

FLATLANDER

LARRY NIVEN



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INSIDE JOB

I reached out to touch his face with my imaginary hand.

He froze.

“That’s what you were afraid of,” I told him. “You never dreamed I could reach through a phone screen to do *this*.” I reached into his head, felt smooth muscle and grainy bone and sinus cavities like bubbles. He tossed his head, but my hand went with it. I ran imaginary fingertips along the smooth inner surface of his skull.

Then he screamed.

By Larry Niven

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Larry Niven

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For Frederik Pohl

and the memory of John W. Campbell.

DEATH BY ECSTASY

First came the routine request for a breach of privacy permit. A police officer took down the details and forwarded the request to a clerk, who saw that the tape reached the appropriate civic judge. The judge was reluctant, for privacy is a precious thing in a world of eighteen billion, but in the end he could find no reason to refuse. On November 2, 2123, he granted the permit.

The tenant's rent was two weeks in arrears. If the manager of Monica Apartments had asked for eviction, he would have been refused. But Owen Jennison did not answer his doorbell or his room phone. Nobody could recall seeing him in many weeks. Apparently the manager only wanted to know that he was all right.

And so he was allowed to use his passkey, with an officer standing by.

And so they found the tenant of 1809.

And when they had looked in his wallet, they called me.

I was at my desk at ARM Headquarters, making useless notes and wishing it were lunchtime.

At this stage the Loren case was all correlate and wait. It involved an organlegging gang apparently run by a single man yet big enough to cover half the North American west coast. We had considerable data on the gang—methods of operation, centers of activity, a few former customers, even a tentative handful of names—but nothing that would give us a excuse to act. So it was a matter of shoving what we had into the computer, watching the feeds of suspected associates of the gang lord Loren, and waiting for a break.

The months of waiting were ruining my sense of involvement.

My phone buzzed.

I put the pen down and said, "Gil Hamilton."

A small dark face regarded me with soft black eyes. "I am Detective-Inspector Julio Ordaz of the Los Angeles Police Department. Are you related to an Owen Jennison?"

"Owen? No, we're not related. Is he in trouble?"

"You do know him, then."

"Sure I know him. Is he here, on Earth?"

"It would seem so." Ordaz had no accent, but the lack of colloquialisms in his speech made him sound vaguely foreign. "We will need positive identification, Mr. Hamilton. Mr. Jennison's ident lists you as next of kin."

"That's funny. I—back up a minute. Is Owen dead?"

"Somebody is dead, Mr. Hamilton. He carried Mr. Jennison's ident in his wallet."

“Okay. Now, Owen Jennison was a citizen of the Belt. This may have interworld complications. That makes it ARM’s business. Where’s the body?”

“We found him in an apartment rented under his own name. Monica Apartments, Lower Los Angeles, room 1809.”

“Good. Don’t move anything you haven’t moved already. I’ll be right over.”

Monica Apartments was a nearly featureless concrete block, eighty stories tall, a thousand feet across the edges of its square base. Lines of small balconies gave the sides a sculptural look above a forty-foot inset ledge that would keep tenants from dropping objects on pedestrians. A hundred buildings just like it made Lower Los Angeles look lumpy from the air.

Inside, a lobby done in anonymous modern. Lots of metal and plastic showing, lightweight comfortable chairs without arms, big ashtrays, plenty of indirect lighting, a low ceiling, no wasted space. The whole room might have been stamped out with a die. It wasn’t supposed to look small, but it did, and that warned you what the rooms would be like. You’d pay your rent by the cubic centimeter.

I found the manager’s office and the manager, a soft-looking man with watery blue eyes. His conservative paper suit, dark red, seemed chosen to render him invisible, as did the style of his brown hair, worn long and combed straight back without a part. “Nothing like this has ever happened here,” he confided as he led me to the elevator banks. “Nothing. It would have been bad enough without his being a Belter, but *now*—” He cringed at the thought. “Newsmen. They’ll *smother* us.”

The elevator was coffin-sized, but with the handrails on the inside. It went up fast and smooth. I stepped out into a long, narrow hallway.

What would Owen have been doing in a place like this? Machinery lived here, not people.

Maybe it wasn’t Owen. Ordaz had been reluctant to commit himself. Besides, there’s no law against picking pockets. You couldn’t enforce such a law on this crowded planet. Everyone on Earth was a pickpocket.

Sure. Someone had died carrying Owen’s wallet.

I walked down the hallway to 1809.

It was Owen who sat grinning in the armchair. I took one good look at him, enough to be sure, and then I looked away and didn’t look back. But the rest of it was even more unbelievable.

No Belter could have taken that apartment. I was born in Kansas, but even I felt the awful anonymous chill. It would have driven Owen bats.

“I don’t believe it,” I said.

“Did you know him well, Mr. Hamilton?”

“About as well as two men can know each other. He and I spent three years mining rock in the main asteroid belt. You don’t keep secrets under those conditions.”

“Yet you didn’t know he was on Earth.”

“That’s what I can’t understand. Why the blazes didn’t he phone me if he was in trouble?”

“You’re an ARM,” said Ordaz. “An operative in the United Nations Police.”

He had a point. Owen was as honorable as any man I knew, but honor isn’t the same in the Belt. Belters think flatlanders are all crooks. They don’t understand that to a flatlander picking pockets is a game of skill. Yet a Belter sees smuggling as the same kind of game, with no dishonesty involved. He balances the thirty percent tariff against possible confiscation of his cargo, and if the odds are right, he gambles.

Owen could have been doing something that would look honest to him but not to me.

“He could have been in something sticky,” I admitted. “But I can’t see him killing himself over it. And ... not here. He wouldn’t have come here.”

Room 1809 was a living room and a bathroom and a closet. I’d glanced into the bathroom knowing what I would find. It was the size of a comfortable shower stall. An adjustment panel outside the door would cause it to extrude various appurtenances in memory plastic, to become a washroom, a shower stall, a toilet, a dressing room, a steam cabinet. Luxurious everything but size as long as you pushed the right buttons.

The living room was more of the same. A king bed was invisible behind a wall. The kitchen alcove, with basin and oven and grill and toaster, would fold into another wall; the sofa, chairs, and tables would vanish into the floor. One tenant and three guests would make a crowded cocktail party, a cozy dinner gathering, a closed poker game. Card table, dining table, coffee table were all there, surrounded by the appropriate chairs, but only one set at a time would emerge from the floor. There was no refrigerator, no freezer, no bar. If a tenant needed food or drink, he phoned down and the supermarket on the third floor would send it up.

The tenant of such an apartment had his comfort. But he owned nothing. There was room for him; there was none for his possessions. This was one of the inner apartments. An age ago there would have been an air shaft, but air shafts took up expensive room. The tenant didn’t even have a window. He lived in a comfortable box.

Just now the items extruded were the overstuffed reading armchair, two small side tables, a footstool, and the kitchen alcove. Owen Jennison sat grinning in the armchair. Naturally he grinned. Little more than dried skin covered the natural grin of his skull.

“It’s a small room,” Ordaz said, “but not too small. Millions of people live this way. In any case, a Belter would hardly be a claustrophobe.”

“No. Owen flew a singleship before he joined us. Three months at a stretch in a cabin so small, you couldn’t stand up with the air lock closed. Not claustrophobia, but—” I swept my arm about the room. “What do you see that’s his?”

Small as it was, the closet was nearly empty. A set of street clothes, a paper shirt, a pair of shoes, a small brown overnight case. All new. The few items in the bathroom medicine chest had been equally new and equally anonymous.

Ordaz said, “Well?”

“Belters are transients. They don’t own much, but what they do own, they guard. Small

possessions, relics, souvenirs. I can't believe he wouldn't have had *something*."

"His space suit?"

"You think that's unlikely? It's not. The inside of his pressure suit is a Belter's home. Sometimes it's the only home he's got. He spends a fortune decorating it. If he loses his suit, he's not a Belter anymore.

"No, I don't insist he'd have brought his suit. But he'd have had *something*. His phial of Marsdust. The bit of nickel-iron they took out of his chest. Or, if he left all his souvenirs home, he'd have picked up things on Earth. But in this room—there's *nothing*."

"Perhaps," Ordaz suggested delicately, "he didn't notice his surroundings."

And somehow that brought it all home.

Owen Jennison sat grinning in a water-stained silk dressing gown. His space-darkened face lightened abruptly beneath his chin, giving way to normal suntan. His blond hair, too long to have been cut Earth style; no trace remained of the Belter strip cut he'd worn all his life. A month's growth of untended beard covered half his face. A small black cylinder protruded from the top of his head. An electric cord trailed from the top of the cylinder and ran to a wall socket.

The cylinder was a droud, a current addict's transformer.

I stepped closer to the corpse and bent to look. The droud was a standard make, but it had been altered. Your standard current addict's droud will pass only a trickle of current into the brain. Owen must have been getting ten times the usual charge, easily enough to damage his brain in a month's time.

I reached out and touched the droud with my imaginary hand.

Ordaz was standing quietly beside me, letting me make my examination without interruption. Naturally he had no way of knowing about my restricted psi powers.

With my imaginary fingertips I touched the droud in Owen's head, then ran them down to a tiny hole in his scalp and farther.

It was a standard surgical job. Owen could have had it done anywhere. A hole in his scalp, invisible under the hair, nearly impossible to find even if you knew what you were looking for. Even your best friends wouldn't know unless they caught you with the droud plugged in. But the tiny hole marked a bigger plug set in the bone of the skull. I touched the ecstasy plug with my imaginary fingertips, then ran them down the hair-fine wire going deep into Owen's brain, down into the pleasure center.

No, the extra current hadn't killed him. What had killed Owen was his lack of willpower. He had been unwilling to get up.

He had starved to death sitting in that chair. There were plastic squeezebottles all around his feet and a couple still on the end tables. All empty. They must have been full a month ago. Owen hadn't died of thirst. He had died of starvation, and his death had been planned.

Owen my crewmate. Why hadn't he come to me? I'm half a Belter myself. Whatever his trouble, I'd have gotten him out somehow. A little smuggling—what of it? Why had he arranged to tell me only after it was over?

The apartment was so clean, so clean. You had to bend close to smell the death; the air conditioning whisked it all away.

He'd been very methodical. The kitchen was open so that a catheter could lead from Owen to the sink. He'd given himself enough water to last out the month; he'd paid his rent a month in advance. He'd cut the droud cord by hand, and he'd cut it short, deliberately tethering himself to a wall socket beyond reach of the kitchen.

A complex way to die, but rewarding in its way. A month of ecstasy, a month of the highest physical pleasure man can attain. I could imagine him giggling every time he remembered he was starving to death. With food only a few footsteps away ... but he'd have to pull out the droud to reach it. Perhaps he had postponed the decision and postponed it again ...

Owen and I and Homer Chandrasekhar, we had lived for three years in a cramped shell surrounded by vacuum. What was there to know about Owen Jennison that I hadn't known? Where was the weakness we didn't share? If Owen had done this, so could I. And I was afraid.

"Very neat," I whispered. "Belter neat."

"Typically Belter, would you say?"

"I would not. Belters don't commit suicide. Certainly not this way. If a Belter had to go he'd blow his ship's drive and die like a star."

"Well," Ordaz said. "Well." He was uncomfortable. The facts spoke for themselves, yet he was reluctant to call me a liar. He fell back on formality.

"Mr. Hamilton, do you identify this man as Owen Jennison?"

"It's him." He'd always been a touch overweight, yet I'd recognized him the moment I saw him. "But let's be sure." I pulled the dirty dressing gown back from Owen's shoulder. A nearly-perfect circle of scar tissue, eight inches across, spread over the left side of his chest. "See that?"

"We noticed it, yes. An old burn?"

"Owen's the only man I know who could show you a meteor scar on his skin. It blasted him in the shoulder one day while he was outside the ship. Sprayed vaporized pressure-suit steel all over his skin. The doc pulled a tiny grain of nickel-iron from the center of the scar, just below the skin. Owen always carried that grain of nickel-iron. Always," I said, looking at Ordaz.

"We didn't find it."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry to put you through this, Mr. Hamilton. It was you who insisted we leave the body in situ."

"Yes. Thank you."

Owen grinned at me from the reading chair. I felt the pain in my throat and in the pit of my stomach. Once I had lost my right arm. Losing Owen felt the same way.

"I'd like to know more about this," I said. "Will you let me know the details as soon as you get them?"

“Of course. Through the ARM office?”

“Yes.” This wasn’t ARM business, despite what I’d told Ordaz, but ARM prestige would help. “I want to know why Owen died. Maybe he just cracked up ... culture shock or something. But if someone hounded him to death, I’ll have his blood.”

“Surely the administration of justice is better left to—” Ordaz stopped, confused. Did I speak as an ARM or as a citizen?

I left him wondering.

The lobby held a scattering of tenants entering and leaving elevators or just sitting around. I stood outside the elevator for a moment, searching passing faces for the erosion of personality that must be there.

Mass-produced comfort. Room to sleep and eat and watch tridee but no room to *be* anyone. Living here, one would own nothing. What kind of people would live like that? They should have looked all alike, moved in unison, like the string of images in a barber’s mirrors.

Then I spotted wavy brown hair and a dark red paper suit. The manager? I had to get closer before I was sure. His face was the face of a permanent stranger.

He saw me coming and smiled without enthusiasm. “Oh, hello, Mr.... uh ... Did you find ...” He couldn’t think of the right question.

“Yes,” I said, answering it anyway. “But I’d like to know some things. Owen Jennison lived here for six weeks, right?”

“Six weeks and two days, before we opened his room.”

“Did he ever have visitors?”

The man’s eyebrows went up. We’d drifted in the direction of his office, and I was close enough to read the name on the door: JASPER MILLER, MANAGER. “Of course not,” he said. “Anyone would have noticed that something was wrong.”

“You mean he took the room for the express purpose of dying? You saw him once and never again?”

“I suppose he might ... no, wait.” The manager thought deeply. “No. He registered on Thursday. I noticed the Belter tan, of course. Then on Friday he went out. I happened to see him pass.”

“Was that the day he got the droud? No, skip it; you wouldn’t know that. Was it the last time you saw him go out?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Then he could have had visitors late Thursday or early Friday.”

The manager shook his head very positively.

“Why not?”

“You see, Mr., uh ...”

“Hamilton.”

“We have a holo camera on every floor, Mr. Hamilton. It takes a picture of each tenant the first time he goes to his room and then never again. Privacy is one of the services a tena-

buys with his room.” The manager drew himself up a little as he said this. “For the same reason, the holo camera takes a picture of anyone who is *not* a tenant. The tenants are thus protected from unwarranted intrusions.”

“And there were no visitors to any of the rooms on Owen’s floor?”

“No, sir, there were not.”

“Your tenants are a solitary bunch.”

“Perhaps they are.”

“I suppose a computer in the basement decides who is and is not a tenant.”

“Of course.”

“So for six weeks Owen Jennison sat alone in his room. In all that time he was totally ignored.”

Miller tried to turn his voice cold, but he was too nervous. “We try to give our guests privacy. If Mr. Jennison had wanted help of any kind, he had only to pick up the house phone. He could have called me, or the pharmacy, or the supermarket downstairs.”

“Well, thank you, Mr. Miller. That’s all I wanted to know. I wanted to know how Owen Jennison could wait six weeks to die while nobody noticed.”

Miller swallowed. “He was dying all that time?”

“Yah.”

“We had no way of knowing. How could we? I don’t see how you can blame us.”

“I don’t, either,” I said, and brushed by. Miller had been close enough, so I had lashed out at him. Now I was ashamed. The man was perfectly right. Owen could have had help if he wanted it.

I stood outside, looking up at the jagged blue line of sky that showed between the tops of the buildings. A taxi floated into view, and I beeped my clicker at it, and it dropped.

* * *

I went back to ARM Headquarters. Not to work—I couldn’t have done any work, not under the circumstances—but to talk to Julie.

Julie. A tall girl, pushing thirty, with green eyes and long hair streaked red and gold. And two wide brown forceps marks above her right knee, but they weren’t showing now. I looked into her office through the one-way glass and watched her at work.

She sat in a contour couch, smoking. Her eyes were closed. Sometimes her brow would furrow as she concentrated. Sometimes she would snatch a glance at the clock, then close her eyes again.

I didn’t interrupt her. I knew the importance of what she was doing.

Julie. She wasn’t beautiful. Her eyes were a little too far apart, her chin too square, her mouth too wide. It didn’t matter. Because Julie could read minds.

She was the ideal date. She was everything a man needed. A year ago, the day after the night I killed my first man, I had been in a terribly destructive mood. Somehow Julie had

turned it into a mood of manic exhilaration. We'd run wild through a supervised anarchic park, running up an enormous bill. We'd hiked five miles without going anywhere, facing backward on a downtown slidewalk. At the end we'd been utterly fatigued, too tired to think ... But two weeks ago it had been a warm, cuddly, comfortable night. Two people happy with each other, no more than that. Julie was what you needed, anytime, anywhere.

Her male harem must have been the largest in history. To pick up on the thoughts of a male ARM, Julie had to be in love with him. Luckily there was room in her for a lot of love. She didn't demand that we be faithful. A good half of us were married. But there had to be love for each of Julie's men, or Julie couldn't protect him.

She was protecting us now. Each fifteen minutes Julie was making contact with a specific ARM agent. Psi powers are notoriously undependable, but Julie was an exception. If we got in a hole, Julie was always there to get us out ... provided that some idiot didn't interrupt her at work.

So I stood outside, waiting, with a cigarette in my imaginary hand.

The cigarette was for practice, to stretch the mental muscles. In its way my "hand" was as dependable as Julie's mind-touch, possibly because of its very limitations. Doubt your psi powers and they're gone. A rigidly defined third arm was more reasonable than some warlock's ability to make objects move by wishing at them. I knew how an arm felt and what it would do.

Why do I spend so much time lifting cigarettes? Well, it's the biggest weight I can lift without strain. And there's another reason ... something taught me by Owen.

At ten minutes to fifteen Julie opened her eyes, rolled out of the contour couch, and came to the door. "Hi, Gil," she said sleepily. "Trouble?"

"Yah. A friend of mine just died. I thought you'd better know." I handed her a cup of coffee.

She nodded. We had a date tonight, and this would change its character. Knowing that, she probed lightly.

"Jesus!" she said, recoiling. "How ... how horrible. I'm terribly sorry, Gil. Date's off, right?"

"Unless you want to join the ceremonial drunk."

She shook her head vigorously. "I didn't know him. It wouldn't be proper. Besides, you'd be wallowing in your own memories, Gil. A lot of them will be private. I'd cramp your style if you knew I was there to probe. Now, if Homer Chandrasekhar were here, it'd be different."

"I wish he were. He'll have to throw his own drunk. Maybe with some of Owen's girls, they're around."

"You know what I feel," she said.

"Just what I do."

"I wish I could help."

"You always help." I glanced at the clock. "Your coffee break's about over."

"Slave driver." Julie took my earlobe between thumb and forefinger. "Do him proud," she said.

said, and went back to her soundproof room.

She always helps. She doesn't even have to speak. Just knowing that Julie has read my thoughts, that someone understands ... that's enough.

All alone at three in the afternoon, I started my ceremonial drunk.

The ceremonial drunk is a young custom, not yet tied down by formality. There is no set duration. No specific toasts must be given. Those who participate must be close friends of the deceased, but there is no set number of participants.

I started at the Luau, a place of cool blue light and running water. Outside it was fifteen thirty in the afternoon, but inside it was evening in the Hawaiian Islands of centuries ago. Already the place was half-full. I picked a corner table with considerable elbow room and dialed for Luau grog. It came, cold, brown, and alcoholic, its straw tucked into a cone of ice.

There had been three of us at Cubes Forsythe's ceremonial drunk one black Ceres night four years ago. A jolly group we were, too, Owen and me and the widow of our third crewman. Gwen Forsythe blamed us for her husband's death. I was just out of the hospital with a right arm that ended at the shoulder, and I blamed Cubes and Owen and myself all at once. Even Owen had turned dour and introspective. We couldn't have picked a worse trio for a worse night for it.

But custom called, and we were there. Then as now, I found myself probing my own personality for the wound that was a missing crewman, a missing friend. Introspecting.

Gilbert Hamilton. Born of flatlander parents in April 2093 in Topeka, Kansas. Born with two arms and no sign of wild talents.

Flatlander: a Belter term referring to Earthmen, particularly to Earthmen who had never seen space. I'm not sure my parents ever looked at the stars. They managed the third largest farm in Kansas, ten square miles of arable land between two wide strips of city paralleling two strips of turnpike. We were city people, like all flatlanders, but when the crowds got to be too much for my brothers and me, we had vast stretches of land to be alone in. Ten square miles of playground, with nothing to hamper us but the crops and automachinery.

We looked at the stars, my brothers and I. You can't see stars from the city; the lights hide them. Even in the fields you couldn't see them around the lighted horizon. But straight overhead, they were there: black sky scattered with bright dots and sometimes a flat white moon.

At twenty I gave up my UN citizenship to become a Belter. I wanted stars, and the Belter government holds title to most of the solar system. There are fabulous riches in the rocks, riches belonging to a scattered civilization of a few hundred thousand Belters, and I wanted my share of that, too.

It wasn't easy. I wouldn't be eligible for a singleship license for ten years. Meanwhile I would be working for others and learning to avoid mistakes before they killed me. Half the flatlanders who join the Belt die in space before they can earn their licenses.

I mined tin on Mercury and exotic chemicals from Jupiter's atmosphere. I hauled ice from Saturn's rings and quicksilver from Europa. One year our pilot made a mistake pulling up to a new rock, and we damn near had to walk home. Cubes Forsythe was with us then. F

managed to fix the com laser and aim it at Icarus to bring us help. Another time the mechanic who did the maintenance job on our ship forgot to replace an absorber, and we all got roaring drunk on the alcohol that built up in our breathing air. The three of us caught the mechanic six months later. I hear he lived.

Most of the time I was part of a three-man crew. The members changed constantly. When Owen Jennison joined us, he replaced a man who had finally earned his singleship license and couldn't wait to start hunting rocks on his own. He was too eager. I learned later that he made one round trip and half of another.

Owen was my age but more experienced, a Belter born and bred. His blue eyes and blond cockatoo's crest were startling against the dark of his Belter tan, the tan that ended abruptly where his neck ring cut off the space-intense sunlight his helmet let through. He was permanently chubby, but in free fall it was as if he'd been born with wings. I took to copying his way of moving, much to Cubes's amusement.

I didn't make my own mistake until I was twenty-six.

We were using bombs to put a rock in a new orbit. A contract job. The technique is older than fusion drives, as old as early Belt colonization, and it's still cheaper and faster than using a ship's drive to tow the rock. You use industrial fusion bombs, small and clean, and you set them so that each explosion deepens the crater to channel the force of later blasts.

We'd set four blasts already, four white fireballs that swelled and faded as they rose. When the fifth blast went off, we were hovering nearby on the other side of the rock.

The fifth blast shattered the rock.

Cubes had set the bomb. My own mistake was a shared one, because any of the three of us should have had the sense to take off right then. Instead, we watched, cursing, as valuable oxygen-bearing rock became nearly valueless shards. We watched the shards spread slowly into a cloud ... and while we watched, one fast-moving shard reached us. Moving too slowly to vaporize when it hit, it nonetheless sheared through a triple crystal-iron hull, slashed through my upper arm, and pinned Cubes Forsythe to a wall by his heart.

A couple of nudists came in. They stood blinking among the booths while their eyes adjusted to the blue twilight, then converged with glad cries on the group two tables over. I watched and listened with an eye and an ear, thinking how different flatlander nudists were from Belter nudists. These all looked alike. They all had muscles, they had no interesting scars, they carried their credit cards in identical shoulder pouches, and they all shaved the same areas.... We always went nudist in the big bases. Most people did. It was a natural reaction to the pressure suits we wore day and night while out in the rocks. Get him into a shirtsleeve environment, and your normal Belter sneers at a shirt. But it's only for comfort. Give him a good reason and your Belter will don shirt and pants as quickly as the next guy.

But not Owen. After he got that meteor scar, I never saw him wear a shirt. Not just in the Ceres domes but anywhere there was air to breathe. He just had to show that scar.

A cool blue mood settled on me, and I remembered ...

... Owen Jennison lounging on a corner of my hospital bed, telling me of the trip back.

couldn't remember anything after that rock had sheared through my arm.

I should have bled to death in seconds. Owen hadn't given me the chance. The wound was ragged; Owen had sliced it clean to the shoulder with one swipe of a com laser. Then he tied a length of fiberglass curtain over the flat surface and knotted it tight under my remaining armpit. He told me about putting me under two atmospheres of pure oxygen as a substitute for replacing the blood I'd lost. He told me how he'd reset the fusion drive for four geees to get me back in time. By rights we should have gone up in a cloud of starfire and glory.

"So there goes my reputation. The whole Belt knows how I rewired our drive. A lot of 'em figure if I'm stupid enough to risk my own life like that, I'd risk theirs, too."

"So you're not safe to travel with."

"Just so. They're starting to call me Four Gee Jennison."

"You think you've got problems? I can just see how it'll be when I get out of this bed. 'You do something stupid, Gil?' The hell of it is, it *was* stupid."

"So lie a little."

"Uh huh. Can we sell the ship?"

"Nope. Gwen inherited a third interest in it from Cubes. She won't sell."

"Then we're effectively broke."

"Except for the ship. We need another crewman."

"Correction. *You* need *two* crewmen. Unless you want to fly with a one-armed man. I can't afford a transplant."

Owen hadn't tried to offer me a loan. That would have been insulting even if he'd had the money. "What's wrong with a prosthetic?"

"An iron arm? Sorry, no. I'm squeamish."

Owen had looked at me strangely, but all he'd said was, "Well, we'll wait a bit. Maybe you'll change your mind."

He hadn't pressured me. Not then and not later, after I'd left the hospital and taken an apartment while I waited to get used to a missing arm. If he thought I would eventually settle for a prosthetic, he was mistaken.

Why? It's not a question I can answer. Others obviously feel differently; there are millions of people walking around with metal and plastic and silicone parts. Part man, part machine, and how do they themselves know which is the real person?

I'd rather be dead than part metal. Call it a quirk. Call it, even, the same quirk that makes my skin crawl when I find a place like Monica Apartments. A human being should be a human. He should have habits and possessions peculiarly his own, he should not try to look like or behave like anyone but himself, and he should not be half robot.

So there I was, Gil the Arm, learning to eat with my left hand.

An amputee never entirely loses what he's lost. My missing fingers itched. I moved to keep from barking my missing elbow on sharp corners. I reached for things, then swore when they didn't come.

Owen had hung around, though his own emergency funds must have been running low. hadn't offered to sell my third of the ship, and he hadn't asked.

There had been a girl. Now I'd forgotten her name. One night I had been at her place waiting for her to get dressed—a dinner date—and I'd happened to see a nail file she'd left on a table. I'd picked it up. I'd almost tried to file my nails but remembered in time. Irritated, I had tossed the file back on the table—and missed.

Like an idiot I'd tried to catch it with my right hand.

And I'd caught it.

I'd never suspected myself of having psychic powers. You have to be in the right frame of mind to use a psi power. But who had ever had a better opportunity than I did that night, with a whole section of brain tuned to the nerves and muscles of my right arm, and no right arm?

I'd held the nail file in my imaginary hand. I'd felt it, just as I'd felt my missing fingernail getting too long. I had run my thumb along the rough steel surface; I had turned the file over in my fingers. Telekinesis for lift, esper for touch.

"That's it," Owen had said the next day. "That's all we need. One crewman, and you with your eldritch powers. You practice, see how strong you can get that lift. I'll go find a sucker."

"He'll have to settle for a sixth of net. Cubes's widow will want her share."

"Don't worry. I'll swing it."

"Don't worry!" I'd waved a pencil stub at him. Even in Ceres's gentle gravity it was as much as I could lift—then. "You don't think TK and esper can make do for a real arm, can you?"

"It's better than a real arm. You'll see. You'll be able to reach through your suit without losing pressure. What Belter can do that?"

"Sure."

"What the hell do you want, Gil? Someone should give you your arm back? You can't have that. You lost it fair and square, through stupidity. Now it's your choice. Do you fly with an imaginary arm, or do you go back to Earth?"

"I can't go back. I don't have the fare."

"Well?"

"Okay, okay. Go find us a crewman. Someone I can impress with my imaginary arm."

I sucked meditatively on a second Luau grog. By now all the booths were full, and a second layer was forming around the bar. The voices made a continuous hypnotic roar. Cocktail hour had arrived.

... He'd swung it, all right. On the strength of my imaginary arm, Owen had talked a kid named Homer Chandrasekhar into joining our crew.

He'd been right about my arm, too.

Others with similar senses can reach farther, up to halfway around the world. M

unfortunately literal imagination had restricted me to a psychic hand. But my esper fingertips were more sensitive, more dependable. I could lift more weight. Today, in Earth's gravity, I can lift a full shot glass.

I found I could reach through a cabin wall to feel for breaks in the circuits behind it. In a vacuum I could brush dust from the outside of my faceplate. In port I did magic tricks.

I'd almost ceased to feel like a cripple. It was all due to Owen. In six months of mining I had paid off my hospital bills and earned my fare back to Earth, with a comfortable stake left over.

"Finagle's black humor!" Owen had exploded when I had told him. "Of all places, why Earth?"

"Because if I can get my UN citizenship back, Earth will replace my arm. Free."

"Oh. That's true," he'd said dubiously.

The Belt had organ banks, too, but they were always undersupplied. Belters didn't give things away. Neither did the Belt government. They kept the prices on transplants as high as they would go. Thus they dropped the demand to meet the supply and kept taxes down to a boot.

In the Belt I'd have to buy my own arm. And I didn't have the money. On Earth there was social security and a vast supply of transplant material.

What Owen had said couldn't be done, I'd done. I'd found someone to hand me my arm back.

Sometimes I'd wondered if Owen held the choice against me. He'd never said anything, but Homer Chandrasekhar had spoken at length. A Belter would have earned his arm or done without. Never would he have accepted charity.

Was that why Owen hadn't tried to call me?

I shook my head. I didn't believe it.

The room continued to lurch after my head stopped shaking. I'd had enough for the moment. I finished my third grog and ordered dinner.

Dinner sobered me for the next lap. It was something of a shock to realize that I'd run through the entire life span of my friendship with Owen Jennison. I'd known him for three years, though it had seemed like half a lifetime. And it was. Half my six-year life span as a Belter.

I ordered coffee grog and watched the man pour it: hot, milky coffee laced with cinnamon and other spices and high-proof rum poured in a stream of blue fire. This was one of the special drinks served by a human headwaiter, and it was the reason they kept him around. Phase two of the ceremonial drunk: blow half your fortune in the grand manner.

But I called Ordaz before I touched the drink.

"Yes, Mr. Hamilton? I was just going home for dinner."

"I won't keep you long. Have you found out anything new?"

Ordaz took a closer look at my phone image. His disapproval was plain. "I see that you

have been drinking. Perhaps you should go home now and call me tomorrow.”

I was shocked. “Don’t you know *anything* about Belt customs?”

“I do not understand.”

I explained the ceremonial drunk. “Look, Ordaz, if you know that little about the way Belter thinks, then we’d better have a talk. Soon. Otherwise you’re likely to miss something.”

“You may be right. I can see you at noon, over lunch.”

“Good. What have you got?”

“Considerable, but none of it is very helpful. Your friend landed on Earth two months ago arriving on the *Pillar of Fire*, operating out of Outback Field, Australia. He was wearing haircut in the style of Earth. From there—”

“That’s funny. He’d have had to wait two months for his hair to grow out.”

“That occurred even to me. I understand that a Belter commonly shaves his entire scalp except for a strip two inches wide running from the nape of his neck forward.”

“The strip cut, yah. It probably started when someone decided he’d live longer if his hair couldn’t fall in his eyes during a tricky landing. But Owen could have let his hair grow out during a singleship mining trip. There’d be nobody to see.”

“Still, it seems odd. Did you know that Mr. Jennison has a cousin on Earth? One Harvey Peele, who manages a chain of supermarkets.”

“So I wasn’t his next of kin, even on Earth.”

“Mr. Jennison made no attempt to contact him.”

“Anything else?”

“I’ve spoken to the man who sold Mr. Jennison his droud and plug. Kenneth Graham owns an office and operating room on Gayley in Near West Los Angeles. Graham claims that the droud was a standard type, that your friend must have altered it himself.”

“Do you believe him?”

“For the present. His permits and his records are all in order. The droud was altered with soldering iron, an amateur’s tool.”

“Uh huh.”

“As far as the police are concerned, the case will probably be closed when we locate the tools Mr. Jennison used.”

“Tell you what. I’ll wire Homer Chandrasekhar tomorrow. Maybe he can find out things—why Owen landed without a strip haircut, why he came to Earth at all.”

Ordaz shrugged with his eyebrows. He thanked me for my trouble and hung up.

The coffee grog was still hot. I gulped at it, savoring the sugary, bitter sting of it, trying to forget Owen dead and remember him in life. He was always slightly chubby, I remembered, but he never gained a pound and never lost a pound. He could move like a whippet when he had to.

And now he was terribly thin, and his death grin was ripe with obscene joy.

I ordered another coffee grog. The waiter, a showman, made sure he had my attention.

before he lit the heated rum, then poured it from a foot above the glass. You can't drink the drink slowly. It slides down too easily, and there's the added spur that if you wait too long, might get cold. Rum and strong coffee. Two of these and I'd be drunkenly alert for hours.

Midnight found me in the Mars Bar, running on scotch and soda. In between I'd been barhopping. Irish coffee at Bergin's, cold and smoking concoctions at the Moon Pool, scotch and wild music at Beyond. I couldn't get drunk, and I couldn't find the right mood. There was a barrier to the picture I was trying to rebuild.

It was the memory of the last Owen, grinning in an armchair with a wire leading down into his brain.

I didn't know that Owen. I had never met the man and never would have wanted to. From bar to nightclub to restaurant I had run from the image, waiting for the alcohol to break the barrier between present and past.

So I sat at a corner table, surrounded by 3D panoramic views of an impossible Mars. Crystal towers and long, straight blue canals, six-legged beasts and beautiful, impossible slender men and women looked out at me across never-never land. Would Owen have found it sad or funny? He'd seen the real Mars and had not been impressed.

I had reached that stage where time becomes discontinuous, where gaps of seconds or minutes appear between the events you can remember. Somewhere in that period I found myself staring at a cigarette. I must have just lighted it, because it was near its original two-hundred-millimeter length. Maybe a waiter had snuck up behind me. There it was, at an even rate, burning between my middle and index fingers.

I stared at the coal as the mood settled on me. I was calm, I was drifting, I was lost in time ...

... We'd been two months in the rocks, our first trip out since the accident. Back we came to Ceres with a holdful of gold, fifty percent pure, guaranteed suitable for rustproof wiring and conductor plates. At nightfall we were ready to celebrate.

We walked along the city limits, with neon blinking and beckoning on the right, a melted rock cliff to the left, and stars blazing through the dome overhead. Homer Chandrasekhar was practically snorting. On this night his first trip out culminated in his first homecoming and homecoming is the best part.

"We'll want to split up about midnight," he said. He didn't need to enlarge on that. Three men in company might conceivably be three singleship pilots, but chances are they're a ship crew. They don't have their singleship licenses yet; they're too stupid or too inexperienced. We wanted companions for the night—

"You haven't thought this through," Owen answered. I saw Homer's double take, then his quick look at where my shoulder ended, and I was ashamed. I didn't need my crewmates to hold my hand, and in this state I'd only slow them down.

Before I could open my mouth to protest, Owen went on. "We've got a draw here that we can't be idiots to throw away. Gil, pick up a cigarette. No, not with your left hand—"

I was drunk, gloriously drunk and feeling immortal. The attenuated Martians seemed to move in the walls, the walls that seemed to be picture windows on a Mars that never was. For the first time that night I raised my glass in a toast.

“To Owen, from Gil the Arm. Thanks.”

I transferred the cigarette to my imaginary hand.

By now you’ve got the idea I was holding it in my imaginary fingers. Most people have the same impression, but it isn’t so. I held it clutched ignominiously in my fist. The coal couldn’t burn me, of course, but it still felt like a lead ingot.

I rested my imaginary elbow on the table, and that seemed to make it easier—which is ridiculous, but it works. Truly, I’d expected my imaginary arm to disappear after I got the transplant. But I’d found I could dissociate from the new arm to hold small objects in my invisible hand, to feel tactile sensations in my invisible fingertips.

I’d earned the title Gil the Arm that night in Ceres. It had started with a floating cigarette. Owen had been right. Everyone in the place eventually wound up staring at the floating cigarette smoked by the one-armed man. All I had to do was find the prettiest girl in the room with my peripheral vision, then catch her eye.

That night we had been the center of the biggest impromptu party ever thrown in Ceres Base. It wasn’t planned that way at all. I’d used the cigarette trick three times so that each of us would have a date. But the third girl already had an escort, and he was celebrating something; he’d sold some kind of patent to an Earth-based industrial firm. He was throwing money around like confetti. So we let him stay. I did tricks, reaching esper fingers into a closed box to tell what was inside, and by the time I finished, all the tables had been pushed together and I was in the center, with Homer and Owen and three girls. Then we got to singing old songs, and the bartenders joined us, and suddenly everything was on the house.

Eventually about twenty of us wound up in the orbiting mansion of the First Speaker for the Belt Government. The goldskin cops had tried to bust us up earlier, and the First Speaker had behaved very rudely indeed, then compensated by inviting them to join us ...

And that was why I used TK on so many cigarettes.

Across the width of the Mars Bar a girl in a peach-colored dress sat studying me with her chin on her fist. I got up and went over.

My head felt fine. It was the first thing I checked when I woke up. Apparently I remembered to take a hangover pill.

A leg was hooked over my knee. It felt good, though the pressure had put my foot to sleep. Fragrant dark hair spilled beneath my nose. I didn’t move. I didn’t want her to know I was awake.

It’s damned embarrassing when you wake up with a girl and can’t remember her name.

Well, let’s see. A peach dress neatly hung from a doorknob ... I remembered a whole lot of traveling last night. The girl at the Mars Bar. A puppet show. Music of all kinds. I’d talked about Owen, and she’d steered me away from that because it depressed her. Then—

Hah! Taffy. Last name forgotten.

“Morning,” I said.

“Morning,” she said. “Don’t try to move; we’re hooked together ...” In the sober morning light she was lovely. Long black hair, brown eyes, creamy untanned skin. To be lovely that early was a neat trick, and I told her so, and she smiled.

My lower leg was dead meat until it started to buzz with renewed circulation, and then it made faces until it calmed down. Taffy kept up a running chatter as we dressed. “That third hand is strange. I remember you holding me with two strong arms and stroking the back of my neck with the third. *Very nice*. It reminded me of a Fritz Leiber story.”

“‘The Wanderer.’ The panther girl.”

“Mm hmm. How many girls have you caught with that cigarette trick?”

“None as pretty as you.”

“And how many girls have you told that to?”

“Can’t remember. It always worked before. Maybe this time it’s for real.”

We exchanged grins.

A minute later I caught her frowning thoughtfully at the back of my neck. “Something wrong?”

“I was just thinking. You really crashed and burned last night. I hope you don’t drink that much all the time.”

“Why? You worried about me?”

She blushed, then nodded.

“I should have told you. In fact, I think I did, last night. When a good friend dies, it’s obligatory to get smashed.”

Taffy looked relieved. “I didn’t mean to get—”

“Personal? Why not. You’ve the right. Anyway, I like—” *maternal types*, but I couldn’t say that. “—people who worry about me.”

Taffy touched her hair with some kind of complex comb. A few strokes snapped her hair instantly into place. Static electricity?

“It was a good drunk,” I said. “Owen would have been proud. And that’s all the mourning I’ll do. One drunk and—” I spread my hands. “Out.”

“It’s not a bad way to go,” Taffy mused reflectively. “Current stimulus, I mean. I mean, you’ve got to bow out—”

“Now, drop that!” I don’t know how I got so angry so fast. Ghoul-thin and grinning in my reading chair, Owen’s corpse was suddenly vivid before me. I’d fought that image for too many hours. “Walking off a bridge is enough of a cop-out,” I snarled. “Dying for a month while current burns out your brain is nothing less than sickening.”

Taffy was hurt and bewildered. “But your friend did it, didn’t he? You didn’t make him sound like a weakling.”

“Nuts,” I heard myself say. “He didn’t do it. He was—”

Just like that, I was sure. I must have realized it while I was drunk or sleeping. Of course

he hadn't killed himself. *That* wasn't Owen. And current addiction wasn't Owen, either.

"He was murdered," I said. "Sure he was. Why didn't I see it?" And I made a dive for the phone.

"Good morning, Mr. Hamilton." Detective-Inspector Ordaz looked very fresh and neat this morning. I was suddenly aware that I hadn't shaved. "I see you remembered to take your hangover pills."

"Right Ordaz, has it occurred to you that Owen might have been murdered?"

"Naturally. But it isn't possible."

"I think it might be. Suppose he—"

"Mr. Hamilton."

"Yah?"

"We have an appointment for lunch. Shall we discuss it then? Meet me at headquarters twelve hundred."

"Okay. One thing you might take care of this morning. See if Owen registered for a nudist license."

"Do you think he might have?"

"Yah. I'll tell you why at lunch."

"Very well."

"Don't hang up. You said you'd found the man who sold Owen his droud and plug. What was his name again?"

"Kenneth Graham."

"That's what I thought." I hung up.

Taffy touched my shoulder. "Do—do you really think he might have been—killed?"

"Yah. The whole setup depended on him not being able to—"

"No. Wait. I don't want to know about it."

I turned to look at her. She really didn't. The very subject of a stranger's death was making her sick to her stomach.

"Okay. Look, I'm a jerk not to at least offer you breakfast, but I've got to get on this right away. Can I call you a cab?"

When the cab came, I dropped a ten-mark coin in the slot and helped her in. I got her address before it took off.

ARM Headquarters hummed with early morning activity. Hellos came my way, and I answered them without stopping to talk. Anything important would filter down to me eventually.

As I passed Julie's cubicle, I glanced in. She was hard at work, limply settled in her contoured couch, jotting notes with her eyes closed.

Kenneth Graham.

A hookup to the basement computer formed the greater part of my desk. Learning how to

use it had taken me several months. I typed an order for coffee and doughnuts, the

INFORMATION RETRIEVAL. KENNETH GRAHAM, LIMITED LICENSE: SURGERY. GENERAL LICENSE: DIRECT CURRENT STIMULUS EQUIPMENT SALE

ADDRESS: NEAR WEST LOS ANGELES.

Tape chattered out of the slot, an instant response, loop after loop of it curling on my desk. I didn't need to read it to know I was right.

New technologies create new customs, new laws, new ethics, new crimes. About half the activity of the United Nations Police, the ARMs, dealt with control of a crime that hadn't existed a century ago. The crime of organ-legging was the result of thousands of years of medical progress, of millions of lives selflessly dedicated to the ideal of healing the sick. Progress had brought these ideals to reality and, as usual, had created new problems.

1900 A.D. was the year Karl Landsteiner classified human blood into four types, giving patients their first real chance to survive a transfusion. The technology of transplants had grown with the growing of the twentieth century. Whole blood, dry bone, skin, live kidney, live hearts could all be transferred from one body to another. Donors had saved tens of thousands of lives in that hundred years by willing their bodies to medicine.

But the number of donors was limited, and not many died in such a way that anything of value could be saved.

The deluge had come something less than a hundred years ago. One healthy donor (but of course there was no such animal) could save a dozen lives. Why, then, should a condemned murderer die for no purpose? First a few states, then most of the nations of the world had passed new laws. Criminals condemned to death must be executed in a hospital, with surgeons to save as much as could be saved for the organ banks.

The world's billions wanted to live, and the organ banks were life itself. A man could live forever as long as the doctors could shove spare parts into him faster than his own parts wore out. But they could do that only as long as the world's organ banks were stocked.

A hundred scattered movements to abolish the death penalty died silent, unpublicized deaths. Everybody gets sick sometime.

And still there were shortages in the organ banks. Still patients died for the lack of parts to save them. The world's legislators had responded to steady pressure from the world's people. Death penalties were established for first-, second-, and third-degree murder. For assault with a deadly weapon. Then for a multitude of crimes: rape, fraud, embezzlement, having children without a license, four or more counts of false advertising. For nearly a century the trend had been growing as the world's voting citizens acted to protect their right to live forever.

Even now there weren't enough transplants. A woman with kidney trouble might wait a year for a transplant: one healthy kidney to last the rest of her life. A thirty-five-year-old heart patient must live with a sound but forty-year-old heart. One lung, part of a liver, prosthetics that wore out too fast or weighed too much or did too little ... there weren't enough criminals. Not surprisingly, the death penalty was a deterrent. People stopped committing crimes rather than face the donor room of a hospital.

For instant replacement of your ruined digestive system, for a *young* healthy heart, for

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