

Contact

Part IV: Nihil

By Rudolph Najar

The alien and Mark Roth rode along the edge of the Methane Sea. Although the cold of the helium atmosphere did not penetrate his suit, Mark still felt uncomfortable. He did not like being outside the station. He came only because the alien said he had something interesting to show him. What could be of interest to a biologist on a planet with a helium atmosphere and where methane was liquid? Much too cold for any life. Nonetheless, an invitation from the alien was not to be dismissed out of hand.

Their conversation was sporadic until the alien asked Mark about his belief in god and the afterlife.

"I don't believe in any god and I don't believe in an afterlife," Mark responded.

"Yes. I know," the alien said. "Agate Kleinfeld told me."

"There's not much to say."

"There is. For example, why don't you believe in a god or in an afterlife?"

Mark began to respond, but the alien cut him off. "There is something else that intrigues me even more. If you do not believe in an afterlife, this life is the only one you have and must be incredibly valuable to you."

Mark stared at the alien for a long moment. "I never thought of that," he said at last. "I just live my life and when it's over, it's over." He spoke slowly. "I cease to exist. All that survives me is the memories people have of me, my reputation."

"Still," the alien persisted. "The life you have now is the totality of what you have, of what you are. Nothing

more. Nothing less. If I were an atheist, I would think that the worst harm a human could commit against another human would be to terminate that individual's life before its natural end. The greatest good a human could do for another would be to protect another's life. Even extend it if that were possible."

"No," Mark said. "You have it wrong. This life is all I have, true. But it is only so long. However it ends, naturally or violently, it ends. All that survives is memories of me. And they survive regardless of how I die."

"So you are content that all you leave behind are memories?"

"Yes! Emphatically! Even if you believe in a god, that is all you leave behind. Even if you believe in an afterlife, memories are all you leave behind."

"If you don't believe in an afterlife, then you have nothing to look forward to after your life ends."

"That's right. I do not look forward to anything after my death. Once I die, it is all over."

"Why don't you believe in a god? Or in an afterlife?"

"Because there is no evidence for either. There is no objective evidence for the existence of a god or for the existence of an afterlife. There is nothing to convince me of either."

"You humans are interesting. We, all of us, believe in three gods, a creator of the universe, a maker of man, at least of the Alenibatti, and a ruler of the afterlife. You, on the other hand, have different beliefs about god and the afterlife. Julio Guerrero, Neftali Zuckerman, and Agate Kleinfeld appear to believe in the same god and the same afterlife but with differences. I intended to speak with Abdullah al-Saqa, but he was killed during the quakes. And you, Mark. You have totally different beliefs. No god. No afterlife."

Mark's atheism disturbed the alien. He could understand and accept different belief systems, but not a total disbelief in a god. He wondered how a rational being could be an atheist. Given what Julio, Neftali and Agate

had told him, he was overwhelmed that members of a single species differed so much in their belief systems. He would discuss the matter further with each of them.

"Well, as I said. I see no reason to believe in a god or in an afterlife. I try to be a good man, but if I'm threatened, I will defend myself, even to the extreme."

The alien was momentarily silent. "Your views are very interesting, Mark. I do wish to continue our conversation. However, I did promise you something intriguing. We're here."

They had reached low lying hills with gentle rocky slopes. He parked the runabout and walked up the slope above the Methane Sea. He pointed. Mark saw a cave opening with methane streaming in. Steam puffed out intermittently.

"We can't go in," the alien said. "The methane level is dangerous. Deep inside the cave it's probably warm enough to boil the methane. Notice the puffs of methane steam."

"Is this what you showed Agate?"

"Yes, but not all. We were inside when the meteor swarm hit. That started the inflow of methane. We didn't explore everything. Now we can't. Come. We'll look for another cave."

He drove slowly. They scanned the hillsides. "There's one!" He parked. They climbed up the slope to a cave opening.

The cave floor was a fine powder. "Another problem for the geologists. Sand outside. Dust inside."

The cave rapidly grew dark. The hand lights gave barely adequate illumination. The downward slope of the cave made walking awkward.

The alien stopped. "Look!" He pointed his light at the floor. At first, Mark saw nothing unusual. He became slowly aware of the floor seething at a near microscopic level.

"Don't step in there. It's dangerous. Now look at the ceiling." They turned off their lights.

The darkness was total. After what seemed like an eternity Mark saw extremely faint pinpoints of color in the ceiling ahead of them and on the floor. As he watched the lights became brighter until the ceiling was covered with faint colors swaying back and forth. Mark was astounded. He had never seen such colors before. Bioluminescence, he thought. Slowly the colors coalesced into waves that surged in all directions. The pattern slowly changed until the waves moved toward them.

The alien turned on his light. The waves of color on the floor also moved toward them.

Mark looked up at the ceiling. The colors were still visible. Now there was a shower of near microscopic particles raining down on them. They burned up on touching their suits leaving tiny marks. "A cave ecology," Mark said.

"Our heat is attracting them," the alien said. The particles are damaging our suits. We'd better go."

On the way out, the alien pulled a rock off the wall and gave it to Mark. "It's a diamond. They're everywhere. A souvenir of this cave."

The alien drove rapidly back across the plain. "There are plenty of questions about this planet to keep geologists busy for years. The cave also presents numerous issues for biologists. What are the particles in the cave? Are they alive in any sense of the word? Is it, like you said, a cave ecology? What is their energy source? Where are they on their evolutionary path?"

Both were silent. Finally, Mark said, "And the diamonds. How did they form?"

"Mark, leave that to the geologists. You're a biologist. Stick to that. But I warn you, don't go back to that cave alone. We saw only one danger. There are probably more."

Mark did not answer. Diamonds filled his thoughts and imagination. He would return. Alone.

The alien reacted as if he had read Mark's thoughts. He was disappointed. The diamonds meant nothing to him. "I'll never understand you humans," he said.

Nor we you thought Mark.

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