Concerto for Siren and Serotonin

Roger Zelazny

I

Sitting shade-clad in a booth at Vito’s Italian, odd-hour and quiet, lowering a mound of linguini and the level in a straw-bound bottle⁠—black hair stiff with spray or tonic⁠—the place’s only patron had drawn attention from the staff in the form of several wagers, in that this was his seventh entrée, when a towering civilian with a hand like a club came in off the street and stood near, watching, also, through bloodshot eyes.

The man continued to stare at the diner, who finally swung his mirror lenses toward him.

“You the one I’m looking for?” the newcomer asked.

“Maybe so,” the diner replied, lowering his fork, “if it involves money and certain special skills.”

The big man smiled. Then he raised his right hand and dropped it. It struck the edge of the table, removed the corner, shredded the tablecloth, and jerked it forward. The linguini spilled backward into the dark-haired man’s lap. The man jerked away as this occurred and his glasses fell askew, revealing a pair of glittering, faceted eyes.

“Prick!” he announced, his hands shooting forward, paralleling the other’s clublike appendage.

“Son of a bitch!” the giant bellowed, jerking his hand away. “You fuckin’ burned me!”

“ ‘Fuckin’ shocked,’ ” the other corrected. “Lucky I didn’t fry you! What is this? Why you taking my table apart?”

“You’re hirin’ fuckin’ aces, ain’t you? I wanted you to see my shit.”

“I’m not hiring aces. I thought you were, the way you came on.”

“Hell, no! Bug-eyed bastard!”

The other moved quickly to adjust his glasses.

“It’s a real pain,” he stated, “looking at two hundred sixteen views of an asshole.”

“I’ll give you something up the asshole!” said the giant, raising his hand again.

“You got it,” said the other, an electrical storm erupting suddenly between his palms. The giant stepped back a pace. Then the storm passed and the man lowered his hands. “If it weren’t for the linguini in my lap,” he said then, “this would be funny. Sit down. We can wait together.”

“Funny?”

“Think about it while I go clean up,” he replied. Then, “Name’s Croyd,” he said.

“Croyd Crenson?”

“Yeah. And you’re Bludgeon, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. What do you mean ‘funny’?”

“Like mistaken identity,” Croyd answered. “Two guys thinking they’re each somebody else, you know?”

Bludgeon’s brow was furrowed for several seconds before his lips formed a tentative smile. Then he laughed, four coughlike barks. “Yeah, fuckin’ funny!” he said then, and barked again.

Bludgeon slid into the booth, still chuckling, as Croyd slid out. Croyd headed back toward the men’s room and Bludgeon ordered a pitcher of beer from the waiter who came by to clean up. A few moments later, a black-suited man entered the dining area from the kitchen and stood, thumbs hooked behind his belt, toothpick moving slowly within a faint frown. Then he advanced.

“You look a little familiar,” he said, coming up beside the booth.

“I’m Bludgeon,” the other replied, raising his hand.

“Chris Mazzucchelli. Yeah, I’ve heard of you. I hear you can bash your way through nearly anything with that mitt of yours.”

Bludgeon grinned. “Fuckin’ A,” he said.

Mazzucchelli smiled around the toothpick and nodded. He slid into Croyd’s seat.

“You know who I am?” he asked.

“Hell, yes,” Bludgeon said, nodding. “You’re the Man.”

“That I am. I guess you heard there’s some trouble coming down, and I need some special kind of soldiers.”

“You need some fuckin’ heads broke, I’m fuckin’ good at it,” Bludgeon told him.

“That’s nicely put,” Mazzucchelli said, reaching inside his jacket. He removed an envelope and tossed it onto the tabletop. “Retainer.”

Bludgeon picked it up, tore it open, then counted the bills slowly, moving his lips. When he was finished, he said, “Fuckin’ price is fuckin’ right. Now what?”

“There’s an address in there too. You go to it eight o’clock tonight and get some orders. Okay?”

Bludgeon put away the envelope and rose.

“Damn straight,” he agreed, reaching out and picking up the pitcher of beer, raising it, draining it, and belching.

“Who’s the other guy⁠—the one back in the john?”

“Shit, he’s one of us,” Bludgeon replied. “Name’s Croyd Crenson. Bad man to fuck with, but he’s got a great sense of humor.”

Mazzucchelli nodded. “Have a good day,” he said.

Bludgeon belched again, nodded back, waved his club-hand, and departed.

\* \* \*

Croyd hesitated only a moment on reentering the dining room and regarding Mazzucchelli in his seat. He advanced, raised two fingers in mock salute, and said, “I’m Croyd,” as he drew near. “Are you the recruiter?”

Mazzucchelli looked him up and looked him down, eyes dwelling for a moment on the large wet spot at the front of his trousers.

“Something scare you?” he asked.

“Yeah, I saw the kitchen,” Croyd replied. “You looking for talent?”

“What kind of talent you got?”

Croyd reached for a small lamp on a nearby table. He unscrewed the bulb and held it before him. Shortly it began to glow. Then it brightened, flared, and went out.

“Oops,” he observed. “Gave it a little too much juice.”

“For a buck and a half,” Mazzucchelli stated, “I can buy a flashlight.”

“You got no imagination,” Croyd said. “I can do some heavy stuff with burglar alarms, computers, telephones⁠—not to mention anybody I shake hands with. But if you’re not interested, I won’t starve.”

He began to turn away.

“Sit down, sit down!” Mazzucchelli said. “I heard you had a sense of humor. Sure, I like that stuff, and I think maybe I can use you in a certain matter. I need some good people in a hurry.”

“Something scare you?” Croyd asked, sliding into the seat recently vacated by Bludgeon.

Mazzucchelli scowled and Croyd grinned.

“Humor,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Crenson,” the other stated, “that’s your last name. See, I do know you. I know a lot about you. I’ve been stringing you along. That’s humor. I know you’re pretty good, and you usually deliver what you promise. But we got some things to talk about before we talk about other things. You know what I mean?”

“No,” Croyd answered. “But I’m willing to learn.”

“You want anything while we’re talking?”

“I’d like to try the linguini again,” Croyd said, “and another bottle of Chianti.”

Mazzucchelli raised his hand, snapped his fingers. A waiter rushed into the room.

“Linguini, e una bottiglia,” he said. “Chianti.”

The man hurried off. Croyd rubbed his hands together, to the accompaniment of a faint crackling sound.

“The one who just left…,” Mazzucchelli said at length. “Bludgeon…”

“Yes?” Croyd said, after an appropriate wait.

“He’ll make a good soldier,” Mazzucchelli finished.

Croyd nodded. “I suppose so.”

“But you, you have some skills besides what the virus gave you. I understand you are a pretty good second-story man. You knew old Bentley.”

Croyd nodded again. “He was my teacher. I knew him back when he was a dog. You seem to know more about me than most people do.”

Mazzucchelli removed his toothpick, sipped his beer. “That’s my business,” he said after a time, “knowing things. That’s why I don’t want to send you off to be a soldier.”

The waiter returned with a plate of linguini, a glass, and a bottle, which he proceeded to uncork. He passed Croyd a setting from the next booth. Croyd immediately began to eat with a certain manic gusto that Mazzucchelli found vaguely unsettling.

Croyd paused long enough to ask, “So what is it you’ve got in mind for me?”

“Something a little more subtle, if you’re the right man for it.”

“Subtle. I’m right for subtle,” Croyd said.

Mazzucchelli raised a finger. “First,” he said, “one of those things we talk about before we talk about other things.”

Observing the speed with which Croyd’s plate was growing empty, he snapped his fingers again and the waiter rushed in with another load of linguini.

“What thing?” Croyd asked, pushing aside the first plate as the second slid into place before him.

Mazzucchelli laid his hand on Croyd’s left arm in an almost fatherly fashion and leaned forward. “I understand you got problems,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I have heard that you are into speed,” Mazzucchelli observed, “and that every now and then you become a raging maniac, killing people, destroying property and wreaking general havoc until you run out of steam or some ace who knows you takes pity and puts you down for the count.”

Croyd laid his fork aside and quaffed a glass of wine.

“This is true,” he said, “though it is not something I enjoy talking about.”

Mazzucchelli shrugged. “Everybody has the right to a little fun every now and then,” he stated. “I ask only for business reasons. I would not like to have you act this way if you were working for me on something sensitive.”

“The behavior of which you’ve heard is not an indulgence,” Croyd explained. “It becomes something of a necessity, though, after I’ve been awake a certain period of time.”

“Uh⁠—you anywhere near that point yet?”

“Nowhere near,” Croyd replied. “There’s nothing to worry about for a long while.”

“If I was to hire you, I’d rather I didn’t worry about it at all. Now, it’s no good asking somebody not to be a user. But I want to know this: Have you got enough sense when you start on the speed that you can take yourself off of my work? Then go crash and burn someplace not connected with what you’re doing for me?”

Croyd studied him for a moment, then nodded slowly. “I see what you mean,” he said. “If that’s what the job calls for, sure, I can do it. No problem.”

“With that understanding, I want to hire you. It’s a little more subtle than breaking heads, though. And it isn’t any sort of simple burglary either.”

“I’ve done lots of odd things,” Croyd said, “and lots of subtle things. Some of them have even been legal.”

They both smiled.

“For this one, it may well be that you see no violence,” Mazzucchelli said. “Like I told you, my business is knowing things. I want you to get me some information. The best way to get it is so that nobody even knows it’s been got. On the other hand, if the only way you can get it is to cause somebody considerable angst, that’s okay. So long as you clean up real good afterwards.”

“I get the picture. What do you want to know, and where do I find it?”

Mazzucchelli gave a short, barking laugh.

“There seems to be another company doing business in this town,” he said then. “You know what I mean?”

“Yes,” Croyd replied, “and there is not usually room on one block for two delicatessens.”

“Exactly,” Mazzucchelli answered.

“So you are taking on extra help to continue the competition by heavier means.”

“That is a good summary. Now, like I said, there is certain information I need about the other company. I will pay you well to get it for me.”

Croyd nodded. “I’m willing to give it a shot. What particular information are you after?”

Mazzucchelli leaned forward and lowered his voice, his lips barely moving. “The chairman of the board. I want to know who’s running the show.”

“The boss? You mean he didn’t even send you a dead fish in somebody’s pants? I thought it was customary to observe certain amenities in these matters?”

Mazzucchelli shrugged. “These guys got no etiquette. Could be a bunch of foreigners.”

“Have you got any leads at all, or do I go it cold?”

“You will be pretty much a ground-breaker. I will give you a list of places they sometimes seem to operate through. I also have names of a couple people who might do some work for them.”

“Why didn’t you just pick one of them up and pop the question?”

“I think that, like you, they are independent contractors rather than family members.”

“I see.”

Then, “And that may not be all they have in common with you,” Mazzucchelli added.

“Aces?” Croyd asked.

Mazzucchelli nodded.

“If I’ve got to mess with aces it’s going to cost more than if they’re just civilians.”

“I’m good for it,” Mazzucchelli said, withdrawing another envelope from his inner pocket. “Here is a retainer and the list. You may consider the retainer ten percent of the total price for the job.”

Croyd opened the envelope, counted quickly. He smiled when he finished.

“Where do you take delivery?” he asked.

“The manager here can always get in touch with me.”

“What’s his name?”

“Theotocopoulos. Theo’ll do.”

“Okay,” Croyd said. “You just hired subtlety.”

“When you go to sleep you turn into a different person, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if that happens before the job is done, that new guy’s still got a contract with me.”

“So long as he gets paid.”

“We understand each other.”

They shook hands, Croyd rose, left the booth, crossed the room. Moth-sized snowflakes swirled in as he departed. Mazzucchelli reached for a fresh toothpick. Outside, Croyd tossed a black pill into his mouth.

\* \* \*

Wearing gray slacks, blue blazer, and bloodclot-colored tie, his hair marcelled, shades silver, nails manicured, Croyd sat alone at a small window table in Aces High, regarding the city’s lights through wind-whipped snow beyond his baked salmon, sipping Chateau d’Yquem, hashing over plans for the next move in his investigation and flirting with Jane Dow, who had passed his way twice so far and was even now approaching again⁠—a thing he took to be more than coincidence and a good omen, having lusted after her in a variety of hearts (some of them multiples) on a number of occasions⁠—and hoping he might fit the occasion to the feelings, he raised his hand as she drew near and touched her arm.

A tiny spark crackled, she halted, said, “Yike!” and reached to rub the place where the shock had occurred.

“Sorry⁠—” Croyd began.

“Must be static electricity,” she said.

“Must be,” he agreed. “All I wanted to say was that you do know me, even though you wouldn’t recognize me in this incarnation. I’m Croyd Crenson. We’ve met in passing, here and there, and I always wanted just to sit and talk a spell, but somehow our paths never crossed long enough at the right time.”

“That’s an interesting line,” she said, running a finger across her damp brow, “naming the one ace nobody’s certain about. I bet a lot of groupies get picked up that way.”

“True,” Croyd replied, smiling, as he opened his arms wide. “But I can prove it if you’ll wait about half a minute.”

“Why? What are you doing?”

“Filling the air with neg-ions for you,” he said, “for that delightfully stimulating before-the-storm feeling. Just a hint at the great time I could show⁠—”

“Cut it out!” She began backing away. “It sometimes triggers⁠—”

Croyd’s hands were wet, his face was wet, his hair collapsed and leaked onto his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“What the hell,” he said, “let’s make it a thunderstorm,” and lightning danced among his fingertips. He began laughing.

Other diners glanced in their direction.

“Stop,” she said. “Please.”

“Sit down for a minute and I will.”

“Okay.”

She took the seat opposite him. He dried his face and hands on his napkin.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “My fault. I should be careful with storm effects around someone they call Water Lily.”

She smiled.

“Your glasses are all wet,” she said, suddenly reaching forward and plucking them from his face. “I’ll clean⁠—”

“Two hundred sixteen views of moist loveliness,” he stated as she stared. “The virus has, as usual, overendowed me in several respects.”

“You really see that many of me?”

He nodded. “These joker aspects sometimes crop up in my changes. Hope I haven’t turned you off.”

“They’re rather⁠—magnificent,” she said.

“You’re very kind. Now give back the glasses.”

“A moment.”

She wiped the lenses on the corner of the tablecloth, then passed them to him.

“Thanks.” He donned them again. “Buy you a drink? Dinner? A water spaniel?”

“I’m on duty,” she said. “Thanks. Sorry. Maybe another time.”

“Well, I’m working now myself. But if you’re serious, I’ll give you a couple of phone numbers and an address. I may not be at any of them. But I get messages.”

“Give them to me,” she said, and he scribbled quickly in a notepad, tore out the page, and passed it to her. “What kind of work?” she asked.

“Subtle investigation,” he said. “It involves a gang war.”

“Really? I’ve heard people say you’re kind of honest, as well as kind of crazy.”

“They’re half-right,” he said. “So give me a call or stop by. I’ll rent scuba gear and show you a good time.”

She smiled and began to rise. “Maybe I will.”

He withdrew an envelope from his pocket, opened it, pushed aside a wad of bills, and removed a slip of paper with some writing on it.

“Uh, before you go⁠—does the name James Spector mean anything to you?”

She froze and grew pale. Croyd found himself wet once again.

“What did I say?” he asked.

“You’re not kidding? You really don’t know?”

“Nope. Not kidding.”

“You know the aces jingle.”

“Parts of it.”

“ ‘Golden Boy ain’t got no joy,’ ” she recited. “ ‘If it’s Demise, don’t look in his eyes…’⁠—that’s him: James Spector is Demise’s real name.”

“I never knew that,” he said. Then, “I never heard any verses about me.”

“I don’t remember any either.”

“Come on. I always wondered.”

“ ‘Sleeper waking, meals taking,’ ” she said slowly. “ ‘Sleeper speeding, people bleeding.’ ”

“Oh.”

“If I call you and you’re that far along…”

“If I’m that far along, I don’t return calls.”

“I’ll get you a couple of dry napkins,” she offered. “Sorry about the storms.”

“Don’t be. Did anyone ever tell you you’re lovely when you exude moisture?”

She stared at him. Then, “I’ll get you a dry fish too,” she said.

Croyd raised his hand to blow her a kiss and gave himself a shock.

II

Checking to see that no one was watching, Croyd dropped a pair of Black Beauties with his espresso. He cursed softly as a part of the sigh that followed. This was not working out as he had anticipated. All of the leads he had tried during the past days had pretty much fizzled, and he was further along into the speed than he cared to be. Ordinarily this would not bother him, but for the first time he had made two separate promises concerning drugs and his actions. One being business and one being personal, he reflected, they kind of caught him coming and going. He would definitely have to keep an eye, or at least a few facets, on himself so as not to mess up on this job, and he didn’t want to turn Water Lily off on their first date. Usually, though, he could feel the paranoia coming on, and he decided to let that be his indicator as to his degree of irrationality this time around.

He had run all over town, trying to trace two leads who seemed to have vanished. He had checked out every possible front on his list, satisfying himself that they had only been randomly chosen rendezvous points. Next was James Spector. While he hadn’t recognized the name, he did know Demise. He had met him, briefly, on a number of occasions. The man had always impressed him as one of the sleazier aces. “If it’s Demise, don’t look in his eyes,” he hummed as he signaled to a waiter.

“Yes, sir?”

“More espresso, and bring me a bigger cup for it, will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“For that matter, bring me a whole pot.”

“All right.”

He hummed a little more loudly and began tapping his foot. “Demise eyes. The eyes of Demise,” he intoned. He jumped when the waiter placed a cup before him.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

The man began to fill the cup.

“Don’t stand behind me while you’re pouring. Stand off to the side where I can see you.”

“Sure.”

The waiter moved off to Croyd’s right. He left the carafe on the table when he departed.

As he drank cup after cup of coffee, Croyd began thinking thoughts he had not thought in a long while, concerning sleep, mortality, transfiguration. After a time he called for another carafe. It was definitely a two-carafe problem.

\* \* \*

The evening’s snowfall had ceased, but the inch or so that lay upon the sidewalks sparkled under the streetlamps, and a wind so cold it burned whipped glittering eddies along Tenth Street. Walking carefully, the tall, thin man in the heavy black overcoat glanced back once as he turned the corner, breath pluming. Ever since he’d left the package store he’d had a feeling that he was being watched. And there was a figure, a hundred yards or so back, moving along the opposite side of the street at about the same pace as himself. James Spector felt that it might be worth waiting for the man and killing him just to avoid any possible hassle farther along the way. After all, there were two fifths of Jack Daniel’s and a six-pack of Schlitz in his bag, and if someone were to accost him abruptly on these icy walks⁠— He winced at the thought of the bottles breaking, of having to retrace his path to the store.

On the other hand, waiting for the man and killing him right here, while holding the package, could also result in his slipping⁠—even if it was only when he leaned forward to go through the man’s pockets. It would be better to find a place to set things down first. He looked about.

There were some steps leading up to a doorway, farther along. He headed for them and set his parcel down on the third one, against its iron railing. He brushed off his collar and turned it up, fished a package of cigarettes from his pocket, shook one out, and lit it within cupped hands. He leaned against the rail then and waited, watching the corner.

Shortly a man in gray slacks and a blue blazer came into sight, necktie whipping in the wind, dark hair disheveled. He paused and stared, then nodded and advanced. As he came nearer, Spector realized that the man was wearing mirrorshades. He felt a sudden jab of panic, seeing that the other possessed an adequate first line of defense against him. It wasn’t likely to be an accident either, in the middle of the night. Therefore, this was more than some strong-arm hood on his tail. He took a long drag on his cigarette, then mounted several steps backward, slowly, gaining sufficient height for a good kick at the other’s head, to knock the damned things off.

“Yo, Demise!” the man called. “I need to talk to you!”

Demise stared, trying to place him. But there was nothing familiar about the man, not even his voice.

The man came up and stood before him, smiling. “I just need a minute or two of your time,” he said. “It’s important. I’m in a big hurry and I’m trying for a certain measure of subtlety. It isn’t easy.”

“Do I know you?” Demise asked him.

“We’ve met. In other lives, so to speak. My lives, that is. Also, I believe you might once have done some accounting for my brother-in-law’s company, over in Jersey. Croyd’s the name.”

“What do you want?”

“I need the name of the head of the new mob that’s trying to take over operations from the kindly old Mafia, which has run this town for half a century or so.”

“You’re kidding,” Demise said, taking a final drag on his cigarette, dropping it and moving his toe to grind it.

“No,” said Croyd. “I definitely require this information so I can rest in peace. I understand you’ve done some work other than bookkeeping for these guys. So tell me who runs the show and I’ll be moving along.”

“I can’t do that,” Demise answered.

“As I said, I’m aiming for subtlety. So I’d rather not work this the hard way⁠—”

Demise kicked him in the face. Croyd’s glasses flew over his shoulder, and Demise found himself staring into 216 glittering eye-facets. He was unable to lock gazes with the points of light.

“You’re an ace,” he said, “or a joker.”

“I’m the Sleeper,” Croyd told him as he reached out and took hold of Demise’s right arm, then broke it across the railing. “You should have let me be subtle. It doesn’t hurt as much.”

Demise shrugged even as he winced. “Go ahead and break the other one too. But I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

Croyd stared at the arm hanging at Demise’s side. Demise reached across and caught hold of it, twisted it into place, held it.

“You heal real fast, don’t you?” Croyd said. “In minutes, even. I remember now.”

“That’s right.”

“Can you grow a new arm if I tear one off ?”

“I don’t know, and I’d rather not find out. Look, I’ve heard you’re a psycho and I believe it. I’d tell you if I knew. I don’t enjoy regenerating. But all I did was a lousy contract hit. I’ve got no idea who’s on top.”

Croyd reached out with both hands, catching hold of Demise’s wrists.

“Breaking you up may not do much good,” he observed, “but there’s still room for subtlety. Ever have any electroshock therapy? Try this.”

When Demise stopped jerking, Croyd released his wrists. When he could speak again, Demise said, “I still can’t tell you. I don’t know.”

“So let’s lose a few more neurons,” Croyd suggested.

“Cool it a minute,” Demise said. “I never learned the names of any of the big guys. Never meant dick to me. Still don’t. All I know is this guy named Eye⁠—a joker. He just has one big eye and he wears a monocle in it. He met me once, in Times Square, gave me a hit and paid me. That’s all that matters. You know how it is. You freelance yourself.”

Croyd sighed. “Eye? Seems I’ve heard of him someplace or other. Where can I get hold of the guy?”

“I understand he hangs around Club Dead Nicholas. Plays cards there awhile on Friday nights. Kept meaning to go by and kill the fucker, but I never got around to it. Cost me a foot.”

“ ‘Club Dead Nicholas’?” Croyd said. “I don’t believe I know that one.”

“Used to be Nicholas King’s Mortuary, near Jokertown. Serves food and booze, has music and a dance floor, gambling in a back room. Just opened recently. Kind of Halloween motif. Too morbid for my taste.”

“Okay,” Croyd said. “I hope you’re not bullshitting me, Demise.”

“That’s all I got.”

Croyd nodded slowly. “It’ll do.” He released the other and backed away. “Maybe then I can rest,” he said. “Subtle. Real subtle.” He picked up Demise’s package and put it in his arms. “Here. Don’t forget your stuff. Better watch your step too. It’s getting slippery.” He continued to back away, muttering to himself, up the street, to the corner. Then he turned again and was gone.

Sinking to a seated position on the stoop, Demise cracked open a fifth and took a long swallow.

III

The wind came and went like heavy surf, vibrating streetside windowpanes, driving icy pellets against the stone lions flanking the entranceway. These sounds were intensified as the door to the Jokertown Clinic was opened. A man entered and began stamping his feet and brushing snow from his dark blue blazer. He made no effort to close the door behind him.

Madeleine Johnson, sometimes known as the Chickenfoot Lady, doing a partial front desk deathwatch for her friend Cock Robin, with whom she had a good thing going, looked up from her crossword puzzle, stroked her wattles with her pencil, and squawked, “Close the damn door, mister!”

The man lowered the handkerchief with which he had been wiping his face and stared at her. She realized then that his eyes were faceted. His jaw muscles bunched and unbunched.

“Sorry,” he said, and he drew the door closed. Then he turned his head slowly, seeming to study everything in the room, though with those eyes it was difficult to tell for certain. Finally “I’ve got to talk to Dr. Tachyon,” he said.

“The doctor is out of town,” she stated, “and he’s going to be away for some time. What is it that you want?”

“I want to be put to sleep,” he said.

“This isn’t a veterinary clinic,” she told him, and regretted it a moment later when he moved forward, for he developed a distinct halo and began emitting sparks like a static electricity generator. She doubted this had much to do with virtue, for his teeth were bared and he clenched and unclenched his hands as if anticipating strenuous activity.

“This⁠—is⁠—an⁠—emergency,” he said. “My name is Croyd Crenson, and there is probably a file. Better find it. I get violent.”

She squawked again, leaped and departed, leaving two pinfeathers to drift in the air before him. He put out a hand and leaned upon her desk, then mopped his brow again. His gaze fell upon a half-filled coffee cup beside her newspaper. He picked it up and chugged it.

Moments later there came a clattering sound from the hallway beyond the desk. A blond, blue-eyed young man halted at the threshold and stared at him. He had on a green and white polo shirt, a stethoscope and a beach-boy smile. From the waist down he was a palomino pony, his tail beautifully braided. Madeleine appeared behind him and fluttered.

“He’s the one,” she told the centaur. “He said, ‘violent.’ ”

Still smiling, the quadripedal youth entered the room and extended his hand. “I’m Dr. Finn,” he said. “I’ve sent for your file, Mr. Crenson. Come on back to an examination room, and you can tell me what’s bothering you while we wait for it.”

Croyd took his hand and nodded.

“Any coffee back there?”

“I think so. We’ll get you a cup.”

\* \* \*

Croyd paced the small room, swilling coffee, as Dr. Finn read over his case history, snorting on several occasions and at one point making a noise amazingly like a whinny.

“I didn’t realize you were the Sleeper,” he said finally, closing the file and looking at his patient. “Some of this material has made the textbooks.” He tapped the folder with a well-manicured finger.

“So I’ve heard,” Croyd replied.

“Obviously you have a problem you just can’t wait for your next cycle to clear up,” Dr. Finn observed. “What is it?’

Croyd managed a bleak smile. “It’s the matter of getting on with the crapshoot, of actually going to sleep.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I don’t know how much of this is in the file,” Croyd told him, “but I’ve a terrible fear of going to sleep⁠—”

“Yes, there is something about your paranoia. Perhaps some counseling⁠—”

Croyd punched a hole in the wall.

“It’s not paranoia,” he said, “not if the danger is real. I could die during my next hibernation. I could wake up as the most disgusting joker you can imagine, with a normal sleep-cycle. Then I’d be stuck that way. It’s only paranoia if the fear is groundless, isn’t it?”

“Well,” Dr. Finn said, “I suppose we could call it that if the fear is a really big thing, even if it is justified. I don’t know. I’m not a psychiatrist. But I also saw in the file that you tend to take amphetamines to keep from falling asleep for as long as you can. You must know that that’s going to add a big chemical boost to whatever paranoia is already present.”

Croyd was running his finger around the inside of the hole he had punched in the wall, rubbing away loose pieces of plaster.

“But of course a part of this is semantics,” Dr. Finn went on. “It doesn’t matter what we call it. Basically you’re afraid to go to sleep. This time, though, you feel that you should?”

Croyd began cracking his knuckles as he paced. Fascinated, Dr. Finn counted each cracking noise. When the seventh popping sound occurred, he began to wonder what Croyd would do when he was out of knuckles.

“Eight, nine, ten…” he subvocalized.

Croyd punched another hole in the wall.

“Uh, would you like some more coffee?” Dr. Finn asked him.

“Yes, about a gallon.”

Dr. Finn was gone, as if a starting gate had opened.

\* \* \*

Later, not telling Croyd it was decaf he was guzzling, Dr. Finn continued, “I’m afraid to give you any more drugs on top of all the amphetamines you’ve taken.”

“I’ve made two promises,” Croyd said, “that I’d try sleeping this time, that I wouldn’t resist. But if you can’t knock me out fast, I’ll probably leave rather than put up with all this anxiety. If that happens, I know I’ll be back on bennies and dexes fast. So hit me with a narcotic. I’m willing to take my chances.”

Dr. Finn shook his mane. “I’d rather try something simpler and a lot safer first. What say we do a little brain wave entrainment and suggestion?”

“I’m not familiar with the procedure,” Croyd said.

“It’s not traumatic. The Russians have been experimenting it for years. I’ll just clip these little soft pads to yours,” he said, swabbing the lobes with something moist, and we’ll pulse a low amp current through your head⁠—say, four hertz. You won’t even feel it.”

He adjusted a control on the box from which the leads emerged.

“Now what?” Croyd asked.

“Close your eyes and rest for just a minute. You may notice a kind of drifting feeling.”

“Yeah.”

“But there’s heaviness, too, within it. Your arms are heavy and your legs are heavy.”

“They’re heavy,” Croyd acknowledged.

“It will be hard to think of anything in particular. Your mind will just go on drifting.”

“I’m drifting,” Croyd agreed.

“And it should feel very good. Probably better than you’ve felt all day, finally getting a chance to rest. Breathe slowly and let go in all the tight places. You’re almost there already. This is great.”

Croyd said something, but it was muttered, indistinguishable.

“You are doing very well. You’re quite good at this. Usually I count backward from ten. For you, though, we can start at eight, since you’re almost asleep already. Eight. You are far away and it feels fine. Nine. You are already asleep, but now you are going into it even more deeply. Ten. You will sleep soundly, without fear or pain. Sleep.”

Croyd began to snore.

There were no spare beds, but since Croyd had stiffened to mannequinlike rigidity before turning bright green, his respiration and heartbeat slowing to something between that of a hibernating bear and a dead one, Dr. Finn had had him placed, erect, at the rear of a broom closet, where he did not take up much space, and he drove a nail into the door and hung the chart on it, after having entered, “Patient extremely suggestible.”

IV

When Croyd awoke, he pushed aside mop handles, stepped into a bucket, and fell forward. The closet’s door offered small resistance to the wild, forward thrust of his hands. As it sprang open and he sprawled, the light stabbing painfully into his eyes, he began to recall the circumstances preceding his repose: the centaur-doctor⁠—Finn⁠—and that funny sleep-machine, yes… And another little death would mean another sleep-change.

Lying in the hallway, he counted his fingers. There were ten of them all right, but his skin was dead white. He shook off the bucket, climbed to his feet, and stumbled again. His left arm shot downward, touched the floor, and pushed against it. This impelled him to his feet and over backward. He executed an aerial somersault to his rear, landed on his feet, and toppled rearward again. His hands dropped toward the floor to catch himself, then he withdrew them without making contact and simply let himself fall. Years of experience had already given him a suspicion as to what new factor had entered his life-situation. His overcompensations were telling him something about his reflexes.

When he rose again, his movements were very slow, but they grew more and more normal as he explored. By the time he located a washroom all traces of excessive speed or slowness had vanished. When he studied himself in the mirror, he discovered that, in addition to having grown taller and thinner, it was now a pink-eyed countenance that he regarded, a shock of white hair above the high, glacial brow. He massaged his temples, licked his lips, and shrugged. He was familiar with albinism. It was not the first time he had come up short in the pigment department.

He sought his mirrorshades then recalled that Demise had kicked them off. No matter. He’d pick up another pair along with some sun block. Perhaps he’d better dye the hair too, he decided. Less conspicuous that way.

Whatever, his stomach was signaling its emptiness in a frantic fashion. No time for paperwork, for checking out properly⁠—if, indeed, he’d been checked in properly. He was not at all certain that was the case. Best simply to avoid everyone if he didn’t want to be delayed on the road to food. He could stop by and thank Finn another time.

Moving as Bentley had taught him long ago, all of his senses extended fully, he began his exit.

\* \* \*

“Hi, Jube. One of each, as usual.”

Jube studied the tall, cadaverous figure before him, meeting diminished images of his own tusked, blubbery countenance in the mirrorshades that masked the man’s eyes.

“Croyd? That you, fella?”

“Yep. Just up and around. I crashed at Tachyon’s clinic this time.”

“That must be why I hadn’t heard any Croyd Crenson disaster stories lately. You actually went gentle into your last good night?”

Croyd nodded, studying headlines. “You might put it that way,” he said. “Unusual circumstances. Funny feeling. Hey! What’s this?’ He raised a newspaper and studied it. “ ‘Bloodbath at Werewolf Clubhouse.’ What’s going on, a fucking gang war?”

“A fucking gang war,” Jube acknowledged.

“Damn! I’ve got to get back on the stick fast.”

“What stick?”

“Metaphorical stick,” Croyd replied. “If this is Friday, it must be Dead Nicholas.”

“You okay, boy?”

“No, but twenty or thirty thousand calories will be a step in the right direction.”

“Ought to take the edge off,” Jube agreed. “Hear who won the Miss Jokertown Beauty Pageant last week?”

“Who?” Croyd asked.

“Nobody.”

\* \* \*

Croyd entered Club Dead Nicholas to the notes of an organ playing “Wolverine Blues.” The windows were draped in black, the tables were coffins, the waiters wore shrouds. The wall to the crematorium had been removed; it was now an open grill tended by demonic jokers. As Croyd moved into the lounge, he saw that the casket-tables were open beneath sheets of heavy glass; ghoulish figures⁠—presumably of wax⁠—were laid out within them in various states of unrest.

A lipless, noseless, earless joker as pale as himself approached Croyd immediately, laying a bony hand upon his arm.

“Pardon me, sir. May I see your membership card?” he asked.

Croyd handed him a fifty-dollar bill.

“Yes, of course,” said the grim waiter. “I’ll bring the card to your table. Along with a complimentary drink. I take it you will be dining here?”

“Yes. And I’ve heard you have some good card games.”

“Back room. It’s customary to get another player to introduce you.”

“Sure. Actually, I’m waiting for someone who should be stopping by this evening to play. Fellow name of Eye. Is he here yet?”

“No. Mr. Eye was eaten. Partly, that is. By an alligator. Last September. In the sewers. Sorry.”

“Ouch,” Croyd said. “I didn’t see him often. But when I did he usually had a little business for me.”

The waiter studied him. “What did you say your name was?”

“Whiteout.”

“I don’t want to know your business,” the man said. “But there is a fellow named Melt, who Eye used to hang around with. Maybe he can help you, maybe he can’t. You want to wait and talk to him, I’ll send him over when he comes in.”

“All right. I’ll eat while I’m waiting.”

Sipping his comp beer, waiting for a pair of steaks, Croyd withdrew a deck of Bicycle playing cards from his side pocket, shuffled it, dealt one facedown and another faceup beside it. The ten of diamonds faced him on the clear tabletop, above the agonized grimace of the fanged lady, a wooden stake through her heart, a few drops of red beside the grimace. Croyd turned over the hole card, which proved a seven of clubs. He flipped it back over, glanced about him, turned it again. Now it was a jack of spades keeping the ten company. The flicker-frequency-switch was a trick he’d practiced for laughs the last time his reflexes had been hyped-up. It had come back almost immediately when he’d tried to recall it, leading him to speculate as to what other actions lay buried in his prefrontal gyrus. Wing-flapping reflexes? Throat contractions for ultrasonic wails? Coordination patterns for extra appendages?

He shrugged and dealt himself poker hands just good enough to beat those he gave the staked lady till his food came.

Along about his third dessert the pallid waiter approached, escorting a tall, bald individual whose flesh seemed to flow like wax down a candlestick. His features were constantly distorted as tumorlike lumps passed beneath his skin.

“You told me, sir, that you wanted to meet Melt,” the waiter said.

Croyd rose and extended his hand.

“Call me Whiteout,” he said. “Have a seat. Let me buy you a drink.”

“If you’re selling something, forget it,” Melt told him.

Croyd shook his head as the waiter drifted away.

“I’ve heard they have good card games here, but I’ve got nobody to introduce me,” Croyd stated.

Melt narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, you play cards.”

Croyd smiled. “I sometimes get lucky,”

“Really? And you knew Eye?”

“Well enough to play cards with him.”

“That all?”

“You might check with Demise,” Croyd said. “We’re in a similar line of work. We’re both ex-accountants who moved on to bigger things. My name says it all.”

Melt glanced hastily about, then seated himself. “Let’s keep that kind of noise down, okay? You looking for work now?”

“Not really, not now. I just want to play a little cards.”

Melt licked his lips as a bulge ran down his left cheek, passed over his jawline, distended his neck.

“You got a lot of green to throw around?”

“Enough.”

“Okay, I’ll get you into the game,” Melt said. “I’d like to take some of it away from you.”

Croyd smiled, paid his check, and followed Melt into the back room, where the casket gaming table was closed and had a nonreflective surface. There were seven of them in the game to begin with, and three went broke before midnight. Croyd and Melt and Bug Pimp and Runner saw piles of cash grow and shrink before them till three in the a.m. Then Runner yawned, stretched, and turned out a small bottle of pills from an inside pocket.

“Anybody need something to keep awake?” he asked.

“I’ll stick with coffee,” Melt said.

“Gimme,” said Bug Pimp.

“Never touch the stuff,” said Croyd.

A half hour later Bug Pimp folded and made noises about checking on the line of joker femmes he hustled to straights wanting jittery jollies. By four o’clock the Runner was broke and had to walk. Croyd and Melt stared at each other.

“We’re both ahead,” said Melt.

“True.”

“Should we take the money and run?”

Croyd smiled.

“I feel the same way,” Melt said. “Deal.”

As sunrise tickled the stained glass window and the dusty mechanical bats followed the hologram ghosts to their rest, Melt massaged his temples, rubbed his eyes, and said, “Will you take my marker?”

“Nope,” Croyd replied.

“You shouldn’t have let me play that last hand then.”

“You didn’t tell me you were that broke. I thought you could write a check.”

“Well, shit. I ain’t got it. What do you want to do?”

“Take something else, I guess.”

“Like what?”

“A name.”

“Whose name?” Melt asked, reaching inside his jacket and scratching his chest.

“The person who gives you your orders.”

“What orders?”

“The ones you pass on to guys like Demise.”

“You’re kidding. It’d be my ass to name a name like that.”

“It’ll be your ass if you don’t,” Croyd said.

Melt’s hand came out from behind his coat holding a .32, automatic, which he leveled at Croyd’s chest. “I’m not scared of two-bit muscle. There’s dumdum slugs in here. Know what they do?”

Suddenly Melt’s hand was empty and blood began to ooze from around the nail of his trigger finger. Croyd slowly twisted the automatic out of shape before he tore out the clip and ejected a round.

“You’re right, they’re dumdums,” he acknowledged. “Look at the little flat-nosed buggers, will you? By the way, my name’s not Whiteout. I’m Croyd Crenson, the Sleeper, and nobody welshes on me. Maybe you’ve heard I’m a little bit nuts. You give me the name and you don’t find out how true that is.”

Melt licked his lips. The lumps beneath his glistening skin increased the tempo of their passage.

“I’m dead if they ever hear.”

Croyd shrugged. “I won’t tell them if you won’t.” He pushed a stack of bills toward Melt. “Here’s your cut for getting me into the game. Give me the name, take it and walk, or I’ll leave you in three of these boxes.” Croyd kicked the coffin.

“Danny Mao,” Melt whispered, “at the Twisted Dragon, over near Chinatown.”

“He gives you a hit list, pays you?”

“Right.”

“Who pulls his strings?”

“Beats the shit out of me. He’s all I know.”

“When’s he at the Twisted Dragon?”

“I think he hangs out there a lot, because other people in the place seem to know him. I’d get a call, I’d go over. I’d check my coat. We’d have dinner, or a few drinks. Business didn’t get mentioned. But when I’d leave, there’d be a piece of paper in my pocket with a name or two or three on it, and an envelope with money in it. Same as with Eye. That’s how he worked it.”

“The first time?”

“The first time we took a long walk and he explained the setup. After that, it was like I just said.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all.”

“Okay, you’re off the hook.”

Melt picked up his stack of bills and stuffed it into his pocket. He opened his distorted mouth as if to say something, thought better of it, thought again, said, “Let’s not leave together.”

“Fine with me. G’bye.”

Melt moved toward the side door, flanked by a pair of tombstones. Croyd picked up his winnings and began thinking about breakfast.

\* \* \*

Croyd rode the elevator to Aces High, regretting the absence of a power of flight on such a perfect spring evening. Arriving, he stepped into the lounge, paused, and glanced about.

Six tables held twelve couples, and a dark-haired lady in a low-cut silver blouse sat alone at a two-person table near the bar, twirling a swizzle in some exotic drink. Three men and a woman were seated at the bar. Soft modern jazz sounds circulated through the cool air, accompaniment to blender and laughter, to the clicks and splashes of ice, liquid, and glass. Croyd moved forward.

“Is Hiram here?” he asked the bartender.

The man looked at him, then shook his head.

“Are you expecting him this evening?”

A shrug. “Hasn’t been around much lately.”

“What about Jane Dow?”

The man studied him. Then, “She’s taken off too,” he stated.

“So you really don’t know if either of them’ll be in?”

“Nope.”

Croyd nodded. “I’m Croyd Crenson and I plan to eat here tonight. If Jane comes in, I’d like to know.”

“Your best bet’s to leave a note at the reservation desk before you’re seated.”

“Got something I can write on?” Croyd asked.

The bartender reached beneath the bar, brought up a pad and a pencil and passed them to him. Croyd scribbled a message.

As he set the pad down, his hand was covered by a more delicate one, of darker complexion, with bright red nails. His gaze moved along it to the shoulder, skipped to the silver décolletage, paused a beat, rose. It was the solitary lady with the exotic drink. On closer inspection there was something familiar…

“Croyd?” she said softly. “You get stood up too?”

As he met her dark-eyed gaze a name drifted up from the past.

“Veronica,” he said.

“Right. You’ve a good memory for a psycho,” she observed, smiling.

“Tonight’s my night off. I’m real straight.”

“You look mature and distinguished with the white sideburns.”

“Damn, I missed some,” he said. “And you’re really missing a custom⁠—Er, a date?”

“Uh-huh. Seems like we’ve both thought about getting together too.”

“True. You have dinner yet?”

She gave her hair a toss and smiled. “No, and I was looking forward to something special.”

He took her arm. “I’ll get us a table,” he said, “and I’ve already got a great special in mind.”

Croyd crumpled the note and left it in the ashtray.

\* \* \*

The trouble with women, Croyd reflected, was that no matter how good they might be in bed, eventually they wanted to use that piece of furniture for sleeping⁠—a condition he was generally unable and unwilling to share. Consequently, when Veronica had finally succumbed to the sleep of exhaustion, Croyd had risen and begun pacing his Morningside Heights apartment, to which they had finally repaired sometime after midnight.

He poured the contents of a can of beef and vegetable soup into a pan and set it on the stove. He prepared a pot of coffee. While he waited for them to simmer and percolate, he phoned those of his other apartments with telephone answering machines and used a remote activator to play back their message tapes. Nothing new.

Finishing his soup, he checked whether Veronica was still asleep, then removed the key from its hiding place and opened the reinforced door to the small room without windows. He turned on its single light, locked himself in, and went to sit beside the glass statue reclining upon the day bed. He held Melanie’s hand and began talking to her⁠—slowly at first; but after a time the words came tumbling out. He told her of Dr. Finn and his sleep machine and talked about the Mafia and Demise and Eye and Danny Mao⁠—whom he hadn’t been able to run down yet⁠—and about how great things used to be. He talked until he grew hoarse, and then he went out and locked the door and hid the key again.

Later, a pallid dawn spreading like an infection in the east, he entered the bedroom on hearing sounds from within.

“Hey, lady, ready for a coffee fix?” he called. “And a little angular momentum? A steak⁠—”

He paused on observing the drug paraphernalia Veronica had set out on the bedside table. She looked up, winked at him, and smiled.

“Coffee would be great, lover. I take it light. No sugar.”

“All right,” he replied. “I didn’t realize you were a user.”

She glanced down at her bare arms, nodded. “Doesn’t show. Can’t mainline or you spoil the merchandise.”

“Then what⁠—”

She assembled a hype and filled it. Then she stuck out her tongue, took hold of its tip with the fingers of her left hand, raised it, and administered the injection in the underside.

“Ouch,” Croyd commented. “Where’d you learn that trick?”

“House of D. Can I fix you up here?”

Croyd shook his head. “Wrong time of month.”

“Makes you sound raggedy.”

“With me it’s a special need. When the time comes, I’ll drop some purple hearts or do some benz.”

“Oh, bombitas. Sí,” she said, nodding. “Speedballs, STP, high-octane shit. Crazy man’s cooking. I’ve heard of your habits. Loco stuff.”

Croyd shrugged. “I’ve tried it all.”

“Not yage?”

“Yeah. It ain’t that great.”

“Desoxyn? Desbutol?”

“Uh-huh. They’ll do.”

“Khat?”

“Hell, yes. I’ve even done huilca. You ever try pituri? Now that’s some good shit. Routine’s a little messy, though. Learned it from an abo. How’s about kratom? Comes out of Thailand⁠—”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“Jeez, we’ll never run out of conversation. Bet I can pick up a lot from you.”

“I’ll see that you do.”

“Sure I can’t set you up?”

“Right now coffee’ll do fine.”

The morning entered the room, spilling over their slow movements.

“Here’s one called the Purple Monkey Proffers the Peach and Takes It Away Again,” Croyd murmured. “Learned it⁠—heard of it, that is⁠—from the lady gave me the kratom.”

“Good shit,” Veronica whispered.

\* \* \*

When Croyd entered the Twisted Dragon for the third time in as many days, he headed directly to the bar, seated himself beneath a red paper lantern, and ordered a Tsingtao.

A nasty-looking Caucasian with ornate scars all over his face occupied the stool two seats to his left, and Croyd glanced at him, looked away, and looked again. Light shone through the septum of the man’s nose. There was a good-size hole there, and a patch of scabbed pinkish flesh occurred on the nose’s tip. It was almost as if he had recently given up on wearing a nose ring under some duress.

Croyd smiled. “Stand too near a merry-go-round?”

“Huh?”

“Or is it just the feng shui in here?” Croyd continued.

“What the hell’s feng shui?” the man said.

“Ask any of these guys,” Croyd said, gesturing broadly. “Especially, though, ask Danny Mao. It’s the way energy circulates in the world, and sometimes it gets you in a tricky bind. Lady from Thailand told me about it once. Like, killer chi will come blasting in that door, bounce off the mirror here, get split by that ba-gua fixture there and”⁠—he chugged his beer, stepped down from his stool and advanced⁠—“hit you right in the nose.”

Croyd’s movement was too fast for the man’s eyes to follow, and he screamed when he felt that the finger had passed through his perforated septum.

“Stop it! My God! Cut it out!” he cried.

Croyd led him off his stool.

“Twice I’ve gotten the runaround in this joint,” he said loudly. “I promised myself today that the first person I ran into here was going to talk to me.”

“I’ll talk to you! I’ll talk! What do you want to know?”

“Where’s Danny Mao?” Croyd asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know any⁠—aah!”

Croyd had crooked his finger, moved it in a figure eight, straightened it.

“Please,” the man whined. “Let go. He’s not here. He’s⁠—”

“I’m Danny Mao,” came a well-modulated voice from a table partly masked by a dusty potted palm. Its owner rose and followed it around the tree, a middle-size Oriental man, expressionless save for a quirked eyebrow. “What’s your business here, paleface?”

“Private,” Croyd said, “unless you want to stand out on the street and shout.”

“I don’t give interviews to strangers,” Danny said, moving toward him.

The man whose nose Croyd wore on his finger whimpered as Croyd turned, dragging him with him.

“I’ll introduce myself in private,” Croyd said.

“Don’t bother.”

The man’s fist flashed forward. Croyd moved his free hand with equal rapidity and the punch struck his palm. Three more punches followed, and Croyd stopped all of them in a similar fashion. The kick he caught behind the heel, raising the foot high and fast. Danny Mao executed a backward flip, landed on his feet, caught his balance.

“Shit!” Croyd observed, moving his other hand rapidly. The stranger howled as something in his nose snapped and he was hurled forward, crashing into Danny Mao. Both men went down, and the weeping man’s nose gushed red upon them. “Bad feng shui,” Croyd added. “You’ve got to watch out for that stuff. Gets you every time.”

“Danny,” came a voice from behind a carved wooden screen beyond the foot of the bar, “I gotta talk to you.”

Croyd thought he recognized the voice, and when the small, scaly joker with the fanged, orange face looked around the screen’s corner, he saw it to be Linetap, who had erratic telepathic abilities and often worked as a lookout.

“Might be a good idea,” Croyd told Danny Mao.

The man with the bleeding nose limped off to the rest room while Danny flowed gracefully to his feet, brushed off his trousers, and gave Croyd a quick burning glance before heading back toward Linetap.

After several minutes’ conversation Danny Mao returned from behind the screen and stood before him.

“So you’re the Sleeper,” Danny said.

“Yep.”

“St. John Latham, of the law firm Latham, Strauss.”

“What?”

“The name you’re after. I’m giving it to you: St. John Latham.”

“Without further struggle? Free, gratis and for nothing?”

“No. You will pay. For this information I believe that soon you will sleep forever. Good day, Mr. Crenson.”

Danny Mao turned and walked away. Croyd was about to do the same when the man with the nose job emerged from the rest room, holding a large wad of toilet tissue to his face.

“Hope you know you’ve made the Cannibal Headhunters’ shit list,” he snuffled.

Croyd nodded slowly. “Tell them to mind the killer chi,” he said, “and keep your nose clean.”

V

After running a small favor for Veronica, reporting his progress to Theotocopoulos, and phoning Latham, Strauss for an appointment, Croyd met Veronica for dinner. As he told her of the day’s doings, she shook her head when he told her about St. John Latham.

“You’re crazy,” she told him. “If he’s that well-connected, what do you want to fool around with him for, anyway?”

“Somebody wanted to know about something he was up to.”

She frowned. “I find a guy I like, I don’t want to lose him so quick.”

“I won’t get hurt.”

She sighed, put a hand on his arm. “I mean it,” she said.

“So do I. I can take care of myself.”

“What does that mean? How dangerous is it?”

“I’ve got a job to finish, and I think I’m almost there. I’ll probably wrap it up soon without any sweat, get the rest of my money, and maybe take a little vacation before I sleep again. Thought we might go someplace real nice together⁠—say, the Caribbean.”

“Aw, Croyd,” she said, taking his hand, “you’ve been thinking of me.”

“Of course I’ve been thinking of you. Now, I’ve got an appointment with Latham for Thursday. Maybe I can finish this thing by the weekend. Then we’ll have some time for just the two of us.”

“You be careful, then.”

“Hell, I’m almost done. Haven’t had any problems yet.”

\* \* \*

After stopping at one of his banks for additional funds, Croyd took a taxi to the building that held the law offices of Latham, Strauss. He had made the appointment by describing a fictitious case designed to sound expensive, and he arrived fifteen minutes ahead of time. On entering the waiting room he suppressed a sudden desire for medication. Hanging out with Veronica seemed to have him thinking about it ahead of schedule.

He identified himself to the receptionist, sat and read a magazine till she told him, “Mr. Latham will see you now, Mr. Smith.”

Croyd nodded, rose, and entered the inner office.

Latham rose from his seat behind his desk, displaying an elegantly cut gray suit, and he offered his hand. He was somewhat shorter than Croyd, and his refined features remained expressionless.

“Mr. Smith,” he acknowledged. “Won’t you have a seat?”

Croyd remained standing. “No.”

Latham raised an eyebrow, then seated himself. “As you would,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me about your case now?”

“Because there isn’t one. What I really need is some information.”

“Oh? That being?”

Instead of replying Croyd looked away, casting his gaze about the office. Then his hand moved forward, to pick up an orange and green stone paperweight from Latham’s desk. He held it directly before him and squeezed. A cracking, grinding sound followed. When he opened his hand, a shower of gravel fell upon the desk.

Latham remained expressionless. “What sort of information are you seeking?”

“You have done work for the new mob,” Croyd said, “the one trying to move in on the Mafia.”

“Are you with the Justice Department?”

“No.”

“DA’s office?”

“I’m not a cop,” Croyd responded, “and I’m not an attorney either. I’m just someone who needs an answer.”

“What is the question?”

“Who is the head of this new family? That’s all I want to know.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps someone wishes to arrange a meeting with that person.”

“Interesting,” Latham said. “You wish to retain me to arrange such a meeting?”

“No, I only want to know who the person in charge is.”

“Quid⁠—pro⁠—quo,” Latham observed. “What are you offering for this?”

“I am prepared to save you,” Croyd said, “some very large bills from orthopedic surgeons and physiotherapists. You lawyers know all about such matters, don’t you?”

Latham smiled a totally artificial smile. “Kill me and you’re a dead man, hurt me and you’re a dead man, threaten me and you’re a dead man. Your little trick with the stone means nothing. There are aces with fancier powers than that on call. Now, was that a threat you just made?”

Croyd smiled back. “I will die before too long, Mr. Latham, to be born again in a completely different form. I am not going to kill you. But supposing I were to cause you to talk to stop the pain, and supposing that later your friends were to put out a contract on the man you see before you. It wouldn’t matter. He would no longer exist. I am a series of biological ephemera.”

“You are the Sleeper.”

“Yes.”

“I see. And if I give you this information, what do you think will happen to me?”

“Nothing. Who’s to know?”

Latham sighed. “You place me in an extremely awkward position.”

“That was my intention”⁠—Croyd glanced at his watch⁠—“and I’m on a tight schedule. I should have begun beating the shit out of you about a minute and a half ago, but I’m trying to be a nice guy about this. What should we do, counselor?”

“I will cooperate with you,” Latham said, “because I don’t think it will make an iota of difference in what is going on right now.”

“Why not?”

“I can give you a name, but not an address. I do not know from where they do business. We have always met in no-man’s-land or spoken over the telephone. I cannot even give you a telephone number, however, for they have always gotten in touch with me. And I say that it will make no difference because I do not believe that the interests you represent are capable of doing them harm. This group is too well staffed with aces. Also, I am fully convinced that they are going to manage what we might refer to as a “corporate takeover” very soon. Should your employer wish to save lives and perhaps even settle for a bit of pocket money as something of a retirement bonus, I would be happy to try to arrange the terms for such an agreement.”

“Naw,” Croyd said, “I don’t have any instructions for that kind of deal.”

“I’d be surprised if you did.” Latham glanced at his telephone. “But if you would like to relay the suggestion, be my guest.”

Croyd did not move. “I’ll pass the word along, with the name you’re going to give me.”

Latham nodded. “As you would. My offer to negotiate does not assure the acceptance of any particular terms, though, and I feel obliged to advise you that it may not be acceptable at all to the other side.”

“I’ll tell them that, too,” Croyd said. “What’s the name?”

“Also, to be completely scrupulous, I ought to tell you that if you force me to divulge the name, I have a duty to inform my client that this information has been given out, and to whom. I cannot take responsibility for any actions this might precipitate.”

“The name of my client has not been stated either.”

“As with so much else in life, we must be guided by certain suppositions.”

“Stop beating around the bush and give me the name.”

“Very well,” Latham told him. “Siu Ma.”

“Say again.”

Latham repeated the name.

“Write it down.”

He jotted the name on a pad, tore off the sheet, and handed it to Croyd.

“Oriental,” Croyd mused. “I take it this guy is head of a tong or a triad or a yakuza⁠—one of those Asian culture clubs?”

“Not a guy.”

“A woman?”

The attorney nodded. “Can’t give you a description either. She’s probably short, though.”

Croyd looked fast, but he could not decide whether the residue of a smile lay upon the other’s lips.

“And I’ll bet she’s not in the Manhattan directory either,” Croyd suggested.

“Safe bet. So I’ve given you what you came for. Take it home, for all the good it will do you.” He rose then, turned away from his desk, moved to a window, and stared down into traffic. “Wouldn’t it be great,” he said after a time, “if there were a way for you wild card freaks to bring a class action suit against the Takisians?”

Croyd let himself out, not totally pleased with what he had let himself in for.

\* \* \*

Croyd required a restaurant with a table within shooting distance of a pay phone. He found what he was looking for on his third try, was seated, placed his order, and hurried to make his first call. It was answered on the fourth ring.

“Vito’s Italian.”

“This is Croyd Crenson. I want to talk to Theo.”

“Hold on a minute. Hey, Theo!” Then, “He’s coming.”

Half a minute. A minute.

“Yeah?”

“This Theo?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell Chris Mazzucchelli that Croyd Crenson’s got a name for him and needs to know where he wants to hear it.”

“Right. Call me back in half an hour, forty-five minutes, okay?”

“Sure.”

Croyd phoned Tavern-on-the-Green then and was able to make reservations for two at eight-fifteen. Then he phoned Veronica. It was answered on the sixth ring.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded weak, distant.

“Veronica, love, it’s Croyd. Not to be carried away, but I think I’m just about done with this job and I want to celebrate. What say we cut out about seven-thirty and start doing it?”

“Oh, Croyd, I really feel shitty. I ache all over, I can’t keep anything down, and I’m so weak I can hardly hold the phone up. It’s gotta be flu. All I’m good for is sleeping.”

“I’m sorry. You need anything? Aspirins? Ice cream? Horse? Snow? Bombitas? You name it and I’ll pick it up.”

“Aw, that’s sweet, lover. But no. I’ll be okay, and I don’t want to expose you to this thing. I just want to sleep. Okay?”

“All right.”

Croyd headed back to his table. His food arrived moments later. When he finished it, he ordered again and rolled a pair of pills between his thumb and forefinger. Finally he took them with a swallow of iced tea. Then he ordered again and checked various of his personal phones for messages till his next order arrived. He went back and took care of it, then buzzed Theo again.

“So what’d he say?”

“I haven’t been able to get hold of him, Croyd. I’m still trying. Get back to me in maybe an hour.”

“I will,” Croyd said, and he called Tavern-on-the-Green and canceled his reservation, then returned to his table to order a few desserts.

He phoned before the hour had run as there were a number of matters he was anxious to attend to. Fortunately Theo had made a connection in the meantime, and he gave him an apartment address on the upper East Side. “Be there nine o’clock tonight. Chris wants you to make a full report to the management.”

“It’s just a lousy name I could give him over the phone,” Croyd said.

“I am only a message service, and that is the message.”

Croyd hung up and paid his tab, the afternoon open before him.

As he stepped outside, a short, broad-shouldered man with an Oriental cast to his features emerged from a doorway perhaps ten feet to the left, hands within his blue satin jacket, gaze focused on the ground. As he turned toward Croyd, he raised his head and their eyes met for a moment. Croyd felt later that he had known in that instant what was to occur. Whatever the case, he knew for certain a moment later when the man’s right hand emerged from his jacket, fingers wrapped in an unusual grip about the hilt of a long, slightly curved knife, its blade extending back along the man’s forearm, edge outward. Then his left hand emerged as he moved forward, and it held a matching blade in an identical grip. Both weapons moved in unison as his pace accelerated.

Croyd’s abnormal reflexes took over. As he moved forward to meet the attack, it seemed as if the other had suddenly dropped into slow motion. Turning to match the double-bladed pass, Croyd reached across a line of gleaming metal, caught a hand, and twisted it inward. The weapon’s edge was rotated back toward the attacker’s abdomen. Its point entered there, moved diagonally upward, and was followed by a rush of blood and innards. As the man doubled, Croyd beheld the white egret that decorated the jacket’s back.

Then the window at his side shattered and the sound of a gunshot rang in his ears. Turning, drawing his collapsed assailant before him, he saw a dark, late-model car moving slowly along the curbside, almost parallel to him. There were two men in the vehicle, the driver and a passenger in the rear seat who was pointing a pistol in his direction through the opened window.

Croyd moved forward and stuffed the man he held into the car. He did not fit through the window easily, but Croyd pushed hard and he went in nevertheless, losing only a few pieces along the way. His final screams were mixed with the roar of the engine as the car jumped forward and raced off.

It had been, he realized, a kind of proof that Latham had told him the truth and nothing but, though not necessarily the whole truth; and by this he was pleased with his work, after a fashion. Now, though, he had to start looking over his shoulder and keep it up till he had his money. And this was aggravating.

He stepped over some of his attacker’s odds and ends and felt in his pocket for one of his pillboxes. Aggravating.

\* \* \*

As Croyd approached the apartment building that evening, he noted that the man in the car parked before it appeared to be speaking into a small walkie-talkie and staring at him. He’d grown very conscious of parked cars following the second attempt on his life, a little earlier. Massaging his knuckles, he turned suddenly and stepped toward the car.

“Croyd,” the man said softly.

“That’s right. We’d better be on the same side.”

The man nodded and shifted a wad of chewing gum into his left cheek. “You can go on up,” he said. “Third floor, apartment thirty-two. Don’t have to ring. Guy by the door’ll let you in.”

“Chris Mazzucchelli’s there?”

“No, but everyone else is. Chris couldn’t make it, but it don’t matter. You tell those people what they want to know. It’s the same as telling him.”

Croyd shook his head. “Chris hired me. Chris pays me. I talk to Chris.”

“Wait a minute.” The man pressed the button on his walkie-talkie and began speaking into it in Italian. He glanced at Croyd after a few moments, raised his index finger, and nodded.

“What’s comin’ down?” Croyd asked when the conversation was concluded. “You find him all of a sudden?”

“No,” the guard answered, shifting his wad of gum. “But we can satisfy you everything’s okay in just a minute.”

“Okay,” Croyd said. “Satisfy me.”

They waited. Several minutes later a man in a dark suit emerged from the building. For a moment Croyd thought it was Chris, but on closer inspection he realized the man to be thinner and somewhat taller. The newcomer approached and nodded to the guard, who nodded at Croyd and said, “There he is.”

“I’m Chris’s brother,” the man said, smiling faintly, “and that’s as close as we can get at the moment. I can speak for him, and it’s okay for you to tell the gentlemen upstairs what you’ve learned.”

“Okay,” Croyd said. “That’s good. But I was thinking about collecting the rest of my money from him too.”

“I don’t know about that. Maybe you better ask Vince about it. Schiaparelli. He sometimes does payroll. Maybe you shouldn’t, though.”

Croyd turned toward the guard. “You’ve got the bitchbox. You call the guy and ask him. The other side’s already hit on me today for what I got. If my money’s not here, I’m walking.”

“Wait a minute,” Chris’s brother said. “No reason to get upset. Hang on.”

He pointed at the walkie-talkie with his thumb and the guard spoke into it, listened, waited, glanced at Croyd.

“They’re getting Schiaparelli,” the guard said. After a longer while he listened to a low squawking, spoke, listened again, looked at Croyd again. “Yeah, he’s got it,” he told Croyd.

“Good,” Croyd said. “Have him bring it down.”

“No, you go up and get it.”

Croyd shook his head.

The man stared at him and licked his lips, as if loath to relay the message. “This does not make a very good impression, for it is as if you had no trust.”

Croyd smiled. “It is also correct. Make the call.”

This was done, and after a time a heavyset man with graying hair emerged from the building and stared at Croyd. Croyd stared back.

The man approached. “You are Mr. Crenson?”

“That is correct.”

“And you want your money now?”

“That’s the picture.”

“Of course I have it here,” the other told him, reaching into his jacket. “Chris sent it along. It will grieve him that you are so suspicious.”

Croyd held out his hand. When the envelope was placed in it, he opened it and counted. Then he nodded. “Let’s go,” he said, and he followed Schiaparelli and Chris’s brother into the building. The man with the walkie-talkie was shaking his head.

Upstairs, Croyd was introduced to a group of old and middle-aged men and their bodyguards. He declined a drink, just wanting to give them the name and get out. But it occurred to him that giving them the money’s worth might entail stretching the story out a bit to show that he’d earned it. So he explained things, step by step, from Demise to Loophole. Then he told them of the attempt to take him out following that interview, before he finally got around to giving them Siu Ma’s name.

The expected question followed: Where could she be found?

“This I do not know,” Croyd replied. “Chris asked me for a name, not for an address. You want to hire me to get that for you, too, I suppose I could do it, though it would be cheaper to use your own talent.”

This drew some surly responses, and Croyd shrugged, said goodnight, and walked out, stepping up his pace to the blur level as the muscle near the door looked about, as if for orders.

It was not until a couple of blocks later that a pair of such street troops caught up and attempted to brace him for a refund. He tore out a sewer grating, stuffed their bodies down through the opening and replaced it, for his final bit of subtlety before closing the books on this one.

VI

Croyd took a taxi crosstown, then hiked a circuitous route to his Morningside Heights apartment. There were no lights on within, and he entered quickly and quietly, painkillers, antihistamines, psychedelics, and a five-pound box of assorted chocolates all gift-wrapped together in a gaudy parcel beneath his arm. He flipped on the hall light and slipped into the bedroom.

“Veronica? You awake?” he whispered.

There was no reply, and he crossed to the bedside, lowered himself to a seated position, and reached out. His hand encountered only bedclothes.

“Veronica?” he said aloud.

No reply.

He turned on the bedside lamp. The bed was empty, her stuff gone. He looked about for a note. No. Nothing. Perhaps in the living room. Or the kitchen. Yes. Most likely she’d leave it in the refrigerator where he’d be certain to find it.

He rose, then halted. Was that a footstep? Back toward the living room?

“Veronica?”

No reply.

Foolish of him to have left the door open, he suddenly realized, though there had been no one in the hallway.

He reached out and extinguished the lamp. He crossed to the door, dropped silently to the floor, moved his head outside at floor level, and drew it back quickly.

Empty. No one in the hall. No further sounds either.

He rose and stepped outside. He walked back toward the living room.

In the dim light from the hallway, as he rounded the corner, he beheld a Bengal tiger, and its tail twitched once before it sprang at him.

“Holy shit!” Croyd commented, dropping Veronica’s present and leaping to the side.

Plaster shattered and fell as he caromed off the wall, an orange and black shoulder grazed him in passing, and he threw a punch that slid over the animal’s back. He heard it growl as he leaped into the living room. It turned quickly and followed him, and he picked up a heavy chair and threw it as the beast sprang again.

It roared as the chair struck it, and Croyd overturned a heavy wooden table, raised it like a shield, and rushed with it against the animal. The tiger shook itself, snarling, as it batted the chair aside. It turned and caught the table’s flat surface upon a smooth expanse of shoulder muscle. Then it swung a paw over the table’s upper edge. Croyd ducked, pushed forward.

The big cat fell back, dropped out of sight. Seconds crept by like drugged cockroaches.

“Kitty?” he inquired.

Nothing.

He lowered the table a foot. With a roar the tiger sprang. Croyd snapped the table upward, faster than he could remember ever having lifted a piece of furniture before. Its edge caught the tiger a terrible blow beneath the jaw, and it let out a human-sounding whimper as it was turned sideways and fell to the floor. Croyd raised the table high and slammed it down atop the beast, as if it were a giant flyswatter. He raised it again. He halted. He stared.

No tiger.

“Kitty?” he repeated.

Nothing.

He lowered the table. Finally he set it aside. He moved to the wall switch and threw it. Only then did he realize that the front of his shirt was torn and bloody. Three furrows ran down the left side of his chest from collarbone to hip.

On the floor, a bit of whiteness…

Stooping, he touched the object, raised it, studied it. He held one of those little folded paper figures⁠—origami, he remembered, the Japanese called them. This one was…a paper tiger. He shivered at the same time as he chuckled. This was almost supernatural. This was heavy shit. It occurred to him then that he had just fought off another ace⁠—one with a power he did not understand⁠—and he did not like this a bit. Not with Veronica missing. Not with his not even knowing which side had sent the stranger ace to take him out.

He locked the door to the hallway. He opened Veronica’s present, took out the bottle of Percodans and tossed off a couple before he hit the bathroom, stripped off his shirt, and washed his chest. Then he fetched a beer from the refrigerator and washed down a French green with it, to provide the Percs with some contrast. There was no note propped against the milk carton or even in the egg drawer, and this made him sad.

When the bleeding stopped, he washed again, taped a dressing in place, and drew on a fresh shirt. He was not even sure whether he had been followed or whether this had been a stakeout. Either way, he wasn’t going to stick around. He hated abandoning Veronica if someone really had a make on the place, but at the moment he had no choice. It was a very familiar feeling: they were after him again.

\* \* \*

Croyd rode subways and taxis and walked for over four hours, crouched behind his mirrorshades, crissing and crossing the island in a pattern of evasion calculated to confuse anybody. And for the first time in his life he saw his name up in lights in Times Square.

CROYD CRENSON, said the flowing letters high on the buildingside, CALL DR. T. EMERGENCY

Croyd stood and stared, reading it over and over. When he had convinced himself it was not a hallucination, he shrugged. They ought to know he’d stop by and pay his bill when he got a chance. It was damn humiliating, implying to the whole world that he was a deadbeat. They’d probably even try to charge him for a bed, too, he guessed, when broom closets should be a lot cheaper. Out to screw him, the same as everyone else. They could damn well wait.

Cursing, he ran for a subway entrance.

\* \* \*

Heading south on the Broadway line, sucking on a pair of purple hearts and a stray pyrahex he’d found at the bottom of his pocket, Croyd was amazed and impressed that Senator Hartmann actually did seem a man of the people, boarding the train at the Canal Street Station that way. Then another Senator Hartmann followed him. They glanced his way, conferred for an instant, and one leaned out the door and hollered something, and more Hartmanns came running. There were tall Hartmanns, short Hartmanns, fat Hartmanns and even a Hartmann with an extra appendage⁠—seven Hartmanns in all. And Croyd was not so unsophisticated as to fail in realizing, this near Jokertown, that Hartmanns was the Werewolves’ face of the day.

The doors closed, the train began to move, the tallest Hartmann turned, stared, and approached.

“You Croyd Crenson?” he asked.

“Nope,” Croyd replied.

“I think you are.”

Croyd shrugged. “Think whatever you want, but do it someplace else if you want my vote.”

“Get up.”

“I am up. I’m a lot higher than you. And I’m up for anything.”

The tall Hartmann reached for him, and the other Hartmanns began a swaying advance.

Croyd reached forward, caught the oncoming hand, and drew it toward his face. There followed a crunching sound, and the tall Hartmann screamed as Croyd jerked his head to the side, then spat out the thumb he had just bitten off the hand he held. Then he rose to his feet, still holding the Werewolf’s right wrist with his left hand. He jerked the man forward and drove the fingers of his free hand deep into his abdomen and began drawing them upward. Blood spurted and ribs popped and protruded.

“Always following me,” he said. “You’re a real pain in the ass, you know? Where’s Veronica?”

The man commenced a coughing spasm. The other Werewolves halted as the blood began to flow. Croyd’s hand plunged again, downward this time. Red up to the elbow now, he began drawing out a length of intestine. The others began to gag, to back toward the rear of the car.

“This is a political statement,” Croyd said as he raised the gory Hartmann and tossed him after the others. “See you in November, motherfuckers!”

\* \* \*

Croyd exited quickly at the Wall Street Station, tore off his bloody shirt, and tossed it into a trash receptacle. He washed his hands in a public fountain before departing the area, and he offered a big black guy who’d said, “You really a Whitey!” fifty bucks for his shirt⁠—a pale blue, long-sleeved polyester affair, which fit him fine. He trotted over to Nassau then, followed it north till it ran into Centre. He stopped in an open all night Greek place and bought two giant styrofoam cups of coffee, one for each hand, to sip as he strolled.

He continued up to Canal and bore westward. Then he detoured several blocks to a café he knew, for steak and eggs and coffee and juice and more coffee. He sat beside the window and watched the street grow light and come alive. He took a black pill for medicinal purposes and a red one for good luck.

“Uh,” he said to the waiter, “you’re the sixth or seventh person I’ve seen wearing a surgical mask recently…”

“Wild card virus,” the man said. “It’s around again.”

“Just a few cases, here and there,” Croyd said, “last I heard.”

“Go listen again,” the man responded. “It’s close to a hundred⁠—maybe over⁠—already.”

“Still,” Croyd mused, “do you think a little strip of cloth like that will really do you any good?”

The waiter shrugged. “I figure it’s better than nothing… More coffee?”

“Yeah. Get me a dozen donuts to go, too, will you?”

“Sure.”

He made his way to the Bowery via Broome Street, then on down toward Hester. As he drew nearer, he saw that the newsstand was not yet open, and Jube nowhere in sight. Pity, he’d a feeling Walrus might have some useful information or at least some good advice on dealing with the fact that both sides in the current gang war periodically took time out to shoot at him⁠—say, every other day. Was it sunspots? Bad breath? It was rapidly ceasing to be cost effective for the Mob to keep chasing him to recover his fee for his investigation⁠—and Siu Ma’s people must have hit at him enough by now to have recovered a lot more face than he’d ever cost them.

Munching a donut, he passed on, heading for his Eldridge apartment. Later. No rush. He could talk to Jube by and by. Right now it would be restful to lean back in the big easy chair, his feet up on the ottoman, and close his eyes for a few minutes…

“Shit!” he observed, tossing half a donut down the stairwell to a vacant basement flat as he turned the corner onto his block. Was it getting to be that time already?

Then he continued to turn with that rapid fluidity of movement that had come with the territory this time around, following the donut down into darkness where the asthmatic snuffling of some ancient dog would have been distracting but for the fact that he was viewing, even as he descended, a classical stakeout up the street near his pad.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” he added, just his head above ground level now, outline broken by a length of upright piping that supported the side railing.

One man sat in a parked car up past the building, in view of its front entrance. Another sat on a stoop, filing his nails, in command of an angled view of the rear of the building from across the side alley.

Croyd heard a panicked gasping as he swore, unlike any doggy sound with which he was familiar. Glancing downward and back into the shadows, he beheld the quivering, amorphous form of Snotman, generally conceded to be the most disgusting inhabitant of Jokertown, as he cringed in the corner and ate the remains of Croyd’s donut.

Every square inch of the man’s surface seemed covered with green mucus, which ran steadily from him and added to the stinking puddle in which he crouched. Whatever garments he had on were so saturated with it as to have become barely distinguishable⁠—like his features.

“For Christ’s sake! That’s filthy and I was eating on it!” Croyd said. “Have a fresh one.” He extended the bag toward Snotman, who did not move. “It’s okay,” he added, and finally he set the bag down on the bottom step and returned to watching the watchers.

Snotman finished the discarded fragment and remained still for some time. Finally, he asked, “For me?”

His voice was a liquid, snotty, snuffling thing.

“Yeah, finish ’em. I’m full,” Croyd said. “I didn’t know you could talk.”

“Nobody to talk to,” Snotman replied.

“Well⁠—yeah. That’s the breaks, I guess.”

“People say I make them lose their appetites. Is that why you don’t want the rest?”

“No,” Croyd said. “I got a problem. I’m trying to figure what to do next. There’re some guys up there have my place covered. I’m deciding whether to take them out or just go away. You don’t bother me, even with that gunk all over you. I’ve looked as bad myself on occasion.”

“You? How?”

“I’m Croyd Crenson, the one they call the Sleeper. I change appearance every time I sleep. Sometimes it’s for the better, sometimes it isn’t.”

“Could I?”

“What? Oh, change again? I’m a special case, is what it is. I don’t know any way I could share that with other people. Believe me, you wouldn’t want a regular diet of it.”

“Just once would be enough,” Snotman answered, opening the bag and taking out a donut. “Why are you taking a pill? Are you sick?”

“No, it’s just something to help me stay alert. I can’t afford to sleep for a long time.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a long story. Very long.”

“Nobody tells me stories anymore.”

“What the hell. Why not?” Croyd said.

VII

When Snotman grew ill, Croyd snapped the lock on the door behind him, letting him into the dusty ruin of a small two-room apartment whose owner was obviously using the place to store damaged furniture. He located a threadbare couch on which the glistening joker sprawled, quivering. He rinsed a jelly jar he found near a basin in the next room and took him a drink of water. Sweeping aside a mess of ancient drug paraphernalia, Croyd seated himself on a small cracked bench as the other sipped.

“You been sick?” Croyd asked him.

“No. I mean, I always feel like I’ve got a cold, but this is different. I feel sort of like I did a long time ago, when it all started.”

Croyd covered the shivering joker with a pile of curtains he found in a corner, then seated himself again.

“Finish telling me what happened,” Snotman said after a time.

“Oh, yeah.”

Croyd popped a methamphet and a dex and continued his tale. When Snotman passed out, Croyd did not notice. He kept talking until he realized that Snotman’s skin had gone dry. Then he grew still and watched, for the man’s features seemed slowly to be rearranging themselves. Even speeded, Croyd was able to spot the onset of a wild card attack. But even speeded, this did not quite make sense. Snotman was already a joker and Croyd had never heard of anyone⁠—himself excluded⁠—coming down with it a second time.

He shook his head, rose and paced, stepped outside. It was afternoon now, and he was hungry again. It took him a few moments to spot the new shift that had taken over surveillance of his quarters. He decided against disposing of them. The most sensible thing to do, he guessed, would be to go and get a bite to eat, then come back and keep an eye on the now-transforming Snotman through his crisis, one way or the other. Then clear out, go deeper underground.

In the distance a siren wailed. Another Red Cross helicopter came and went, low, from the southeast, heading uptown. Memories of that first mad Wild Card Day swam in his head, and Croyd decided that perhaps he’d better acquire a new pad even before he ate. He knew just the sleaze-bin, not too far away, where he could get in off the streets and no questions asked, provided they had a vacancy⁠—which was generally the case. He detoured to check it out.

Like a mating call, another siren answered the first, from the opposite direction. Croyd waved at the man who hung upside down by his feet from a lamppost, but the fellow took offense or grew frightened and flew away.

From somewhere he heard a loudspeaker mentioning his name, probably saying terrible things about him.

His fingers tightened on the fender of a parked car. The metal squealed as he pulled at it, tearing a wide strip loose. He turned then, bending it, folding it, blood dripping from a tear in his hand. He would find that speaker and destroy it, whether it was high on a buildingside or the top of a cop car. He would stop them from talking about him. He would…

That would give him away, though⁠—he realized in a moment’s clarity⁠—to his enemies, who could be anybody. Anybody except the guy with the wild card virus, and Snotman couldn’t be anybody’s enemy just now. Croyd hurled the piece of metal across the street, then threw back his head and began to howl. Things were getting complicated again. And nasty. He needed something to calm his nerves.

He plunged his bloody hand into his pocket, withdrew a fistful of pills, and gulped them without looking to see what they were. He had to get presentable to go and get a room.

He ran his fingers through his hair, brushed off his clothes, began walking at a normal pace. It wasn’t far.

VIII

Again they were after him. If you can’t even trust your doctor, he wondered, who can you trust? The sirens’ wails were almost a steady sheet of sound now.

He hurled chunks of concrete, broke streetlights, and dashed from alley to doorway. He crouched within parked cars. He watched the choppers go by, listening to the steady phut-phut of their blades. Every now and then he heard parts of appeals over some loudspeaker or other. They were talking to him, lying to him, asking him to turn himself in. He chuckled. That would be the day.

Was it all Tachy’s fault again? An image flashed before his mind’s eye, of Jetboy’s small plane darting like a tiny fish among great, grazing whales there in the half-clouded sky of an afternoon. Back when it all began. What had ever happened to Joe Sarzanno?

He smelled smoke. Why did things always get burned in times of trouble? He rubbed his temples and yawned. Automatically he sought in his pocket after a pill, but there was nothing there. He tore open the door to a Coke machine before a darkened service station, broke into the coin box, then fed quarters back into the mechanism, collected a Coke for either hand, and walked away sipping.

After a time he found himself standing before the Jokertown Dime Museum, wanting to go inside and realizing that the place was closed.

He stood undecided for perhaps ten seconds. Then a siren sounded nearby. Probably just around the corner. He moved forward, snapped the lock, and entered. He left the price of admission on the little desk to his left and as an afterthought, tossed in something for the lock.

He sat on a bench for a while, watching shadows. Every now and then he rose, strolled, and returned. He saw again the golden butterfly, poised as if about to depart from the golden monkey wrench, both of them transmuted by the short-lived ace called Midas. He looked again at the jars of joker fetuses, and at a buckled section of a metal door bearing Devil John’s hoofprint.

He walked among the Great Events in Wild Card History dioramas pressing the button over and over again at the Earth vs. Swarm display. Each time that he hit it, Modular Man fired his laser at a Swarm monster. Then he located one that made the statue of the Howler scream…

It was not until his final Coke was down to its last swallow that he noticed the diminutive human skin, stuffed, displayed in a case. He pressed nearer, squinting, and read the card that identified it as having been found in an alley. He sucked in his breath as the recognition hit him.

“Poor Gimli,” he said. “Who could have done this to you? And where are your insides? My stomach turns at it. Where are your wisecracks now? Go to Barnett, tell him to preach till all hell freezes. In the end it’ll be his hide, too.”

He turned away. He yawned again. His limbs were heavy. Rounding a corner, he beheld three metal shells, suspended by long cables in the middle of the air. He halted and regarded them, realizing immediately what they were.

On a whim he leaped and slapped the nearest of the three⁠—an armor-plated VW body. It rang all about him and swayed slightly on its moorings, and he sprang a second time and slapped it again before another yawning jag seized him.

“Have shell, will travel,” he muttered. “Always safe in there, weren’t you, Turtle⁠—so long as you didn’t stick your neck out?”

He began to chuckle again, then stopped as he turned to the one he remembered most vividly⁠—the sixties model⁠—and he could not reach high enough to trace the peace symbol on its side, but “ ‘Make love, not war,’ ” he read, the motto painted into a flower-form mandala. “Shit, tell that to the guys trying to kill me.

“Always wondered what it looked like inside,” he added, and he leaped and hooked his fingers over the edge and drew himself upward.

The vehicle swayed but held his weight easily. In a minute he was sequestered within.

“Ah, sweet claustrophobia!” he sighed. “It does feel safe. I could…”

He closed his eyes. After a time he shimmered faintly.

Notes

Before switching to English literature, Zelazny majored in psychology and worked in a lab for over a year. His knowledge of and interest in psychology created the futuristic psychiatrist and the ro-womb (instead of a couch) in “He Who Shapes” / The Dream Master. Zelazny revisited psychology and technology as themes in this third Croyd Crenson tale; Croyd manages to sleep by using a device for brain wave entrainment and suggestion.

In its first appearance in Wild Cards V: Down and Dirty, this story interweaves with tales written by other authors. At the story’s end, in his hyped-up state Croyd has become Typhoid Croyd, unwittingly transmitting the Wild Card virus to all he encounters.

A concerto is a musical composition for a solo instrument or instruments accompanied by an orchestra. Likewise, this story intermingles with others in this novel. A siren is a mythological woman whose singing lures sailors onto rocks; it can also mean a beautiful but dangerous woman; it is also the noise made by emergency vehicles. In this story, it refers to all three⁠—Veronica, who leads Croyd further into addiction; Veronica, whom Croyd infects, transforms into an Ace who sucks the life out of males (detailed in a linked story); and the sirens at the end because of the plague’s recurrence and the search for Croyd. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter and hormone produced by the brain; it regulates sleep and other behaviors (mood, appetite, sexuality, aggression, etc).

Chianti is Italy’s most famous red wine. Theotocopolos was the painter El Greco. Marcelled hair has multiple waves set by a curling iron. Chateau d’Yquem is French wine from Graves in the southern part of Bordeaux. Compound eyes of bees and other insects have thousands of facets. Croyd’s eyes have only 216. Black Beauties contain amphetamine (speed) and dextroamphetamine. Two-carafe problem pays homage to Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, for whom challenging puzzles would be a “three-pipe problem” in the original tales, and a “two-pipe problem” beginning in 1959’s film adaptation of The Hound of the Baskervilles. Jack Daniels is a brand of whiskey; Schlitz is a brand of beer. Wattles are fleshy lobes that hang from the throats of turkeys and some other birds. A palomino is a horse with a golden coat and a white mane and tail. Semantics is study of word meanings. Bennies are amphetamines and dexes are dextroamphetamines. Décolletage is a low-cut neckline on a woman’s dress. Sí means yes.

Numerous addictive stimulants are mentioned in rapid succession⁠—purple hearts are blue triangular Drinamyl containing both Dextroamphetamine and Amobarbital (a barbiturate); benz is benzadrine; bombitas is a mix of heroin and amphetamines; speedballs are combination heroin and cocaine; STP is DOM or 2,5-Dimethoxy-4-methylamphetamine; yage is ayahuasca, a brew of plants with near-mythical hallucinogenic properties; Desoxyn is methamphetamines/speed; Desbutol is a combination of methamphetamine and nembutal (pentobarbital); khat is both the alkaloid stimulant cathinone and the plant that it is derived from; huilca is DMT or dimethyltryptamine; pituri is an aboriginal drug that contains 5% nicotine (tobacco contains about 1%); kratom is a leaf containing many different alkaloids of which the main component may be 7-hydroxymitragynine; Percodan is oxycodone and aspirin.

Abo means aboriginal, now considered pejorative. Tsingtao is a Chinese beer; feng shui is the Chinese practice which seeks harmony with the environment by arranging spaces; chi is the spiritual energy that every living being possesses; ba-gua is an eight-sided “feng shui map” used to determine which part of a living space correlates with a particular situation in one’s life. Ephemera are items of passing interest. A tong is a secret criminal organization of Chinese Americans; Yakuza are Japanese gangsters. Takisian are the people of Takis, Dr. Tachyon’s planet of origin and the source of the Wild Card virus. Horse is heroin; snow is cocaine. French blue are amphetamines; French green is not a street drug name. Pyrahex may be an invented term.