

## Contact

### Part II: Exodus

by Rudolph Najjar

The alien invited Neftali Zuckerman for a walk along the Methane Lake. The super cool helium atmosphere intrigued Neftali. He was here to study the aliens. Nevertheless, as an exobiologist, he often wondered whether any life was possible on this planet and longed to examine conditions everywhere.

"Julio Guerrero suggested I talk with you," the alien began the conversation.

"Really? Julius? The Priest? Why? What for?" Neftali could not think of any reason why Julius would make such a suggestion.

"I was talking to him about humans' beliefs in god and the afterlife. He suggested I speak with you."

What was the Priest up to Neftali wondered. He and Julius had a good relationship but occasionally Julius' actions disturbed Neftali. Could this be one of those occasions?

Neftali arched his eyebrows. "I'm no expert. I may not be able to help you."

"Let me explain," said the alien. "I wish to compare our beliefs about god and the afterlife with beliefs held by humans. We believe in three gods. One is the creator of the universe. The second is the man maker. He made us, the Alenibatti, to inhabit the universe."

The universal translator gave the alien's race name as Alenibatti. It transliterated the name rather than give its meaning. In the alien's language the name meant people of the soil.

"The third rules over us in the afterlife. Julio told me about his beliefs. Now I want to learn yours."

"Three gods? That's interesting. Do all of you hold the same beliefs?"

"Yes. We have all had the same beliefs for over a million years."

"Wow! That's a long time. Do your historical records go back that far?" Leading question treading on forbidden topics. What would the alien say?

"They do. Longer than that. They always speak of three gods and the afterlife. Our beliefs are longstanding, from the very dawn of our race."

That's a freaking long time Neftali thought. What wouldn't Julius do to get at those records. Did he even know they existed? Must check with him.

"Our written records go back less than ten thousand years. The earliest are not even accurate historical accounts but business dealings. Our first cities and civilizations were just being formed." How about that for throwing out a savory bone of closely guarded information!

"That is very interesting, Neftali. Perhaps we can get on to your beliefs about god and the afterlife."

So Neftali began, using Genesis and Exodus for rough outlines: the story of creation and the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the age of the patriarchs, Jacob and his twelve sons, the captivity in Egypt, the exodus, the forty desert years and, finally, the conquest of the Promised Land.

The alien listened without interrupting. When Neftali finished, he asked, "Do you people really believe the entire story?"

"No," Neftali answered. "Most of us accept the narrative as a figurative story trying to explain how we came to be and how our relationship with our god developed. Some parts, for example, Adam and Eve, are totally fictitious. That episode represents a primeval state of total innocence, which never existed but prefigures what the afterlife will be."

"Very interesting," the alien said. "You must tell me more about just who your people are, what they believe, and how your people relate to Julius' people."

"I'll try."

The two continued their discussion with many questions from the alien and answers, sometimes confusing, sometimes requiring even more explanations from Neftali. They had just turned to return to the station when a violent quake struck, felling them to the ground.

The quake continued, slowly diminishing in intensity. Neftali suffered an intense sense of terror, magnified when he tried holding on to the ground while it continued to shake him off. The alien was up first and helped Neftali to his feet.

The radio buzzed. "Neftali Zuckerman here with Albert." The humans had assigned arbitrary human names to distinguish among the aliens.

"Are you all right? The quake did some serious damage here. How are you? Do you need some help? We can send a vehicle out to you."

Neftali looked at the alien who shook his head. "We're all right. Don't need help. We're about two miles out along the south shore of the lake. Back in about an hour."

"Very good. If you do need help, just call. Out."

Neftali and the alien looked around. The landscape

had changed. New rocks and boulders protruded through the sandy soil, which had previously been flat and smooth. Fissures crossed the soil. A seitch roiled the surface of the Methane Lake.

"We'd better start back," Neftali said.

The path back was even more devastated. Boulders and small extrusions, up to ten feet high, dotted the route back to the station. The two picked their way gingerly among the obstructions, clambering over hazards when they could not go around them.

Occasional aftershocks drove them to their knees. They continued on, careful to maintain their balance and to fend at each aftershock.

Neftali glanced at the lake and felt a sense of growing danger. His neck hair rose. The level in the lake appeared down, not much, an inch or two, but perceptible. He pointed it out to the alien.

"You are correct," the alien said "The lake level is down. It must be draining somewhere. It could be very dangerous."

The lake was so large that even a one inch drop represented an immense volume spilling out somewhere. That somewhere could pose a danger to themselves or to the station.

Neftali called the station. "Thanks for the alert," was the response. "There is nothing visible from here. Can't see any spillage or outflow. Keep us informed."

"Neftali," the alien called. "Look here. The lake was in a depression on the plain. Now there is a dike around the lake that was not there before the quakes. The quakes have lifted up part of the lake. It must be spilling out somewhere."

The dike was clearly visible, about two feet high, gently sloping up from the plain to the lake. It took a huge amount of energy to lift the lake that far Neftali thought. We could be in trouble.

The alien saw the first evidence that they were

approaching a spill point. He pointed out a lake stretching out over an immense area of the plain. It was new, not part of the Methane Lake they knew.

"We can't walk around that lake," the alien said. "We'll need assistance from base."

"Let's get closer and see just how it is before we call for help."

Methane was flowing out the lake on a twenty foot front about six inches deep. "We can't cross that," Neftali said.

"Just wait a moment," the alien responded. "We may be able to make a bridge."

"How?"

"Look. There are boulders sticking out of the lake outflow. If we add some, we'll be able to walk on them to cross the outflow."

"Ok! Let's try that."

Neftali and the alien rolled and threw boulders into the spillway, slowly forming a causeway. They built the path across boulders already in the outflow. Neftali noted that the alien picked up boulders twice the size he could manage. There's strength here we're not aware of he thought. Slowly the path formed, not continuous but marked by breaks they could step across.

Finally, it was finished except for a large break at the far side they would have to jump over. That would be difficult Neftali thought. You can't jump very far in the protective suits they wore.

"You first, Neftali," the alien said.

Neftali stepped out gingerly. He knew some boulders were firmly set in the soil and others rocked and shifted. He had to get across. Delays increased the difficulty of the crossing. He had seen pieces of the dike break off at the shoulders of the spillway and widen the outflow.

He stepped out on the boulders and picked his way to the last point. The jump was only five feet but it seemed impossible. He gathered his courage and jumped, landed safely and rolled to the ground. He looked back to watch the alien.

The alien reached the jump point and tamped down the boulders to get a solid footing underneath. A quake struck, a strong roiling shock. It seemed to last forever. Neftali watched as the alien tottered, tried to regain his balance, and fell seemingly in slow motion into the liquid methane.

"Oh, my god!" Neftali shouted. Without hesitation, he stepped into the liquid methane, six inches deep, walked to the alien, grabbed an arm, and started pulling.

The alien was unconscious, a dead weight. Neftali pulled but didn't budge him. He pulled harder and barely moved him. "Oh, my god," he kept screaming.

He had to get the alien out of the liquid methane quickly otherwise he would die. He could already feel the cold penetrating his boots. He pulled again with all his strength. The alien moved. He pulled again, harder and harder.

Slowly, inch by inch, he pulled the alien toward the dry ground. The cold was hurting his feet. His cries, "Oh, my god," had changed from surprise and shock to a prayer.

He screamed from the pain of the cold. With one last supreme effort, he pulled the alien onto the dry land. Amid bouts of excruciating pain, he called the base to request help.

The base land rover found Neftali and the alien an hour later, fifty feet from the outflow. Neftali had continued, even semiconscious, to pull the alien away from the liquid methane.

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The prognosis was indefinite. Neftali might lose his feet. He rolled down the corridor in a wheel chair to the alien's room. It was the first time they had seen each other since the accident.

The entire left side of the alien's body was wrapped in bandages. The alien medical staff would not say how badly he was injured nor what his prognosis was. Neftali believed he would suffer some amputations.

"Why did you rescue me, Neftali," the alien asked.

"Why? Why not?"

"I am an alien. You could have chosen to save yourself."

"You may be an alien, but you are still a sentient being. You deserve to be rescued."

"I remember hearing you call on your god. Was it a prayer for help from him?"

"Not at first. Initially, it was an expression of shock and surprise. When I started pulling you and couldn't move you, it did become a prayer. It was a prayer for assistance from anybody."

"In the end, it was you who saved me. My people and I will forever be grateful."

"You may not know if your god the creator made us. Or god the man maker. Or god the ruler of the afterlife. I believe that my god made you. Because of that you deserve the same treatment I would give another Jew, or Christian, atheist, or any other human being. That is what we do and are. It's that simple."

"It may be simple to you," the alien said. "But it's difficult for me. I'll never understand you humans."

Nor we you thought Neftali.

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