## Half Jack

Roger Zelazny

One day, I saw a nice, slick, pretty, new magazine called Omni and was overcome by the desire to have a story m it, so I wrote this one and did.

He walked barefoot along the beach. Above-the city several of the brighter stars held for a few final moments against the wash of light from the east. He fingered a stone, then buried it in the direction from which the sun would come. He watched for a long while until it had vanished from sight. Eventually it would begin skipping. Before then, he had turned and was headed back, to the city, the apartment, the girl.Somewhere beyond the skyline a vehicle lifted, burning its way into the heavens. It took the remainder of the night with it as it faded. Walking on, he smelled the countryside as well as the ocean. It was a pleasant world, and this a pleasant city—spaceport as well as seaport— here in this backwater limb of the galaxy. A good place in which to rest and immerse the neglected portion of himself in the flow of humanity, the colors and sounds of the city, the constant tugging of gravity. But it had been three months now. He fingered the scar on his brow. He had let two offers pass him by to linger. There was another pending his consideration.

As he walked up Kami’s street, he saw that her apartment was still dark. Good, she would not even have missed him, again. He pushed past the big front door, still not repaired since he had kicked it open the evening of the fire, two—no, three—nights ago. He used the stairsHe let himself in quietly.

He was in the kitchen preparing breakfast when he heard her stirring.

“Jack?”

“Yes. Good morning.”

“Come back.”

“All right.”

He moved to the bedroom door and entered the room. She was lying there, smiling. She raised her arms slightly.

“I’ve thought of a wonderful way to begin the day.”

He seated himself on the edge of the bed and embraced her. For a moment she was sleep-warm and sleep-soft against him, but only for a moment.

“You’ve got too much on,” she said, unfastening his shirt.

He peeled it off and dropped it. He removed his trousers. Then he held her again.

“More,” she said, tracing the long fine scar that ran down his forehead, alongside his nose, traversing his chin, his neck, the right side of his chest and abdomen, passing to one side of his groin, where it stopped.

“Come on.”

“You didn’t even know about it until a few nights ago.”

She kissed him, brushing his cheeks with her lips.

“It really does something for me.”

“For almost three months—”

“Take it off. Please."He sighed and gave a half-smile. He rose to bis feet.

“All right.”

He reached up and put a hand to his long, black hair. He took hold of it- He raised his other hand and spread his fingers along his scalp at the hairline. He pushed his fingers toward the back of his head and the entire hairpiece came free with a soft, crackling sound. He dropped the hairpiece atop his shirt on the floor.

The right side of his head was completely bald; the left had a beginning growth of dark hair. The two areas were precisely divided by a continuation of the faint scar on his forehead.

He placed his fingertips together on the crown of his head, then drew his right hand to the side and down. His face opened vertically, splitting apart along the scar, padded synthetic flesh tearing free from electrostatic bonds. He drew it down over his right shoulder and biceps, rolling it as far as his wrist. He played with the flesh of his hand as with a tight glove, finally withdrawing the hand with a soft, sucking sound. He drew it away from his side, hip, and buttock, and separated it at his groin. Then, again seating himself on the edge of the bed, he rolled it down his leg, over the thigh, knee, calf, heel. He treated his foot as he, had his hand, pinching each toe free separately before pulling off the body glove. He shook it out and placed it with his clothing.

Standing, he turned toward Kathi, whose eyes had not left him during all this time. Again, the half-smile. The uncovered portions of his face and body were dark metal and plastic, precision-machined, with various openings and protuberances, some gleaming, some dusky.

“Halfjack,” she said as he came to her. “Now I know what that man in the cafe meant when he called you that.”

“He was lucky you were with me. There are places where that’s an unfriendly term,”

“You’re beautiful,” she said.

“I once knew a girl whose body was almost entirely prosthetic. She wanted me to keep the glove on— at all times. It was the flesh and the semblance of flesh that she found attractive.”

“What do you call that kind of operation?”

“Lateral hemicorporectomy."After a time she said, “Could you be repaired? Can you replace it some way?”

He laughed.

“Either way,” he said. “My genes could be fractioned, and the proper replacement parts could be grown. I could be made whole with grafts of my own flesh. Or I could have much of the rest removed and replaced with bioroechanical analogues. But I need a stomach and balls and lungs, because I have to eat and screw and breathe to feel human.”

She ran her hands down his back, one on metal, one on flesh.

“I don’t understand,” she said when they finally drew apart. “What sort of accident was it?”

“Accident? There was no accident,” he said. “I paid a lot of money for this work, so that I could pilot a special sort of ship. I am a cyborg. I hook myself directly into each of the ship’s systems,”

He rose from the bed, went to the closet, drew out a duffel bag, pulled down an armful of garments, and stuffed them into it. He crossed to the dresser, opened a drawer, and emptied its contents into the bag.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

He entered the bathroom, emerged with two fistfuls of personal items, and dropped them into the bag.

“Why?”

He rounded the bed, picked up his bodyglove and hairpiece, rolled them into a parcel, and put them inside the bag.

“It’s not what you may think,” he said then, “or even what I thought until just a few moments ago.”

She sat up.

“You think less of me,” she said, “because I seem to like you more now that I know your secret. You think there’s something pathological about it—”

“No,” he said, pulling on his shirt, “that’s not it at all. Yesterday I would have said so and used that for an excuse to storm out of here and leave you feeling bad, But I want to be honest with myself this time, and fair to you. That’s not it.”

He drew on his trousers.

“What then?” she asked.

“It’s just the wanderlust, or whatever you call it. I'vestayed too long at the bottom of a gravity well. I’m restless. I’ve got to get going again. It’s my nature, that’s all. I realized this when I saw that I was looking to your feelings for an excuse to break us up and move on.”

“You can wear the bodyglove. It’s not that important. It’s really you that I like.”

“I believe you, I like you, too. Whether you believe me or not, your reactions to my better half don’t matter. It’s what I said, though. Nothing else. And now I’ve got this feeling I won’t be much fun anymore. If you really like me, you’ll let me go without a lot of fuss.”

He finished dressing. She got out of the bed and faced him.

“If that’s the way it has to be,” she said. “Okay.”

“I’d better just go, then. Now.”

“Yes.”

He turned and walked out of the room, left the apartment, used the stairs again, and departed from the building. Some passersby gave him more than a casual look, cyborg pilots not being all that common in this sector- This did not bother him. His step lightened. He stopped in a paybooth and called the shipping company to tell them that be would haul the load they had in orbit: the sooner it was connected with the vessel, the better, he said.

Loading, the controller told him, would begin shortly and he could ship up that same afternoon from the local field. Jack said that he would be there and then broke the connection. He gave the world half a smile as he put the sea to his back and swung on through the city, westward.

Blue-and-pink world below him, black sky above, the stars a snapshot snowfall all about, he bade the shuttle pilot goodbye and keyed his airlock. Entering the Morgana, he sighed and set about stowing his gear. His cargo was already in place and the ground computers had transferred course information to the ship’s brain. He hung his clothing in a locker and placed bis body glove and hairpiece in compartments.

He hurried forward then and settled into the control web, which adjusted itself about him. A long, dark unit swung down from overhead and dropped into position at his right. It moved slowly, making contact with various points on that half of his body.—Good to have you back. How was your vacation, Jack?

—Oh. Fine. Real fine.

—Meet any nice girls?

—A few.

—And here you are again. Did you miss things?

—You. know it. How does this haul look to you?

—Easy, for us. I’ve already reviewed the course programs.

—Let’s run over the systems.

—Check. Care for some coffee?

—That’d be nice.

A small unit descended on his left, stopping within easy reach of his mortal hand. He opened its door. A bulb of dark liquid rested in a rack.

—Timed your arrival. Had it ready.

—Just the way I like it, too. I almost forgot. Thanks. Several hours later, when they lett orbit, he had already switched off a number of his left-side systems. He was merged even more closely with the vessel, absorbing data at a frantic rate. Their expanded perceptions took in the near-ship vicinity and moved out to encompass the extrasolar panorama with greater than human clarity and precision. They reacted almost instantaneously to decisions great and small.

—It is good to be back together again. Jack.

—I’d say.

Morgana held him tightly. Their velocity built.