

# Gods and Men

by Chris Villars

*An unnerving discovery in deep space.*

A solitary, silver spacecraft sped through the black void. Only a handful of stars pierced the oppressive blackness. Commander Clifford knew that, in fact, these were not stars but galaxies though he preferred not to think about it. Even now, after flying these missions for many years, the thought of being out here so far from the home galaxy still frightened him. Alone in his tiny craft, he preferred not to look around and wonder at the immensity of the universe.

Two squares flashing green on the orange and black chessboard in front of him indicated that the onboard computer had made its move. Recognising the strategy, he keyed in his reply, then turned and lay on his back. Sleep, drug-induced, swallowed him instantly.

When he awoke, the spacecraft was stationary. Another pair of green squares flashed monotonously on the chessboard. Turning to the viewscreen he noticed that, as expected, the image of an orange star, slightly blurred by a surrounding veil of gas and dust, had appeared. He moved to the main console. Docking with the Outstation had been completed successfully while he slept.

It seemed likely that there would be no power supply on the Outstation. Its failure to return with the others was considered to be most probably due to power failure, a problem which had dogged this whole project. Failure of the early central reactor units out here, where regular contact was so difficult to maintain, had almost caused the project to be abandoned. The Commander tested a portable arc-lamp before going aboard. The brilliance of its white glare drowned the softer colours of the cabin lights, throwing everything into harsh relief and emphasising the velvet blackness of the viewscreen.

The Outstation was an immense torus 2km in diameter. Long ago, when it was operational, vast quantities of hydrogen and helium had poured through it every day into the assembly site, funnelled from the surrounding regions by an elaborate network of electromagnetic pathways. The Outstations were the key components of the collection mechanism, the apex of the collection pyramid, and still valuable enough to be worth retrieving for use on new projects. The Commander worked for two hours in the small control room deep inside the cylindrical shell of the Station. He replaced the reactor control unit and re-

programmed the homing device. He wished that he too could head back to the home galaxy when this job was completed, but he had other tasks to perform.

When he switched off the arc-lamp the rigid white brilliance of the room dissolved into luminous purple patches, slipping and sliding with his gaze and slowly fading. While he waited for his vision to clear a small green form appeared, drifting slowly through the space nearby. He had difficulty dissociating it from the vague forms which clouded his vision but it seemed hard and clear, though now more bluish than before. Soon there was nothing in the surrounding darkness but this small bluish- violet ring drifting slowly by. Instinctively he put up his gloved hand and caught it. It felt hard, like a large washer. Perhaps something, escaped from his tool box, had been induced to fluoresce by the lamp. He slipped it back into the box and went back to the spacecraft.

Back at the main console, he entered the instructions that would start the Outstation on its long journey home. Then he returned control of his own craft to the onboard computer. The glowing ring preoccupied him. When he opened the tool box the violet glow of the ring lit up the other contents. When he touched it, it felt metallic, yet it looked translucent, like glass filled with fluorescent liquid. It was about 8cm in diameter, a perfectly smooth torus, the central hole being about 6cm across. He put it down on the chessboard.

After a while it seemed to be fading. He got out the arc-lamp again and shone it over the ring at close range for several minutes. If anything it appeared even fainter afterwards. Then, recalling its greenish appearance when he first saw it, he wondered whether it was really fading or whether its colour was merely shifting into the ultraviolet. Some hastily rigged-up equipment proved this to be the case. As the ring slowly faded its radiation at invisible, ultraviolet frequencies steadily increased. The Commander watched with satisfaction as the radiation from the now non-luminous, and completely transparent, ring shifted to higher and higher frequencies. Then, quite suddenly, it stopped transmitting.

A minute later the ring started to glow again, this time a very dull red. This quickly brightened, turned orange, and passed through all the shades of the visible spectrum and on into the ultraviolet in what must have been less than a minute. This time when it disappeared in the ultraviolet, the Commander quickly selected infrared frequencies, and, sure enough, found the ring to be still radiating at frequencies slowly shifting towards the visible region. This time its progress through the whole spectrum took about four minutes, then the process began again even more slowly than before. The ring's cycle time seemed to follow a square law, taking successively 1, 4, 9, 16, 25, and 36 minutes. After this discovery the Commander paid less attention to the times. The ring seemed

to grow more deeply beautiful. He was fascinated by its subtly changing colours.

By the time his next sleep period arrived the Commander was convinced that the ring was some kind of timing device. Its period grew steadily longer, the last so far having been 81 minutes. He speculated that, after reaching a maximum, it would revert to the short period and the whole cycle would begin again. What was the function of this device on the Outstation? And what technology had produced it? These questions revolved in his mind as he gazed at the ring, glowing yellow on the chessboard, before he lay back and fell asleep.

By coincidence it was glowing yellow again when he awoke, but his attention was immediately distracted by the brilliant orange star which now dominated the viewscreen. Just below the star the small, cloud-covered planet that was his destination could be seen. The young star still held an equatorial disc of gas and dust, like an umbilical cord still linking it with the gas cloud from which it had condensed. This was visible as a dark band across its orange disc.

This star had taken only a fraction of the time other stars take to form, for it was man-made. Gases from nearby intergalactic clouds had been electromagnetically funnelled into the collection site and there artificially compressed and made to rotate more rapidly. Later, artificial centres of mass had been introduced into the cloud to provide nuclei for the planets, in this case, seven in number, and for the central proto-star itself. In this way the evolution period for the star had been reduced to about one ten thousandth of the normal period. Nevertheless many millennia had passed since the project began. The Outstations and other apparatus had returned to the home galaxy and had been used to start other similar projects. As the human race slowly spread through the galaxies wars had been fought around them, and even over them, yet most had survived. Today three of these Star Projects possessed planets on which chemical evolution was well advanced. Those who created them, reflected the Commander, must have imagined themselves as Gods, creating on such a grand scale whole new worlds from which they hoped new intelligent races would eventually emerge. If they could have stood with him now, bathed in the warm orange light of this star, they might indeed have felt themselves to be Gods, basking in the glory of their creation.

Lights on the console flashed to indicate that the spacecraft had begun its approach to the planet. The Commander prepared for the descent. He put on the special protective suit and strapped himself into the seat facing the viewscreen. The surface of the planet was completely invisible, being covered by thick, agitated clouds. The topmost clouds glowed bright orange and yellow, darkening through amber to dark red and black at lower levels. It was over five

hundred years since this planet, the third of the seven in this system, had been visited. The report of the last visit emphasised that violent electric storms raged continuously in the atmosphere. Already the spacecraft's sensors were monitoring frequent sudden bursts of radiation at radio frequencies. As the craft drew closer, lightning flashes could be seen, lighting up large areas of the cloud with brilliant purple light.

The descent through the atmosphere was unsteady. Once the spacecraft's speed had slowed sufficiently the Commander released himself and took over control manually. On entering the cloud layer the light faded rapidly until the viewscreen showed only darkness, a darkness punctuated every few seconds by a brilliant flash of lightning. The first site that had been selected for landing proved to be too soft to land on safely. The Commander suspected it to be part of some kind of shoreline, for there were certainly seas on the planet. Using the spacecraft's remote sensors as his means of guidance he moved the craft in the direction in which the firmness of the terrain increased until it was over solid ground, then he set it gently down. Almost at once it was struck by lightning. Streams of brilliant white light, like rivulets of white hot metal, poured down the conduction lines in the viewscreen. The spacecraft lurched to one side, then slowly recovered. It had been designed to withstand extreme conditions like these.

The surface temperature was 65 degrees. Because of the thick cloud cover it was in almost continual darkness. Only the presence of a fluctuating, faint red patch in the sky, where the sun was, indicated the difference between night and day. The hot, dark surface of this planet, continuously raked by terrifying flashes of lightning, seemed to the Commander more like a realisation of Hell than a cradle from which the first signs of life might soon emerge.

Search lights on the spacecraft could illuminate the immediate vicinity and the lightning flashes provided some degree of wider visibility, but it was impossible to see as far as the horizon or even to gain a general view of the nearby surroundings. A steady fall of hot rain and volcanic ash further restricted visibility. The immediate terrain consisted of hard rock, volcanic magma which had solidified long ago. This gave way to a softer, sponge-like material which slowly sloped down towards the sea. The Commander had to collect samples of both types of material and of the seawater. He was pleased to have found straight away a site with such varied terrain. Later he would have to visit sites at other, widely spaced, points on the planet's surface, so that an accurate overall picture could be built up.

The intervals between his next two sleep periods were spent exclusively in the arduous routine of collecting, classifying and storing samples from the site. Never had he felt more tired of this mission than now. This was his third assignment within the last two years, and now, as he struggled in the hot rain and ash on the surface of this most inhospitable planet, he dearly hoped it would be his last.

When he awoke from the second sleep period he decided to pack up and move to another site. He sat before the viewscreen waiting for the pre-flight system checks to be completed. The spacecraft's search lights were still on, illuminating a circle of rock about 20m in diameter. When they went off the Commander noticed something glowing in the darkness. It looked like the ring he had found on the Outstation. A sudden flash of lightning momentarily obscured everything, but when his vision cleared he saw that it was the ring, glowing bright yellow. He must have dropped it as he was bringing in the last batch of samples. He entered an instruction to cancel the pre-flight sequence and prepared to go outside again. The ring was an important find which he had to take with him.

As he passed the chessboard he noticed the ring lying there, just as he had left it. From where he stood the glowing patch on the viewscreen was still clearly visible. There were two rings! Hurriedly he went outside again and collected the second ring. Back inside, when he put it on the chessboard beside the first, both were glowing an identical shade of orange. Slowly their colours shifted, in perfect unison, into the green.

Two things now seemed clear. Firstly, the rings were not man-made. They were not like any known human artefact. Indeed, even the material they were made of could not be identified by the onboard computer. Secondly, finding them both on this flight, in such unlikely places, could not be a coincidence. They must have been put there in order that he find them. It seemed as if an alien race were trying to make its existence known to him. This thought seemed so strange that he checked his reasoning with the onboard computer, something he rarely did, being used to trusting his own judgement. It confirmed his reasoning, but added a comment that the existence of an alien race was, a priori, an extremely improbable event.

Despite its rapid expansion through the universe, the human race had never yet encountered any other form of intelligent life. Indeed, it was now the scientific orthodoxy to consider humankind to be unique in the universe. The conditions necessary for the evolution of intelligent life were, it was believed, so improbable as to defy even the vast number of sites available. It was this ever increasing sense of solitude which had driven humankind eventually to initiate

the Star Projects. Feeling like ageing Gods alone in the universe, they had sought to create other races in their own image by artificially reproducing the initial conditions considered most favourable. Ironically, it was precisely here, at the site of one of these projects, that the Commander had now discovered indisputable evidence of the existence of alien life.

Because of the importance of his discoveries the Commander decided to abandon his surveillance of the planet and return home immediately. As he gazed at the two rings, glowing bright red on the orange and black chessboard, a sense of foreboding, almost of fear, gripped him.

When he awoke from his next sleep period the dusty orange star was already far away, just a tiny, blurred speck on the viewscreen, only its colour distinguishing it from the remote galaxies. The Commander was anxious to enter the hibernation period he had to go through whilst the spacecraft traversed the space-warp which would return it to the vicinity of the home galaxy as soon as possible, and set about making his preparations.

While he had been asleep, the onboard computer had begun its analysis of the water and rock samples he had collected. Now a light flashing on the main console attracted his attention. In the midst of the other thoughts that preoccupied him he found it hard to take in this new information. The console message read: "Primitive organisms detected in seawater sample SB100/2". Was it possible? The Commander read it again, then entered the instructions to have a drop of water from the sample transferred to the viewscope.

At first there was no sign of anything animate. The water seemed remarkably clear. As the scanner traversed the sample only tiny bubbles and particles of grit were visible. Then suddenly, at the lower right of the screen, a group of tiny organisms appeared. The Commander stared at the screen, fascinated. More of the organisms came into view. Each had a small, oval body and a filament-like tail. They resembled human sperm. His recent fears were forgotten in excited contemplation of these first living organisms created by humankind. In a sudden rush of enthusiasm he felt that humankind had indeed become Gods, creating for themselves new life-forms from inanimate matter.

Suddenly the remote sensors detected another spacecraft nearby. The image of a large, oval spacecraft flashed onto the viewscreen, to be replaced almost immediately by the head and shoulders of an alien being. It was a humanoid creature with bright red, almost scarlet, skin and deep blue, pupil-less eyes. It spoke in a slow, gentle voice:

"Commander Clifford."

The Commander stared in horror at the screen. Then, instinctively, he shut it off. His heart beat savagely in his ears and he was breathing heavily. But the voice came again, this time from behind him:

"Do not be afraid, Commander. You have been prepared, I think, for my arrival."

He whirled round and saw the creature standing near him. It wore a long, dark-blue robe draped loosely around its red body. The Commander staggered to the seat beside the chessboard and sat staring at the creature. As the creature slowly approached him he lost consciousness.

When he came round the creature was sitting near him, on the opposite side of the chessboard. Becoming aware that he had regained consciousness it picked up one of the glowing rings and slipped it onto its wrist.

"They are clocks, Commander," the creature said. "We do not divide time into equal periods as you do, but, as you have discovered, into periods of varying length, though in a regular sequence. We tell which period we are in by observing the rate at which the colours are changing and the time within the period by which colour is showing." He paused, and then added, "The orbit of our planet about its sun is highly irregular."

Had the creature attempted a joke? The Commander smiled feebly and the creature seemed to smile too, wrinkling its red, leathery skin. This kinship of feeling between them seemed to soften the Commander's reaction, and suddenly, he understood why the creature was there. Overcoming his emotion he asked quietly:

"Did your race create us?"

"Yes," the creature replied, "Just as the human race initiated this Star Project and nurtured it to its fulfilment, so my ancestors, many millennia ago, created your Solar System, seeded it with planets at the appropriate time and watched over the development of the race that has become humankind today. Now the time is right to reveal our presence. You must take me back to your home galaxy. On the way we must consider how best to reveal this secret to the rest of humankind."

The Commander looked away from the creature, down at the chessboard and the solitary alien ring, glowing with a vivid violet glare. Only a short time ago,

in his excitement at the success of the project, he had compared humankind to Gods. Now, it seemed, the true Gods had appeared.

*Originally published in Aphelion: The Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy Issue 15, Vol 2 (Jun-Jul 1998).*