

Decency

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THE VENERABLE old Hubble telescope saw it first. A silvery splash moving against the stars, the object proved enormous —larger than some worlds —and it was faster than anything human-built, still out among the comets but coming, the first touch of cold light just beginning to brake its terrific fall. "It's a light sail," astronomers announced, giddy as children, drunk by many means. "Definitely artificial. Probably automated. No crew, minimal mass. Photons move the thing, and even accounting for deceleration, it's going to make a quick flyby of the Earth."

By the time the sail crossed Saturn's orbit, a three-inch reflector cost its weight in platinum. Amateur astronomers were quitting their day jobs in order to spend nights plotting trajectories. Novice astronomers, some armed with nothing but binoculars or rifle sights, risked frostbite for the privilege of a glimpse. But it was the professionals who remained the most excited: every topflight facility in the northern hemisphere studied the object, measuring its mass, its albedo, its vibrations, and its damage —ragged mile-wide punctures scattered across its vast surface, probably stemming from collisions with interstellar comets. The sail's likely point of origin was a distant G-class sun; its voyage must have taken a thousand years, perhaps more. Astronomers tried to contact the automated pilot. Portions of the radio spectrum were cleared voluntarily for better listening. Yet nothing was heard, ever. The only sign of a pilot was a subtle, perhaps accidental, twisting of the sail, the pressure of sunlight altering its course, the anticipated flyby of the Earth becoming an impact event.

Insubstantial as a soap bubble, the sail offered little risk to people or property. Astronomers said so. Military and political people agreed with them. And despite Hollywood conventions, there was no great panic among the public. No riots. No religious upheavals. A few timid souls took vacations to New Zealand and Australia, but just as many southerners came north to watch the spectacle. There were a few ugly moments involving the susceptible and the emotionally troubled; but generally people responded with curiosity, a useful fatalism, and the gentle

nervousness that comes with a storm front or a much-anticipated football game.

The world watched the impact. Some people used television, others bundled up and stepped outdoors. In the end, the entire northern sky was shrouded with the brilliant sail. In the end, as the Earth's gravity embraced it, scientists began to find structures within its thin, thin fabric. Like a spiderweb, but infinitely more complex, there were fibers and veins that led to a central region — a square mile of indecipherable machinery—and the very last images showed damaged machines, the sail's tiny heart wounded by a series of swift murderous collisions.

The impact itself was beautiful. Ghostly fires marked where the leading edge bit into the stratosphere. Without sound or fuss, the sail evaporated into a gentle rain of atomized metals. But the spiderweb structures were more durable, weathering the impact, tens of thousands of miles of material falling over three continents and as many oceans, folding and fracturing on their way down, the most massive portions able to kill sparrows and crack a few windows and roof tiles.

No planes were flying at the time, as a precaution. Few people were driving. Subsequent figures showed that human death rates had dropped for that critical hour, a worldly caution in effect; then they lifted afterward, parties and carelessness taking their inevitable toll.

The sail's central region detached itself at the end, then broke into still smaller portions. One portion crashed along the shore of Lake Superior. The Fox affiliate in Duluth sent a crew, beating the military by twenty minutes. The only witness to the historic event was a temperamental bull moose. Only when it was driven off did the crew realize that the sail wasn't an automated probe. A solitary crew member lay within a fractured diamond shell, assorted life-support equipment heaped on all sides. Despite wounds and the fiery crash, it was alive —an organism built for gravity, air, and liquid water. A trembling camera showed the world its first genuine alien sprawled out on the forest floor, a dozen jointed limbs reaching for its severed web, and some kind of mouth generating a clear, strong, and pitiful wail that was heard in a billion homes.

A horrible piercing wail.

The scream of a soul in perfect agony.

Caleb was one of the guards supplied by the U.S. Marines.

Large in a buttery way, with close-cropped hair and tiny suspicious eyes, Caleb was the kind of fellow who would resemble a guard even without his uniform or bulky side arm. His service record was flawless. Of average intellect and little creativity, nonetheless he possessed a double dose of what, for lack of a better word, could be called shrewdness.

Working the security perimeter, he helped control access to the alien. *The bug*, as he dubbed it, without a shred of originality. Twice in the first two days he caught unauthorized civilians attempting to slip inside —one using a false ID, the other hiding inside bales of computer paper. Late on the third day he found a fellow guard trying to smuggle out a piece of the bug's shell. "It's a chunk of diamond," was the man's pitiful defense. "Think what it's worth, Caleb. And I'll give you half... what do you say... ?"

Nothing. He saw no reason to respond, handcuffing the man — a sometime acquaintance —then walking him back toward the abrupt little city that had sprung up on the lakeshore. Double-walled tents were kept erect with pressurized air and webs of rope, each tent lit and heated, the rumble of generators and compressors making the scene appear busier than it was. Most people were asleep; it was three in the morning. A quarter moon hung overhead, the January stars like gemstones, brighter and more perfect than the battered diamond shard that rode against Caleb's hip. But the sky barely earned a glance, and despite the monumental events of the last weeks and days, the guard felt no great fortune for being where he was. His job was to deliver the criminal to his superiors, which he did, and he did it without distraction, acting with a rigorous professionalism.

The duty officer, overworked and in lousy spirits, didn't want the shard. "You take it back to the science people," he ordered. "I'll call ahead. They'll be watching for you."

Mistrust came with the job; Caleb expected nothing less from his superior.

The bug was at the center of the city, under a converted circus tent. Adjacent tents and trailers housed the scientists and their machinery. One facility was reserved for the press, but it was almost empty, what with the hour and the lack of fresh events. Overflow equipment was stored at the back of the tent, half-unpacked and waiting to be claimed by experts still

coming from the ends of the world. Despite the constant drone of moving air, Caleb could hear the bug now and again. A wail, a whimper. Then another, deeper wail. Just for a moment, the sound caused him to turn his head, listening now, feeling something that he couldn't name, something without a clear source. An emotion, liquid and intense, made him pay close attention. But then the bug fell silent, or at least it was quieter than the man-made wind, and the guard was left feeling empty, a little cold, confused and secretly embarrassed.

He was supposed to meet a Dr. Lee in the press tent; those were his orders, but nobody was waiting for him.

Caleb stood under a swaying fluorescent light, removing the diamond shard from his pocket and examining it for the first time. Cosmic dust and brutal radiations had worn at it; he'd seen prettier diamonds dangling from men's ears. What made it valuable? Why care half this much about the bug? The Earth had never been in danger. The sail's lone passenger was dying. Everyone who visited it said it was just a matter of time. To the limits of his vision, Caleb could see nothing that would significantly change people's lives. Scientists would build and destroy reputations. Maybe some fancy new machines would come from their work. Maybe. But the young man from central Missouri understood that life would go on as it always had, and so why get all worked up in the first place?

"You've got something for me?"

Caleb looked up, finding a middle-aged woman walking toward him. A very tired, red-eyed woman. She was one of the nation's top surgeons, although he didn't know or particularly care.

"I'll take that for you—"

"Sorry, ma'am." He had read her ID tag, adding, "I'm expecting Marvin Lee. Material studies."

"I know. But Marvin's busy, and I like the press tent's coffee. Since I was coming this way, I volunteered."

"But I can't give it to you. Ma'am." Caleb could see how the shard had been stolen in the first place.

Red eyes rolled, amused with his paranoia.

Not for the first time, he felt frustration. No sense of protocol here; no respect for sensible rules. The name on the ID was Hilton. Showing none of his feeling, Caleb said, "Perhaps you could take me to him, Dr. Hilton. If it's no trouble."

"I guess." She poured black coffee into a Styrofoam cup, a knowing little smile appearing. "Now I get it. You're after a trip to the big tent, aren't you?"

Hadn't he just said that?

A sly wink, and she said, "Come on then. I'll take you."

They left the press tent, the doctor without a coat and the guard not bothering to zip his up. A twenty-yard walk, then they entered the bug's enormous tent, three sets of sealed doors opening for them. The last pair of guards waved them on without a look. Caleb smelled liquor, for just a moment, and as he stepped through the door he was wondering whom to warn about this serious breach of the rules —

—and there was a horrible, horrible wail.

Caleb stopped in midstride, his breath coming up short, a bolt of electricity making his spine straighten up and his face reflexively twist as if in agony.

Turning, showing the oddest half-grin, Dr. Hilton inquired, "Is something wrong?"

It took him a moment to say, "No, I'm fine."

"But it's your first time here, isn't it?"

What was her point?

"You've heard stories about it, haven't you?"

"Some."

"And you're curious. You want to see it for yourself."

"Not particularly," he answered, with conviction.

Yet she didn't believe him. She seemed to enjoy herself. "Marvin's on the other side. Stay with me."

Caleb obeyed. Walking between banks of instruments, he noticed that the technicians wore bulky, heavily padded headphones to blunt the screams. Now and again, at unpredictable moments, the bug would roar, and again Caleb would pause, feeling a little ill for that terrible moment when the air itself seemed to rip apart. Then just as suddenly there was silence, save for the clicking machines and hushed, respectful voices. In silence, Caleb found himself wondering if the guards drank because of the sounds. Not that he could condone it, but he could anticipate their excuse. Then he stepped off a floor of particle boards, onto rocky earth punctuated with tree stumps, and in the middle of that cleared patch of forest, stretched out on its apparent back, was the very famous bug. Not close enough to touch, but nearly so. Not quite dead, but not quite alive, either.

There was some kind of face on a wounded appendage, a silent mouth left open, and what seemed to be eyes that were huge and strange and haunted. Dark liquid centers stared helplessly at the tent's high ceiling. It was no bug, Caleb realized. It didn't resemble an insect, or any mammal, for that matter. Were those legs? Or arms? Did it eat with that flexible mouth? And how did it breathe? Practical questions kept offering themselves, but he didn't ask any of them. Instead, he turned to the surgeon, dumbfounded. "Why bring me here?" he inquired.

She was puzzled. "I'm sorry, isn't that what you wanted? I assumed seeing Marvin was an excuse."

Not at all.

"You know," she informed him, "anyone else would give up a gland to be here. To stand with us."

True. He didn't quite see why, but he knew it was true.

Another pair of guards watched them from nearby. They knew the doctor. They had seen her come and go dozens of times, struggling to help her patient. In the course of three days, they had watched her face darken, her humor growing cynical, and her confidence languishing as every effort failed. They felt sorry for her. Maybe that was why they allowed Caleb to stand too close to government property. The soldier lacked clearance, but he was with Hilton, and he was safe looking, and how could this tiny

indiscretion hurt? It made no sense to be hard-asses. Glancing at their watches, they measured the minutes before their shift ended... and once more that gruesome critter gave a big roar... !

"It's in pain," Caleb muttered afterward.

The doctor looked at him, then away. "Are you sure?"

What a strange response. Of course it was in pain. He searched for the usual trappings of hospitals and illness. Where were the dangling bags of medicine and food? "Are you giving it morphine?" he asked, fully expecting to be told, "Of course."

But instead Hilton said, "Why? Why morphine?"

As if speaking to an idiot, Caleb said each word with care. "In order to stop the pain, naturally."

"Except morphine is an intricate, highly specific compound. It kills the hurt in Marines, but probably not in aliens." She waited a moment, then gestured. "You've got more in common—biochemically speaking—with these birch trees. Or a flu virus, for that matter."

He didn't understand, and he said so.

"This creature has DNA," she explained, "but its genetic codes are all different. It makes different kinds of amino acids, and very unusual proteins. Enzymes nothing like ours. And who knows what kinds of neurotransmitters."

The alien's mouth opened, and Caleb braced himself.

It closed, and he sighed.

"We've found organs," said Hilton, sipping her coffee. "Some we know, some we don't. Three hearts, but two are punctured. Dead. The scar tissue shows radiation tracks. Count them, and we get an estimate of the tissue's age. A thousand years, maybe. Which means it was injured when it flew through a dust storm, probably on its way out of the last solar system."

The alien was about the size of a good riding horse. It seemed larger only because of its peculiar flattened shape. The wounds were surgically

precise holes, wisps of dust having pierced diamond as well as flesh. Knowing what ballistic wounds meant, he asked, "How is it even alive?"

"Implanted machinery, in part. Most of the machinery isn't working, but what does is repairing some tissues, some organs." She took a big swallow of coffee. "But its wounds may not have been the worst news. Marvin and my other esteemed colleagues think that the cosmic buckshot crippled most of the sail's subsystems. The reactors, for instance. There were three of them, a city block square each, thick as a playing card. Without power, the creature had no choice but to turn *everything* off, including itself. A desperation cryogenic freeze, probably for most of the voyage. And it didn't wake until it was over our heads, almost. Its one maneuver might have been a doomed skydiver's attempt to strike a mound of soft hay."

Caleb turned and asked, "Will it live?"

Hilton was tiring of the game. "Eventually, no. There's talk about another freeze, but we can't even freeze humans yet."

"I said it was in pain, and you said, 'Are you sure?'"

"It's not us. We can't measure its moods, or how it feels. Empirical evidence is lacking—"

As if to debate the point, the alien screamed again. The eyes kept shaking afterward, the closing mouth making a low wet sound. Watching the eyes, Caleb asked, "Do you think it means, 'Hi, how are you?' "

Hilton didn't respond. She didn't have time.

Again the alien's mouth opened, black eyes rippling as the air was torn apart; and Caleb, hands to his ears and undistracted by nasty gray abstractions, knew exactly what that horrible noise meant.

Not a doubt in him, his decision already made.

For three days and several hours, a worldwide controversy had been brewing, sweeping aside almost every other human concern.

What should be done with the alien?

Everyone who would care knew about the wounds and screams. Almost everyone had seen those first horrid tapes of the creature, and they'd watched the twice-daily news conferences, including Dr. Hilton's extended briefings. No more network cameras were being allowed inside the central tent, on the dubious ground of cleanliness. (How did you infect such an odd creature with ordinary human pathogens?) But the suffering continued, without pause, and it was obvious that the people in charge were overmatched. At least according to those on the outside.

The United Nations should take over, or some trustworthy civilian agency. Said many.

But which organization would be best?

And assuming another caretaker, what kinds of goals would it try to accomplish?

Some observers wanted billions spent in a crash program, nothing more important now than the alien's total recovery. Others argued for a kind death, then a quick disposal of the body, all evidence of the tragedy erased in case a second sail-creature came searching for its friend. But the Earth was littered with wreckage; people couldn't hope to salvage every incriminating fiber. That led others to argue that nothing should be done, allowing Nature and God their relentless course. And should death come, the body could be preserved in some honorable way, studied or not, and should more aliens arrive in some distant age —unlikely as that seemed—they could see that people were decent, had done their best, and no blame could possibly be fixed to them.

Anne Hilton despised all those options. She wanted to heal her patient, but crash programs were clumsy and expensive, and she was a pragmatic doctor who realized that human patients would suffer as a result, no money left for their mortal ills. Besides, she doubted if there was time. The fiery crash had plainly damaged the tissue-repairing systems. And worse, there was no easy way to give the creature its simplest needs. Its oxygen use was falling.

Nitrogen levels were building in the slow, clear blood. Teams of biochemists had synthesized a few simple sugars, amino acids, and other possible metabolites; yet the creature's success with each was uneven, the intravenous feedings canceled for now.

The truth told, Hilton's patient was collapsing at every level, and all that remained for the doctor was some of the oldest, most venerable skills.

Patience.

Prayer.

And whatever happened: "Do no harm."

For the next days, months, and years, Dr. Anne Hilton would wrestle with her memories, trying to decide why she had acted as she did that morning. Why get coffee at that particular moment? Why offer to retrieve the diamond shard? And why invite Caleb on that impromptu tour?

The last question had many answers. She had assumed that he wanted a tour, that he was being stubborn about the shard for no other reason. And because he was a Marine, he represented authority, order, and ignorance. She'd already had several collisions with his sort, politicians and other outsiders without enough mental activity to form a worthy thought. Maybe she'd hoped that shocking him would help her mood. She'd assumed that he was a big thoughtless lump of a man, the very worst kind...! Imagine. Stationed here for three days, guarding something wondrous, and precious, yet he didn't have the feeblest grasp of what was happening... !

The last scream done, Caleb asked, "Where's its brain?"

She glanced at him, noticing a change in his eyes.

"Doctor?" he asked. "Do you know where it does its thinking?"

She was suddenly tired of dispensing free knowledge, yet something in his voice made her answer. A sip of coffee, an abbreviated gesture. Then she said, "Below the face. Inside what you'd call its chest," and with that she turned away.

She should have watched him.

She could have been more alert, like any good doctor, reading symptoms and predicting the worst.

But an associate was approaching, some nonvital problem needing her

best guess. She didn't guess that anything was wrong until she saw her associate's face change. One moment he was smiling. Then he became suddenly confused. Then, horrified. And only after that did she bother to ask herself why that Marine would want to know where to find the brain.

Too late, she wheeled around.

Too late and too slow, she couldn't hope to stop him, or even slow him. Caleb had removed his side arm from its holster, one hand holding the other's wrist, the first shot delivered to the chest's exact center, missing the brain by an inch. Security cameras on all sides recorded the event, in aching detail. The alien managed to lift one limb, two slender fingers reaching for the gun. Perhaps it was defending itself. Or perhaps, as others have argued, it simply was trying to adjust its killer's aim. Either way, the gesture was useless. And Hilton was superfluous. Caleb emptied his clip in short order, achieving a perfectly spaced set of holes. Two bullets managed to do what bits of relativistic dust couldn't, devastating a mind older than civilization. And the eyes, never human yet obviously full of intelligence, stared up at the tent's high ceiling, in thanks, perhaps, seeing whatever it is that only the doomed can see.

There was a trial.

The charge, after all the outcry and legal tap dancing, was reduced to felony destruction of federal property. Caleb offered no coordinated defense. His attorneys tried to argue for some kind of alien mind control, probably wishing for the benefit of the doubt. But Caleb fired them for trying it, then went on the stand to testify on his own behalf. In a quiet, firm voice, he described his upbringing in the Ozarks and the beloved uncle who had helped raise him, taking him hunting and fishing, instructing him in the moral codes of the decent man.

" 'Aim to kill,' he taught me. 'Don't be cruel to any creature, no matter how lowborn.' " Caleb stared at the camera, not a dab of doubt entering his steady voice. "When I see suffering, and when there's no hope, I put an end to it. Because that's what's right." He gave examples of his work: Small game. A lame horse. And dogs, including an arthritic Labrador that he'd raised from a pup. Yet that wasn't nearly enough reason, and he knew it. He paused for a long moment, wiping his forehead with his right palm. Then with a different voice, he said, "I was a senior, in high school, and my uncle got the cancer. In his lungs, his bones. Everywhere." He was

quieter, if anything. Firmer. More in control, if that was possible. "It wasn't the cancer that killed him. His best shotgun did. His doctor and the sheriff talked it over, deciding that he must have held the twelve gauge up like this, then tripped the trigger like this." An imaginary gun lay in his outstretched arms, the geometry difficult even for a healthy oversized man. For the first time, the voice broke. But not badly and not for long. "People didn't ask questions," Caleb explained, arms dropping. "They knew what my uncle was feeling. What he wanted. They knew how we were, the two of us. And where I come from, decent people treat people just as good as they'd treat a sick farm cat. Dying stinks, but it might as well be done fast. And that's all I've got to say about that."

He was sentenced to five years of hard labor, serving every month without incident, without complaint, obeying the strict rules well enough that the prison guards voted him to be a model citizen of their intense little community.

Released, Caleb returned to Missouri, taking over the daily operations of the impoverished family farm.

Networks and news services pleaded for interviews; none were granted.

Some idiots tried sneaking onto his property. They were met by dogs and a silent ex-Marine —lean as a fence post now —and the famous shotgun always cradled in his wiry long arms.

He never spoke to trespassers.

His dogs made his views known.

Eventually, people tired of running in the woods. Public opinions began to soften. The alien had been dying, it was decided. Nothing good could have been done for it. And if the Marine wasn't right in what he did, at least he'd acted according to his conscience.

Caleb won his privacy.

There were years when no one came uninvited.

Then it was a bright spring day twenty-some years after the killing, and a small convoy drove in past the warning signs, through the tall barbed-wire gates, and right up to the simple farmhouse. As it happened,

a Marine colonel had been selected to oversee the operation. Flanked by government people, he met with the middle-aged farmer, and with a crisp no-nonsense voice said, "Pack your bags, soldier. But I'll warn you, you don't need to bring much."

"Where am I going?"

"I'll give you one guess."

Something had happened; that much was obvious. With a tight, irritated voice, Caleb told the colonel, "I want you all off my land. Now."

"Goddamn! You really don't know, do you?" The colonel gave a big laugh, saying, "Nothing else is on the news anymore."

"I don't have a television," said Caleb.

"Or a family anymore. And precious few friends." He spoke as if he'd just read the man's file. Then he pointed skyward, adding, "I just assumed you'd have seen it. After dusk is a good time—"

"I get to bed early," was Caleb's excuse. Then a sudden hard chill struck him. He leaned against his doorjamb, thinking that he understood, the fight suddenly starting to leave him. "There's another sail, isn't there? That's what this is all about."

"One sail? Oh, that's wonderful!" All the government men were giggling. "Make it three hundred and eighteen sails, and that's just *today's* count!"

"An armada of them," said someone.

"Gorgeous, gorgeous," said another, with feeling.

Caleb tried to gather himself. Then with a calm, almost inaudible voice, he asked, "But what do you want with me?"

"We don't want you," was the quick reply.

No?

"*They* do." The colonel kept smiling. "*They* asked specifically for *you*, soldier."

He knew why. Not a doubt in him.

Caleb muttered, "Just a minute," and dropped back into the house, as if to get ready.

The colonel waited for a couple seconds, then knew better. He burst through the door and tried to guess where Caleb would have gone. Upstairs? No, there was an ominous *click* from somewhere on his right. Caleb was in a utility room, his shotgun loaded and cocked, the double barrels struggling to reach his long forehead; and the colonel grabbed the gun's butt and trigger, shouting, "No! Wait!" Then half a dozen government men were helping him, dark suits left rumpled and torn. But they wrestled the shotgun away from their charge, and the colonel stood over him, asking, "What were you thinking? Why in hell would you—?"

"I killed one of theirs," Caleb said. "Now they want their revenge. Isn't that it?"

"Not close." The colonel was too breathless to put much into his laugh. "In fact, I don't think you could be more wrong, soldier. The last thing they want to kill is you... !"

Caleb was packed into a new shuttle and taken to orbit, an ungainly lunar tug carrying him the rest of the way. There was a new moon in a high, safe orbit. One of the sail creatures had captured a modest nickel-iron asteroid and brought it there. Healthy and whole, the creature scarcely resembled its dead brother. Its vast sail was self-repairing, and it possessed an astonishing grace, superseding the most delicate butterfly. Partially folded, riding the captive asteroid, it swallowed the tug, guiding it into a docking facility built recently from the native ores. Other tugs had brought up dignitaries, scientists, and a complete medical team. Everyone had gathered in the central room. As the onetime guard drifted into view, there was applause — polite but not quite enthusiastic — and from some of the faces, envy. Incandescent green envy.

Anne Hilton was among that number.

Old and long retired, she was present at the request of the sail creatures. Caleb didn't recognize her at first glance. She shook his hand, tried smiling, then introduced him to each member of her team. "We're just advisers," she informed him. "Most of the work will be done by our

host."

Caleb flinched, just for a moment.

Their "host" didn't resemble the first alien, save for the artificial trappings. Sail creatures were an assemblage of sentient species. Perhaps dozens of them. Caleb had seen photographs of this particular species: fishlike; human-sized; blackish gills flanking an unreadable carpish mouth. It had disgusted him at first glance, and the memory of it disgusted him now.

Dr. Hilton asked, "Would you like to meet her?"

He spoke honestly, saying, "Not particularly."

"But she wants to meet you." A cutting smile, then she promised, "I'll take you to her. Come on."

They had done this before, more than two decades ago. She had taken him to meet an alien, and for at least this moment she could feel superior in the same way. In charge.

There was a narrow tunnel with handholds, toeholds.

Suddenly they were alone, and with a soft, careful voice, Caleb confessed, "I don't understand. Why *me*?"

"Why not you?" Hilton growled.

"I'm not smart. Or clever. Not compared to everyone else up here, I'm not."

She lifted her eyebrows, watching him.

"These aliens should pick a scientist. Someone who cares about stars and planets..."

"You're going to be young again." Hilton said the words as if delivering a curse. "It'll take her some time to learn our genetics, but she's promised me that she can reverse the aging process. A twenty-year-old body again."

"I know."

"As for being smart," she said, "don't worry. She's going to tease your neurons into dividing, like inside a baby's head. By the time you leave us, you'll be in the top ninety-nine percentile among humans. And as creative as can be."

He nodded, already aware of the general plan.

Then they were near the entrance to *her* chamber. Hilton stopped, one hand resting on Caleb's nearer arm, a firm and level voice telling him, "I would do anything —almost —for the chance to go where you're going. To live for aeons, to see all those wondrous places!"

In a quiet, almost conspiratorial tone, he said, "I'll tell her to take you instead of me."

Hilton knew that he meant it, and she grew even angrier.

Then again, Caleb asked, "Why *me*?"

"They think they know you, I guess. They've been studying our telecommunications noise for years, and you certainly earned their attention." Her withered face puckered, tasting something sour. "You acted out of a kind of morality. You didn't hesitate, and you didn't make excuses. Then you accepted the hardships of prison, and the hardships that came afterward. Being able to live alone like you did... well, that's a rare talent for our species, and it's invaluable..."

He gave a little nod, a sigh.

"These creatures don't treasure intelligence," she exclaimed. "That's something they can grow, in vats. The same with imagination. But there's some quality in you that makes you worth taking..."

A dull ocher button would open the hatch.

Hilton reached for it, and her hand was intercepted, frail bones restrained by an unconscious strength.

Caleb put his face close to hers, and whispered.

"What I did for that alien," he confessed, "I would have done for a dog." She opened her mouth, but said nothing. After a moment, he continued:

"Or a bug. Or *anything*."

She stared at him, pulling at her hand until he abruptly let go.

"Time to get this business started," Caleb announced.

With an elbow, he smacked the button. There was a hiss, a little wind blowing as the hatch pulled open, carrying with it the smell of warm water and things unnamed.

He turned and left her.

And she hugged herself as if cold, and she watched him, her mouth open and nothing to say, the ex-Marine growing small with the distance as her bewilderment grew vast and bitter and black.