

# If the Stars Are Gods (v2.0)

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They have collaborated on a Nebula Award-winning story about strange aliens and their even stranger beliefs.

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*A dog cannot be a hypocrite, but neither can he be sincere.*

*-LUDWIG Wittgenstein*

It was deceptively huge and massive, this alien starship, and somehow seemed as if it belonged almost anywhere else in the universe but here.

Reynolds stepped carefully down the narrow corridor of the ship, still replaying in his mind's eye the approach to the air lock, the act of being swallowed. The ceilings were high, the light poor, the walls made of some dull, burnished metal.

These aspects and others flitted through his mind as he walked. Reynolds was a man who appreciated the fine interlacing pleasures of careful thought, but more than that, thinking so closely of these things kept his mind occupied and drove away the smell. It clung to him like Pacific fog. Vintage manure, Reynolds had decided the moment he passed through the air lock. Turning, he had glared at Kelly firmly encased inside her suit. He told her about the smell. 'Everybody stinks,' she had said, evenly, perhaps joking, perhaps not, and pushed him away in the light centrifugal gravity. Away, into a maze of tight passages that would lead him eventually to look the first certified intelligent alien beings straight in the eye. If they happened to have eyes, that is.

It amused him that this privilege should be his. More rightly, the honor should have gone to another, someone younger whose tiny paragraph in the future histories of the human race had not already been enacted. At fifty-eight, Reynolds had long since lived a full and intricate lifetime. Too full, he sometimes thought, for any one man. So then, what about this day now? What about today? It did nothing really, only succeeded in forcing the fullness of his lifetime past the point of all reasonableness into a realm of positive absurdity.

The corridor branched again. He wondered precisely where he was inside the sculpted and twisted skin of the ship. He had tried to memorize everything he saw but there was nothing, absolutely nothing but metal with thin seams, places where he had to stoop or crawl, and the same awful smell. He realized now what it was about the ship that had bothered him the first

time he had seen it, through a telescope from the moon. It reminded him, both in size and shape, of a building where he had once lived not so many years ago, during the brief term of his most recent retirement, 1987 and '88, in Sao Paulo, Brazil: a huge ultramodern lifting apartment complex of a distinctly radical design. There was nothing like it on Earth, the advertising posters had proclaimed; and seeing it, hating it instantly, he had agreed. Now here was something else truly like it, but not on Earth.

The building had certainly not resembled a starship but then, neither did this thing. At one end was an intricately designed portion, a cylinder with interesting modifications. Then came a long, plain tube and at the end of that something truly absurd: a cone, opening outward away from the rest of the ship and absolutely empty. Absurd, until you realized what it was.

The starship's propulsion source was, literally, hydrogen bombs. The central tube evidently held a vast number of fusion devices. One by one the bombs were released, drifted to the mouth of the cone and were detonated. The cone was a huge shock absorber; the kick from the bomb pushed the ship forward. A Rube Goldberg star drive.

Directly ahead of him, the corridor neatly stopped and split, like the twin prongs of a roasting fork. It jogged his memory: roasting fork, yes, from the days when he still ate meat. Turning left, he followed the proper prong. His directions had been quite clear.

He still felt very ill at ease. Maybe it was the way he was dressed that made everything seem so totally wrong. It didn't seem quite right, walking through an alien maze in his shirtsleeves and plain trousers. Pedestrian.

But the air was breathable, as promised. Did they breathe this particular oxygen-nitrogen balance, too? And like the smell?

Ahead, the corridor parted, branching once more. The odor was horribly powerful at this spot, and he ducked his head low, almost choking, and dashed through a round opening.

This was a big room. Like the corridor, the ceiling was a good seven meters above the floor, but the walls were subdued pastel shades of red, orange and yellow. The colors were mixed on all the walls in random, patternless designs. It was very pretty, Reynolds thought, and not at all strange. Also, standing neatly balanced near the back wall, there were two aliens.

When he saw the creatures, Reynolds stopped and stood tall. Raising his eyes, he stretched to reach the level of their eyes. While he did this, he also reacted. His first reaction was shock. This gave way to the tickling sensation of surprise. Then pleasure and relief. He liked the looks of these two creatures. They were certainly far kinder toward the eyes than what he had expected to find.

Stepping forward, Reynolds stood before both aliens, shifting his gaze from one to the other. Which was the leader? Or were both leaders? Or neither? He decided to wait. But neither alien made a sound or a move. So Reynolds kept waiting.

What had he expected to find? Men? Something like a man, that is, with two arms and two legs and a properly positioned head, with a nose, two eyes and a pair of floppy ears? This was what Kelly had expected him to find-she would be disappointed now-but Reynolds had never believed it for a moment. Kelly thought anything that spoke English had to be a man, but Reynolds was more imaginative. He knew better; he had not expected to find a man, not even a man with four arms and three legs and fourteen fingers or five ears. What he had expected to find was something truly alien. A blob, if worst came to worst, but at best something more like a shark or snake or wolf than a man. As soon as Kelly had told him that the aliens wanted to meet him-'Your man who best knows your star'-he had known this.

Now he said, 'I am the man you wished to see. The one who knows the stars.'

As he spoke, he carefully shared his gaze with both aliens, still searching for a leader, favoring neither over the other. One-the smaller one-twitched a nostril when Reynolds said, '... the stars'; the other remained motionless.

There was one Earth animal that did resemble these creatures, and this was why Reynolds felt happy and relieved. The aliens were sufficiently alien, yes. And they were surely not men. But neither did they resemble blobs or wolves or sharks or snakes They were giraffes. Nice,

kind, friendly, pleasant, smiling, silent giraffes. There were some differences, of course. The aliens' skin was a rainbow collage of pastel purples, greens, reds and yellows, similar in its random design to the colorfully painted walls. Their trunks stood higher off the ground, their necks were stouter than that of a normal giraffe. They did not have tails. Nor hooves. Instead, at the bottom of each of their four legs, they had five blunt short fingers and a single wide thick offsetting thumb.

'My name is Bradley Reynolds,' he said. 'I know the stars.' Despite himself, their continued silence made him nervous. 'Is something wrong?' he asked.

The shorter alien bowed its neck toward him. Then, in a shrill high-pitched voice that reminded him of a child, it said, 'No. ' An excited nervous child. 'That is no,' it said.

'This?' Reynolds lifted his hand, having almost forgotten what was in it. Kelly had ordered him to carry the tape recorder, but now he could truthfully say, 'I haven't activated it yet.'

'Break it, please,' the alien said.

Reynolds did not protest or argue. He let the machine fall to the floor. Then he jumped, landing on the tape recorder with both feet. The light aluminum case split wide open like the hide of a squashed apple. Once more, Reynolds jumped. Then, standing calmly, he kicked the broken bits of glass and metal toward an unoccupied corner of the room. 'All right?' he asked.

Now for the first time the second alien moved. Its nostrils twitched daintily, then its legs shifted, lifting and falling. 'Welcome,' it said, abruptly, stopping all motion. 'My name is Jonathon. '

'Your name?' asked Reynolds.

'And this is Richard.'

'Oh,' said Reynolds, not contradicting. He understood now. Having learned the language of man, these creatures had learned his names as well.

'We wish to know your star,' Jonathon said respectfully. His voice was a duplicate of the other's. Did the fact that he had not spoken until after the destruction of the tape recorder indicate that he was the leader of the two? Reynolds almost laughed, listening to the words of his own thoughts. Not he, he reminded himself: it.

'I am willing to tell you whatever you wish to know,' Reynolds said.

'You are a ... priest ... a reverend of the sun?'

'An astronomer,' Reynolds corrected.

'We would like to know everything you know. And then we would like to visit and converse with your star. '

'Of course. I will gladly help you in any way I can.' Kelly had cautioned him in advance that the aliens were interested in the sun, so none of this came as any surprise to him. But nobody knew what it was in particular that they wanted to know, or why, and Kelly hoped that he might be able to find out. At the moment he could think of only two possible conversational avenues to take; both were questions. He tried the first. 'What is it you wish to know? Is our star greatly different from others of its type? If it is, we are unaware of this fact.'

'No two stars are the same,' the alien said. This was Jonathon again. Its voice began to rise in excitement. 'What is it? Do you not wish to speak here? Is our craft an unsatisfactory place?'

'No, this is fine,' Reynolds said, wondering if it was wise to continue concealing his puzzlement. 'I will tell you what I know. Later, I can bring books.'

'No!' The alien did not shout, but from the way its legs quivered and nostrils trembled, Reynolds gathered he had said something very improper indeed.

'I will tell you,' he said. 'In my own words.'

Jonathon stood quietly rigid. 'Fine.'

Now it was time for Reynolds to ask his second question. He let it fall within the long

silence which had followed Jonathon's last statement. 'Why do you wish to know about our star?'

'It is the reason why we have come here. On our travels, we have visited many stars. But it is yours we have sought the longest. It is so powerful. And benevolent. A rare combination, as you must know.'

'Very rare,' Reynolds said, thinking that this wasn't making any sense. But then, why should it? At least he had learned something of the nature of the aliens' mission, and that alone was more than anyone else had managed to learn during the months the aliens had slowly approached the moon, exploding their hydrogen bombs to decelerate.

A sudden burst of confidence surprised Reynolds. He had not felt this sure of himself in years, and just like before, there was no logical reason for his certainty. 'Would you be willing to answer some questions for me? About your star?'

'Certainly, Bradley Reynolds.'

'Can you tell me our name for your star? Its coordinates?'

'No,' Jonathon said, dipping its neck. 'I cannot.' It blinked its right eye in a furious fashion. 'Our galaxy is not one. It is a galaxy too distant for your instruments.'

'I see,' said Reynolds, because he could not very well call the alien a liar, even if it was. But Jonathon's hesitancy to reveal the location of its homeworld was not unexpected; Reynolds: would have acted the same in similar circumstances.

Richard spoke. 'May I pay obeisance?'

Jonathon, turning to Richard, spoke in a series of shrill ching noises. Then Richard replied in kind.

Turning back to Reynolds, Richard again asked, 'May I pay obeisance?'

Reynolds could only say, 'Yes.' Why not?

Richard acted immediately. Its legs abruptly shot out from beneath its trunk at an angle no giraffe could have managed: Richard sat on its belly, legs spread, and its neck came down, the snout gently scraping the floor.

'Thank you,' Reynolds said, bowing slightly at the waist... 'But there is much we can learn from you, too.' He spoke to hide his embarrassment, directing his words at Jonathon while hoping that they might serve to bring Richard back to its feet as well. When this failed to work, Reynolds launched into the speech he had been sent here to deliver. Knowing what he had to say, he ran through the words as hurriedly as possible. 'We are backward people. Compared to you, we are children in the universe. Our travels have carried us no farther than our sister planets, while you have seen stars whose light takes years to reach your home. We realize you have much to teach us, and we approach you as pupils before a grand philosopher. We are gratified at the chance to share our meager knowledge with you and wish only to be granted the privilege of listening to you in return.'

'You wish to know deeply of our star?' Jonathon asked.

'Of many things,' Reynolds said. 'Your spacecraft, for instance. It is far beyond our meager knowledge.'

Jonathon began to blink its right eye furiously. As it spoke, the speed of the blinking increased. 'You wish to know that?'

'Yes, if you are willing to share your knowledge. We, too, would like to visit the stars.'

Its eye moved faster than ever now. It said, 'Sadly, there is nothing we can tell you of this ship. Unfortunately, we know nothing ourselves.'

'Nothing?'

'The ship was a gift.'

'You mean that you did not make it yourself. No. But you must have mechanics, individuals capable of repairing the craft in the event of some emergency.'

'But that has never happened. I do not think the ship could fail.'

'Would you explain?'

'Our race, our world, was once visited by another race of creatures. It was they who presented us with this ship. They had come to us from a distant star in order to make this gift. In return, we have used the ship only to increase the wisdom of our people

'What can you tell me about this other race?' Reynolds asked.

'Very little, I am afraid. They came from a most ancient star near the true center of the universe.'

'And were they like you? Physically?'

'No, more like you. Like people. But-please-may we be excused to converse about that which is essential. Our time is short. '

Reynolds nodded, and the moment he did, Jonathon ceased to blink. Reynolds gathered that it had grown tired of lying, which wasn't surprising; Jonathon was a poor liar. Not only were the lies incredible in themselves, but every time it told a lie it blinked like a madman with an ash in his eye.

'If I tell you about our star,' Jonathon said, 'will you consent to tell of yours in return?' The alien tilted its head forward, long neck swaying gently from side to side. It was plain that Jonathon attached great significance to Reynolds' reply.

So Reynolds said, 'Yes, gladly,' though he found he could not conceive of any information about the sun which might come as a surprise to these creatures. Still, he had been sent here to discover as much about the aliens as possible without revealing anything important about mankind. This sharing of information about stars seemed a safe enough course to pursue.

'I will begin,' Jonathon said, 'and you must excuse my impreciseness of expression. My knowledge of your language is limited. I imagine you have a special vocabulary for the subject.'

'A technical vocabulary, yes.'

The alien said, 'Our star is a brother to yours. Or would it be sister? During periods of the most intense communion, his wisdom-or hers?-is faultless. At times he is angry, unlike your star, but these moments are not frequent. Nor do they last for longer than a few fleeting moments. Twice he has prophesied the termination of our civilization during times of great personal anger, but never has he felt it necessary to carry out his prediction. I would say that he is more kind than raging, more gentle than brutal. I believe he loves our people most truly and fully. Among the stars of the universe, his place is not great, but as our home star, we must revere him. And, of course, we do.'

'Would you go on?' Reynolds asked.

Jonathon went on. Reynolds listened. The alien spoke of its personal relationship with the star, how the star had helped it during times of individual darkness. Once, the star had assisted it in choosing a proper mate; the choice proved not only perfect but divine. Throughout, Jonathon spoke of the star as a reverent Jewish tribesman might have spoken of the Old Testament God. For the first time, Reynolds regretted having had to dispose of the tape recorder. When he tried to tell Kelly about this conversation, she would never believe a word of it. As it spoke, the alien: did not blink, not once, even briefly, for Reynolds watched carefully.

At last the alien was done. It said, 'But this is only a beginning. We have so much to share, Bradley Reynolds. Once I am conversant with your technical vocabulary. Communication between separate entities-the great barriers of language ...'

'I understand,' said Reynolds.

'We knew you would. But now-it is your turn. Tell me about your star.'

'We call it the sun,' Reynolds said. Saying this, he felt more than mildly foolish-but what else? How could he tell Jonathon what it wished to know when he did not know himself? All he knew about the sun was facts. He knew how hot it was and how old it was and he knew its

size and mass and magnitude. He knew about sunspots and solar winds and solar atmosphere. But that was all he knew. Was the sun a benevolent star? Was it constantly enraged? Did all mankind revere it with the proper quantity of love and dedication? 'That is its common name. More properly, in an ancient language adopted by science, it is Sol. It lies approximately eight-

'Oh,' said Jonathon. 'All of this, yes, we know. But its demeanor. Its attitudes, both normal and abnormal. You play with us, Bradley Reynolds. You joke. We understand your amusement-but, please, we are simple souls and have traveled far. We must know these other things before daring to make our personal approach to the star. Can you tell us in what fashion it has most often affected your individual life? This would help us immensely.'

Although his room was totally dark, Reynolds, entering did not bother with the light. He knew every inch of this room, knew it as well in the dark as the light. For the past four years, he had spent an average of twelve hours a day here. He knew the four walls, the desk, the bed, the bookshelves and the books, knew them more intimately than he had ever known another person. Reaching the cot without once stubbing his toe or tripping over an open book or stumbling across an unfurled map, he sat down and covered his face with his hands, feeling the wrinkles on his forehead like great wide welts. Alone, he played a game with the wrinkles, pretending that each one represented some event or facet of his life. This one here the big one above the left eyebrow-that was Mars. And this other one-way over here almost by his right ear-that was a girl named Melissa whom he had known back in the 1970s. But he wasn't in the proper mood for the game now. He lowered his hands. He knew the wrinkles for exactly what they really were: age, purely and simply and honestly age. Each one meant nothing without the others. They represented impersonal and unavoidable erosion. On the outside, they reflected the death that was occurring on the inside.

Still, he was happy to be back here in this room. He never realized how important these familiar surroundings were to his state of mind until he was forcefully deprived of them for a length of time. Inside the alien starship, it hadn't been so bad. The time had passed quickly then; he hadn't been allowed to get homesick. It was afterward when it had got bad. With Kelly and the others in her dank, ugly impersonal hole of an office. Those had been the unbearable hours.

But now he was home, and he would not have to leave again until they told him. He had been appointed official emissary to the aliens, though this did not fool him for a moment. He had been given the appointment only because Jonathon had refused to see anyone else. It wasn't because anyone liked him or respected him or thought him competent enough to handle the mission. He was different from them, and that made all the difference. When they were still kids, they had seen his face on the old TV networks every night of the week. Kelly wanted someone like herself to handle the aliens. Someone who knew how to take orders, someone ultimately competent, some computer facsimile of a human being. Like herself. Someone who, when given a job, performed it in the most efficient manner in the least possible time.

Kelly was the director of the moon base. She had come here two years ago, replacing Bill Newton, a contemporary of Reynolds', a friend of his. Kelly was the protégée of some U.S. Senator, some powerful idiot from the Midwest, a leader of the anti-NASA faction in the Congress. Kelly's appointment had been part of a wild attempt to subdue the Senator with favors and special attention. It had worked after a fashion. There were still Americans on the moon. Even the Russians had left two years ago.

Leaving the alien starship, he had met Kelly the instant he reached the air lock. He had managed to slip past her and pull on his suit before she could question him. He had known she wouldn't dare try to converse over the radio; too great a chance of being overheard. She would never trust him to say only the right things.

But that little game had done nothing except delay matters a few minutes. The tug had returned to the moon base and then everyone had gone straight to Kelly's office. Then the interrogation had begun. Reynolds had sat near the back of the room while the rest of them flocked around Kelly like pet sheep.

Kelly asked the first question. 'What do they want?' He knew her well enough to understand exactly what she meant: What do they want from us in return for what we want from them?

Reynolds told her: They wanted to know about the sun.

'We gathered that much,' Kelly said. 'But what kind of information do they want? Specifically, what are they after?'

With great difficulty, he tried to explain this too.

Kelly interrupted him quickly. 'And what did you tell them?'

'Nothing,' he said.

'Why?..'

'Because I didn't know what to tell them.'

'Didn't you ever happen to think the best thing to tell them might have been whatever it was they wished to hear?'

'I couldn't do that either,' he said, 'because I didn't know. You tell me: Is the sun benevolent? How does it inspire your daily life? Does it constantly rage? I don't know, and you don't know either, and it's not a thing we can risk lying about, because they may very well know themselves. To them, a star is a living entity. It's a god, but more than our gods, because they can see a star and feel its heat and never doubt that it's always there.'

'Will they want you back?' she asked.

'I think so. They liked me. Or he liked me. It. I only talked to one of them.'

'I thought you told us two.'

So he went over the whole story for her once more, from beginning to end, hoping this time she might realize that alien beings are not human beings and should not be expected to respond in familiar ways. When he came to the part about the presence of the two aliens, he said, 'Look. There are six men in this room right now besides us. But they are here only for show. The whole time, none of them will say a word or think a thought or decide a point. The other alien was in the room with Jonathon and me the whole time. But if it had not been there, nothing would have been changed. I don't know why it was there, and I don't expect I ever will. But neither do I understand why you feel you have to have all these men here with you.'

She utterly ignored the point. 'Then that is all they are interested in? They're pilgrims and they think the sun is Mecca. Mecca. '

'More or less,' he said, with the emphasis on 'less.'

'Then they won't want to talk to me-or any of us. You're the one who knows the sun. Is that correct?' She jotted a note on a pad, shaking her elbow briskly.

'Reynolds,' she said, looking up from her pad, 'I sure as hell hope you know what you're doing.'

He said, 'Why?'

She did not bother to attempt to disguise her contempt. Few of them did any more and especially not Kelly. It was her opinion that Reynolds should not be here at all. Put him in a rest home back on Earth, she would say. The other astronauts-they were considerate enough to retire when life got too complicated for them. What makes this one man, Bradley Reynolds, why is he so special? All right-she would admit-ten years, twenty years ago, he was a great brave man struggling to conquer the unknown. When I was sixteen years old, I couldn't walk a dozen feet without tripping over his name or face. But what about now? What is he? I'll tell you what he is: a broken-down, wrinkled relic of an old man. So what if he's an astronomer as well as an astronaut? So what if he's the best possible man for the Lunar observatory? I still say he's more trouble than he's worth. He walks around the moon base like a dog having a dream. Nobody can communicate with him. He hasn't attended a single psychological expansion session since he's been here, and that goes back well before my time. He's a morale problem; nobody can stand the sight of him any more. And, as far as doing his job goes, he

does it, yes-but that's all. His heart isn't in it. Look, he didn't even know about the aliens being in orbit until I called him in and told him they wanted to see him.

That last part was not true, of course. Reynolds, like everyone, had known about the aliens, but he did have to admit that their approach had not overly concerned him. He had not shared the hysteria which had gripped the whole of the Earth when the announcement was made that an alien starship had entered the system. The authorities had known about it for months before ever releasing the news. By the time anything was said publicly, it had been clearly determined that the aliens offered Earth no clear or present danger. But that was about all anyone had learned. Then the starship had gone into orbit around the moon, an action intended to confirm their lack of harmful intent toward Earth, and the entire problem had landed with a thud in Kelly's lap. The aliens said they wanted to meet a man who knew something about the sun, and that had turned out to be Reynolds. Then-and only then-had he had a real reason to become interested in the aliens. That day, for the first time in a half-dozen years, he had actually listened to the daily news broadcasts from Earth. He discovered-and it didn't particularly surprise him-that everyone else had long since got over their initial interest in the aliens. He gathered that war was brewing again. In Africa this time, which was a change in place if not in substance. The aliens were mentioned once, about halfway through the program, but Reynolds could tell they were no longer considered real news. A meeting between a representative of the American moon base and the aliens was being arranged, the newscaster said. It would take place aboard the aliens' ship in orbit around the moon, he added. The name Bradley Reynolds was not mentioned. I wonder if they remember me, he had thought.

'It seems to me that you could get more out of them than some babble about stars being gods,' Kelly said, getting up and pacing around the room, one hand on hip. She shook her head in mock disbelief and the brown curls swirled downward, flowing like dark honey in the light gravity.

'Oh, I did,' he said casually.

'What?' There was a rustling of interest in the room.

'A few facts about their planet. Some bits of detail I think fit together. It may even explain their theology.'

'Explain theology with astronomy?' Kelly said sharply. 'There's no mystery to sun worship. It was one of our primitive religions.' A man next to her nodded.

'Not quite. Our star is relatively mild-mannered, as Jonathon would say. And our planet has a nice, comfortable orbit, nearly circular. '

'Theirs doesn't?'

'No. The planet has a pronounced axial inclination, too, nothing ordinary like Earth's twenty-three degrees. Their world must be tilted at forty degrees or so to give the effects Jonathon mentioned. '

'Hot summers?' one of the men he didn't know said, and Reynolds looked up in mild surprise. So the underlings were not just spear-carriers, as he had thought. Well enough.

'Right. The axial tilt causes each hemisphere to alternately slant toward and then away from their star. They have colder winters and hotter summers than we do. But there's something more, as far as I can figure it out. Jonathon says its world 'does not move in the perfect path' and that ours, on the other hand, very nearly does.'

'Perfect path?' Kelly said, frowning. 'An eight-fold way? The path of enlightenment?'

'More theology,' said the man who had spoken.

'Not quite,' Reynolds said. 'Pythagoras believed the circle was a perfect form, the most beautiful of all figures. I don't see why Jonathon shouldn't. '

'Astronomical bodies look like circles. Pythagoras could see the moon,' Kelly said.

'And the sun,' Reynolds said. 'I don't know whether Jonathon's world has a moon or not. But they can see their star, and in profile it's a circle.'

'So a circular orbit is a perfect orbit.'

'Q.E.D. Jonathon says its planet doesn't have one, though.'

'It's an ellipse.'

'A very eccentric ellipse. That's my guess, anyway. Jonathon used the terms 'path-summer' and 'pole-summer,' so they do distinguish between the two effects.'

'I don't get it,' the man said.

'An ellipse alone gives alternate summers and winters, but in both hemispheres at the same time,' Kelly said brusquely, her mouth turning slightly downward. 'A 'pole-summer' must be the kind Earth has.'

'Oh,' the man said weakly.

'You left out the 'great-summer,' my dear,' Reynolds said with a thin smile.

'What's that?' Kelly said carefully.

'When the 'pole-summer' coincides with the 'path-summer'-which it will, every so often. I wouldn't want to be around when that happens. Evidently neither do the members of Jonathon's race. '

'How do they get away?' Kelly said intently.

'Migrate. One hemisphere is having a barely tolerable summer while the other is being fried alive, so they go there. The whole race.'

'Nomads,' Kelly said. 'An entire culture born with a pack on its back,' she said distantly. Reynolds raised an eyebrow. It was the first time he had ever heard her say anything that wasn't crisp, efficient and uninteresting.

'I think that's why they're grazing animals, to make it easy even necessary-to keep on the move. A 'great-summer' wilts all the vegetation; a 'great-winter'-they must have those, too freezes a continent solid.'

'God,' Kelly said quietly.

'Jonathon mentioned huge storms, winds that knocked it down, sand that buried it overnight in dunes. The drastic changes in the climate must stir up hurricanes and tornadoes.'

'Which they have to migrate through,' Kelly said. Reynolds noticed that the room was strangely quiet.

'Jonathon seems to have been born on one of the Treks. They don't have much shelter because of the winds and the winters that erode away the rock. It must be hard to build up any sort of technology in an environment like that. I suppose it's pretty inevitable that they turned out to believe in astrology. '

'What?' Kelly said, surprised.

'Of course.' Reynolds looked at her, completely deadpan. 'What else should I call it? With such a premium on reading the stars correctly, so that they know the precise time of year and when the next 'great-summer' is coming-what else would they believe in? Astrology would be the obvious, unchallengeable religion-because it worked!' Reynolds smiled to himself, imagining a flock of atheist giraffes vainly fighting their way through a sandstorm.

'I see,' Kelly said, clearly at a loss. The men stood around them awkwardly, not knowing quite what to say to such a barrage of unlikely ideas. Reynolds felt a surge of joy. Some lost capacity of his youth had returned: to see himself as the center of things, as the only actor onstage who moved of his own volition, spoke his own unscripted lines. This is the way the world feels: when you are winning, he thought. This was what he had lost, what Mars had taken from him during the long trip back in utter deep silence and loneliness. He had tested himself there and found some inner core, had come to think he did not need people ' and the fine edge of competition with them. Work and cramped rooms had warped him.

'I think that's why they are technologically retarded, despite their age. They don't really have the feel of machines, they've' never gotten used to them. When they needed a starship

for their religion, they built the most awkward one imaginable that would work.' Reynolds paused, feeling lightheaded. 'They live inside that machine, but they don't like it. They stink it up and make it feel like a corral. They mistrusted that tape recorder of mine. They must want to know the stars very badly, to depart so much from their nature just to reach them.'

Kelly's lip stiffened and her eyes narrowed. Her face, Reynolds thought, was returning to its usual expression. 'This is all very well, Dr. Reynolds,' she said, and it was the old Kelly, the one he knew; the Kelly who always came out on top. 'But it is speculation. We need facts. Their starship is crude, but it works. They must have data and photographs of stars. They know things we don't. There are innumerable details we could only find by making the trip ourselves, and even using their ship, that will take centuries Houston tells me that bomb-thrower of theirs can't go above one percent of light velocity. I want-'

'I'll try,' he said. 'but I'm afraid it won't be easy. Whenever I try to approach a subject it does not want to discuss, the alien begins telling me the most fantastic lies.'

'Oh?' Kelly said suspiciously, and he was sorry he had mentioned that, because it had taken him another quarter-hour of explaining before she had allowed him to escape the confines of her office.

Now he was back home again-in his room. Rolling over, he lay flat on his back in the bed, eyes wide open and staring straight ahead at the emptiness of the darkness. He would have liked to go out and visit the observatory, but Kelly had said he was' excused from all duties until the alien situation was resolved. He gathered she meant that as an order. She must have. One thing about Kelly: she seldom said a word unless it was meant as an order.

They came and woke him up. He had not intended to sleep. His room was still pitch-black, and far away there was a fist pounding furiously upon a door. Getting up, taking his time, he went and let the man inside. Then he turned on the light.

'Hung and see the director,' the man said breathlessly.

'What does she want now?' Reynolds asked.

'How should I know?'

Reynolds shrugged and turned to go. He knew what she wanted anyway. It had to be the aliens; Jonathon was ready to see him again. Well, that was fine, he thought, entering Kelly's office. From the turn of her expression, he saw that he had guessed correctly. And I know exactly what I'm going to tell them, he thought.

Somewhere in his sleep, Reynolds had made an important decision. He had decided he was going to tell Jonathon the truth.

Approaching the alien starship, Reynolds discovered he was no longer so strongly reminded of his old home in Sao Paulo. Now that he had actually been inside the ship and had met the creatures who resided there, his feelings had changed. This time he was struck by how remarkably this strange twisted chunk of metal resembled what a real starship ought to look like.

The tug banged against the side of the ship. Without having to be told, Reynolds removed his suit and went to the air lock. Kelly jumped out of her seat and dashed after him. She grabbed the camera off the deck and forced it into his hands. She wanted him to photograph the aliens. He had to admit her logic was quite impeccable. If the aliens were as unfearsome as Reynolds claimed, then a clear and honest photograph could only reassure the population of Earth; hysteria was still a worry to many politicians back home. Many people still claimed that a spaceship full of green monsters was up here orbiting the moon only a few hours' flight from New York and Moscow. One click of the camera and this fear would be ended.

Reynolds had told her Jonathon would never permit a photograph to be taken, but Kelly had remained adamant.

'Who cares?' he'd asked her.

'Everyone cares,' she'd insisted.

'Oh, really? I listened to the news yesterday and the aliens weren't even mentioned. Is that hysteria?'

'That's because of Africa. Wait till the war's over, then listen.'

He hadn't argued with her then and he didn't intend to argue with her now. He accepted the camera without a word, her voice burning his ears with last-minute instructions, and plunged ahead.

The smell assaulted him immediately. As he entered the spaceship, the odor seemed to rise up from nowhere and surround him. He made himself push forward. Last time, the odor had been a problem only for a short time. He was sure he could overcome it again this time.

It was cold in the ship. He wore only light pants and a light shirt without underwear, because last time it had been rather warm. Had Jonathon, noticing his discomfort, lowered the ship's temperature accordingly?

He turned the first corner and glanced briefly at the distant ceiling. He called out, 'Hello!' but there was only a slight echo. He spoke again and the echo was the same, flat and hard.

Another turn. He was moving much faster than before. The tight passages no longer caused him to pause and think. He simply plunged ahead, trusting his own knowledge. At Kelly's urging he was wearing a radio attached to his belt. He noticed that it was beeping furiously at him. Apparently Kelly had neglected some important last-minute direction. He didn't mind. He already had enough orders to ignore; one less would make little difference.

Here was the place. Pausing in the doorway, he removed the radio, turning it off. Then he placed the camera on the floor beside it and stepped into the room.

Despite the chill in the air, the room was not otherwise different from before. There were two aliens standing against the farthest wall. Reynolds went straight toward them, holding his hands over his head in greeting. One was taller than the other. Reynolds spoke to it. 'Are you Jonathon?'

'Yes,' Jonathon said, in its child's piping voice. 'And this is Richard.'

'May I pay obeisance?' Richard asked eagerly.

Reynolds nodded. 'If you wish.'

Jonathon waited until Richard had regained its feet, then said; 'We wish to discuss your star now.'

'All right,' Reynolds said. 'But there's something I have to tell you first.' Saying this, for the first time since he had made his decision, he wasn't sure. Was the truth really the best solution in this situation? Kelly wanted him to lie: tell them whatever they wanted to hear, making certain he didn't tell them quite everything. Kelly was afraid the aliens might go sailing off to the sun once they had learned what they had come here to learn. She wanted a chance to get engineers and scientists inside their ship before the aliens left. And wasn't this a real possibility? What if Kelly was right and the aliens went away? Then what would he say?

'You want to tell us that your sun is not a conscious being,' Jonathon said. 'Am I correct?'

The problem was instantly solved. Reynolds felt no more compulsion to lie. He said, 'Yes.'

'I am afraid that you are wrong,' said Jonathon.

'We live here, don't we? Wouldn't we know? You asked for me because I know our sun, and I do. But there are other men on our homeworld who know far more than I do. But no one has ever discovered the least shred of evidence to support your theory.'

'A theory is a guess,' Jonathon said. 'We do not guess; we know.'

'Then,' Reynolds said, 'explain it to me. Because I don't know.' He watched the alien's eyes carefully, waiting for the first indication of a blinking fit.

But Jonathon's gaze remained steady and certain. 'Would you like to hear of our journey?' it asked.

'Yes.'

'We left our homeworld a great many of your years ago. I cannot tell you exactly when, for reasons I'm certain you can understand, but I will reveal that it was more than a century ago. In that time we have visited nine stars. The ones we would visit were chosen for us beforehand. Our priests-our leaders determined the stars that were within our reach and also able to help in our quest. You see, we have journeyed here in order to ask certain questions.'

'Questions of the stars?'

'Yes, of course. The questions we have are questions only a star may answer.'

'And what are they?' Reynolds asked.

'We have discovered the existence of other universes parallel with our own. Certain creatures-devils and demons-have come from these universes in order to attack and capture our stars. We feel we must-'

'Oh, yes,' Reynolds said. 'I understand. We've run across several of these creatures recently.' And he blinked, matching the twitching of Jonathon's eye. 'They are awfully fearsome, aren't they?' When Jonathon stopped, he stopped too. He said, 'You don't have to tell me everything. But can you tell me this: these other stars you have visited, have they been able to answer any of your questions?'

'Oh, yes. We have learned much from them. These stars were very great-very different from our own.'

'But they weren't able to answer all your questions?'

'If they had, we would not be here now.'

'And you believe our star may be able to help you?'

'All may help, but the one we seek is the one that can save us.'

'When do you plan to go to the sun?'

'At once,' Jonathon said. 'As soon as you leave. I am afraid there is little else you can tell us.'

'I'd like to ask you to stay,' Reynolds said. And forced himself to go ahead. He knew he could not convince Jonathon without revealing everything, yet, by doing so, he might also be putting an end to all his hopes. Still, he told the alien about Kelly and, more generally, he told it what the attitude of man was toward their visit. He told it what man wished to know from them, and why.

Jonathon seemed amazed. It moved about the floor as Reynolds spoke, its feet clanking dully. Then it stopped and stood, its feet only a few inches apart, a position that impressed Reynolds as one of incredulous amazement. 'Your people wish to travel farther into space? You want to visit the stars? But why, Reynolds? Your people do not believe. Why?'

Reynolds smiled. Each time Jonathon said something to him, he felt he knew these people-and how they thought and reacted-a little better than he had before. There was another question he would very much have liked to ask Jonathon. How long have your people possessed the means of visiting the stars? A very long time, he imagined. Perhaps a longer time than the whole lifespan of the human race. And why hadn't they gone before now? Reynolds thought he knew: because, until now, they had had no reason for going.

Now Reynolds tried to answer Jonathon's question. If anyone could, it should be him. 'We wish to go to the stars because we are a dissatisfied people. Because we do not live a very long time as individuals, we feel we must place an important part of our lives into the human race as a whole. In a sense, we surrender a portion of our individual person in return for a sense of greater immortality. What is an accomplishment for man as a race is also an accomplishment for each individual man. And what are these accomplishments? Basically this: anything a man does that no other man has done before-whether it is good or evil or neither one or both-is considered by us to be a great accomplishment.'

And-to add emphasis to the point-he blinked once.

Then, holding his eyes steady, he said, 'I want you to teach me to talk to the stars. I want you to stay here around the moon long enough to do that.'

Instantly Jonathon said, 'No.'

There was an added force to the way it said it, an emphasis its voice had not previously possessed. Then Reynolds realized what that was: at the same moment Jonathon had spoken, Richard too had said, 'No.'

'Then you may be doomed to fail,' Reynolds said. 'Didn't I tell you? I know our star better than any man available to you. Teach me to talk to the stars and I may be able to help you with this one. Or would you prefer to continue wandering the galaxy forever, failing to find what you seek wherever you go?'

'You are a sensible man, Reynolds. You may be correct. We will ask our home star and see.'

'Do that. And if it says yes and I promise to do what you wish, then I must ask you to promise me something in return. I want you to allow a team of our scientists and technicians to enter and inspect your ship. You will answer their questions to the best of your ability. And that means truthfully.'

'We always tell the truth,' Jonathon said, blinking savagely.

The moon had made one full circuit of the Earth since Reynolds' initial meeting with the aliens, and he was quite satisfied with the progress he had made up to now, especially during the past ten days after Kelly had stopped accompanying him in his daily shuttles to and from the orbiting starship. As a matter of fact, in all that time, he had not had a single face-to-face meeting with her and they had talked on the phone only once. And she wasn't here now either, which was strange, since it was noon and she always ate here with the others.

Reynolds had a table to himself in the cafeteria. The food was poor, but it always was, and he was used to that by now. What did bother him, now that he was thinking about it, was Kelly's absence. Most days he skipped lunch himself. He tried to remember the last time he had come here. It was more than a week ago, he remembered-more than ten days ago. He didn't like the sound of that answer.

Leaning over, he attracted the attention of a girl at an adjoining table. He knew her vaguely. Her father had been an important wheel in NASA when Reynolds was still a star astronaut. He couldn't remember the man's name. His daughter had a tiny cute face and a billowing body about two sizes too big for the head. Also, she had a brain that was much too limited for much of anything. She worked in the administrative section, which meant she slept with most of the men on the base at one time or another.

'Have you seen Kelly?' he asked her.

'Must be in her office.'

'No, I mean when was the last time you saw her here?'

'In here? Oh-' The girl thought for a moment. 'Doesn't she eat with the other chiefs?'

Kelly never ate with the other chiefs. She always ate in the cafeteria-for morale purposes-and the fact that the girl did not remember having seen her meant that it had been several days at least since Kelly had last put in an appearance. Leaving his lunch where it lay, Reynolds got up, nodded politely at the girl, who stared at him as if he were a freak; and hurried away.

It wasn't a long walk, but he ran. He had no intention of going to see Kelly, He knew that would prove useless. Instead, he was going to see John Sims. At fifty-two, Sims was the second oldest man in the base. Like Reynolds, he was a former astronaut. In 1987, when Reynolds, then a famous man, was living in Sao Paulo, Sims had commanded the first (and only) truly successful Mars expedition. During those few months, the world had heard his name, but people forgot quickly, and Sims was one of the things they forgot. He had never done more than what he was: expected to do; the threat of death had never come near Sims's expedition. Reynolds, on the other hand, had failed. On Mars with him, three men had died. Yet it was he-Reynolds, the failure-who had been the hero, not Sims.

And maybe I'm a hero again, he thought as he knocked evenly on the door to Sims's office.

Maybe down there the world is once more reading about, me daily. He hadn't listened to a news broadcast since the night before his first trip to the ship. Had the story been released to the public yet? He couldn't see any reason why it should be suppressed, but that seldom was important. He would ask Sims. Sims would know.

The door opened and Reynolds went inside. Sims was a huge man who wore his black hair in a crewcut. The style had been out of fashion for thirty or forty years; Reynolds doubted there was another crewcut man in the universe. But he could not imagine Sims any other way.

'What's wrong?' Sims asked, guessing accurately the first time. He led Reynolds to a chair and sat him down. The office was big but empty. A local phone sat upon the desk along with a couple of daily status reports. Sims was assistant administrative chief, whatever that meant. Reynolds had never understood the functions of the position, if any. But there was one thing that was clear: Sims knew more about the inner workings of the moon base than any other man. And that included the director as well.

'I want to know about Vonda,' Reynolds said. With Sims, everything stood on a first-name basis. Vonda was Vonda Kelly. The name tasted strangely upon Reynolds' lips. 'Why isn't she eating at the cafeteria?'

Sims answered unhesitatingly. 'Because she's afraid to leave her desk.'

'It has something to do with the aliens?'

'It does, but I shouldn't tell you what. She doesn't want you to know. '

'Tell me. Please.' His desperation cleared the smile from Sims's lips. And he had almost added: for old times' sake. He was glad he had controlled himself.

'The main reason is the war,' Sims said. 'If it starts, she wants to know at once.'

'Will it?'

Sims shook his head. 'I'm smart but I'm not God. As usual, I imagine everything will work out as long as no one makes a stupid mistake. The worst will be a small local war lasting may a month. But how long can you depend upon politicians to act intelligently? It goes against the grain with diem.'

'But what about the aliens?'

'Well, as I said, that's part of it too.' Sims stuck his pipe in his mouth. Reynolds had never seen it lit, never seen him smoking it, but the pipe was invariable there between his teeth.

'A group of men are coming here from Washington, arriving tomorrow. They want to talk with your pets. It seems nobody least of all Vonda-is very happy with your progress.'

'I am.'

Sims shrugged, as if to say: that is of no significance.

'The aliens will never agree to see them,' Reynolds said.

'How are they going to stop them? Withdraw the welcome mat: Turn out the lights? That won't work.'

'But that will ruin everything. All my work up until now.'

'What work?' Sims got up and walked around his desk until he stood hovering above Reynolds. 'As far as anybody can see, you haven't accomplished a damn thing since you went up there. People want results, Bradley, not a lot of noise. All you've given anyone is the noise. This isn't a private game of yours. This is one of the most significant events in the history of the human race. If anyone ought to know that, it's you. Christ.' And he wandered back to his chair again, jiggling his pipe.

'What is it they want from me?' Reynolds said. 'Look-I got them what they asked for. The aliens have agreed to let a team of scientists study their ship.'

'We want more than that now. Among other things, we want an alien to come down and visit Washington. Think of the propaganda value of that, and right now is a time when we damn well need something like that. Here we are, the only country with sense enough to stay

on the moon. And being here has finally paid off in a way the politicians can understand. They've given you a month in which to play around-after all, you're a hero and the publicity is good-but how much longer do you expect them to wait? No, they want action and I'm afraid they want it now.'

Reynolds was ready to go. He had found out as much as he was apt to find here. And he already knew what he was going to have to do. He would go and find Kelly and tell her she had to keep the men from Earth away from the aliens. If she wouldn't agree, then he would go up and tell the aliens and they would leave for the sun. But what if Kelly wouldn't let him go? He had to consider that. He knew; he would tell her this: If you don't let me see them, if you try to keep me away, they'll know something is wrong and they'll leave without a backward glance. Maybe he could tell her the aliens were telepaths; he doubted she would know any better.

He had the plan all worked out so that it could not fail.

He had his hand on the doorknob when Sims called him back. 'There's another thing I better tell you, Bradley.'

'All right. What's that?'

'Vonda. She's on your side. She told them to stay away, but it wasn't enough. She's been relieved of duty. A replacement is coming with the others.'

'Oh,' said Reynolds.

Properly suited, Reynolds sat in the cockpit of the shuttle tug watching the pilot beside him going through the ritual of a final inspection prior to take-off. The dead desolate surface of the moon stretched briefly away from where the tug sat, the horizon so near that it almost looked touchable: Reynolds liked the moon. If he had not, he would never have elected to return here to stay. It was the Earth he hated. Better than the moon was space itself, the dark endless void beyond the reach of man's ugly grasping hands. That was where Reynolds was going now. Up. Out. Into the void. He was impatient to leave.

The pilot's voice came to him softly through the suit radio, a low murmur, not loud enough for him to understand what the man was saying. The pilot was talking to himself as he worked, using the rumble of his own voice as a way of patterning his mind so that it would not lose concentration. The pilot was a young man in his middle twenties, probably on loan from the Air Force, a lieutenant or, at most, a junior Air Force captain. He was barely old enough to remember when space had really been a frontier. Mankind had decided to go out, and Reynolds had been one of the men chosen to take the giant steps, but now it was late-the giant steps of twenty years ago were mere tentative contusions in the dust of the centuries-and man was coming back. From where he sat, looking out, Reynolds could see exactly 50 percent of the present American space program: the protruding bubble of the moon base. The other half was the orbiting space lab that circled the Earth itself, a battered relic of the expansive seventies. Well beyond the nearby horizon, maybe a hundred miles away, there had once been another bubble, but it was gone now. The brave men who had lived and worked and struggled and died and survived there-they were all gone too. Where? The Russians still maintained an orbiting space station, so some of their former moon colonists were undoubtedly there, but where were the rest? In Siberia? Working there? Hadn't the Russians decided that Siberia-the old barless prison state of the czars and early Communists-was a more practical frontier than the moon?

And weren't they maybe right? Reynolds did not like to think so, for he had poured his life into this-into the moon and the void beyond. But at times, like now, peering through the artificial window of his suit, seeing the bare bubble of the base clinging to the edge of this dead world like a wart on an old woman's face, starkly vulnerable, he found it hard to see the point of it. He was an old enough man to recall the first time he had ever been moved by the spirit of conquest. As a schoolboy, he remembered the first time men conquered Mount Everest-it was around 1956 or '57-and he had religiously followed the newspaper reports. Afterward, a movie had been made, and watching that film, seeing the shadows of pale mountaineers clinging to the edge of that white god, he had decided that was what he wanted to be. And he had never been taught otherwise: only by the time he was old enough

to act, all the mountains had long since been conquered. And he had ended up as an astronomer, able if nothing else to gaze outward at the distant shining peaks of the void, and from there he had been pointed toward space. So he had gone to Mars and become famous, but fame had turned him inward, so that now, without the brilliance of his past, he would have been nobody but another of those anonymous old men who dot the cities of the world, inhabiting identically bleak book-lined rooms, eating daily in bad restaurants, their minds always a billion miles away from the dead shells of their bodies.

'We can go now, Dr. Reynolds,' the pilot was saying.

Reynolds grunted in reply, his mind several miles distant from his waiting body. He was thinking that there was something, after all. How could he think in terms of pointlessness and futility when he alone had actually seen them with his own eyes?

Creatures, intelligent beings, born far away, light-years from the insignificant world of man? Didn't that in itself prove something? Yes. He was sure that it did. But what?

The tug lifted with a murmur from the surface of the moon. Crouched deeply within his seat, Reynolds thought that it wouldn't be long now.

And they found us, he thought, we did not find them. And when had they gone into space? Late. Very late. At a moment in their history comparable to man a hundred thousand years from now. They had avoided space until a pressing reason had come for venturing out, and then they had gone. He remembered that he had been unable to explain to Jonathon why man wanted to visit the stars when he did not believe in the divinity of the suns. Was there a reason? And, if so, did it make sense?

The journey was not long.

It didn't smell. The air ran clean and sharp and sweet through the corridors, and if there was any odor to it, the odor was one of purity and freshness, almost pine needles or mint. The air was good for his spirits. As soon as Reynolds came aboard the starship, his depression and melancholy were forgotten. Perhaps he was only letting the apparent grimness of the situation get the better of him. It had been too long a time since he'd last had to fight. Jonathon would know what to do. The alien was more than three hundred years old, a product of a civilization and culture that had reached its maturity at a time when man was not yet man, when he was barely a skinny undersized ape, a carrion eater upon the hot plains of Africa.

When Reynolds reached the meeting room, he saw that Jonathon and Richard were not alone this time. The third alien Reynolds sensed it was someone important-was introduced as Vergnan. No adopted Earth name for it.

'This is ours who best knows the stars,' Jonathon said. 'It has spoken with yours and hopes it may be able to assist you.'

Reynolds had almost forgotten that part. The sudden pressures of the past few hours had driven everything else from his mind. His training. His unsuccessful attempts to speak to the stars. He had failed. Jonathon had been unable to teach him, but he thought that was probably because he simply did not believe.

'Now we shall leave you,' Jonathon said.

'But-' said Reynolds.

'We are not permitted to stay.'

'But there's something I must tell you.'

It was too late. Jonathon and Richard headed for the corridor, walking with surprising gracefulness. Their long necks bobbed, their skinny legs shook, but they still managed to move as swiftly and sleekly as any cat, almost rippling as they went.

Reynolds turned toward Vergnan. Should he tell this one about the visitors from Earth? He did not think so. Vergnan was old, his skin much paler than the others', almost totally hairless.

His eyes were wrinkled and one ear was torn.

Vergnan's eyes were closed.

Remembering his lessons, Reynolds too closed his eyes.

And kept them closed. In the dark, time passed more quickly than it seemed, but he was positive that five minutes went by.

Then the alien began to speak. No-he did not speak; he, simply sang, his voice trilling with the high searching notes of a well-tuned violin, dashing up and down the scale, a pleasant: sound, soothing, cool. Reynolds tried desperately to concentrate upon the song, ignoring the existence of all other sensations, recognizing nothing and no one but Vergnan. Reynolds ignored the taste and smell of the air and the distant throbbing of the ship's machinery. The alien sang deeper and clearer, his voice rising higher and higher, directed now at the stars. Jonathan, too, had sung, but never like this. When Jonathon sang, its voice had dashed away in a frightened search, shifting and darting wildly about, seeking vainly a place to land. Vergnan sang' without doubt. It-it-was certain. Reynolds sensed the over-whelming maleness of this being, his patriarchal strength and dignity. His voice and song never straggled or wavered. He' knew always exactly where he was going.

Had he felt something? Reynolds did not know. If so, then what? No, no, he thought, and concentrated more fully upon the voice, alive, renewed, resurrected. I'm anew man. Reynolds is dead. He is another. These thoughts came to him like the whispering words of another. Go, Reynolds. Fly. Leave. Fly.

Then he realized that he was singing too. He could not imitate Vergnan, for his voice was too alien, but he tried and heard his own voice coming frighteningly near, almost fading into and being lost within the constant tones of the other. The two voices suddenly became one-mingling indiscriminately-merging and that one voice rose higher, floating, then higher again, rising, farther, going farther out-farther and deeper.

Then he felt it. Reynolds. And he knew it for what it was.

The Sun.

More ancient than the whole of the Earth itself. A greater, vaster being, more powerful and knowing. Divinity as a ball of heat and energy.

Reynolds spoke to the stars.

And, knowing this, balking at the concept, he drew back instinctively in fear, his voice faltering, dwindling, collapsing, Reynolds scurried back, seeking the Earth, but, grasping, pulling, Vergnan drew him on. Beyond the shallow exterior light of the sun, he witnessed the totality of that which lay hidden within. The core. The impenetrable darkness within. Fear gripped him once more. He begged to be allowed to flee. Tears streaking his face with the heat of fire, he pleaded. Vergnan benignly drew him on. Come forward come-see-know. Forces coiled to a point ...

And he saw.

Could he describe it as evil? Thought was an absurdity. Not thinking, instead sensing and feeling, he experienced the wholeness of this entity-a star-the sun-and saw that it was not evil. He sensed the sheer totality of its opening nothingness. Sensation was absent. Colder than cold, more terrifying than hate, more sordid than fear, blacker than evil. The vast inner whole nothingness of everything that was anything, of all.

I have seen enough. No!

Yes, cried Vergnan, agreeing.

To stay a moment longer would mean never returning again. Vergnan knew this too, and he released Reynolds, allowed him to go.

And still he sang. The song was different from before. Struggling within himself, Reynolds sang too, trying to match his voice to that of the alien. It was easier this time. The two voices merged, mingled, became one.

And then Reynolds awoke.

He was lying on the floor in the starship, the rainbow walls swirling brightly around him.

Vergnan stepped over him. He saw the alien's protruding belly as he passed. He did not look

down or back, but continued onward, out the door, gone, as quick and cold as the inner soul of the sun itself. For a brief moment, he hated Vergnan more deeply than he had ever hated anything in his life. Then he sat up, gripping himself, forcing a return to sanity. I am all right now, he insisted. I am back. I am alive. The walls ceased spinning. At his back the floor shed its clinging coat of roughness. The shadows in the corners of his eyes dispersed.

Jonathon entered the room alone. 'Now you have seen,' it said, crossing the room and assuming its usual place beside the wall.

'Yes,' said Reynolds, not attempting to stand.

'And now you know why we search. For centuries our star was kind to us, loving, but now it too-like yours-is changed.'

'You are looking for a new home?'

'True. '

'And?'

'And we find nothing. All are alike. We have seen nine, visiting all. They are nothing. '

'Then you leave here too?'

'We must, but first we will approach your star. Not until we have drawn so close that we have seen everything, not until then can we dare admit our failure. This time we thought we had succeeded. When we met you, this is what we thought, for you are unlike your star. We felt that the star could not produce you-or your race without the presence of benevolence. But it is gone now. We meet only the blackness. We struggle to penetrate to a deeper core. And fail.'

'I am not typical of my race,' Reynolds said.

'We shall see.'

He remained with Jonathon until he felt strong enough to stand. The floor hummed. Feeling it with moist palms, he planted a kiss upon the creased cold metal. A wind swept through the room, carrying a hint of returned life. Jonathon faded, rippled, returned to a sharp outline of crisp reality. Reynolds was suddenly hungry and the oily taste of meat swirled up through his nostrils. The cords in his neck stood out with the strain until, gradually, the tension passed from him.

He left and went to the tug. During the great fall to the silver moon he said not a word, thought not a thought. The trip was long.

Reynolds lay on his back in the dark room, staring upward at the faint shadow of a ceiling, refusing to see.

Hypnosis? Or a more powerful alien equivalent of the same? Wasn't that, as an explanation, more likely than admitting that he had indeed communicated with sun, discovering a force greater than evil, blacker than black? Or-here was another theory: wasn't it possible that these aliens, because of the conditions on their own world, so thoroughly accepted the consciousness of the stars that they could make him believe as well? Similar things had happened on Earth. Religious miracles, the curing of diseases through faith, men who claimed to have spoken with God. What about flying saucers and little green men and all the other incidents of mass hysteria? Wasn't that the answer here? Hysteria? Hypnosis? Perhaps even a drug of some sort: a drug released into the air. Reynolds had plenty of possible solutions-he could choose one or all-but he decided that he did not really care.

He had gone into this thing knowing exactly what he was doing and now that it had happened he did not regret the experience. He had found a way of fulfilling his required mission while at the same time experiencing something personal that no other man would ever know. Whether he had actually seen the sun was immaterial; the experience, as such, was still his own. Nobody could ever take that away from him.

It was some time after this when he realized that a fist was pounding on the door. He decided he might as well ignore that, because sometimes when you ignored things, they went away. But the knocking did not go away-it only got louder. Finally Reynolds got up. He opened

the door.

Kelly glared at his nakedness and said, 'Did I wake you?'

'No.'

'May I come in?'

'No.'

'I've got something to tell you.' She forced her way past him, sliding into the room. Then Reynolds saw that she wasn't alone. A big, red-faced beefy man followed, forcing his way into the room too.

Reynolds shut the door, cutting off the corridor light, but the big man went over and turned on the overhead light. 'All right,' he said, as though it were an order.

'Who the hell are you?' Reynolds said.

'Forget him,' Kelly said. 'I'll talk.'

'Talk,' said Reynolds.

'The committee is here. The men from Washington. They arrived an hour ago and I've kept them busy since. You may not believe this, but I'm on your side.'

'Sims told me.'

'He told me he told you. '

'I knew he would. Mind telling me why? He didn't know.'

'Because I'm not an idiot,' Kelly said. 'I've known enough petty bureaucrats in my life. Those things up there are alien beings. You can't send these fools up there to go stomping all over their toes.'

Reynolds gathered this would not be over soon. He put on his pants.

'This is George O'Hara,' Kelly said. 'He's the new director. '

'I want to offer my resignation,' Reynolds said casually, fixing the snaps of his shirt.

'You have to accompany us to the starship,' O'Hara said.

'I want you to,' Kelly said. 'You owe this to someone. If not me, then the aliens. If you had told me the truth, this might never have happened. If anyone is to blame for this mess, it's you, Reynolds. Why won't you tell me what's been going on up there the last month? It has to be something.'

'It is,' Reynolds said. 'Don't laugh, but I was trying to talk to the sun. I told you that's why the aliens came here. They're taking a cruise of the galaxy, pausing here and there to chat with the stars.'

'Don't be frivolous. And, yes, you told me all that.'

'I have to be frivolous. Otherwise, it sounds too ridiculous. I made an agreement with them. I wanted to learn to talk to the sun. I told them, since I lived here, I could find out what they wanted to know better than they could. I could tell they were doubtful, but they let me go ahead. In return for my favor, when I was done, whether I succeeded or failed, they would give us what we wanted. A team of men could go and freely examine their ship. They would describe their voyage to us-where they had been, what they had found. They promised cooperation in return for my chat with the sun.'

'So, then nothing happened?'

'I didn't say that. I talked with sun today. And saw it. And now I'm not going to do anything except sit on my hands. You can take it from here.'

'What are you talking about?'

He knew he could not answer that. 'I failed,' he said. 'I didn't find out anything they didn't know.'

'Well, will you go with us or not? That's all I want to know right now.' She was losing her patience, but there was also more than a minor note of pleading in her voice. He knew he ought to feel satisfied hearing that, but he didn't.

'Oh, hell,' Reynolds said. 'Yes-all right-I will go. But don't ask me why. Just give me an hour to get ready.'

'Good man,' O'Hara said, beaming happily.

Ignoring him, Reynolds opened his closets and began tossing clothes and other belongings into various boxes and crates.

'What do you think you'll need all that for?' Kelly asked him.

'I don't think I'm coming back,' Reynolds said.

'They won't hurt you,' she said.

'No. I won't be coming back because I won't be wanting to come back.'

'You can't do that,' O'Hara said.

'Sure I can,' said Reynolds.

It took the base's entire fleet of seven shuttle tugs to ferry the delegation from Washington up to the starship. At that, a good quarter of the group had to be left behind for lack of room. Reynolds had requested and received permission to call the starship prior to departure, so the aliens were aware of what was coming up to meet them. They had not protested, but Reynolds knew they wouldn't, at least not over the radio. Like almost all mechanical or electronic gadgets, a radio was a fearsome object to them.

Kelly and Reynolds arrived with the first group and entered the air lock. At intervals of a minute or two, the others arrived. When the entire party was clustered in the lock, the last tug holding to the hull in preparation for the return trip, Reynolds signaled that it was time to move out.

'Wait a minute,' one of the men called. 'We're not all here. Acton and Dodd went back to the tug to get suits.'

'Then they'll have to stay there,' Reynolds said. 'The air is pure here-nobody needs a suit.'

'But,' said another man, pinching his nose. 'This smell. It's awful.'

Reynolds smiled. He had barely noticed the odor. Compared to the stench of the first few days, this was nothing today. 'The aliens won't talk if you're wearing suits. They have a taboo against artificial communication. The smell gets better as you go farther inside. Until then, hold your nose, breathe through your mouth.'

'It's making me almost sick,' confided a man at Reynolds' elbow. 'You're sure what you say is true, Doctor?'

'Cross my heart,' Reynolds said. The two men who had left to fetch the suits returned. Reynolds wasted another minute lecturing them.

'Stop enjoying yourself so much,' Kelly whispered when they were at last under way.

Before they reached the first of the tight passages where crawling was necessary, three men had dropped away, dashing back toward the tug. Working from a hasty map given him by the aliens, he was leading the party toward a section of the ship where he had never before. The walk was less difficult than usual. In most places a man could walk comfortably and the ceilings were high enough to accommodate the aliens themselves. Reynolds ignored the occasional shouted exclamation from the men behind. He steered a silent course toward his destination.

The room, when they reached it, was huge, big as a basketball gymnasium, the ceiling lost in the deep shadows above. Turning, Reynolds counted the aliens present: fifteen ... twenty ... thirty ... forty ... forty-five ... forty-six. That had to be about all. He wondered if this was the full crew.

Then he counted his own people: twenty-two. Better than he had expected-only six lost

en route, victims of the smell.

He spoke directly to the alien who stood in front of the others.

'Greetings,' he said. The alien wasn't Vergnan, but it could have been Jonathon.

From behind, he heard, 'They're just like giraffes.'

'And they even seem intelligent,' said another.

'Exceedingly so. Their eyes.'

'And friendly too.'

'Hello, Reynolds,' the alien said. 'Are these the ones?'

'Jonathon?' asked Reynolds.

'Yes. '

'These are the ones.'

'They are your leaders-they wish to question my people. '

'They do.'

'May I serve as our spokesman in order to save time?'

'Of course,' Reynolds said. He turned and faced his party, looking from face to face, hoping to spot a single glimmer of intelligence, no matter how minute. But he found nothing. 'Gentlemen?' he said. 'You heard?'

'His name is Jonathon?' said one.

'It is a convenient expression. Do you have a real question?'

'Yes,' the man said. He continued speaking to Reynolds. 'Where is your homeworld located?'

Jonathon ignored the man's rudeness and promptly named a star.

'Where is that?' the man asked, speaking directly to the alien now.

Reynolds told him it lay some thirty light-years from Earth. As a star, it was very much like the sun, though somewhat larger.

'Exactly how many miles in a light-year?' a man wanted to know.

Reynolds tried to explain. The man claimed he understood, though Reynolds remained skeptical.

It was time for another question.

'Why have you come to our world?'

'Our mission is purely one of exploration and discovery,' Jonathon said.

'Have you discovered any other intelligent races besides our own?'

'Yes. Several.'

This answer elicited a murmur of surprise from the men. Reynolds wondered who they were, how they had been chosen for this mission. Not what they were, but who. What made them tick. He knew what they were: politicians, NASA bureaucrats, a sprinkling of real scientists. But who?

'Are any of these people aggressive?' asked a man, almost certainly a politician. 'Do they pose a threat to you-or to us?'

'No,' Jonathon said. 'None.'

Reynolds was barely hearing the questions and answers now.

His attention was focused upon Jonathon's eyes. He had stopped blinking now. The last two questions-the ones dealing with intelligent life forms-he had told the truth. Reynolds thought he was beginning to understand. He had underestimated these creatures. Plainly, they had encountered other races during their travels before coming to Faith. They were

experienced Jonathon was lying-yes-but unlike before, he was lying well, only when the truth would not suffice.

'How long do you intend to remain in orbit about our moon?'

'Until the moment you and your friends leave our craft. Then we shall depart.'

This set up an immediate clamor among the men. Waving his arms furiously, Reynolds attempted to silence them. The man who had been unfamiliar with the term 'light-year' shouted out an invitation for Jonathon to visit Earth.

This did what Reynolds himself could not do. The others fell silent in order to hear Jonathon's reply.

'It is impossible,' Jonathon said. 'Our established schedule requires us to depart immediately.'

'Is it this man's fault?' demanded a voice. 'He should have asked you himself long before now.'

'No, ' Jonathon said. 'I could not have come-or any of my people-because we were uncertain of your peaceful intentions. Not until we came to know Reynolds well did we fully comprehend the benevolence of your race.' The alien blinked rapidly now.

He stopped during the technical questions. The politicians and bureaucrats stepped back to speak among themselves and the scientists came forward. Reynolds was amazed at the intelligence of their questions. To this extent at least, the expedition had not been wholly a farce.'

Then the questions were over and all the men came forward to listen to Jonathon's last words.

'We will soon return to our homeworld and when we do we shall tell the leaders of our race of the greatness and glory of the human race. In passing here, we have come to know your star and through it you people who live beneath its soothing rays. I consider your visit here a personal honor to me as an individual. I am sure my brothers share my pride and only regret an inability to utter their gratitude. '

Then Jonathon ceased blinking and looked hard at Reynolds. 'Will you be going too?'

'No,' Reynolds said. 'I'd like to talk to you alone if I can.'

'Certainly,' Jonathon said.

Several of the men in the party protested to Kelly or O'Hara, but there was nothing they could do. One by one they left the chamber to wait in the corridor. Kelly was the last to leave. 'Don't be a fool,' she cautioned.

'I won't,' he said.

When the men had gone, Jonathon took Reynolds away from the central room. It was only a brief walk to the old room where they had always met before. As if practicing a routine, Jonathon promptly marched to the farthest wall and stood there waiting. Reynolds smiled. 'Thank you,' he said.

'You are welcome.'

'For lying to them. I was afraid they would offend you with their stupidity. I thought you would show your contempt by lying badly, offending them in return. I underestimated you. You handled them very well.'

'But you have something you wish to ask of me?'

'Yes,' Reynolds said. 'I want you to take me away with you.'

As always, Jonathon remained expressionless. Still, for a long time, it said nothing. Then, 'Why do you wish this? We shall never return here.'

'I don't care. I told you before: I am not typical of my race. I can never be happy here.'

'But are you typical of my race? Would you not be unhappy with us?'

'I don't know. But I'd like to try.'

'It is impossible,' Jonathon said.

'But-but-why?'

'Because we have neither the time nor the abilities to care for you. Our mission is a most desperate one. Already, during our absence, our homeworld may have gone mad. We must hurry. Our time is growing brief. And you will not be of any help to us. I am sorry, but you know that is true.'

'I can talk to the stars.'

'No,' Jonathon said. 'You cannot.'

'But I did.'

'Vergnan did. Without him, you could not.'

'Your answer is final? There's no one else I can ask? The captain?'

'I am the captain.'

Reynolds nodded. He had carried his suitcases and crates all this way and now he would have to haul them home again. Home? No, not home. Only the moon. 'Could you find out if they left a tug for me?' he asked.

'Yes. One moment.'

Jonathon rippled lightly away, disappearing into the corridor. Reynolds turned and looked at the walls. Again, as he stared, the rainbow patterns appeared to shift and dance and swirl of their own volition. Watching this, he felt sad, but his sadness was not that of grief. It was the sadness of emptiness and aloneness. This emptiness had so long been a part of him that he sometimes forgot it was there. He knew it now. He knew, whether consciously aware of it or not, that he had spent the past ten years of his life searching vainly for a way of filling this void. Perhaps even more than that: perhaps his whole life had been nothing more than a search for that one moment of real completion. Only twice had he ever really come close. The first time had been on Mars. When he had lived and watched while the others had died. Then he had not been alone or empty. And the other time had been right here in this very room-with Vergnan. Only twice in his life had he been allowed to approach the edge of true meaning. Twice in fifty-eight long and endless years. Would it ever happen again? When? How?

Jonathon returned, pausing in the doorway. 'A pilot is there,' it said.

Reynolds went toward the door, ready to leave. 'Are you still planning to visit our sun?' he asked.

'Oh, yes. We shall continue trying, searching. We know nothing else. You do not believe-even-after what Vergnan showed you-do you, Reynolds? I sympathize. All of us-even I-sometimes we have doubts. '

Reynolds continued forward into the corridor. Behind, he heard a heavy clipping noise and turned to see Jonathon coming after him. He waited for the alien to join him and then they walked together. In the narrow corridor, there was barely room for both.

Reynolds did not try to talk. As far as he could see, there was nothing left to be said that might possibly be said in so short a time as that which remained. Better to say nothing, he thought, than to say too little.

The air lock was open. Past it, Reynolds glimpsed the squat bulk of the shuttle tug clinging to the creased skin of the starship.

There was nothing left to say. Turning to Jonathon, he said, 'Goodbye,' and as he said it; for the first time he wondered about what he was going back to. More than likely, he would find himself a hero once again. A celebrity. But that was all right: fame was fleeting; it was bearable. Two hundred forty thousand miles was still a great distance. He would be all right.

As if reading his thoughts, Jonathon asked, 'Will you be remaining here or will you return to your homeworld?'

The question surprised Reynolds; it was the first time the alien had ever evidenced a personal interest in him. 'I'll stay here. I'm happier.'

'And there will be a new director?'

'Yes. How did you know that? But I think I'm going to be famous again. I can get Kelly retained.'

'You could have the job yourself,' Jonathon said.

'But I don't want it. How do you know all this? About Kelly and so on?'

'I listen to the stars,' Jonathon said in its high warbling voice.

'They are alive, aren't they?' Reynolds said suddenly.

'Of course. We are permitted to see them for what they are. You do not. But you are young.'

'They are balls of ionized gas. Thermonuclear reactions.'

The alien moved, shifting its neck as though a joint lay in the middle of it. Reynolds did not understand the gesture. Nor would he ever. Time had run out at last.

Jonathon said, 'When they come to you, they assume a disguise you can see. That is how they spend their time in this universe. Think of them as doorways.'

'Through which I cannot pass.'

'Yes. '

Reynolds smiled, nodded and passed into the lock. It contracted behind him, engulfing the image of his friend. A few moments of drifting silence, then the other end of the lock furled open.

The pilot was a stranger. Ignoring the man, Reynolds dressed, strapped himself down and thought about Jonathon. What was it that it had said? I listen to the stars. Yes, and the stars had told it that Kelly had been fired?

He did not like that part. But the part he liked even less was this: when it said it, Jonathon had not blinked.

(1) It had been telling the truth. (2) It could lie without flicking a lash.

Choose one.

Reynolds did, and the tug fell toward the moon.