

Contact

Part V: Revelation

By Rudolph Najjar

The alien and the priest had been riding along the edge of the Methane Sea for over an hour in a station runaround. Julio was pleased that the alien had resumed the morning jaunts.

Julio liked the alien in spite of his alienness. The alien was friendly, easy to relate to and interacted with the humans at the station beyond the technical discussions much more than any other alien.

The alien had been seriously injured during the quakes and Julio wondered just how well he had recovered. He would not ask but hoped to find out.

Five local years earlier, a human survey ship had encountered an alien vessel. For a year, they met and tried to learn about each other while revealing as little as possible.

The first major breakthrough was an agreement to construct a joint station where they would lay out the guidelines for future interaction, governmental, political, economic, trade, communications, whatever.

A second breakthrough, a real surprise, occurred when engineers devised a "universal translator", an electronic device that enabled humans and the Alenibatti to converse directly. Negotiations picked up. What was still needed was a planet suitable to both humans and aliens. It was to serve as a meeting place where both races could construct their own facilities and house their population.

"Julio," the alien said. "I have very much enjoyed our conversations. You've given me much food for thought." Julio smiled inwardly at the alien's use of a human idiom. "Now I will give you something to think about."

"Who made us?" Julio asked hopefully.

"No. Although conversations with Neftali, Agate, Mark, and you, especially, were very enlightening. Our understanding of humans has improved tremendously, but there is still much to learn."

"So you're not ready to decide who our creator is?" Julio was still hopeful.

"No, Julio. We're not. It will be many, many years before our philosophers make a decision. It's too important to make quickly. Too much rests on it."

Julio hid his disappointment. Yes, he thought. Too much did rest on the decision. Not just the future relations between humans and Alenibatti, but the future of the human race by itself.

"Julio! Have you ever wondered how this planet came to be? It has a helium atmosphere. Methane is abundant, but in liquid form. The surface is primarily sand. There is little evidence of meteor strikes even considering the recent swarm. There is no water or ice. There is no sign of tectonic activity. Just some low hills. How could such a planet form?"

Julio was silent. He was a priest and an astrophysicist, here primarily to study the Alenibatti and surmise what kind of planet they came from and, equally what kind of star system they came from. With enough circumstantial information, humans might locate the Alenibatti home system. Geology was not his field.

"Geologists would have a grand time devising theories."

The alien chuckled. "You're right. Our geologists argue day and night."

They had arrived at the hills near the juncture with the Methane Sea. The alien drove the runabout about twenty feet up the slope. "For my recreation, I study these hills," the alien said. "Alone. Against all our guidelines. I found a cave and brought Agate to it. We were inside during the meteor shower. She was injured. I carried her out. The meteor shower raised the Sea enough so that it is now streaming into the cave."

"Agate told me about it. She was genuinely terrified, afraid of being buried alive." Julio did not mention that the alien had given Agate a huge diamond rock he found in the cave. Another problem for geologists.

"I brought Mark to the same cave. We couldn't enter it because the methane was still streaming into it. We searched and found another cave above the Sea level. I'm taking you there."

Julio wondered what could be interesting in a cave in this frigid world. He knew the alien well enough that his word carried weight. There would be something intriguing.

The alien drove along the foot of the hills away from the Methane Sea. Around a turn they saw another runabout parked a short distance ahead.

"That's about where I took Mark Roth," the alien said in surprise. "Perhaps someone else discovered the cave."

As they approached Julio called the station dispatcher. "It's Mark Roth," he said. "Mark Roth and Jean Marie Annaud. They left the station half an hour before we did."

"Can't be," the alien said. "I saw Jean Marie just before we left."

He parked by the runabout. Julio saw several large rocks on the seat.

"Diamonds. He's been collecting diamonds."

"That big?" Julio exclaimed, choking on his words. The diamonds were much bigger than the one Agate had shown him.

"Yes. That big. We're going in."

The floor of the cave was a very fine dust. Tracks were clearly visible, in and out, in and out. They petered out to just two tracks, one of which was obviously the alien's.

"We came this far," the alien said. "Turn off your light."

Julio did so. The dark was absolute. Gradually an incredibly faint shimmer of color appeared on the ceiling ahead of them. It was a rainbow of colors, constantly changing, waves crisscrossing each other. Julio had never seen such colors. "Oh, my god!" he exclaimed, softly and slowly. He felt a profound sense of amazement, reverence, awe. "What is it?" he asked.

"Bioluminescence. Mark called it a cave ecosystem." The alien turned his light on. The colors vanished instantly. He turned his light to the floor. As Julio watched, the floor seemed to seethe with barely perceptible motion.

Julio understood why Mark called it a cave ecosystem. A fine rain of tiny, barely visible particles showered the floor to be consumed by whatever was there. He had many questions. What's on the ceiling? What feeds that? On the floor? He stepped forward but the alien restrained him. "It's too dangerous. We're already attracting particles. We're a source of heat, of energy. They'll swarm toward us. They are very corrosive to our suits. Let's go."

"That's an extraordinary find," Julio said excitedly. "The biologists will be in seventh heaven. Observing. Sampling. Analyzing. Theorizing. They'll have a field day."

"It won't be easy. We're so much hotter than those creatures that the very act of observing them affects them. They, whatever they are, react to us. Our suits are so hot by comparison that we attract them. They die on contact. Their remains are extremely corrosive. The suits Mark and I wore here were useless afterwards. Riddled with microscopic holes."

Julio shivered. What he had seen raised so many questions his head swam. How could anything "live" in such a cold environment? Where did they get their energy? What did they eat? How big were they? How long had they existed? What was their evolutionary history? Were there other ecosystems elsewhere on the planet?

Julio bumped into the alien. He had stopped and was examining the tracks on the floor. "I hadn't seen this earlier." Mark's tracks led down a side passage they had not noticed. The alien followed them.

It seemed to Julio that the passageway was endless, snaking back and forth, never straight. "Stop," the alien said suddenly. "Back! Back!" he continued urgently.

He pulled a small box out of a pocket and examined it. "It's a radiation dosimeter." He extended it out ahead, inched forward and stopped.

"This is extraordinary. Right in front of us where my hand reaches, the radiation level is so high it would give me a lethal dose in ten minutes." And me in less time Julio thought.

The alien stared at Julio. "I can't just walk away from this," he said. "However dangerous it is, I will take a look ahead, five or ten seconds at most. I need to know what's there."

"I'll do it, too."

"You don't have to, Julio. It's extremely dangerous."

"I have to."

"All right. We'll step out and scan very quickly."

They stepped out and swung their lights across what Julio estimated was a largish room, perhaps forty by forty feet. He had a sense of intricate multicolored designs cut into the walls and ceiling. Otherwise nothing was representational. There was a body on the floor. He backed out when the alien did.

"There's a body there," Julio said excitedly.

"Yes. Mark Roth. Without a dosimeter he was not aware of the radiation. It was so intense it killed him."

"We'll have to leave him there. It's too dangerous to get his body."

"Julio, we can't leave him there. I'll run in, pick him up and bring him out. Follow me out of the cave but don't get close to me."

When Julio emerged from the cave, the alien was walking back from where he had laid Mark's body a hundred feet from the cave entrance. He walked up to Mark's

runabout and threw the diamonds out.

"Why are you doing that?" Julio asked. "They're valuable!"

"They're everywhere," the alien answered. "Just look around. Do you want people to remember that Mark Roth died collecting rocks so common they are almost valueless? And on a strange planet? There was more to his life and to his reputation."

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A week later Julio met the alien in the commissary. He got a cup of coffee and sat down with him. "I got your message ten minutes ago," he said.

"Thank you for coming, Julio. Matters are changing rapidly for me. First of all, thank you for all the conversations about god and the afterlife. I have relished them. They will be the subject of long discussions with our philosophers. Also, all your actions and those of Neftali, Agate, and Mark. Very interesting."

Julio smiled. "Albert," he said, using the humans' name for the alien. "I am pleased to have helped you. I also found our talks interesting. I learned much about you."

"Julio, I'm sorry to say they must come to an end. I am dying. The immersion in the Methane Sea and the radiation exposure carrying Mark out of the cave damaged my body too much. I am going home to spend time with my spouse and children before I die." It was the first time the alien had mentioned a family or any type of personal relationship. So begins Alenibatti sociology Julio thought.

"You appear happy."

"Why not? When I die, I will meet my god in the afterlife. It will be a great and glorious experience."

"You gave up your life for a human being whose god you don't know. In particular, for a human being who does not believe in a god or in the afterlife, for a human being who was trying to enrich himself at the dereliction of his responsibility. I'll never understand you Alenibatti,"

Julio said.

Albert smiled.

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