

## Contact

### Part III: Augsburg

By Rudolph Najjar

Agate Kleinfeld was excited when the alien invited her for a drive along the Methane Sea. They wore heavy suit protection against the cool helium atmosphere and rode a small open four wheel runabout. He said he wanted to show her some geological formations near the Methane Sea. She knew that was an excuse.

Julio Guerrero and Neftali Zuckerman had alerted her that an invitation from the alien was coming. He had discussed god and the afterlife with them so she was anxious to give him her beliefs and opinions. He must not think the Catholic and Jewish perspectives spoke for all of mankind.

The quake that created the Methane Sea had seriously damaged the station and inflicted casualties. Abdullah al-Saga had been crushed. Neftali had lost his feet and departed on the relief ship.

"I want to look at the Methane Sea," the alien said when he invited Agate. That suited her well. She was a geologist. God knows why she was part of the team. They were here to develop working relations with the aliens and, not so surreptitiously, study them. Geological studies of the planet were a plus but a definite afterthought. Agate had learned little of the aliens and less about the planet.

"Have you seen the Methane Sea?" the alien asked.

"No. I haven't been outside the station since the quake."

"This will interest you. The Methane Lake was in a depression. The quake lifted the lake about two feet and formed a dike around the lake. The dike broke and methane escaped to form the Sea. It is immense but very shallow. "

"It was deep enough to seriously injure you." Agate

could see that bandages covered the alien's left side.  
"How are you now?"

"Not completely healed. I may lose some limbs.  
Otherwise, I'm good enough to go outside."

Agate thought of Neftali who had lost his feet after saving the unconscious alien from the Methane Sea. The alien medical staff had not released any information on the alien's condition. Even though he was up and about, it was obvious that he was far from totally healed.

"Really, how are you?" Agate asked. "I couldn't get around if I were as bandaged as you are."

The universal translator replied with a chuckle. "I'm sedated against the pain," the alien replied. "Fortunately, our drugs don't affect lucidity. Agate, Julio Guerrero suggested I talk with you about the beliefs humans have about god and the afterlife. Why he suggested you I don't know."

"Perhaps I can give you a different point of view."

"What's the best way to start? Take the lead. I'll listen and ask questions."

Agate explained the differences between Catholics, Jews, Lutherans, and other protestant sects. The explanation led to a historical overview of how the differences arose. Conflicts played a major role.

"Are you telling me that the differences in beliefs caused wars and the near extermination of groups of humans?" The alien was aghast at that revelation.

"Yes," Agate answered. "In human history, religious differences caused almost as much destruction and misery as greed and power hunger."

"Tell me more."

Agate recounted the Thirty Years War, the Crusades, pogroms against Jews, campaigns against Cathari and Huguenots, the Palestinian conflicts, persecutions, and Inquisitions.

"Why do you humans do such evil things?" the alien

asked when she had finished. "Julio and Neftali did not mention this part of your history. I wish they had. I would have been better prepared for this conversation."

"In our history, religion has been intertwined with power, especially with political power. Religions were used to control the masses. In some instances, religions themselves possessed significant, sometimes great, political power."

"And human beings gravitate towards power."

"Yes. Power and wealth."

The alien was silent for a long time. Agate started to fidget. She did not want to interrupt his thoughts but did not want to just sit there in the runabout. Julius and Neftali had told her that the alien was trying to fit human beings into his beliefs about god and the afterlife. She feared that her comments would bias his reaction against humans.

If he decided that the god that created his race, the Alenibatti, had not also created humans, relations between the two races would deteriorate rapidly. Agate feared that the long history of religious conflicts among humans could convince the alien that a different god had created humans.

They had long since reached the Methane Sea and parked at its edge. It was huge, shallow and unmapped. There was still too much terra incognita.

Finally, to Agate's relief the alien started up the runabout. "I said I wanted to show you something of interest to a geologist. Let's do that now." He left the edge of the Methane Sea and drove toward a range of low hills. He stopped at the foot of a prominent hill.

"Ever wonder how these hills originated? No? Well, they probably have an interesting geological history given what this planet is."

Agate could only nod. The alien dismounted. "Bring a hand light," he said. "We're going underground."

He led the way around the hill until the runabout was out of sight and stopped in front of a cave like opening. "We're going in here," he said. "It's too narrow and too

steep for the runabout. It quickly becomes totally dark. We'll need the hand lights. Watch your step. The footing is loose gravel."

The alien entered, hand light on. Agate followed. The cave became very narrow, steep and low ceilinged. The footing gave way slightly with each step. Agate used the walls for balance. She watched the ceiling carefully. The alien's broad figure blocked the view.

The cave narrowed even more. They sidled sideways. The alien stopped. Agate saw a neon green line on the wall. "This is how far I came," the alien said. "Turn off your hand light. There's something interesting here."

The cave was black, black. Agate had never before experienced such a darkness. Even the neon line was invisible. A mild claustrophobia set in. In the dark with both sides of the cave pressing in on her, she felt the fear. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness but still she could see nothing. She reached forward to touch the alien and convince herself she was not alone.

The walls quivered ever so slightly. "What was that?" she asked in alarm.

"I don't know," came the answer.

Agate could only think of the quake that had wreaked havoc on the station facilities. She did not want to be buried in this cave by another quake. They must get out. She turned her hand light on. Another quiver, barely sensed. "We must get out," she said to the alien.

She turned around, crashed into a low point in the ceiling and fell to the floor.

The alien did not move for several minutes. I must get her out of here he thought. He could not just leave her here. He might not know which god had created humans, the creator or the man maker, but he could not abandon Agate. He remembered that Neftali had saved him from the shallows of the Methane Sea and had lost his feet as a price.

He had to do as much. He bent over and picked up Agate. She was not heavy but the narrow confines of the cave made carrying her an awkward task. The low ceiling

forced him to walk stooped.

The quivers continued at erratic intervals. Many were barely perceptible. An occasional one was hard. These aren't quakes the alien thought. They don't have the feel of the quake that formed the Methane Sea.

Progress was slow. The alien frequently set Agate down to change his hold as he maneuvered the very tight passages. The hand light picked up a shiny liquid trickling down the cave. It puzzled him for a moment. Then he realized with a shock what it was. Liquid methane was pouring down the cave from the Methane Sea.

Whatever caused the quivers had also raised the Methane Sea far enough to reach the entrance to the cave and come coursing down the slope. He paused for a moment to fully grasp the implications. If the flow of liquid methane was large enough the entrance might be impossible to reach. In which case, he and Agate would be sealed in the cave. They were so far into the cave that radio communication with the station was impossible.

The station personnel would not know where they were. He had not informed them of his side trip. A case of hubris. He was so confident of coping with any situation on the planet that he had not taken the most basic precautions. It could be the end of them.

He continued walking up the cave. It was more difficult now that he had to avoid the methane. He proceeded slowly. Occasionally, he stepped in the methane. The flow was only an inch deep but he could feel the numbing cold of the liquid. He carried Agate all the way. There was no place to set her down.

A distant point of light appeared, the entrance. A strong quiver jostled him. He almost dropped Agate into the methane flow. A sudden wave three or four inches high came rushing down the slope. The alien found footing above the flow. It subsided. There had to be a connection between the strong quiver and the sudden surge of methane he thought. Perhaps he would discover a connection once outside the cave.

At last the cave widened and the ceiling rose. The alien put Agate down on a ledge. The effort to carry Agate was tiring him. The analgesic was wearing off. He was in

mild pain.

When he reached the cave entrance, the methane flow completely covered the floor of the cave. There was only one thing to do. He took a strong hold on Agate and stepped out onto the methane. It was barely an inch deep.

He walked out the cave and a short distance up the hillside. He didn't suffer any injury.

A foot taller and half again as heavy as the average human, the alien wondered how Neftali had been able to drag him out of the Methane Sea. His admiration for humans in general and Neftali in particular had risen after that episode.

He set Agate down on a ledge and looked around. The view was awesome. Steam was roiling up from the Methane Sea. Thin clouds were forming. Rain was falling from the clouds and the steam. In the far distance the Methane Lake was choppy as far as he could see. The lake and sea levels surged back and forth. What was causing the disturbance?

As he watched, there was a flash in the distance and a tremendous eruption of steam, liquid and sand. A quiver shook the hillside. A wave of methane surged to the base of the hill and lapped into the cave. Of course, meteors! Other small meteor trails coursed through the sky and into the methane.

He tried his radio. Only static. Strange. The runabout was his only recourse. It was sitting in the methane. Was it still operable? He had to reach it.

He laid boulders to step across the methane. When they came to about ten feet from the runabout, he ran the last few steps in the methane to the vehicle.

The runabout's radio was also dead. Maybe something in the atmosphere he wondered. The vehicle started up immediately. He backed it slowly to the hillside, clambered over the back and placed Agate on a seat. There was blood on her face. She needed medical attention as soon as possible.

He drove slowly along the edge of the hills. He reached the edge of the Methane Sea and turned toward the station. It would be a long ride he thought. He did not

know how far the Methane Sea extended and did not trust the runabout to cross it. He drove around it.

Dusk was setting and the temperature was dropping when he sighted the station in the distance. He felt a sense of relief. They would not have survived a night outside the station.

The medical staff quickly took both Agate and the alien into the emergency suite. Agate had a concussion. The alien had not suffered.

Except for a single strike on the radio transmitter tower, the meteor shower had missed the station. The next nearest strike had been miles away in the Methane Lake.

"You saved me at some danger to yourself," Agate said when the alien first visited her.

"Of course. I had to."

"No! You have no obligation to us. You don't know who created us. You don't know if we're your equals."

"Until the matter is resolved, I will treat you as an equal."

"I am very thankful. Please know that. I would have died."

"Neftali saved me. I saved you. That pays off our debts to each other. We have responsibilities for each other. If I had not saved you, what would have happened to our negotiations? Think about that. But I have something interesting for you. You're a geologist. Look at this."

He handed her a stone bigger than her hand. It had a glassy surface deeply abraded by sand. Agate examined it carefully, turning it over and over.

"I am afraid to guess what it is," she said.

"It's a diamond. You know what this planet is. The surface is sand. The atmosphere is helium and some methane. What mechanism formed this diamond? How many diamonds are on the surface and in the crust?"

"I will try to find out. I thank you for giving me a

reason to be here."

"I'll never understand you humans," the alien remarked.

Nor we you thought Agate.

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