You interested?”

Croyd took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Yeah,” he said then. “I’m interested. But I don’t even know where the morgue is.”

“It’s in the medical examiner’s office at Five-Twenty First Avenue.”

“Okay. Say I go over there and⁠—”

Hairy came by and laid a plate of sausages and hash browns before Croyd. He refilled his coffee cup and placed several bills and some coins on the table.

“Your change, sir.”

Croyd looked at the money.

“What do you mean?” he said. “I didn’t pay you yet.”

“You gave me a fifty.”

“No, I didn’t. I’m not finished.”

It looked as if Hairy smiled, deep within the dark dense pelt that covered him entirely.

“I wouldn’t stay in business long if I gave away money,” he said. “I know when I’m making change.”

Croyd shrugged and nodded.

“I guess so.”

Croyd furrowed his brows when Hairy had left, and he shook his head.

“I didn’t pay him, Jube,” he said.

“I don’t remember seeing you pay him either. But he said a fifty… That’s hard to forget.”

“Peculiar, too. Because I was thinking of breaking a fifty here when I was done.”

“Oh? Do you recall when the thought passed through your mind?”

“Yeah. When he brought the waffles.”

“Did you actually have a mental image of taking out a fifty and handing it to him?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting…”

“What do you mean?”

“I think that maybe your power this time⁠—some kind of telepathic hypnosis. You’ll just have to play with it a bit to get the hang of it, to find its limits.”

Croyd nodded slowly

“Please don’t try it on me, though, I’m screwed up enough as it is today.”

“Why? You got some stake in this corpse business?”

“The less you know the better, Croyd. Believe me.”

“Okay, I can see that. I don’t really care, anyway. Not for what they’re paying,” he said. “So I take this job. Say everything goes smoothly and I’ve got this body. What do I do with it?”

Jube withdrew a pen and a small notebook from an inside pocket. He wrote for a moment, tore off a sheet, and passed it to Croyd. Then he dug in his side pocket, produced a key, and put it next to Croyd’s plate.

“That address is about five blocks from here,” he said. “Rented room, ground floor. The key fits the lock. You take it there, lock it in, and come tell me at the stand.”

Croyd began eating again. After a time, he said, “Okay.”

“Good.”

“But they’ve probably got more than one John Doe in there this time of year. Winos who freeze to death⁠—you know. How do I know which one is the right one?”

“I was getting to that. This guy’s a joker, see? A little fellow. About five feet tall, maybe. Looks kind of like a big bug⁠—legs that fold up like a grasshopper’s, an exoskeleton with some fur on it, four fingers on his hands with three joints each, eyes on the sides of his head, vestigial wings on back…”

“I get the picture. Sounds hard to confuse with the standard model.”

“Yes. Shouldn’t weigh much either.”

Croyd nodded. Someone in the front of the restaurant said, “…pterodactyl!” and Croyd turned his head in time to see the winged shape flit by the window.

“That kid again,” Jube said.

“Yeah. Wonder who he’s pestering this time?”

“You know him?”

“Uh-huh. He shows up every now and then. Kind of an aces fan. At least he doesn’t know what I look like this time. Anyway… How soon do they need this body?”

“The sooner the better.”

“Anything you can tell me about the setup at the morgue?”

Jube nodded slowly.

“Yes. It’s a six-story building. Labs and offices and such, upstairs. Reception and viewing area on the ground floor. They keep the bodies in the basement. The autopsy rooms are down there, too. They have a hundred and twenty-eight storage compartments, with a walk-in refrigerator with shelves for kids’ bodies. When somebody has to view a body for ID purposes, they put it on a special elevator which lifts it to a glass-enclosed chamber in a waiting room on the first floor.”

“So you’ve been there?”

“No, I read Milton Helpern’s memoirs.”

“You’ve got what I’d call a real liberal education,” Croyd said. “I should probably read more myself.”

“You can buy a lot of books for fifty grand.”

Croyd smiled.

“So, we’ve got a deal?”

“Let me think about it a little longer⁠—over breakfast⁠—while I figure out just how my talent works. I’ll come by your stand when I’m done. When would I pick up the ten grand?”

“I can get it by this afternoon.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in a hour or so.”

Jube nodded, raised his massive bulk, slid out of the booth.

“Watch your cholesterol,” he said.

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Blue cracks had appeared in the sky’s gray shell, and sunlight found its way through to the street. The sound of trickling water came steadily now from somewhere to the rear of the newsstand. Jube would normally have thought it a pleasant background to the traffic noises and other sounds of the city, save that a small moral dilemma had drifted in on leathery wings and destroyed the morning. He did not realize he had made a decision in the matter until he looked up and saw Croyd looking at him, smiling.

“No problem,” said Croyd. “It’ll be a piece of cake.”

Jube sighed.

“There’s something I’ve got to tell you first,” he said.

“Problems?”

“Nothing that bears directly on the terms of the job,” Jube explained. “But you may have a problem you didn’t know you had.”

“Like what?” Croyd said, frowning.

“That pterodactyl we saw earlier…?”

“Yeah?”

“Kid Dinosaur was headed here. I found him waiting when I got back. He was looking for you.”

“I hope you didn’t tell him where to find me.”

“No, I wouldn’t do that. But you know how he keeps tabs on aces and high-powered jokers…?”

“Yeah. Why couldn’t he be into baseball players or war criminals?”

“He saw one he wanted you to know about. He said that Devil John Darlingfoot got out of the hospital a month or so ago and dropped out of sight. But he’s back now. He’d seen him near the Cloisters earlier. Says he’s heading for Midtown.”

“Well, well. So what?”

“So he thinks he’s looking for you. Wants a rematch. The Kid thinks he’s still mad over what you did to him the day the two of you trashed Rockefeller Plaza.”

“So let him keep looking. I’m not a short, heavyset, dark-haired guy anymore. I’ll go get the stiff now⁠—before someone buys him a short bier.”

“Don’t you want the money?”

“You already gave it to me.”

“When?”

“What’s your first memory of my coming back here?”

“I looked up about a minute ago and saw you standing there smiling. You said there was no problem. You called it ‘a piece of cake.’ ”

“Good. Then, it’s working.”

“You’d better explain.”

“That’s the place where I wanted you to start remembering. I’d been here for about a minute before that, and I talked you into giving me the money and forgetting about it.”

Croyd withdrew an envelope from an inner pocket, opened it, and displayed cash.

“Good Lord, Croyd! What else did you do during that minute?”

“Your virtue’s intact, if that’s what you mean.”

“You didn’t ask me any questions⁠—about…?”

Croyd shook his head.

“I told you I didn’t care who wants the body or why. I really don’t like to burden myself with other people’s concerns. I’ve enough problems of my own.”

Jube sighed.

“Okay. Go do it, boy.”

Croyd winked.

“Not to worry, Walrus. Consider it done.”

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Croyd walked until he came to a supermarket, went in and purchased a small package of large plastic trash bags. He folded one and fitted it into his inside jacket pocket. He left the rest in a waste bin. Then he walked to the next major intersection and hailed a cab.

He rehearsed his strategy as he rode across town. He would enter the place and use his latest power to persuade the receptionist that he was expected, that he was a pathologist from Bellevue who had been called over by a friend on the staff to consult on a forensic peculiarity. He toyed for a moment with the names Malone and Welby, settled upon Anderson. He would then cause the receptionist to summon someone with the authority to take him downstairs and find him his John Doe. He would place that person under control, get the body and its belongings, transfer it to a baggy, and walk out, causing everyone he passed to forget he had been by. Certainly a lot simpler than more strenuous tactics he had had to employ over the years. He smiled at the classic simplicity of it⁠—no violence, no memory…

When he arrived at the aluminum-paneled building of blue and white glazed brick, he told the cab driver to go on by and drop him at the next corner. There were two police cars parked in front and a shattered door lay before the place. The presence of police at a morgue did not seem that untoward an occurrence, but the broken door aroused his sense of caution. He handed the driver a fifty and told him to wait. He strolled past the place once and looked inside. Several of the police were visible, apparently talking with employees.

This did not seem an ideal time to proceed with his plan. On the other hand, he could not afford to go away without finding out what had happened. So he turned when he reached the corner, and headed back. He entered without hesitation, looking about quickly.

A man in civvies who was standing with the police turned suddenly in his direction and stared. Croyd did not like that stare at all. It pulled the floor out from under his stomach and made his hands tingle.

He reached out immediately with his new power, heading directly toward the man, forcing a smile as he moved.

It’s okay. You want to talk to me and do exactly as I say. Wave your hand now, say, “Hi, Jim!” in a loud voice and walk over to the side there with me.

“Hi, Jim!” the man said, moving to join Croyd.

No! Judas thought. Too damned fast. Nailed me as soon as I spotted him… We can use this guy…

“Plainclothes?” Croyd asked him.

“Yes,” the man felt himself wanting to answer.

“What’s your name?”

“Matthias.”

“What happened here?”

“A body was stolen.”

“Which one?”

“A John Doe.”

“Can you describe it?”

“Looked like a big bug⁠—grasshopper legs.”

“Shit!” Croyd said. “What about his possessions?”

“There weren’t any possessions.”

Several of the uniformed officers were glancing in their direction now. Croyd gave his next order mentally. Matthias turned toward the uniforms.

“Just a minute, guys,” he called. “Business.”

Damn! he thought. This one will come in handy. You can’t hold me like this forever, fella…

“How’d it happen?” Croyd asked.

“A guy came in here a little while ago, went downstairs, forced an attendant to show him the compartment, took the body out, and left with it.”

“Nobody tried to stop him?”

“Sure they did. Four of them are on their way to the hospital as a result. The guy was an ace.”

“Which one?”

“The one who wrecked Rockefeller Plaza last fall.”

“Darlingfoot?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.” Don’t…Don’t ask any more⁠—whether I’m involved, whether I hired him, whether I’m running a cover-up now…

“Which way did he go with it?”

“Northwest.”

“On foot?”

“That’s what the witnesses said⁠—big, twenty-foot leaps.” As soon as you let me go, sucker, I’m calling in the nukes on you.

“Hey, why’d you turn and look at me the way you did when I came in?”

Damn!

“I felt that an ace had just walked through the door.”

“How’d you know?”

“I’m an ace myself. That’s my power⁠—spotting other aces.”

“Useful talent for a cop, I guess. Well, listen close. You are now going to forget you ever met me, and you won’t notice me leaving. You’re just going to walk on over to that fountain and get a drink, then walk back and join your buddies. If anyone asks who you were talking to, you’ll say it was your bookie and forget about it. You do that now. Forget!”

Croyd turned and walked away. Judas realized he was thirsty.

Outside, Croyd walked to his cab, climbed in, slammed the door and said, “Northwest.”

“What do you mean?” the driver asked him.

“Just head uptown and I’ll tell you what to do as we go along.”

“You’re the boss.”

The car jerked into motion.

Over the next mile Croyd had the driver jog westward, as he searched for signs of the other’s passage. It seemed unlikely that Devil John would be using public transportation when carrying a corpse. On the other hand, it was possible he’d had an accomplice waiting with a vehicle. Still, knowing the man’s chutzpah, it did not seem out of the question for him to be hoofing it with the body. He knew that there was very little anyone could do to stop him if he did not wish to be stopped. Croyd sighed as he scanned the way ahead. Why were simple things never easy?

Later, as they were nearing Morningside Heights, the driver muttered, “…one of them damn jokers!”

Croyd followed the man’s gesture to where the form of a pterodactyl was in sight for several moments before passing behind a building.

“Follow it!” Croyd said.

“The leather bird?”

“Yes!”

“I’m not sure where it is now.”

“Find it!”

Croyd waved another bill at the man, and the tires screeched and a horn blared as the cab took a turn. Croyd’s gaze swept the skyline, but the Kid was still out of sight. He halted the cab moments later to question an oncoming jogger. The man popped an earplug, listened a moment, then pointed to the east and took off again.

Several minutes later, he caught sight of the angular birdform, to the north, moving in wide circles. This time they were able to keep track of it for a longer while, and to gain on it.

When they came abreast of the area the pterodactyl circled, Croyd called to the driver to slow. There was still nothing unusual in sight on the ground, but the saurian’s sweeping path covered an area of several blocks. If he were indeed tracking Devil John, the man could well be nearby.

“What are we looking for?” the driver asked him.

“A big, red-bearded, curly-haired man with two very different legs,” Croyd answered. “The right one is heavy, hairy, and ends in a hoof. The other’s normal.”

“I heard something about that guy. He’s dangerous…”

“Yeah, I know.”

“What are you planning on doing if you find him?”

“I was hoping for a meaningful dialogue,” Croyd said.

“I ain’t gettin’ too close to your dialogue. If we spot him, I’m taking off.”

“I’ll make it worth you while to wait.”

“No thanks,” the driver said. “You want out, I’ll drop you and run. That’s it.”

“Well… The pterodactyl is moving north. Let’s try to get ahead of it, and when we do you cut east on the first street where we can.”

The driver accelerated again, drifting to the right while Croyd tried to guess the center of the Kid’s circle.

“The next street,” Croyd said finally. “Turn there and see what happens.”

They took the corner slowly and cruised the entire block without Croyd’s spotting his quarry or even viewing his airborne telltale again. At the next intersection, however, the winged form passed once more and this time he had sight of the one he sought.

Devil John was on the opposite side of the street, halfway down the block. He bore a shrouded parcel in his arms. His shoulders were massive; his white teeth flashed as a woman with a shopping cart rushed to get out of his way. He wore Levi’s⁠—the right leg torn off high on the thigh⁠—and a pink sweatshirt suggesting he had visited Disney World. A passing motorist sideswiped a parked car as John took a normal step with his left foot, bent his right leg at an odd angle, and sprang twenty feet farther ahead to an open area near the curb. He turned then with a normal step and sprang again, clearing a slow-moving red Honda and landing in a patch of grass on the street’s central island. Two large dogs that had been following him rushed to the curb, barking loudly, but halted there and regarded oncoming traffic.

“Stop!” Croyd called to the driver, and he opened the door and stepped to the curb before the vehicle came to a complete halt.

He cupped his hands to his mouth then and shouted, “Darlingfoot! Hold on!”

The man only glanced in his direction, already bending his leg to spring again.

“It’s me⁠—Croyd Crenson!” he called out. “I want to talk to you!”

The satyr-like figure halted in mid-crouch. The shadow of a pterodactyl swept by. The two dogs continued to bark, and a tiny white poodle rounded a corner and rushed to join them. An auto horn blared at two halted pedestrians in a crosswalk. Devil John turned and stared. Then he shook his head.

“You’re not Crenson!” he shouted.

Croyd strode forward.

“The hell I’m not!” he answered, and he darted into the street and crossed to the island.

Devil John’s eyes were narrowed beneath his shaggy brows as he studied Croyd’s advancing figure. He raked his lower lip slowly with his upper teeth, then shook his head more slowly.

“Naw,” he said. “Croyd was darker and a lot shorter. What are you trying to pull, anyway?”

Croyd shrugged.

“My appearance changes pretty regularly,” he said. “But I’m the same guy who whipped your ass last fall.”

Darlingfoot laughed.

“Get lost, fella,” he said. “I don’t have time for groupies⁠—”

They both clenched their teeth as a car drew up beside them and its horn blasted. A man in a gray business suit stuck his head out of the window.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

Croyd growled, stepped into the street, and removed the rear bumper, which he then placed in the vehicle’s back seat through a window that had been closed up until then.

“Auto inspection,” he said. “You pass. Congratulations.”

“Croyd!” Darlingfoot exclaimed as the car sped off. “It is you!”

He tossed his shrouded burden to the ground and raised his fists.

“I’ve been waiting all winter for this…”

“Then, wait a minute longer,” Croyd said. “I’ve got to ask you something.”

“What?”

“That body… Why’d you take it?”

The big man laughed.

“For money, of course. What else?”

“Mind telling me what they’re paying you for it?”

“Five grand. Why?”

“Cheap bastards,” Croyd said. “They say what they want it for?”

“No, and I didn’t ask because I don’t care. A buck’s a buck.”

“Yeah,” Croyd said. “Who are they, anyhow?”

“Why? What’s it to you?”

“Well, I think you’re getting screwed on the deal. I think it’s worth more.”

“How much?”

“Who are they?”

“Some Masons, I think. What’s it worth?”

“Masons? Like secret handshakes and all that? I thought they just existed to give each other expensive funerals. What could they want with a dead joker?”

Darlingfoot shook his head.

“They’re a weird bunch,” he said. “For all I know, they want to eat it. Now, what were you saying about money?”

“I think I could get more for it,” Croyd said. “What say I see their five and raise it one? I’ll give you six big ones for it.”

“I don’t know, Croyd… I don’t like to screw people I work for. Word will get around I’m undependable.”

“Well, maybe I could go seven⁠—”

They both turned suddenly at a series of savage growls and snappings. The dogs⁠—joined by two additional strays⁠—had crossed over during their conversation and dragged the small, insectlike body from its shroud. It had broken in several places, and the Great Dane held most of an arm in his teeth as he backed away, snarling, from the German shepherd. Two others had torn one of the grasshopperlike legs loose and were fighting over it. The poodle was already halfway across the street, a four-digited hand in its mouth. Croyd became aware of a particularly foul odor other than New York air.

“Shit!” Devil John exclaimed, leaping forward, his hoof shattering a square of concrete paving near to the remains. He grabbed for the Great Dane and it turned and raced away. The terrier let go of the leg. The brown mongrel didn’t. It tore across the street in the other direction, dragging the appendage. “I’ll get the arm! You get the leg!” Devil John cried, bounding after the Great Dane.

“What about the hand?” Croyd yelled, kicking at another dog newly arrived on the scene.

Darlingfoot’s reply was predictable, curt, and represented an anatomical unlikelihood of a high order. Croyd took off after the brown dog.

As Croyd approached the corner where he had seen it turn, he heard a series of sharp yelps. Coming onto the side street he saw the dog lying on its back snapping at the pterodactyl which pinned it to the pavement. The battered limb lay nearby Croyd sprinted forward.

“Thanks, Kid. I owe you one,” he said as he reached for the leg, hesitated, took out his handkerchief, wrapped it about his hand, picked up the limb, and held it downwind.

The pterodactyl shape flowed, to be replaced by that of a nude boy⁠—perhaps thirteen years of age⁠—with light eyes and unruly brown hair, a small birthmark on his forehead.

“Got it for you, Croyd,” he announced. “Sure stinks, though.”

“Yeah, Kid,” Croyd said. “Excuse me. Now I’ve got to go put it back together.”

He turned and hurried in the direction from which he had come. Behind him he heard rapid footfalls.

“What you want it for?” the boy asked.

“It’s a long, complicated, boring story, and it’s better you don’t know,” he answered.

“Aw, c’mon. You can tell me.”

“No time. I’m in a hurry.”

“You going to fight Devil John again?”

“I don’t plan on it. I think we can come to a meeting of minds without resorting to violence.”

“But if you do fight, what’s your power this time?”

Croyd reached the corner, cut across to the island. Ahead he saw where another dog now worried the remains. Devil John was nowhere in sight.

“Damn it!” he yelled. “Get away from there!”

The dog paid him no heed, but stripped a furry layer from the chitinous carapace. Croyd noticed that the torn tissue was dripping some colorless liquid. The remains looked moist now, and Croyd realized that fluids were oozing from the breathing holes in the thorax.

“Get away from there!” he repeated.

The dog growled at him. Suddenly, though, the growl turned to a whimper and the animal’s tail vanished between its legs. A meter-high tyrannosaurus hopped past Croyd, hissing fiercely. The dog turned and fled. A moment later, the Kid stood in its place.

“It’s getting away with that piece,” the boy said.

Croyd repeated Darlingfoot’s comment on the hand as he tossed the leg down beside the dismembered body. He withdrew the folded trash bag from the inner pocket of his jacket and shook it out.

“You want to help, Kid, you hold the bag while I toss in what’s left.”

“Okay. It sure is gross.”

“It’s a dirty job,” Croyd agreed.

“Then, why you doing it?”

“It’s what growing up is all about, Kid.”

“How do you mean?”

“You spend more and more of your time cleaning up after mistakes.”

A rapid thumping noise approached, a shadow passed overhead, and Devil John crashed to the earth beside them.

“Damn dog got away,” he announced. “You get the leg?”

“Yeah,” Croyd answered. “It’s already in the bag.”

“Good idea⁠—a plastic bag. Who’s the naked kid?”

“You don’t know Kid Dinosaur?” Croyd answered. “I thought he knew everybody. He’s the pterodactyl was following you.”

“Why?”

“I like to be where the action is,” the Kid said.

“Hey, how come you’re not in school?” Croyd asked.

“School sucks.”

“Now, wait a minute. I had to quit school in ninth grade and I never got to go back. I always regretted it.”

“Why? You’re doing okay.”

“There’s all that stuff I missed. I wish I hadn’t.”

“Like what?”

“Well…Algebra. I never learned algebra.”

“What the fuck good’s algebra?”

“I don’t know and I never will, because I didn’t learn it. I sometimes look at people on the street and say, ‘Gee, I’ll bet they all know algebra,’ and it makes me feel kind of inferior.”

“Well, I don’t know algebra and it doesn’t make feel a damn bit inferior.”

“Give it time,” Croyd said.

The Kid suddenly became aware that Croyd was looking at him strangely.

“You’re going back to school right now,” Croyd told him, “and you’re going to study your ass off for the rest of the day, and you’re going to do your homework tonight, and you’re going to like it.”

“I make better time if I fly,” the Kid said, and he transformed into a pterodactyl, hopped several times, and glided away

“Pick up some clothes on the way!” Croyd shouted after him.

“Just what the hell is going on here?”

Croyd turned and beheld a uniformed officer who had just crossed to their island.

“Go fuck yourself !” he snarled.

The man began unbuckling his belt.

“Stop! Cancel that,” Croyd said. “Buckle up. Forget you saw us and go walk up another street.”

Devil John stared as the man obeyed.

“Croyd, how are you doing those things?” he asked.

“That’s my power, this time around.”

“Then, you could just make me give you the body, couldn’t you?”

Croyd shook the bag down and fastened it. When he finished gagging, he nodded.

“Yeah. And I’ll get it one way or another, too. But I don’t feel like cheating a fellow working stiff today. My offer’s still good.”

“Seven grand?”

“Six.”

“You said seven.”

“Yeah, but it’s not all here now.”

“That’s your fault, not mine. You stopped me.”

“But you put the thing down where the dogs could get it.”

“Yes, but how was I supposed to⁠—Hey, that’s a bar and grill on the corner.”

“You’re right.”

“Care to discuss this over lunch and a couple of brews?”

“Now, that you mention it, I’ve a bit of an appetite,” Croyd said.

\* \* \*

They took the table by the window and set the bag on the empty chair. Croyd visited the men’s room and washed his hands several times while Devil John procured a pair of beers. When he returned he ordered a half-dozen sandwiches. Darlingfoot did the same.

“Who’re you working for?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Croyd answered. “I’m doing it through a third party.”

“Complicated. I wonder what they all want the thing for?”

Croyd shook his head.

“Beats me. I hope there’s enough of him left to collect on.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m willing to deal. I think my guys wanted him in better shape than this. They might try to welsh on me. Better a bird in the hand, you know? I don’t trust them all that much. Bunch of kooks.”

“Say, did he have any possessions?”

“Nope. No belongings at all.”

The sandwiches arrived and they began eating. After a while, Darlingfoot glanced several times at the bag, then remarked, “You know, that thing looks bigger.”

Croyd studied it a moment.

“It’s just settling and shifting,” he said.

They finished, then ordered two more beers.

“No, damn it! It is bigger!” Darlingfoot insisted.

Croyd looked again. It seemed to swell even as he watched.

“You’re right,” he acknowledged. “It must be gases from the⁠—uh⁠—decomposition.”

He extended a finger as if to poke it, thought better of it and lowered his hand.

“So what do you say? Seven grand?”

“I think six is fair⁠—the shape he’s in.”

“But they knew what they were asking for. You’ve got to expect this sort of thing with stiffs.”

“A certain amount, yes. But you’ve got to admit you bounced him around a hell of a lot, too.”

“That’s true, but a regular one could take it better. How was I to know this guy was a special case?”

“By looking at him. He was little and fragile.”

“He felt pretty sturdy when I snatched him. What say we split the difference? Sixty-five hundred?”

“I don’t know…”

Other diners began glancing in their direction as the bag continued to swell. They finished their beers.

“Another round?”

“Why not?”

“Waiter!”

Their waiter, who had been clearing a recently vacated table, ambled over, a stack of dishes and utensils in his hands.

“What can I get⁠—” he began, when the edge of a steak knife, protruding from the pile of crockery, brushed against the swollen bag. “My God!” he finished, as a whooshing sound, accompanied by an odor that might have been compounded of sewer gas and slaughterhouse effluvia filled the immediate vicinity and spread like an escaped experiment in chemical warfare throughout the room.

“Excuse me,” the waiter said, and he turned and hurried off.

There followed a series of gasps from other diners, moments later.

“Use your power, Croyd!” Devil John whispered. “Hurry!”

“I don’t know if I can do a whole roomful…”

“Try!”

Croyd concentrated on the others:

There was a small accident. Nothing important. Now you will forget it. You smell nothing unusual. Return to your meals and do not look in this direction again. You will not notice anything that we do. There is nothing to be seen here. Or smelled.

The other patrons turned away, resumed eating, talking.

“You did it,” Devil John remarked in a peculiar voice.

Croyd looked back and discovered that the man was pinching his nostrils shut.

“Did you spill something?” Croyd asked him.

“No.”

“Uh-oh. Hear that?”

Darlingfoot leaned to the side and bent low.

“Oh damn!” he said. “The bag’s collapsed and he’s running out the slash that guy made. Hey, kill my sense of smell too, you?”

Croyd closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

“That’s better,” he heard moments later as Darlingfoot reached out and uprighted the bag, which made a sloshing, gurgling noise.

Croyd looked to the floor and beheld a huge puddle resembling spilled stew. He gagged slightly and looked away.

“What do you want to do now, Croyd? Leave the mess and take the rest, or what?”

“I think I’m obliged to take everything I can.”

Devil John quirked an eyebrow and smiled.

“Well,” he said, “go sixty-five hundred and I’ll help you get it all together in a manageable form.”

“It’s a deal.”

“Then, cover me if you can so the people in the kitchen don’t notice me.”

“I’ll try. What are you going to do?”

“Trust me.”

Darlingfoot rose, passed the top of the bag to Croyd, and limped back to the kitchen. He was gone for several minutes and when he returned his arms were full.

He unscrewed the top from a large empty pickle jar and set it on the floor beside the chair.

“Now if you’ll just tilt the bag so the opening is right over the jar,” he said, “I’ll raise the bottom and we can pour him into it.”

Croyd complied and the jar was well over half-full before the trickle ceased.

“Now what?” he asked, screwing on the lid.

Darlingfoot took the first from a stack of napkins he had brought with him and opened a small white bundle.

“Doggie bags,” he said. “I’ll just get all the solid stuff up off the floor and into them.”

“Then what?”

“I’ve got a nice, fresh trash-can liner, too,” he explained, stooping. “It should all fit inside with no trouble.”

“Could you hurry?” Croyd said. “I can’t control my own sense of smell.”

“I’m mopping as fast as I can. Open the jar again, though, will you? I can wring out the rest of him from the napkins.”

\* \* \*

When the spilled remains had been collected into the pickle jar and nine doggie bags, Darlingfoot ripped the torn bag the rest of the way open and removed the chitinous plates that remained within. He set the jar on the concavity of the thorax and then placed it all in the fresh bag, covering it with pieces of gristle and smaller bits of plating. He set the head and limbs on top. Then he packed the doggie bags and rolled down the liner.

Croyd was on his feet by then.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll come, too. I have to wash up a bit.”

Above the running of the water Devil John suddenly remarked, “Now that everything’s pretty much settled, I’ve got a favor to ask of you.”

“What’s that?” Croyd inquired, soaping his hands yet again.

“I still feel funny about the ones who hired me, you know?”

Croyd shrugged. “You can’t have it both ways,” he said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t follow you.”

“I was on my way to deliver when you caught up with me. Supposing we went on to the rendezvous point⁠—a little park up near the Cloisters⁠—and I give them some bullshit about the dogs tearing the body apart and getting away with the whole thing. You make them believe it, and then have them forget that you were along. That way, I’m off the hook.”

“Okay. Sure,” Croyd agreed, splashing water on his face. “But you say ‘them.’ How many people are you expecting?”

“Just one or two. The guy who hired me was named Matthias, and there was a red man with him. He’s the one who tried getting me interested in these Masons till the other shut him up…”

“That’s funny,” Croyd said. “I met a Matthias this morning. He was a cop. Plainclothes. And what about the red guy? Sounds like maybe an ace or a joker.”

“Probably is. But if he’s got any special talent he wasn’t showing it.”

Croyd dried his face.

“All of a sudden I’m a little uncomfortable,” he said. “See, this cop Matthias is an ace. The name might just be a coincidence, and I was able to con him with my talent, but I don’t like anything that smacks of too many aces. I might run into someone who’s immune to what I’ve got. This group… It couldn’t be a bunch of Mason aces, could it?”

“I don’t know. The red fellow wanted me to come in to some kind of meeting, and I told him I wasn’t a joiner and that we dealt right there or we forgot about it. So they coughed up my retainer on the spot. There was something about the way the red guy said things that gave me bad vibes.”

Croyd frowned.

“Maybe we should just forget them.”

“I’ve really got this thing about closing deals all proper so they don’t come back to haunt me,” Darlingfoot said. “Couldn’t you just sort of look it over while I talk to him, and then decide?”

“Well, okay… I said that I would. Do you remember anything else that got said? About Masons, aces, the body⁠—anything?”

“No… But what are pheromones?”

“Pheromones? They’re like hormones that you smell. Airborne chemicals that can influence you. Tachyon was telling me about them one time. There was this joker I’d met. You sat too near him in a restaurant and anything you ate tasted like bananas. Anyway, it was pheromones, Tachy said. So what about them?”

“I don’t know. The red guy was saying something about pheromones in connection with his wife when I came up. It didn’t go any further.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else.”

“Okay.” Croyd wadded his paper towel and tossed it toward the wastebasket. “Let’s go.”

When they returned to the table Croyd counted out the money and passed it to his companion.

“Here. Can’t say you didn’t earn it.”

Croyd regarded the strewn napkins, the slimy floor, and the moistness of the empty bag,

“What do you think we should do about the mess?”

Darlingfoot shrugged.

“The waiters will take care of it,” he said. “They’re used to it. Just make sure you leave a good tip.”

\* \* \*

Croyd hung back as they moved toward the park. Two figures were seated on a bench within, and even from the distance it was apparent that one man’s face was bright red.

“Well?” Devil John asked.

“I’ll give it a shot,” Croyd said. “Pretend we’re not together. I’ll keep walking and you go on in and give them your spiel. I’ll double back in a minute and cut through the park. I’ll try to give them the business as soon as I get near. But you be ready. If it doesn’t work this time we may have to resort to something more physical.”

“Got you. Okay.”

Croyd slowed his pace and Darlingfoot moved on ahead, crossing the street and entering upon a gravel walk leading to the bench. Croyd moved on to the corner, crossed slowly, and turned back.

He could hear their voices raised, as if in argument, when he drew nearer. He turned onto the trail and strolled toward the bench, his parcel at his side.

“…crock of shit!” he overheard Matthias say.

The man glanced in his direction, and Croyd realized that it was indeed the policeman he had encountered earlier. There was no sign of recognition on the man’s face, but Croyd was certain that his talent must be telling him that an ace was approaching. So…

“Gentlemen,” he said, focusing his thoughts, “everything that Devil John Darlingfoot has told you is correct. The body was destroyed by dogs. There is nothing for him to deliver. You will have to write this one off. You will forget me as soon as I have⁠—”

He saw Darlingfoot turn his head suddenly, to glance past him. Croyd turned and looked in the same direction.

A young, plain-looking oriental woman was approaching, hands in the pockets of her coat, collar raised against the wind. The wind…

The wind shifted, blowing directly toward him now.

Something about the lady…

Croyd continued to stare. How could he have thought her plain? It must have been a trick of the light. She was breathtakingly lovely. In fact⁠—He wanted her to smile at him. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to run his hands all over her. He wanted to stroke her hair, to kiss her, to make love to her. She was the most gorgeous woman he had ever laid eyes on.

He heard Devil John whistle softly.

“Look at her, will you?”

“Hard not to,” he replied.

He grinned at her, and she smiled back at him. He wanted to grab her. Instead, he said, “Hello.”

“I’d like you to meet my wife, Kim Toy,” he heard the red man say.

Kim Toy! Even her name was like music…

“Tell me what you want and I’ll get it for you,” he heard Devil John say to her. “You’re so special it hurts.”

She laughed.

“How gallant,” she stated. “No, nothing. Not just now. Wait a moment, though, and perhaps I’ll think of something.”

“Do you have it?” she asked her husband.

“No. It was taken by dogs,” he replied.

She cocked her head, quirked an eyebrow.

“Amazing fate,” she said. “And how do you know this?”

“These gentlemen have told us about it.”

“Really?” she observed. “That is so? That is what you told him?”

Devil John nodded.

“That’s what we told him,” Croyd said. “But⁠—”

“And the bag you dropped when you saw me approaching,” she said. “What might it contain? Open it, please, and show me.”

“Of course,” said Croyd.

“Anything you say,” Devil John agreed.

Both men dropped to their knees before her and fumbled unsuccessfully for long seconds before they were able to begin unrolling the top of the bag.

Croyd wanted to kiss her feet while he was in position to do so, but she had asked to see the inside of the bag and that should really come first. Perhaps she might feel inclined to reward him afterward, and⁠—

He opened the bag and a cloud of vapor swirled about them. Kim Toy drew back immediately, choking. As his stomach tightened, Croyd realized that the lady was no longer beautiful, and no more desirable than a hundred others he had passed this day. From the corner of his eye he saw Devil John shift his position and begin to rise⁠—and at that moment Croyd realized the nature of his attitude adjustment.

As the smell dissipated, something of the initial wave of glamour rose again from her person. Croyd clenched his teeth and lowered his head near to the mouth of the bag. He took a deep breath.

Her beauty died in that instant, and he extended his power.

Yes, as I was saying, the body is lost. It was destroyed by dogs. Devil John did his best for you, but he has nothing to deliver. We are going now. You will forget that I was with him.

“Come on!” he said to Darlingfoot as he rose to his feet.

Devil John shook his head.

“I can’t leave this lady, Croyd,” he answered. “She asked me for⁠—”

Croyd waved the opened bag in front of his face. Darlingfoot’s eyes widened. He choked. He shook his head.

“Come on!” Croyd repeated as he slung the bag over his shoulder and broke into a sprint.

With one enormous leap Devil John landed ten feet ahead of him.

“Weird, Croyd! Weird!” he announced as they crossed the street.

“Now you know all about pheromones,” Croyd told him.

\* \* \*

The sky had become completely overcast again, and a few flurries of snow drifted past him. Croyd had parted with Darlingfoot outside another bar and had begun walking, down and across town. He scanned the streets regularly for a taxi but none came into view. He was loath to trust his burden to the crush and press of bus or subway.

The snowfall increased in intensity as he walked the next several blocks, and gusts of wind came now to swirl the flakes and drive them among the buildings. Passing vehicles began switching on their headlights, and Croyd realized as the visibility diminished that he would be unable to distinguish a taxi even if one passed right beside him. Cursing, he trudged on, scrutinizing the nearest buildings, hoping for a diner or restaurant where he could drink a cup of coffee, and wait for the storm to blow over, or call for a cab. Everything he passed seemed to be an office, however.

Several minutes later the flakes became smaller and harder. Croyd raised his free hand to shield his eyes. While the sudden drop in temperature did not bother him, the icy pellets did. He ducked into the next opening he came to⁠—an alleyway⁠—and he sighed and lowered his shoulders as the force of the wind was broken.

Better. The snow descended here in a more leisurely fashion. He brushed it off his jacket, out of his hair; he stamped his feet. He looked about. There was a recess in the building to his left, several paces back, several steps above street level. It looked completely sheltered, dry. He headed for it.

He had already set his foot upon the first step when he realized that one corner of the boxlike area before a closed metal door was already occupied. A pale, stringy-haired woman, dumpy-looking beneath unguessable layers of clothing, sat between a pair of shopping bags, staring past him.

“…So Gladys tells Marty she knows he’s been seeing that waitress down at Jensen’s…” the woman muttered.

“Excuse me,” Croyd said. “Mind if I share the doorway with you? It’s coming down kind of hard.”

“…I told her she could still get pregnant when she was nursing, but she just laughed at me…”

Croyd shrugged and entered the alcove, moving to the opposite corner.

“When she finds another one’s on the way she’s really upset,” the woman continued, “especially with Marty having moved in with his waitress now…”

Croyd remembered his mother’s breakdown following his father’s death, and a touch of sadness at this obvious case of senile dementia stirred within his breast. But⁠—He wondered. Could his new power, his ability to influence the thought patterns of others, have some therapeutic effect on a person such as this? He had a little time to pass here. Perhaps…

“Listen,” he said to the woman, thinking clearly and simply, focusing images. “You are here, now, in the present. You are sitting in a doorway, watching it snow⁠—”

“You bastard!” the woman screamed at him, her face no longer pale, her hands darting toward one of the bags. “Mind your own business! I don’t want now and snow! It hurts!”

She opened the bag, and the darkness inside expanded even as Croyd watched⁠—rushing toward him, filling his entire field of vision, tugging him suddenly in several directions, twisting him and⁠—

The woman, alone now in the doorway, closed her bag, stared at the snow for a moment, then said, “…So I say to her, ‘Men aren’t good about support payments. Sometimes you’ve got to get the law on them. That nice young man at Legal Aid will tell you what to do.’ And then Charlie, who was working at the pizza parlor…”

\* \* \*

Croyd’s head hurt and he was not used to the feeling. He never had hangovers, because he metabolized alcohol too quickly, but this felt like what he imagined a hangover to he. Then he became aware that his back, legs, and buttocks were wet; also, the backs of his arms. He was sprawled someplace cold and moist. He decided to open his eyes.

The sky was clear and twilit between the buildings, with a few bright stars already in sight. It had been snowing. It had also been afternoon. He sat up. What had become of the past several hours, and⁠—

He saw a dumpster. He saw a lot of empty whiskey and wine bottles. He was in an alley, but…

This was not the same alley. The buildings were lower, there had been no dumpster in the other one, and he could not locate the doorway he had occupied with the old woman.

He massaged his temples, felt the throbbing begin to recede. The old woman… What the hell was that black thing she’d hit him with when he’d tried to help her? She had taken it out of one of her bags and⁠—

Bags! He cast about frantically for his own bag, with the carefully parceled remains of the diminutive John Doe. He saw then that he still held it in his right hand, and that it had been turned inside out and torn.

He rose to his feet and looked about in the dim glow from a distant streetlight. He saw the doggie bags scattered about him, and he counted quickly. Nine. Yes. All nine of them were in sight, and he now saw the limbs, the head, and the thorax⁠—though the thorax had now been broken into four pieces and the head looked much shinier than it had earlier. From the dampness, perhaps. The jar! Where was it? The liquid might be very important to whoever wanted the remains. If the jar had been broken…

He uttered a brief cry when he saw it standing upright in the shadows near the wall to his left. The top was missing and so was an inch or so of glass from beneath it. He crossed to it, and from the odor he knew it to be the real thing and not just rainwater.

He gathered up the doggie bags, which seemed surprisingly dry, and he placed them on the sheltered ledge of a barred basement window. Then he collected the pieces of chitin into a heap nearby. When he recovered the legs he noted that they were both broken, but he reflected that that could make for easier packing. Then he turned his attention to the jag-topped pickle jar, and he smiled. How simple. The answer lay all about him, provided by the derelicts who frequented the area.

He gathered an armful of empty bottles and bore them over to the side, where he set them down and began uncorking and uncapping them. When he had finished he decanted the dark liquid.

It took eight bottles of various sizes, and he set them on the ledge with the doggie bags above the small mound of shattered exoskel’ and cartilage. It seemed as if there were a little bit less of the guy each time he got unwrapped. Maybe it had something to do with the way he was divided now. Maybe it took algebra to understand it.

Croyd moved then to the dumpster and opened its side hatch. He smiled almost immediately, for there were long strands of Christmas ribbon near at hand. He withdrew several of these and stuffed them into a side pocket. He leaned forward. If there were ribbon, then⁠—

The sound of rapid footfalls came and went. He spun, raising his hands to defend himself, but there was no one near.

Then he spotted him. A small man in a coat several times too large for him had halted briefly at the windowsill, where he snatched one of the larger bottles and two of the doggie bags. He ran off immediately then, toward the far end of the alley where two other shabby figures waited.

“Hey!” Croyd yelled. “Stop!” and he reached with his power but the man was out of range.

All that he heard was laughter, and a cry of, “Tonight we party, boys!”

Sighing, Croyd withdrew a large wad of red and green Christmas paper from the dumpster and returned to the window to repackage the remainder of the remains.

After he had walked several blocks, his bright parcel beneath his arm, he passed a bar called The Dugout and realized he was in the Village. His brow furrowed for a moment, but then he saw a taxi and waved, and the car pulled over. Everything was okay. Even the headache was gone.

\* \* \*

Jube looked up, saw Croyd smiling at him.

“How⁠—How did it go?” he asked.

“Mission accomplished,” Croyd answered, passing him the key.

“You got it? There was something on the news about Darlingfoot⁠—”

“I got it.”

“And the possessions?”

“There weren’t any.”

“You sure of that, fella?”

“Absolutely. Nothing there but him, and he’s in the bathtub.”

“What?”

“It’s okay, because I closed the drain.”

“What do you mean?”

“My cab was involved in an accident on the way over and some of the bottles broke. So watch out for glass when you unwrap it.”

“Bottles? Broken glass?”

“He was kind of⁠—reduced. But I got you everything that was left.”

“Left?”

“Available. He sort of came apart and melted a bit. But I saved most of him. He’s all wrapped up in shiny paper with a red ribbon around him. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah…That’s fine, Croyd. Sounds like you did your best.”

Jube passed him an envelope.

“I’ll buy you dinner at Aces High,” Croyd said, “as soon as I shower and change.”

“No, thanks. I⁠—I’ve got things to do.”

“Take along some disinfectant if you’re stopping by the apartment.”

“Yeah…I gather there were some problems?”

“Naw, it was a piece of cake.”

Croyd walked off whistling, hands in his pockets. Jube stared at the key as a distant clock began to chime the hour.

Notes

This is the second story featuring Croyd Crenson, a character Zelazny created for George R. R. Martin’s shared world series, Wild Cards.

Milton Helpern was a renowned criminal pathologist whose memoirs of working in the specialty was entitled Autopsy: The Memoirs of Milton Helpern, the World’s Greatest Medical Detective. A bier is a stand for a coffin. Croyd considers using the names of two famous fictional doctors before adopting the alias Dr. Anderson: Young Doctor Malone was a soap opera which ran on radio and then TV from 1939 to 1963; television’s Marcus Welby, MD ran from 1969 to 1976. Chutzpah is audacity. Satyrs are lustful, drunken woodland gods who have a man’s body with a goat’s legs and horns. Pheromones are chemical signals from an animal or insect that affect the behavior or physiology of others of its species.