Lying to Dogs
by Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us that one inspiration for this story comes from a family legend his mother swears is true. His second inspiration for this tale, unlike "Oracles" (_Asimov's,_ January 2002), a story he wrote around the same time that assumed intelligent life is common and relatively easy to find, comes from the assumption that intelligent life occurs very rarely in the universe. Mr. Reed's next novel, _Sister Alice, _is scheduled for publication in May of 2003.

When I was a boy, my family owned a black Labrador retriever. Our dog lived for cold autumn mornings and long rides into the country and the intoxicating stink of fear leaking from the hunted birds. But there were days when dogs weren't welcome. For instance, there was this river-rat buddy of my father's with a goose blind hiding on an isolated sandbar. The river was deep and relentless; it was no place to take your animal swimming. That's why on the first day of goose season, Dad rose before dawn, dressed in his warmest camouflage, then carried his gun to the car and drove off alone. And the way my mother tells the story, the poor dog was devastated by this betrayal. He stood at our front door all day long, howling and sobbing, outraged by what was obviously a horrible, horrible crime.

Dad came home happy, but his joy didn't last.

Mom corralled him in their bedroom, and after a melodramatic replay of her day, they hatched a simple plan. If my father wanted to hunt on the river, he had to slip his gun and clothes out to the car the night before, preferably while our dog was busy terrorizing the squirrels in the backyard. Then in the predawn blackness, he would dress for church: A good suit, a crisp and conservative tie, and shiny black leather shoes. Dad looked exceptionally pious as he drove away. And our Labrador, in delicious innocence, would sleep untroubled at my mother's feet.

It was a lie, but it was a compassionate and moral lie.

About that, I haven't the faintest doubt.

Imagine an enormous coincidence.

And now cube it.

By coincidence, Opal is using the entire array, building a comprehensive map of the Virgo cluster. In the midst of measuring the soft glare of an enormous galaxy, she notices something decidedly odd. Buried inside that wealth of natural light is a coherent pulse. A structured glow. A luminous song born millions of years in the past. And because Opal has a wealth of talents, she quickly teases the song into its assorted notes, discovering oceans of data waiting to be found -- oceans created by a higher intelligence, designed to be obvious and decipherable, as well as utterly compelling.

"I could have been looking anywhere else," Opal admits. "We should have missed the signal. A fantastic amount of energy was utilized, but the signal was propagated in all directions. 'For every imaginable ear,' they claim."

"Who claims?" asks Aisha.

Opal emits a high-pitched squawk. "It's their name for themselves," she admits. "From what they tell me, it means the Blessed."

"A pleasant name," Sue remarks.

The rest of us say "The Blessed" aloud, as if it helps us understand our new neighbors in the cosmos.

Aisha glances at me, but she's speaking to Opal, asking, "So what do the Blessed look like?"

"Very much like you," Opal responds.

An image blossoms on the main screen: The creature is a biped with arms and legs and a recognizable head. But the resemblance stops there. The body is squat and strong and hairless, a thick hide of rhino-like flesh folded neatly at the elbows and shoulders and knees. Each hand has four long fingers, any one of which might be called the thumb, while the feet are triple-toed and resemble bald paws. The alien face has a carp's sucking mouth and no nose that I can find, and what seems to be the single eye is a flattened ellipse that reaches around the backside of the slick leathery head. Two round pupils swim inside the eye, both moving down to where the nose should be, crowding together and staring out at us.

"Hello, there!" Conrad jokes.

Tenwolf points out, "It doesn't look at all human."

"Not to you, perhaps," Opal replies. "But to me, it's practically your twin."

Everyone enjoys a good laugh.

Then our AI continues explaining the image. "The Blessed had DNA genetics and an oxygen-sugar metabolism. Their homeworld was substantially more massive than the Earth, with deeper oceans and a thicker atmosphere. But their sun was very much like ours."

Sue asks, "Is it male or female? Or something else, maybe?"

"Female," Opal says. Then she creates a second, nearly identical image that stands beside the first alien. "This is the male Blessed. If you notice, he's more heavily built and his head is a little more tapered."

Five humans stare at the newly discovered aliens. We are not stupid people. We've proven ourselves to be creative and adaptable individuals, not easily shaken by things unexpected. But our tongues have been stolen. None of us can whisper even the most obvious questions.

Opal decides to repeat herself. "I could have missed their signal. Any other day, and I wouldn't have noticed it. And since this is the only facility sensitive enough to find and decipher their message, we can assume that nobody else knows about the Blessed."

"Speaking of which," says Conrad. "How soon can we talk to Nearside?"

"Our main link is still inoperative," Opal reports. "And our secondary system won't be repaired for another seventy-four hours."

This is a second, decidedly smaller fluke. Our problematic com-satellite has gone on one of its little vacations, while our land-based system -- three thousand kilometers of naked glass cable -- was severed by a careless construction robot somewhere near Hadley.

Aisha asks, "What's our tertiary system?"

"A solar observation satellite," says Opal.

"Good," Conrad exclaims.

"But this is a flare season, and it's making some delicate, highest-priority measurements. It won't be available for another three hours."

"So we've got the story of the millennium," Conrad grumbles, "and we have to wait to deliver our news."

Again, everyone laughs.

Except for Opal. Normally the most joyful member of our team, she is conspicuously quiet for what must feel like an eternity to her. Then she repeats what she has already told us. What her less-perceptive colleagues haven't noticed. "I am using the past tense when I speak about the Blessed," she warns. "They are dead now. They have been extinct for nearly fifty million years."

"How do we know?" asks Tenwolf.

Another eternal pause. Then Opal admits, "It took phenomenal power to generate their signal. They generated that power when their sun and half a hundred of the nearest suns exploded in sequence."

"Shit," I mutter.

"But why?" Aisha inquires.

"I'm trying to learn that now," Opal promises.

A sudden anguish takes hold, and everyone turns to stare at the person who they always seek out whenever they feel less than wonderful.

They look at the base counselor.

At me.

* * *

Exactly five people live on the back side of the moon. None of us are scientists, but each carries a solid layman's understanding of astronomy and high-physics. We were hired as technicians, trained in a rush and put up here to baby the Feynman Observatory -- many billions of dollars' worth of mirrors and radio dishes and hardened electronics that mesh the mess together into a single vast eye.

Humans weren't part of the original plan. This giant facility was designed to be unmanned and self-reliant. But AIs and robots still have limits. Some expensive and embarrassing breakdowns happened during the first eighteen months of operation. Kicking and screaming, NASA found the money and boosters to bring us here. But the human presence has always been minimal on the moon, which makes our mission all the more difficult. And dangerous. And isolated, too. That's why some panel of dusty experts decided that a professional counselor was essential to the mission. And that's why they could include a man like me -- someone with less than sterling talents in the arts of optical feeds and vacuum motors.

What I am is an ordained minister in the Church of Darwin. Raised in a traditional Methodist home, I have two pretentious degrees, in theology and in psychology. According to my resume, I should be perfectly suited to help my four compatriots deal with the isolation of this place, as well as the treacheries that come when too few people are placed too near one another.

I believe in God. Regardless of what skeptics believe, my church and faith call for a caring and wise Lord of All. I believe in goodness and in truth, and most important, I want to do what is right and moral. But despite my credentials and outward bearing, I have a rather slippery hold on those things that should matter most to me.

Aisha likes to tell me so.

She says it after we make love. She has a smart strong voice and lustful almond-shaped eyes, and she always pretends to be delighted with herself and disappointed with me. "I just screwed a minister," she laughs, pulling out from under me. Then she looks up at the ceiling of my tiny cabin, quietly boasting, "I'm ruining you. A man of the collar."

"I don't wear a collar," I'll tell her.

"You know what I mean."

"My church doesn't want celibacy. Not in functioning, normal adults." I will put a finger on her mouth, adding, "Our species is a social ape. Living any other way would be a lie and sacrilege."

But Aisha prefers a more traditional image of faith. Her God is a father figure, and my beliefs are never as important as her desire to be wicked. That's why she will look through me, reminding me, "You're here as a therapist. What kind of therapist fucks his patients?"

"Only one of my patients," I offer.

"Oh, I forgot. That makes it all right."

I love the woman. I can watch her for hours, never growing bored. She has black hair and a delicious Middle Eastern color, with full breasts and wide hips screaming to my genes, "I will make good babies."

But there can't be any children. Each of us has been surgically sterilized, left free of life's gravest and most joyful responsibility.

"But I do love wicked men," Aisha will tell me. Eventually. Then she will push her mouth against the flat of my belly, running her wide tongue downward as she says my name with a fiendish delight.

"Xavier," she will whisper.

I will close my eyes.

"Xavier," she will groan.

Then I will cradle the back of her head, making knots with her hair, softly saying, "Aisha," as my ancient biology begins to stir again.

* * *

The gloomy news about the Blessed shakes Conrad. He looks at his surroundings -- the tiny cafeteria with its five chairs and grimy food dispensers and the viewing screen that covers the longest wall. Knowing him like I do, I'm guessing that he'll quickly slip from surprise into a pissy rage. Sure enough, he says, "Bullshit." He sits up again, then asks Opal, "How do you know that they're extinct? How can you be sure?"

"That's what the Blessed are telling me," our AI explains.

"Is that so?" he barks.

Opal's voice is feminine and youthful. "I'm sorry, Conrad. But they're emphatic about their own demise. That's how they begin their message, and it is repeated throughout this very long text."

Sue straightens in her chair and aims for diplomacy. "It's been fifty million years. Isn't that right? How many species exist for even half as long?" She smiles at Conrad, adding, "It's only natural to refer to yourself as being gone -- "

"No, Sue," Opal interrupts. "The Blessed destroyed their homeworld, and they destroyed their colony worlds, too."

Nobody speaks.

"One hundred and fifty billion died in the cataclysm."

Sue slumps forward. She is a large woman, and plain, and she is the simultaneous lover to both Conrad and Tenwolf. That's the kind of diplomat she can be. "Was it some kind of natural catastrophe?" she sputters, plainly disgusted by the implications. "Or maybe some terrible accident?"

Opal says, "No, and no."

Again, people glance at me.

I am the counselor, their minister and confidant. I clear my throat. "Opal," I say, "we need more details. More of an explanation."

"I'm sorting and translating the message now," she explains. Then she offers a measure of the data, using a crisp exponential number that makes her audience blink and shiver. How many thousands of years would it take humans to digest such a volume of knowledge?

I glance at my Aisha, staring into her narrowed eyes.

"The Blessed willingly destroyed themselves," Opal maintains. "The process began with their home sun, and as the shockwave reached each successive sun, it too was demolished by the same means."

The screen goes to white, and then an image appears. At first glance, I'm sure that Opal is generating the scene, but then I notice odd marks in the center and along the curved edges. This is a portion of the aliens' message. The Blessed have thoughtfully supplied us with captions; their language resembles a slanted line wearing intricate bumps and knots that Opal can already read at a glance. Where it matters, she supplies translations. Where it is vital, she focuses on tiny portions of the image, letting us watch as fleets of silvery vessels plunge into a red dwarf and then a fat yellow-white sun and finally a fierce blue-white giant, each star exploding with the smooth ease of a Fourth of July firecracker.

Impressed, Tenwolf asks, "How did they do this godawful thing?"

"I haven't found any schematics," Opal admits. "What I wanted you to see is this. Here."

The shockwave cools as it expands, but only to a point. It remains bright and fierce, swelling with the smooth inevitability of an inflating balloon. Even a scientific novice like myself can tell that these aren't ordinary novas and supernovas. Each blast is asymmetric, and nothing visible remains of the dead suns. Are they black holes, or has all their matter been consumed? I nearly ask. But then the shockwave washes up against an unseen barrier, and a blinding flash erupts, leaving everyone in the tiny room blinking and wiping at their wounded eyes.

Opal stops the image and runs it backward, enlarging a pinprick of the brilliance. "The wave front was a sphere a little more than twenty light-years across," she reports. "A membrane of some kind had been set in its path. The membrane had an intricate design and minimal mass. It absorbed the wave's energies and retransmitted them as coherent light. In effect, the Blessed built an infrared laser that pointed in every direction at once."

Again, Tenwolf asks, "How can that be done?"

"It can't be," is Conrad's opinion. But I can see the doubt swimming in his face, and I hear a desperate hope in his otherwise solid voice.

"What kind of output are we talking about?" Aisha asks.

Opal offers another extraordinary number, in joules. Then after the briefest pause, she adds, "This was a signal meant for faraway eyes."

The twenty light-year sphere recedes. The galaxy in Virgo fills the screen, and just as suddenly it begins to shrink away. A giant whirlpool of stars and gas perhaps a hundred times more massive than our wispy little Milky Way, but its majesty vanishes with the same smooth ease, becoming a pale smear barely visible against hundreds of smears of nameless, same-looking light.

The alien message is a flicker, silent and quick.

But it is noticeable, yes. Provided that one happens to be looking at the right place with the proper kinds of eyes, it is obvious.

Opal gives her slow companions a moment to wrestle with the distances and energies and this vision of endless Creation. Then with a flat, careful voice, she remarks,

"There is a postscript buried within the message."

"What is it?" Conrad asks.

"I'm translating it now," the AI replies.

Sue straightens her back again, shoring up her nerves.

Tenwolf uses a fingertip, drawing slow and precise circles in the dust that clings to the tabletop.

Aisha glances my way.

"Can you make a translation?" I ask. Then, foolishly, I wonder aloud, "Do you need help, Opal?"

"I am finished, and thank you, no." Again the screen empties itself, turning a perfect deathly white. Then she explains, "The Blessed have left twenty-three routes to make the translation, and I wanted to work through all of them before I answered. I think you'll see: This moment requires absolute certainty."

"Are you certain now?" asks Aisha.

"I am, yes," Opal promises. "It seems that the postscript is many things. But mostly, the Blessed meant it to be a nest of warnings."

* * *

Our base camp is a collection of tiny prefabricated shelters joined together with flexible, intestine-sized tunnels, everything buried beneath several meters of hurriedly packed regolith. The only substantial room is the machine bay with its arching roof over a half acre of native stone. The stone floor is polished smooth but always gray and drab to the eye. The bay is the least habitable portion of the base. We normally leave the main doors open to the vacuum, allowing robots and working humans to come and go as they please. It is a busy, silent place, and I learned early in the mission that this was where the others liked to meet with me, speaking on private channels, telling me about their problems and the problems they could see in their various compatriots.

Conrad is our mission leader, and it is a duty that he takes seriously, even when he pretends to despise the title. He is a gangly, pleasantly handsome man who has climbed mountains on two worlds and has three ex-wives and can thrive on a pair of naps for every twenty-four hours of activity. He often asks me about the mood of our team. But I am everyone's counselor, I remind him. I can't discuss anything said in confidence, no matter how trivial. Conrad likes to kid, telling me, "You can use pseudonyms. How's that?" He means it as a joke, and he doesn't. The simple truth is that our leader worries about the emotional atmosphere around him. Like many charming people, he suspects that others can summon smiles and jokes as easily as he does. His deepest feelings are secrets that he holds close, but I sense them whenever he starts to tease me. He hates his responsibilities as surely as he needs them. For us, Conrad is more friend than boss. And I like the man. I like him quite a lot. But of course I like everyone here. We wouldn't be together if there wasn't an easy, natural affection that was shared by all of us.

Tenwolf is our oldest citizen. In his mid-fifties, with graying black hair and a pudgy, decidedly unimpressive body, he is Pawnee by blood and Presbyterian by upbringing. My friend is a solitary creature who understands machines in an almost spiritual way. When the enormous Delta dish jammed, it was Tenwolf who guessed what was wrong, crawling into the cramped workings to yank loose a slice of insulation that had fallen into the worst possible cranny. Meticulous work is his forte. He feasts on tedious, difficult assignments that last for days and days. What he hates is the deadness of the moon. He will sit with me in the machine bay, hands busy inside the guts of some wounded robot, describing a favorite fishing trip or teaching me how to grow perfect tomatoes. "If I can't feel the wind

on my face," he admits, "at least I can feel it swirling inside my head. Know what I mean?"

Absolutely. Yes.

Occasionally Tenwolf asks about my little church and faith. What exactly do I believe, and why?

I don't want to proselytize, but I can't ignore his curiosity, either. "I believe in life," I tell him. "Life was born for a reason. It prospers for a lot of reasons. Humans aren't holy by themselves, but as we move out into the universe, we'll be doing good godly work."

"Are we going to make the moon green?"

"Eventually, yes."

"Mars and Venus?"

I can't say what the timetable will be. But I find it easy to nod, promising him, "Our neighboring worlds are sure to be terraformed. And people will eventually reach the stars, and if their worlds aren't alive already, we're going to make them happy and green."

He likes the sound of those words. Usually he nods and smiles, even when he's pointing out, "Our mirrors have seen plenty of earth-sized worlds. Several hundred, the last time I counted. But how many of those places show any trace of life?"

"It's early in our search," I have to remind him. And myself.

Then Tenwolf will look out the open doors of the machine bay, staring at the empty dust and the hard black sky, finishing our conversation by saying, "I believe you. Shit, what are my choices here?" Then he laughs, adding, "But doesn't it look like a fucking waste, all the emptiness that we've seen so far...?"

Sue is our diplomat, our easy woman. Sometimes she sleeps with Tenwolf but more often with Conrad. She's also made overtures to me while we discuss her feelings and fears. Sue has surprisingly small hands for a big-bodied woman. On several occasions, she has set her hand on mine, and then with a focused smile, she will say nothing. She just stares at my eyes and waits, and it's up to me to steer us back to a proper subject.

"They knew what they were doing," she likes to tell me, and herself. "Putting the five of us together, I mean. Out of twenty thousand applicants, we're the best people. The best team. A perfect team, I think."

Twenty thousand applicants is an exaggeration. After the unstable and incompetent were excluded, the working list was barely six hundred names.

"You've got to be pleased," Sue tells me. "We've been here for five months, and has there been one serious fight?"

"No," I admit. "Not one punch thrown."

"Seven more months to go," she remarks. "I can't believe it. We're nearly halfway done with our assignment."

Sue has a soft voice. A deep, soothing voice. I suspect that's one reason why men go to bed with her so willingly. They know that after sex, they can close their eyes, letting her pleasant words wash over them, pulling them into a good hard sleep.

Sometimes I wonder about her and me: She drops her hand on mine, and I let her. We're standing in the hard vacuum of the machine bay, each wearing a bulky lifesuit, but I can feel the pressure of her hand through my glove. I look into her plain gray eyes, watching her dare me to make the next move.

"Who do you think is responsible for all these good feelings?" I ask. It's the day before the Virgo signal arrives, and I'm shamelessly fishing for a compliment. I wink and smile, saying, "Sue," with my own soothing voice. "Who do you think does the most to keep us happy?"

But she doesn't tell me, "You do, Xavier."

Instead Sue lifts her eyebrows and smiles with a chilled delight, telling me, "Opal does."

"Our AI?" I sputter.

"Why not?" She laughs, pulling her hand out from under mine. "She's always pleasant, always professional. She's never busy or tired. And she's always at the center of everything we're trying to accomplish up here. Know what I mean?"

* * *

"They didn't always call themselves the Blessed," we are told. "The species took that name late in their history."

Conrad says, "Okay, I'll bite. Why is that, Opal?"

"They were technological creatures for a long time. For nearly one hundred thousand years, by human count." She pauses, pretending to take a thoughtful breath. "Their galaxy is enormous," she reminds us. "It has more than a trillion suns and far more than ten trillion planets. The Blessed built dishes and mirrors that dwarfed everything human-built, and when their telescopes didn't give answers, they sent out fleets of robotic starships. They wanted to find intelligent aliens. They wanted friends. So they looked for worlds like theirs, and when they couldn't find any, they broadened their parameters, studying water worlds and jupiters and cold worlds with ammonia or methane seas. And after all that, they realized just how rare life was and how lucky they were. And that's when they began calling themselves the Blessed."

As Opal speaks, she shows us glimpses of the ancient data. Worlds slide past like snowflakes. Like brown and gray and muddy blue snowflakes. There is a dreary sameness to these anonymous bodies. I notice it even before I read the brief descriptions culled from official reports. The small worlds resemble Mars, pitted with craters and desperate for water. Many of the larger worlds have been suffocated by runaway greenhouse events. But many more are as wet as the Earth, with mild atmospheres and continents that practically beg for life. Yet something has always gone wrong. Eccentric orbits are numbingly common. Impacting asteroids and comet showers are brutal cliches. But more likely still are the supernovas that have sterilized every world within several light-years. And more terrible than exploding suns are the gamma radiation storms that arrive whenever neutron stars collide -- a vicious, amoral event that kills everything within a thousand light-years. And if the world is lucky enough to escape those disasters, it has to face a final nightmare: The core of every galaxy can turn active, gases and entire suns falling into the central black hole, a quasar-like belch ravaging every planet that isn't buried inside the deepest, darkest clouds of interstellar dust.

The Blessed have given us a grim, sobering encyclopedia. After another five minutes of wastelands and ruin, Aisha groans, "Did they find life anywhere, Opal? Anywhere at all?"

"Many times, yes," says Opal. "But life usually comes as single-cell organisms living in subterranean refuges."

"Usually," Conrad echoes.

"The Blessed found three examples of robust, high-functioning biospheres." She shows us one of those worlds: It looks very much like the Earth, complete with blue-green jungles and an emerald blue ocean. But before we can take hope from this image, our AI cautions, "This is a much older world than the Earth, and its fauna are simple-minded and slow to change. Left alone, intelligence wouldn't evolve here until long after its sun left the main spectrum."

I give a low, anguished moan.

Yet Sue insists on finding hope. She says, "But Opal. What percentage of worlds did the Blessed study in depth? In just their own galaxy, I mean."

"A little less than 1 percent," the AI reports.

Sue brightens. She looks at all of us, promising, "There could be dozens of intelligent species that they didn't find. And that's just in their neighborhood."

"Maybe it's an extra dangerous galaxy," Conrad suggests. "Because it's so large. Because its core is sure to be more active than ours."

I like the sound of those words.

But then Opal says, "No, actually. The Blessed are absolutely clear about this. High-technologies have to be exceedingly rare in the universe."

"How rare?" I ask.

"According to the Blessed's formulas," she says, "within our Local Group -- the Milky Way and Andromeda and the assorted dwarf galaxies -- there is no reason to expect even one technological species."

"But we're technological," Conrad complains.

"Maybe we're just very, very lucky," Tenwolf adds. His expression is unnaturally calm, a tight lid set over his emotions. He breathes hard, once and then again, and then he asks Opal, "Is that what we are? A fluke?"

"According to the Blessed," she maintains, "life survives only because of many enormous strokes of good fortune."

Aisha glances at me.

"Okay," I begin. "Opal. How did the aliens arrive at this conclusion? Do they tell you their rationale?"

"By many means, yes," she says.

"So what's the reason?" Conrad demands to know.

The pause is long and unnerving.

Then our AI offers words that I have never heard from her, or from any other machine. Quietly and with a palpable sadness, she tells us, "Really, this is just awful, awful news."

* * *

Sometimes I use Opal as the counselor's counselor. I'll mention my moods, blue or otherwise, and her voice will make the appropriately sympathetic sounds. She wears a veneer of mock-empathy on top of her vast intellect. As well as any lover, she can say, "I'm sorry you feel that way. What can I do to help you?" But after the next false breath, her real nature surfaces. "We have a variety of mood-altering medicines in stock. Or perhaps you should sleep more. As I'm sure you know, sleep deprivation is a problem in modern society."

"Thank you, Opal."

"Have I helped you, Xavier?"

"Not at all," I will admit.

"I'm sorry," she replies, no trace of sorrow in her smooth, untroubled voice. Nor any hint of disappointment, either.

But she does help me. She's an ineffectual counselor, and that always renews my own fragile sense of purpose. She reminds me that only humans can minister to human troubles. I don't care what Sue believes: Opal is just a machine -- our machine -- and she is designed for a few exceedingly narrow tasks. She steers the telescopes with a precise touch, and she has a genius for sorting and interpreting the endless data. But genius isn't

a steerable dish. You just can't point it anywhere and focus it on any thing. We are stationed here because Opal wasn't able to manage unexpected malfunctions. By the time we touched down, nearly half of the facility was in sleep-mode, a string of little catastrophes having done their worst. Yet the machine was unembarrassed by her failures. With a cheery voice, she told us, "Welcome." She said, "It will be my honor to work with you." Then without a trace of shame, she said, "I'm a poor mechanic. Please, take this duty out of my unfit hands."

Opal has no soul.

A genuine soul would have been angry and embarrassed and defensive -- all the reactions that good people think of as ugly weaknesses. But nothing is weak or ugly in Nature. We evolved our thin skins for the best reasons. Pride makes us excel, while nothing can defend our good name quite like an old-fashioned hissy fit.

Opal was designed by souls who believe in ugly things, and that's why they made her endlessly polite and pleasant. That's why she has no soul, and that's one of the reasons why I sometimes catch myself feeling envy toward her.

A helpful and lovely little envy it is.

* * *

"Our universe is frail," Opal declares. "The Blessed discovered the fragility in certain mathematical constructions, and at least twice, their researchers came treacherously close to disaster."

Conrad acts offended. "What do you mean, frail?"

"Our universe only pretends to be stable." Her voice wears sadness, but beneath the words I hear something else. Opal sounds interested. Intrigued, even. "Human physicists have already suggested the possibility. The universe was created tiny and hot, and it was stable in one fashion. But that stability failed, and that's what caused the inflationary expansion. This is why we live within an enormous flat universe today." Opal pauses, giving us a moment to consider her words. Then she says, "Imagine a ball and a long steep hill. Our universe is that ball. We started on the flat crest of the hill, but with the inflationary period, we started to roll free. The expansion ended when the ball came to rest on a second, extremely narrow ledge. And that's where we exist today."

"Shit," I mutter.

Everyone says that simple, perfect word.

"Are you familiar with these concepts?" Opal inquires.

It sounds familiar, yes. But this is an ugly, mostly discredited concept that's usually buried in the back of undergraduate texts.

"In one sense, natural events cannot make the universe unstable," Opal assures us. "Yet in a different sense, it is easily accomplished."

"Explain yourself," Conrad snaps.

"Extreme energies coupled with certain quantum manipulations will create tiny pockets of chaotic pseudomatter, each pocket ripe to begin a cascading, catastrophic event. This is what the Blessed achieved on at least two occasions."

"They did this on purpose?" asks Tenwolf.

"Never," says Opal. "The pseudomatter arose without warning. The mathematics are complicated and misleading, which is why they were unaware of the danger. In the first case, there was a one-in-ninety chance of disaster. The second incident arose from entirely different means, and if the work hadn't been aborted instantly, there would have been a one-in-three chance of obliteration."

Sue slumps forward, gazing at the cement floor.

Aisha looks past me, her almond eyes wide and empty.

With an angry, almost defiant tone, Tenwolf asks, "So what would happen? If they'd gotten that ball rolling again, I mean."

"The universe would fall apart," Opal replies.

Nobody speaks.

She explains, "At the speed of light, beginning at the point of the initial event, our laws would fail and matter would find itself transformed, and no mathematics can predict what would form in whatever was left behind."

Again, I say, "Shit."

"At the speed of light," Aisha repeats. "That fast?"

"Yes," says Opal.

"But that's slow," Sue points out. "I mean, if it happened now, and it began a billion light-years away -- "

I interrupt her, admitting, "I don't understand. How did this prove to the Blessed that intelligent life is very rare?"

But then I see what is ugly and obvious.

"The universe appears to be intact," she tells me. She reminds everyone of this hard fact. "When the aliens looked into the sky, they saw stars and galaxies. If there were any species with their technical skills, they reasoned, and if these species were a mere one or two million years older than them ... well, then at least one neighbor would have accomplished the unthinkable."

"But you wouldn't see it coming," Conrad points out. He looks at each of us, shrugging his shoulders with a forced nonchalance. "It's like an accident around the bend. You can't know it's there until you're on top of it."

I don't know why that should make me feel any better.

Our gloom makes Conrad angry. "Hey, people," he cries out. "It isn't going to happen. Even if the Blessed were right about everything -- which is a big mess of ifs -- then there just aren't that many species to worry about. And besides, shit ... it's fifty million years later, and we're still part of the landscape here...!"

I think about death, and another obvious question takes hold of me.

"Opal," I say.

"Yes, Xavier."

"Why did the Blessed kill themselves?"

"In part, because they didn't trust their own nature." Her sadness evaporates into a cool puzzlement. "They had discovered two routes by which they could destroy the universe, but that probably isn't an exhaustive list. Any researcher with a modern facility and a careless attitude might -- "

"Wait," Conrad interrupts. "Let me understand this. They killed themselves because they were afraid that they might do something awful in the future?"

"Essentially, yes."

I am numb and cold and empty.

"Shit, they don't sound human to me." Conrad gives out a big jolly laugh, forced and unseemly. "God, can you imagine us doing that? Can you?"

I stare at my nervous hands.

"Their message," says Opal, "is also an attempt to warn other species. Yes, they orchestrated a mass suicide. But this was also the only way to generate a signal sufficiently bright to be noticed by whichever species might be living inside distant, widely scattered galaxies."

Aisha wipes at her cheeks, flattening her tears.

Conrad decides on action. He stands and says, "Opal. How soon can we transmit through our tertiary link?"

"In another fifty-two minutes," she answers.

"Create a message. Keep it brief, and then show it to us."

I look up suddenly. I look up and blurt, "No. Stop."

As if offended, Conrad throws a hard glare my way. "What do you mean, stop?"

"There's choices here," I tell him. Then I take an enormous breath that leaves me shaking, and turning to the others, I explain myself. "We need to be careful. We have to find another course, if there is one." I gasp, and I swallow, and I add, "Please. Just let's talk it through with me once. Will you, please?"

* * *

At the center of the Feynman Array stands a small and very dead volcano. A gentle road leads to a summit made smooth and simple by the endless rain of micrometeorites.

When I'm in a reflective mood, or when my duties are too much to comfortably bear, I will ride a buggy up to where the ground is flat, and I'll gaze out across the sprawling field of telescopes, marveling at the energy and relentless genius of Life.

I wish I were standing there now.

"If we tell the world," I begin. Then I lick my lips and swallow, my throat lined with sandpaper. "If we give people even a hint that we've gotten this message ... well, I think we have to consider the consequences...."

"What consequences?" Conrad barks.

But the others trade worried little looks, thinking along the same awful lines.

"If the Blessed are right -- " Aisha begins.

"This is horrible," Sue interrupts, wiping her eyes with little fists. "People will be terrified. How can we live, knowing that at any moment, without warning, the universe can come to an end?"

"An empty, lifeless universe," Tenwolf rumbles.

"I'm alive," Conrad counters. "Plenty alive, thank you!"

He means it as a joke, but nobody laughs.

"What we need to do now," I say, "is take our time. We won't do anything that we can't take back later, at least until we've reached a consensus. That's all I'm asking for." I show them a warm, caring smile. Or at least I hope I do. "We'll just let this first window pass. There's no need to sprint into the future without a little soul-searching first."

Everyone nods in agreement, except for Conrad.

But he finally begins to appreciate the general mood. Shrugging his broad shoulders, he admits, "That wouldn't be too awful, I guess. I mean, it's not like this news is going to go stale on us."

Sue touches him lightly on the an arm, squeezing in a comforting way.

"Opal," Conrad calls out. "No transmissions. Until you're given a specific order, we are off-line."

"As you wish," she replies.

Then his charm reasserts itself. He smiles and coughs gently into a loose fist, and then with a calm and reasonable voice says, "But of course, you know, this really shouldn't be our decision to make."

Sue glances at me, trying to read my response. Then she asks Conrad, "What do you mean? Whose decision should it be?"

"Good question," he allows.

Aisha leans closer to me, a fond hand finding my knee. "If we decide not to share this ... if that's what we end up doing ... then won't we have to destroy the information, eventually...?"

"Opal," I say.

"Yes, Xavier."

"How long will it take to erase all the data from the Blessed's transmission?"

She is a powerful, deeply redundant machine. "Six minutes," she says, "and twelve seconds." Which is a very long time for her.

"No retrieval possible. Am I right?"

"A complete digital scrub. Yes, Xavier."

Only the thinnest, weakest doubt can be heard, and I'm not sure if the doubt is in her voice or in my own ears.

"Okay," says Conrad. His eyes are as bright as torches, and his big hands make fists that cause the muscles of his wrists to bunch up. "Just so we understand," he says, working to sound reasonable. "Just to put things in perspective. What are we talking about throwing out here? Plutonium? Anthrax? Or could it be, maybe, the secrets of the universe?"

A doubting silence blossoms.

Before I can respond, our leader blurts, "Opal. In their transmissions, do the Blessed show us how to build starships?"

"Not as schematics, no. But they show all of their machines in considerable detail. Yes, by several routes, I think their engines and life support systems can be reinvented."

"How about terraforming dead worlds? Any clues there?"

"Blessedform," says Opal, "is a more accurate translation."

Conrad faces me, smiling with a mixture of conviction and honed fury. "Whichever," he allows. "What I want to know ... just tell us ... are we now going be able to turn Mars into a habitable place?"

A dirty red planet appears on the screen. An armada of alien ships appear, falling like rain on its barren surface, each ship collapsing into a heap of ant-like machines that build factories that generate more ants that subsequently march across the dunes and low craters, remaking the shape and composition of everything within their considerable reach. The air thickens and warms. Water bursts from the cold ground, flowing into the dead seas. Then Blessed vegetation explodes from the enriched soil, and a second wave of ships brings the carp-mouthed, rhino-hided colonists.

The world is transformed in an instant. But that's impossible, of course. According to a translated calendar in the bottom corner, the entire miracle takes a few days less than eighteen Earth years.

"The Blessed did this work routinely," Opal explains. "This was their standard method for spreading across several hundred solar systems."

"And then they killed themselves," Aisha mutters, in despair.

I nod at her, smiling in a grim, approving fashion. The mood inside our little room is shifting moment by moment. I feel the electric play of emotions. I'm alert but remote, watching events from some high vantage point. Every anxious breath brings an instant shift in allegiances. When people glance at Conrad, they grin instinctively, telling him that they are in his court. Who wouldn't want to believe his rosy, determined vision? But when those same people glance at their counselor, they find themselves pensive and lost, showing me sad-eyed stares that prove they are good people, desperate to do whatever is right.

Conrad is a winner and a natural optimist; he sees only the affirmative expressions. Counting allies, he discovers what looks like a majority, and then with the courage of his convictions, the man makes his bold misstep.

"Opal," he says. "Have you put together that broadcast? In case we ever tell people about this, I mean."

"I have prepared a message, yes. Three and a half seconds long, it is compressed and explains the fundamentals. Yes."

In every way possible, I say nothing. I sit without moving, staring at my own hands, guessing that it will be Aisha --

"Wait," my lover growls. "I thought we were still deciding what to do here!"

"We are deciding," Conrad counters. "I just want to get things ready. You know, in case we vote to go ahead with it."

"I guess that's reasonable," Sue offers.

Tenwolf stares at the screen, studying the blue-green face of that long-dead world. He intends to speak. His mouth opens and closes again, and then he manages a deep breath and turns to face us, an observation beginning with a sigh that is hacked off when Conrad asks our AI, "Can you show us what you've done? Concentrate on the starships, okay? Show us what our friends back home will see on their holos." He can't help but speak as if this is a certainty. Giving us a little wink, he asks, "How's that sound to you?"

Aisha squirms in her seat.

"It sounds fair," Sue allows. Then she says, "Fair," again, as if she isn't sure that she said the word properly the first time.

"Sure, why not?" Tenwolf mutters.

Conrad looks in my direction, but his focus is wrong. Is off. He only pretends to make eye contact with me, asking nobody in particular, "How about it? Are you going to let this happen?"

"Do I have a choice?" I ask.

Conrad gives a little snort, and then says, "Sure you've got a choice. That's why I just asked you -- "

"In the end, I mean."

He isn't quite sure what he just heard. "What end? What -- ?"

Tenwolf rises to my bait. "You're the boss here," he explains to Conrad. "If you want, you can make the transmission. You don't need our blessing, if that's what you want to do."

Conrad bristles. "Hey, I am willing to listen. If you people don't want -- "

"'You people'?" I whisper. "What's that mean?"

He didn't intend to sound dismissive, and that's exactly how he sounds now. Conrad is ambitious and practical, and it is that first beautiful trait that causes him to spout out, "Listen to yourselves! This is the biggest, finest thing that's ever happened to our species. A message from the stars! It's exactly why each of us wanted to come here to begin with, and what you're talking about doing is throwing away the greatest gift -- "

"A damned gift," I whisper.

"Shut up," he blurts. Then he takes a deep breath through his big white teeth, and he adds, "I know. There's some tough stuff in this message. But you've got to realize something here: It isn't up to us to decide what humanity knows and what it doesn't know." He gives a determined little snort, adding, "Sure, there's dangers involved in this -- "

"Like the end of everything," says Aisha, her voice somewhere between sarcasm

and grief.

"I agree," says Conrad. He lifts his big hands, and then slaps them into his lap again. "But let's talk about that. How can we protect ourselves from this kind of nightmare? I'll tell you how. We have a guidebook to the dangers, ready-made and ours for the taking. Have you thought about that? If the five of us, just the five of us, decide to erase this fabulous wealth of information, and a thousand years down the line, people stumble into the same two traps that the Blessed found -- "

"But what if," Sue begins. Then she dips her head, realizing that she just interrupted Conrad.

He looks at her, and with too much sharpness, he tells her, "Go on. Say what you're thinking."

"People might do it intentionally."

"Do what? End the universe?" Conrad snorts and shakes his head, unable to even conceive of such a thing. "Who the hell -- ?"

Aisha tells him, "A religion might do just that." Then she gives me a glance and an apologetic grin, adding, "People have all sorts of odd beliefs. Don't they, Xavier?"

I say nothing.

"We wouldn't let them," is Conrad's reply.

"I can imagine it," says Tenwolf. Then he laughs darkly, adding, "It'd be like a race among the doomsday faiths. Who's going to be first to do God's will?"

It wouldn't be God's will.

But instead of saying what is obvious, I choose a middle course. Without fuss or any negative rumblings, I tell them, "All I want is for us to miss the next broadcast window. All right? Just give us time to study the Blessed's broadcast a little more and imagine some of the consequences, and then if we can agree -- "

"If we can," Aisha whispers.

"That's all." I shrug my shoulders, and I give everyone a little wink. I know these people. For five months, I have lived with nobody else, hearing only their voices and the thoughts behind them, and if I don't feel in control, at least I know that I've won the first round of what will be a long, hard-fought battle.

I win the round when Conrad rises to his feet, blurting, "Okay, then. We'll sit on the most extraordinary news in human history. Because we're that much more important than anyone else in Creation."

Sue acts uneasy, but not enough to abandon the group's wishes.

Tenwolf suggests, "Let's all just take a break. I know I need one."

Aisha says, "I could use a long nap." Then she looks at me with frank, intoxicating eyes.

"Okay, then," Conrad says. And without another sound, he leaves the four of us sitting alone in the tiny galley.

We stay in our seats.

For six or seven minutes, we calmly and rationally discuss things that are too large and horrible to be discussed either calmly or rationally. I speak, but only when it can help. Aisha talks about responsibility toward our own species. Sue pushes for some accommodation that will make everyone happy. Could we erase only the dangerous portions of the Blessed's message, maybe? But Tenwolf finds technical reasons why that selective censorship will fail, and with a cold eye on the future, he adds, "But of course, you know, if one of us ever decides to break the silence ... even just to admit what we know now ... well, just what we know now could have some profound implications...."

He pauses, grinning as if in pain. "If we decide to keep this secret forever," he says finally, and sadly, "I guess there's only one way to manage it...."

That dark thought catches us by surprise. What the man seems to be suggesting -- if only as a theory -- is that we should repeat what the Blessed undertook for themselves.

Some kind of group suicide? Is that what he means?

I start to tell everyone, "No, I think we can keep the silence. Even Conrad can. If we're motivated, and if nobody would believe us anyway..."

But before my voice can find a convincing tone, another thought intrudes. I'm suddenly thinking about Conrad. Where exactly did he go when he stormed out of the room? I straighten my back, and I swallow hard, and with a flat, worried voice, I say, "Opal? What is Conrad doing right now?"

"Conrad," she says, as if barely able to remember the man. Then after the illusion of a shallow wet breath, she admits, "Conrad has taken a small buggy out, and he just reached the Delta dish, and he is preparing to broadcast a tight-beamed signal toward the Lagrange Solar-Watch Satellite."

* * *

An icy hand drops onto the back of my neck.

I flinch, reaching behind my head and feeling nothing but my own goose-pimpled flesh.

"Shit," I mutter.

Then with a louder, less emotional voice, I ask, "Do you have control of the dish?"

"By several means," replies Opal, her voice halfway cheerful. "But Conrad has left specific instructions. I am not to interfere -- "

"If we tell you to interfere," Aisha begins.

"None of you are the mission's leader," the machine reminds us. And with a cold but palpable pleasure, she adds, "He doesn't want me to listen to you, and I don't want to help you. I agree with Conrad. I want him to succeed."

Tenwolf gives me a hard look, rising now.

Except to breathe, I don't move. I feel numb and stupid, and beaten.

Aisha stands and says, "We can use the big wagon, all of us. If we start right now -- "

"Yeah," says Tenwolf.

Sue says, "There isn't time," even as she rises to her feet. Then she thinks to ask, "How much time is there, Opal?"

The machine won't answer.

Tenwolf says, "That satellite's going to be deaf for another twenty-nine minutes. About. And then its high-gain automatically swings back around to us -- "

"We'll get to the dish inside ten minutes," says Aisha. "We've got plenty of time." Then she looks at the one person not standing. "Or do you want him to succeed? Is that what you're thinking, Xavier?"

Honestly, I'm not sure about my own thoughts now.

"Xavier?" she repeats.

I stand, and with a quiet, sad voice, I tell them, "The door to the machine bay ... we're going to find it shut and sealed...."

"Shit, it is closed," says Tenwolf. He looks at the galley's map of the facility, mashing a thick finger against a horizontal red line. "And I bet Conrad's got it jammed tight, too. That's what I'd do, sure."

"Then it's finished," Sue whispers, faintly relieved to have been beaten. "It's been decided."

"Nothing's decided," I tell her.

Tenwolf looks at me, his finger pointing elsewhere. "You're thinking about the emergency airlock?"

I nod.

"There's only emergency suits in there," Aisha warns.

"But they're quick on and already primed," Tenwolf counters.

"You can't," Sue says to him. Pleading now.

A bitter laugh leaks from Tenwolf, and then he says, "I'll take a robot off its repair job, and you can ride it out to the dish. I just don't know how long that's all going to take --
"

He's speaking to me.

"Run," he advises.

But I already am.

* * *

The dish is enormous and frail -- a bowl-shaped skeleton of native metals and fine glass suspended high above me, almost impossible to see against the cold black vacuum. The robot chugs along beneath it, wheels turning as fast as possible, yet nothing about its motion implies haste or a lack of precious time. I'm tempted to jump off and sprint the last little ways. I'm tempted to turn around and head home. Tenwolf keeps talking in my ears, using a private channel to explain what Conrad has probably done already and what he will do next and what's the easiest, quickest way to sabotage the dish and stop the transmission.

I barely listen to him.

For Tenwolf, every answer invokes hardware and obscure lines of code. But there's almost no time left, and I'm sure that our friend has made every technical fix as difficult as possible. I won't win this war with cleverness. That's why I'm riding the robot still, dismantling it as it rolls along, jerking at its most useful limb until the socket pops free of its housing and then fitting a power pack to the limb's single finger -- a diamond-encrusted drill longer than my forearm and infinitely more powerful.

"Are you listening to me?" Tenwolf asks.

I tell him, "Sure."

"What did I just say?"

"'Are you listening to me?'" I test the drill. It makes no sound, except the vibration riding along my bones. "How much time do I have now?"

"Five minutes and change," he says.

"Put on Aisha," I say.

She says, "Xavier," with a tight, worried voice.

Starlight falls through the spiderweb bowl, illuminating what looks like a gargantuan termite mound. A buggy is parked beside the structure. This is what holds up and turns the Delta Dish. There are no windows, no airlocks. This place wasn't built for human use. I know where an access tunnel hides in the black shadows, but despite all my squinting, I can't see it.

"Xavier," Aisha repeats.

"I love you," I tell her.

That startles her somehow. She takes a deep breath, then another. And she makes herself say, "I love you," with what might be conviction. "Be careful there. Will you,

please?"

"I can't let Conrad do this," I'm saying. To her, or to myself. Or maybe, God. "Not like this. Not today."

Another voice intrudes.

"What are you planning to do?" Sue asks. She's alarmed by something she hears in my voice. "Xavier, don't you -- !"

I kill my radio and jump off the robot, holding my weapon in both hands. Where's that access tunnel? I half-run, half-bounce my way past the empty buggy, and for a sliver of time, I'm absolutely sure that I won't find any way inside, not soon enough, and I am beaten.

But no, there's the opening. There.

The tunnel is large enough to admit every robot that services the array, and it is unlit. I have to turn on my own lights, my eyes blinking with the sudden glare. A quick glance tells me the time remaining. Three minutes, minus some seconds. I know where he has to be. There is a cavity above me; when we first arrived, Tenwolf made it into a control room, putting in a set of crude panels to give humans access to the dish's basic functions.

A secondary tunnel should end with a ladder. But someone's taken the trouble to cut off the lowest rungs with a diamond saw.

The son of a bitch is here, I tell myself. And he's got his own weapon.

The new tunnel is vertical, cavities in its walls meant as limb-holds for small robots. I fasten the drill to my suit with Velcro. I kill my lights, hoping that Conrad will guess that I went another way. Then I leap and reach high, totally blind, and I fall short of my target. But my left boot manages to slip into a lower cavity, and I slam against the facing wall, reaching until my shoulders ache from the stiff fabric of my suit. Numbed fingers curl around a surviving rung. I lift myself up, my right hand letting go and reaching higher, and my boots and left hand slip free of their holds at the same moment my reaching hand finds the highest rung.

For a long, long while, I hang in space. Then I manage to yank and kick my way up, gasping for breath and almost sick from worry and fear. I climb up into the reflected glare of another man's lights, and for that little moment, I'm sure that Conrad will just give me a little kick. That's all it would take to knock me back down the tunnel. But he has his back to me, both hands working with those simple controls, doing a last few checks before he can relax enough to straighten his back and twist his head like people do when they are fighting with a sore neck. He hasn't any idea that I'm here. None. I pull at the Velcro strap, and I turn on my drill, and maybe it's the vibration traveling through me and into the metal floor. Or maybe someone speaks to Conrad. Sue, or Opal. Someone. And he turns to face me, already wearing what looks like a smile. Already speaking. My radio is off, but with the soft white glare of his lights, I can make out the slow, smiling motions of his mouth. "You're too late," he tells me. Then he says, "Xavier," and shakes his head with what might be a genuine amusement. Then he seems to say, "I've always liked you," or words like that. I can't be sure what he says. I have stopped watching his face. And the horrible drill shivers in my hands, cutting deep into things hard and things holy.

* * *

One person rides the buggy up the slope just so far, then dismounts and comes the rest of the way on foot. I call out, "Aisha," with a hopeful tone. But it isn't my lover. When the helmet lifts, I see another face peering up at me, the expression cautious and calm. "Tenwolf," I say, and he nods at me. Then he drops his head again, watching his boots, making absolutely sure of his last few steps.

Lunar dust and human grease give his work suit a comfortably filthy appearance. He turns on his radio, and I hear his breathing. He hears mine. He stops short and turns in a slow circle, gazing across the floor of the crater. With a tone of confession, he admits, "I've never made it up here before." Then he adds, "I see why you like this place. With the array below, and this sky -- "

"Is Conrad dead?" I blurt.

"Don't you know?" he asks.

"He looked like he was," I admit. "But his suit managed to seal itself, and I couldn't tell if the wound was fatal...."

The man turns to face me. "How about Opal's message to Earth?" he asks. "Want to know if it got sent, or if your heroics stopped it just in time?"

I start to ask, but my voice is gone.

Tenwolf steps a little closer and looks up into the sky for a long moment. "When I was a boy," he begins, "we had this black Labrador retriever." And then he tells me a decidedly odd little story that involves lying to a dog.

His fable means nothing to me. But just the same, I listen.

Then Tenwolf looks down and halfway winks at me, admitting, "I've been thinking about that stupid dog today. For the first time in years, I bet."

"Why?" I have to ask.

If anything, he's disappointed that I don't see what is obvious to him. He shakes his head, one hand gesturing at the sky. "All this beauty and all this space, and most everything is perfectly sterile. For maybe ten million light years in every direction, nothing lives but us. One wet world, and the few of us up on this desiccated chunk of rock."

I shake my head. Yes, there are awful things to consider.

"Why would God create such a universe?" Tenwolf asks me. And himself. And God, too, I suppose.

"I can't imagine why," I admit. "I keep wondering just that...!"

"But it's pretty obvious, isn't it?" Tenwolf begins. And he hesitates, waiting for my eyes to meet his. "The universe isn't created yet. It isn't even close to being finished." He almost laughs, telling me, "The universe has rolled only partway down that long slope, and then it got hung up. It got itself stuck. And God, being God, found the most elegant means of delivering the next little nudge. He made life, but only just enough of us. Just enough that He could be sure that here and there, now and again, we'd stumble into his trap. Stumble in with very little warning, and then accidentally put His Creation back on track."

I look at Tenwolf, and then I stare up at the empty sky.

"The Blessed were right," he tells me. "Eventually, an intelligent species -- if it survives and spreads across the stars -- will stumble into one of God's traps."

"Traps set by God," I whisper.

"A good, moral lie," says Tenwolf. And then he laughs loudly, making himself nearly breathless. "That's what the stars are, you know. And the infinite worlds. God is lying to dogs, telling us there's nothing out here but good hunting, and empty fields, and Sundays meant for sleeping on warm covers...."