



Starship Gods

By Gary L.M. Martin

Forward: The Court Martial

"What does God need with a starship?"

The prosecutor, Lieutenant Commander Julia Fuller, let the question hang in the air for a moment. Then she said, "Did anyone on PR-52981 ever ask you that?"

Survey Service Lieutenant Michael Taylor coughed nervously. "No ma'am. In fact, their prophesy suggested that their god, their gods, would arrive on a fiery silver chariot."

"Which you led them to believe was the USS *Asgard*," said Lieutenant Commander Fuller.

"Yes ma'am," said Taylor.

"As you also led the natives of PR-52981 to believe that you and the survivors of the *Asgard* were gods," said Fuller.

"Well... yes ma'am... but... very reluctantly," said Taylor again.

"Very reluctantly," said Fuller, glaring at him. "And then you proceeded to.. *very reluctantly* impersonate their deities, and rule over them like gods. Is that correct, Lieutenant Taylor?"

"Well, in a way... Commander," said Taylor, biting his lip.

"In a way? Did you or did you not impersonate their deities on PR-52981?"

"I... I suppose I did. We all did," said Taylor.

"You are the one on trial, Lieutenant," said Fuller sharply. "You ordered the population to obey your every command, did you not, Lieutenant?"

"I did," Taylor said.

"You ordered them to turn over their wealth to you, did you not?"

"Well, we did initiate a modest revenue enhancement program-

"A yes or no, Lieutenant."

"Well, that would be yes, then," said Taylor.

"You ordered them to worship you, did you not?"

"Well, no... not *ordered*," said Taylor.

"What then?" Fuller asked. "Did you, while impersonating their gods, merely *suggest* they worship you?"

"I never really asked for it," said Taylor. "It was more... implied. You might say it came with the job."

There was muffled laughter in the courtroom.

Fuller gave Taylor a skeptical look. "You exercised absolute authority over the native population, did you not?"

"I... I guess I did," said Taylor reluctantly.

"You even, using this authority, ordered native women to service you in ways that violated Section 293.4 of the United Survey Service Code of Conduct."

Commander Fuller glared at Taylor. Taylor was studiously silent.

"We're waiting for your answer, Lieutenant Taylor."

"Oh, was that a question? I'm sorry, Commander," said Taylor, sweating profusely. He, paused, licking his lips. "Can you repeat the question again?"

Fuller's eyes flared. "Lastly, and most seriously, is it true that when the population rebelled against your rule, you purposefully flew the USS *Asgard* low over the population, fired up the thrusters, and burned thousands of people to their deaths?"

Taylor bit his lip, but said nothing.

Fuller said, "Your Honor, the witness is refusing to answer the question."

"Lieutenant Taylor, you will answer the question," said the military judge sternly.

Taylor paused, looking at the audience, and then at the jury. "Yes," he whispered.

There was more than one gasp from the crowd.

"How many thousands did you kill, Lieutenant? Five thousand? Ten thousand? More?"

"I don't know," said Taylor, in a small voice. "I was not able to count them."

"Well, could it have been five thousand?"

"Yes."

"Could it have been ten thousand?"

"Yes."

"Possibly more than ten thousand?"

Taylor paused. "Possibly."

There was a gasp from the audience again.

Commander Fuller turned to the military tribunal. "Your honors, it is clear that Lieutenant Michael Taylor broke numerous Codes of Regulations regarding contact with less developed civilizations. He has admitted to the most serious crime, of mass genocide against an entire culture. Given the extreme nature of his violations, I ask you to impose the most severe penalty." And she glared at Taylor as she said it. "Death."

Taylor felt like he was going to faint. How had he landed in this situation? It seemed, every step of the way, that he had had no choice. He had been forced into it. If only they knew the true story, of what really happened that year on PR-52981....