

On The One Hand

by **David L. Kuzminski**

(known popularly as **Attack Butterfly**)

Janus Wend gazed down upon the old revolver he owned. He hadn't fired it often since bullets cost too much apiece. Guns were cheap. Just about anyone could own one. Actually, even the bullets were cheap. That is, until you took the government tax on them into account. That was the government's way of enforcing gun control after all the anti-gun efforts failed in the twentieth century. Just taxing the hell out of bullets had done wonders for knocking the stuffing out of the murder rates. By firearms, that is. Janus knew that people were still murdered. It was just done with a knife more often than before.

He grasped the revolver with his one good hand. Slowly, he moved the gun toward his head. He had it next to his right temple when he thought about how much it would cost Jill to purchase another bullet for home defense. Could she afford a new bullet once he was dead?

The gun wavered in his hand. Slowly it dropped back down as he lowered his arm until he could place the gun back in the drawer he stored it in. Then Janus closed the drawer and sat motionless for a moment.

Jill called out, "Janus, honey, are you going out on salvage anytime soon?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess so," Janus replied.

Jill appeared at the doorway to their bedroom. She said, "I was hoping that you'd pick up some things for me on your way back in. You don't mind, do you?"

Janus replied, "I don't mind. Give me the list. Looks like I better get going."

"Should I call Mike and let him know you're ready?" she asked.

"Not taking Mike with me this time."

She asked, "Why not?"

He answered, "On the one hand, I can't afford to pay him."

Jill winced inwardly as he reminded her of his disability once more and asked hesitantly, "Are you sure you can handle anything you find?"

Janus slowly replied, "I can handle the ship and salvage operations. Just because the Space Merchant Marine retired me after losing my left hand doesn't mean that I'm an invalid. It's more a technicality. That and insurance restrictions."

"Of course, it is," she said softly, recognizing one of his moods. "Do you want me to pack anything for you?"

"Just the usual," Janus answered as he accepted the list without glancing at it.

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Janus stared at the asteroid belt in front of his ship. It would be only too easy to override the controls and manually drive his ship straight into the confusing jumble of orbiting rocks. He contemplated it for a moment, then thought of the list Jill gave him. He looked at it for the first time after retrieving it from a pocket. There wasn't anything unusual on it. Merely things he'd bought before for Jill and himself. The trouble was, he could scarcely afford any of what she wanted, let alone the things they needed.

Janus wondered why he even came out to the asteroid belt once more since he was unlikely to find anything. It hadn't been so bad at first when there were lots of wrecks studding the belt that could be salvaged for the precious metals in them. He'd found a few. So had other salvage operators. Then the number of wrecks seemed to dwindle as there just weren't any ships being lost to it as there was in the old days. It was a supply that was bound to dwindle and run out eventually. The same technology that made it possible for him to salvage those wrecks was also responsible for preventing more ships from ending up destroyed.

Still, he thought how easy it would be to add just one more ship. At least he'd give some other poor salvage operator one last ship to recover. He reached for the controls and froze midway to them. Try as he might, he couldn't force himself to reach any farther. Reluctantly, he sadly concluded after several agonizing moments that he didn't have the courage to take his life. He knew then that even if bullets weren't expensive, he didn't possess the nerve to take his life earlier. Thinking earlier about how much the bullets cost was merely a convenient way to put off what he was too afraid to do. He knew that now.

For several moments, tears flowed down his cheeks. His body heaved slightly while he cried out of pity for himself. He might have cried longer except for the sensor tone that announced the presence of a huge cache of metal that was most likely a ship.

Janus straightened up in his seat and cleared his eyes to stare mistily at the console in front of him. It took a few moments before he could see clearly. Then he doubted his vision. He couldn't remember ever finding a wreck as large as the sensor was indicating.

"Holy mother," Janus muttered. "What the hell have we here? Not the *Stellar Princess*, I don't think. I can't be that lucky to have found the largest ship ever lost in the belt."

Janus stared some more at the sensor panel. The figures didn't change any. If anything, the figures seemed to firm up as the mass came nearer in the orbiting rocks in front of his ship. All the while, Janus attempted not to think of all the valuables that were lost on the *Stellar Princess* when it was lost decades ago. Plenty of salvagers had tried to find it before only to fail. They were lured by the presence of jewels, precious metals, and other valuables the passengers took with them on board the ill-fated ship. That wasn't even taking into account some of the precious metals used in the engine and controls of the ship.

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Janus stared at the wreck that floated within the cosmic rubble with the flow as it wended its way in an eternal orbit. It was close enough now for visual observation and for him to see that, though the ship was large, it wasn't the *Stellar Princess*. What it was, he didn't rightly know. One thing for certain that he did know was that it wasn't any ship lost by men. Not when Janus knew that only one large ship had ever

been lost. They were too closely regulated by the government for that kind of accident to happen twice. It was usually the small, privately owned stuff that got into trouble and became wrecks. That or the occasional mid-size freighter that carried dangerous cargo and probably didn't leave enough behind to find, let alone salvage.

However, this ship was huge, possibly bigger than the *Stellar Princess*. Despite being in the asteroid belt, much of the ship was still intact, too. Of course, that was easily explained by the fact that the wreck was travelling in the same direction and general speed as the rocks. Janus wondered if the ship was trying to make its way through the belt. Only he couldn't think of any reason for it to do so unless it was exploring. Even then, he could think of a dozen better ways to explore the belt than taking the whole ship into it. Janus left his controls after setting them to keep pace outside the belt with the wreck. He then went back to the suit locker and struggled to suit himself up. There was only one way to reach the wreck. Only one way that was relatively safe, that is. He'd have to go in personally with only his armored suit to protect him. At least he'd be a much smaller target than his ship. As well, if he saw anything coming directly at him, he could always press the retract switch and be yanked out by a winch on his ship. He hoped that wouldn't happen since he'd only have to try again. Janus didn't relish making his way through those rocks more than twice. Once to get in and once more to get out. As well, he had no idea whether the designers of the alien wreck had used anything valuable in constructing their ship.

Janus knew that the entire ship might be an archaeological treasure house if he could winch it out. Provided the government didn't commandeer it without any compensation, Janus knew that he could practically name his price. However, if he couldn't get the wreck out, he'd have to make do with anything he could tear loose and carry back. Hopefully, there'd be enough value in what he found to supplement his income. Then he could purchase those things that Jill wanted, but said nothing about when she didn't get any of them.

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Janus finished his survey of the exterior. He hadn't planned on the ship being wedged as it was among several large asteroids or being so deep within the belt. It wasn't that he couldn't pull it out. It was more that he was concerned that he might disturb too many rocks at the same time. Rocks that could come out at him to hit his exposed engines. As well, he hadn't found anyplace to link his line so that he could winch it out. That was the single most important reason for his disappointment. He had wanted the ship so bad, he could practically taste it despite having his armored suit between himself and the wreck.

As well, his thoughts about why the ship was in the asteroid belt were different. He was certain after his inspection that the alien ship wasn't exploring. Not with the apparent battle damage he found that he couldn't see from outside the belt. He didn't know if the ship was hit before or after it came to rest within the belt, though that didn't matter. He only knew that the wreck was even more important to the government than before since it was a warship. He consoled himself with the thought that the government would have taken it away without compensation anyway, so it didn't much matter that he couldn't get the whole ship out. If the government wanted it, then the government would have to salvage it. For the time being, he'd try to find what he could to sell and tell the government after he had some cash in his pocket. Let them commandeer the missing parts from whoever he sold them to. That would be their tough luck.

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Janus entered through one of the rents in the fuselage. There were plenty to choose from. He chose one that was more than large enough and led to a visible corridor inside the ship. He made his way silently along the corridor, peeking into cabins as if there might still be someone alive in one to react to his presence. In a way, he was glad that Mike wasn't along. Mike was too much to the right and supportive

of the government. Likely, Mike would have forced him to reveal the wreck's presence before he had anything off it to make the trip worthwhile. That or Mike would have radioed the government while Janus explored the wreck.

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The box floated eerily in the room. To Janus' amazement, the box still had lights on it indicating that there was still something within it that held power. Though Janus didn't know what the box's purpose was, it was one of the few things he'd encountered that wasn't damaged or destroyed by the battle the ship was in. Janus moved cautiously around the box, staring at it intently while trying to determine just what the hell its purpose might have been.

Finally, Janus touched the box.

Nothing happened. It merely floated slightly away from his touch as it obeyed the laws of action and reaction.

Satisfied that the box didn't appear to be a bomb or other booby trap left by any battle survivors for their enemy, Janus moved the box to the rent where he entered the superstructure. There he netted it and fastened it to his line. He gazed out at his ship for a moment, then turned back into the wreck to search for more items worth salvaging.

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Too quickly, Janus moved as he squirmed about in one cabin. He felt the tear to a flexible portion of his armored suit. Alarmed, he backed out quickly as his suit lost its atmosphere. His good hand slipped into a pocket and came out with a suit clamp. Hurrying without panicking, Janus placed the clamp into position, then laboriously fastened the two ends down to close the clamp on the small tear. Then Janus allowed himself to float while he composed his nerves. As he did, he thought, well, you didn't even have the nerve to let it happen when death came calling. Did you, Janus, old boy?

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Janus stared at the meager cache of salvageable items he'd found. The tear in his suit had cost him valuable searching time. The oxygen he lost could have let him search for another two hours. Now he had to return with less than he wanted. Janus could only hope that what he recovered would make the trip worthwhile since he couldn't return to the wreck anymore. It wasn't like in the early days after he first retired and could afford to carry more than one oxygen canister.

Slowly, Janus attached himself back to the line, checking carefully that he wouldn't be caught once more by any sharp fragments from the wreck. Then he reached into a pocket and retrieved a beacon. Much as he hated using it so the government could take over his find, he knew what would happen if he didn't. Janus affixed the beacon to the wreck and activated it. A check of his instruments indicated that it was operating properly.

Then Janus activated the retraction winch. The line began recoiling back toward his ship. Janus watched for asteroids and gently warded off a few as a precaution even though his ship and the line still kept pace with most of the orbiting rocks.

Then he and his treasure were out of the belt into clear space. Janus speeded up the winch so he could get on board quicker.

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Finally out of his suit, Janus had to carry the salvage from the airlock before he could go anywhere. It wasn't actually that he had to. It was more a precaution on his part in case his ship was stopped for inspection. The last thing he wanted was for the government to find out about his haul before he could sell it.

The damaged items were easy to handle. It was the box that proved difficult. In the artificial gravity on board his ship, it was no longer just bulky and awkward to handle. It possessed some mass that required a bit of muscle power on his part. Janus inspected the box to see where he could grab it. He felt elated when he spotted an opening on one end that he could wedge his stump of a left wrist into. Otherwise, he probably couldn't have lifted it. Janus stooped down to pick up the box. He reached around and shoved his left wrist in. That was the last thing he remembered before losing consciousness.

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Janus came to with his left wrist still inside the box. He jerked it out and stared at the box before glancing at his right wrist to see how long he'd been out. He reached over to shove his sleeve up out of the way with his stump only to see a hand.

"What?" Janus exclaimed to himself before just sitting there to stare at a hand that shouldn't have been on the end of his left wrist. Long seconds went by before Janus attempted to flex and try out the hand that was once more a part of him. Not surprisingly, he found that it worked, though awkwardly at first as he used nerves that hadn't carried signals for years. Slowly, then more quickly, his brain remembered the right signals to send to get the proper response from a hand that shouldn't have been there.

Finally, Janus just talked to himself. "Well, Janus, old boy, you sure lucked out this time. Got your hand back in the bargain, too. However, you better not talk too much right now or you'll never get home to Jill. Won't she be surprised when she discovers that I can do all those things she had to help me with or do for me?"

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Janus smiled at the inspector who boarded his ship.

"Any luck?" Inspector Cline asked.

"Found a ship, but I couldn't get it out by myself. I left a beacon on it," Janus replied.

"Oh? Something wrong with your hand?" Cline asked.

Janus brought his left hand around from behind his back. "No sir. Guess I'm just used to standing with it behind me. Old habit. Nothing to be alarmed about."

"Um, okay. Just an old habit of mine when inspecting ships. Some operators think they can get away with something by pulling out a knife and threatening me. You don't mind turning around, do you?"

Janus turned so the inspector could see that Janus didn't have a knife tucked behind him.

Cline said, "Thanks. You wouldn't believe how many operators think we're dumb. You have anything to declare?"

"Just some scrap metal I removed before I had to leave. Didn't get much because I tore my suit."

Cline looked at the suit hanging in an open locker. The clamp was still in place over the tear. "You should have had a partner with you."

"Couldn't afford to hire anyone this time. I just hope the metal I brought back pays for this trip," Janus replied.

"Mind showing me the metal?" Cline asked.

"Just follow me."

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Janus breathed with a sigh of relief when the inspector left without saying anything about the scrap metal on board. It was too torn up and damaged for the inspector to recognize as being of alien manufacture. Janus went back to the cockpit and sat down at the controls. He engaged them and left the inspector's ship before glancing at what had been the co-pilot's seat. It was now occupied by the strange box that gave him back his left hand. Janus knew that there was a fortune to be made with that box. There were plenty of people who'd pay well for the chance to have a missing hand replaced. On the other hand, maybe it would even replace feet. Janus wasn't sure, but he hoped that it would. He knew plenty of other medical retirees who'd pay, within reason, to be whole once more.

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Janus answered the radio. "Hiya, Jill. Got a surprise for you when I get back in."

"A surprise? What kind of surprise?" she asked.

"Not going to tell you now. How about if you have someone bring you to the port and meet me when I get in?"

Jill answered, "I'll see what I can do. You had some luck in the belt?"

"Did I ever! I really can't discuss it now. However, I think we're going to be fine now because of this trip."

She asked, "Have you stopped to get that shopping done?"

"No, but we can do that together on the way home. How's that sound?"

"Together? Uh, sure. That sounds fine."

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The ship settled down. Everything was going well. Janus leaned back in his seat and listened for tower instructions telling him that he was clear to disembark. Not that it mattered much since his landing slot was private, though paid for by the government because of his handicap, and well out of range from all the other landing slots. Still, it was a government requirement that all operators take their instructions from the tower. As well, Janus didn't want to do anything that might bring about another inspection. One had been more than enough.

"Tower to Wend. You're clear to disembark and unload any cargo. Nice landing, by the way."

Janus replied, "Thanks, Tower. Guess that was one of my best yet, huh?"

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Jill entered the ship. She quickly made her way to the cockpit to meet with Janus. Janus was just shutting

off his instruments in the cockpit when she appeared. "Janus!"

"Jill! Guess what? I think we're going to be on easy course from now on. Maybe even no more salvage trips!"

"Really? You found something valuable?" she asked.

Janus said, "Yep! It's right there where the co-pilot's seat used to be."

Jill said, "Oh! That box?" as she spotted it.

Janus said, "It's not from Earth. I found an alien ship. A real honest-to-goodness alien ship! Stupid government's been searching without success for other life for what? Two centuries now? It was there under their noses the whole time. All they had to do was look."

"You're sure it's alien?" she asked as she unstrapped it and took hold of it to carry out.

"Of course I'm sure. I was on the alien ship myself. Besides, you know of anything we've ever made that can restore a missing limb?" he replied as he shoved his left hand out into view.

Jill was startled. She let go of the box. Janus could only watch in horror as the box tumbled along out of control. It fell through the corridor to crash into a bulkhead as Jill stared at his restored left hand. She asked, "How? You mean the box . . . ?" before seeing the shocked look on his face as he continued to stare down the passageway at the remnants of the alien box. "I'm sorry, Janus. I'm sorry. It's just that you startled me. Can it be fixed?"

Janus said, "I doubt it. I don't know, I mean."

"Maybe there's another one back at the wreck," she suggested.

He shook his head. "No, I checked through the wreck carefully. There wasn't another like it on board. That was the only one."

A commotion came from the air lock entrance. A voice shouted, "Permission to come aboard?"

"Who wants to come aboard?" Janus shouted down the passageway.

"Space Merchant Marine inspection."

"This isn't a Space Merchant Marine ship. This is privately owned," Janus hollered.

"We're not here to inspect the ship. We're here to inspect you. We have word that you're not disabled."

Janus looked at his left hand for a moment. Then he said, "I guess they're right. I'm not disabled any longer. Come aboard!"

A smallish man entered and made his way up the passageway. It was obvious that he hadn't been on many ships, if any. He didn't even have to get all the way to Janus before he saw what he was there to inspect. He stopped short and said, "Your records state that you lost your left hand. Is that a prosthesis?"

Janus replied, "No, it's real flesh and blood. It's mine."

The man said, "Then I'm going to have to report this. I appreciate you being honest with me. First time I ever heard of anyone fooling . . . Uh, wait a minute. Did you get it cloned?"

Janus said, "Not exactly. On the other hand, though, that's the only way I can describe what really happened. It's a long story."

The man said, "I better schedule you for a hearing then. I'm just supposed to inspect. Not make determinations. Save your story for the hearing."

"Yeah, I'll do that," Janus replied before the man turned and left.

Jill asked, "What will you tell them?"

"I don't know. I sure didn't plan on anyone reporting that I wasn't disabled any longer. Must have been that Inspector Cline who reported me. He must have checked my records after I left."

"Who?" Jill asked.

Janus replied, "Nothing. It doesn't matter now. Who knows? Maybe they'll let me go back to work now after the hearing."

"And if they don't?" she asked.

"Well, if they don't, they don't. On the other hand, maybe I can fix that box. Then we won't have to depend on them for enough to starve on. C'mon. Let's go shopping. We'll take a look at the box later."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

Janus answered, "Yeah, I'm sure. Nevermind how we'll pay for it. Just leave that to me."

"What about the box?"

"What about it? Right now, it's nothing but junk. No one's going to steal junk."

Jill said, "I really didn't mean to . . ."

Janus cut her off. "Shhh! I won't have any of that. Neither of us has anything to feel pity or sorry about. We've got lives to lead, no matter what comes of this. Now, let's go shopping."