

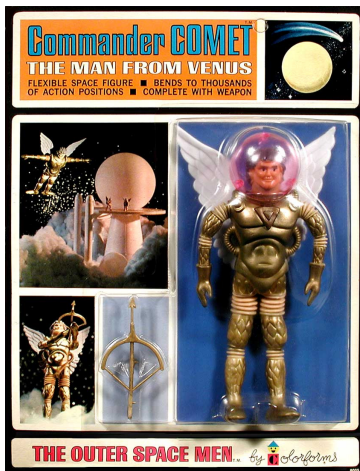
The Outer Space Men

Chapter 2

COMMANDER COMET

THE MAN FROM VENUS

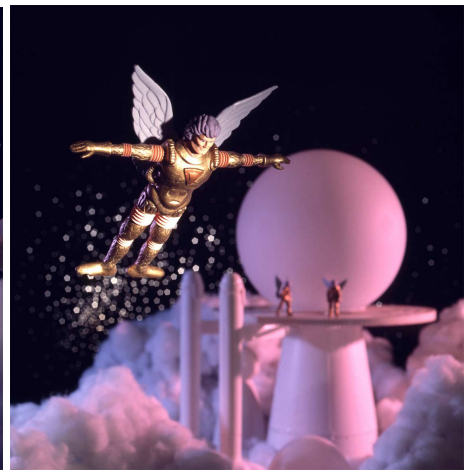
By Francis McGrath



Commander COMET

THE MAN FROM VENUS

From Olympus, largest of the great cloud cities of Venus, the mighty cloud ship Cumulus sets forth. Like a fiery comet it blazes through the blackness of outer space toward our Earth. Its captain, Commander Comet, is a direct descendant of the mighty Zeus, leader of the historic first Venusian expedition to Earth, which landed near the Grecian Isles 3,000 years ago. Commander Comet's present mission is one of routine Earth surveillance, and once within the atmosphere of Earth, his ship will join the great fleet of Venusian craft that float like clouds above our planet night and day, watching undetected over our world.



Compassion is more important than Dogma.

Flying was strictly forbidden in the Command Cathedral unless there was an emergency. Commander Comet never understood that rule. Why would the Great Creator frown on the use of one of the gifts he had given? Of all the creatures in the Solar System, only Venusians had wings. (Well technically the Hollow Men of Earth had wings, but they weren't counted as sentient beings by the rest of the system.) For centuries, the no-fly zone was enforced and no one remembered why. But like so many other commandments on Venus, most people never questioned it.

In a subtle act of defiance, Comet gave an occasional flick of his wings, just enough that he could kick off the ground and look like he was walking. Several lieutenant monks and cathedral captains glared at him. He was obviously moving too fast, but his casual gait confused them enough to not bother about him. Before they could realize what he was doing, he had made it across the holy space to Major Marson's door, exactly in time for his regular reconnaissance reconciliation.

Comet entered the small, dark room and genuflected.

"Forgive me Major for I have sinned. It was been three days since my last briefing."

"At ease Commander, tell me of your sins." Major Marson didn't even look at Comet, he just mechanically recited the sacrament without glancing up from his terminal.

There was a long pause. Longer than was common in military mores. Marson stifled a yawn and looked at Comet with concern.

For several minutes they sat in silence. Marson knew something was on Comet's mind. He also knew how a long, silent pause between two old friends can convey trust and concern. An impatient question or insensitive remark would have stifled the conversation. By doing nothing, Marson conveyed the deep openness that Comet appeared to need.

Finally, Comet spoke, "I think I'm losing my faith."

In a religious/military organization, it's hard to determine if such a statement is blasphemy or insubordination. But Marson wasn't actually surprised. He had worried about Comet for months. There was only one thing he could do: nothing. He let Comet talk. The words came slowly. Painfully. A conversation that could have taken minutes was going to take hours. Both men were going to miss mess call and vespers and neither were concerned about the consequences of either.

"I think it started on my last visit to Earth. Humans used to show such deep belief. But now...they have squandered our gifts of science and logic. Instead of improving their planet, they either exploit others or distract the population with meaningless entertainment. I fail to see how we have improved their planet."

Major Marson took time to decide where to start. "You are not the first to raise these concerns. When we discovered the Earthlings, we weren't sure on the best way to help them. The science and logic of which you speak is such a small portion of what we tried to instill. We still hope that they will embrace our gifts of belief and charity."

"But that's the problem Major. They seem to have forgotten the wonder of the universe. Every night, I still go to the grand steeple so I can look out above the clouds and bask in the miracle of starlight. But the earthlings don't

have the perpetual clouds as we do. The light of a thousand stars travelling across the galaxy is on display and all they have to do is look up. Instead, they build more and more lights until their cities have entirely drowned out the rest of the universe.”

“Comet, you know I’m not one to quote our dogmatic regulations, but you are forgetting one of the tenants from The Book of Olympus: ‘It easiest to overlook that which is most common.’ If they came here, they might tell us about how we ignore the wonder and beauty of our clouds. I realize how far fetched that seems, but the monotony of our sky might be novelty to others.

“They are a good people. You know that I was there with your grandfather Zeus three thousand years ago. When we revealed ourselves, our mere presence unlocked the wonder that you are rightfully concerned about.”

Comet hesitated, but it was time he shared his deepest fears, “Does that really count as faith? The humans were stuck in a primitive state when a group of purple-haired Venusians swooped out of the sky. The Book of Olympus also says ‘The faithful are those who never witness a miracle and still believe.’ Did we help instill belief or short circuit their faith?”

Major Marson dove into the heart of Comet’s concern, “This isn’t about the earthlings, is it? There is something more personal going on?”

“Yes Major. The humans that witnessed your arrival built their own temples to Olympus, but that did not create a lasting dogma. No one even worships at those temples anymore. Other religions have taken their place, but most people either avoid worship or do it with a cavalier attitude.”

“Is your prayer life cavalier, Commander?”

“I’m not sure. Permission to speak freely, Major?”

The Major laughed at this, “Of course, Comet. We have been.”

“Isn’t it possible that we are in the same situation as the humans? Perhaps the Great Creator was just a visitor who came to Venus eons ago. His advanced technology and alien appearance impressed us so much that we still worship him. Perhaps he wasn’t much more advanced than we are now. But unlike Earth, we have unilaterally held to those beliefs. And while my life is so much richer because of it, I fear that instead of worshipping the Great Creator, we only worship our rituals. Is prayer just an end in itself?”

Before the major could answer, a klaxon disrupted the serene moment. Marson punched his comlink: “What is going on lieutenant?”

“Sir, something has been picked up on Earth’s proximity detector.”

Comet and Marson stared at each other in disbelief, completely forgetting about their conversation on belief. No words were spoken, just a flurry of wings as the two flew back out to the Command Cathedral. This counted as an emergency and flying was always quicker than walking.

The lieutenant didn’t even look up from his screen as the two flew up, he just continued, “We had been tracking some irregular signals for several hours. A tiny blip approached the planet then vanished, appeared again, then vanished. We’ve been checking our equipment to see if it was a malfunction because if it’s a ship, it’s the

smallest ship I've ever seen. A few minutes ago it appeared high above Earth."

Comet was too well trained to wallow in his feelings. "Are there any life signs?"

The lieutenant finally looked up from his screen, "I'm not sure. We are picking up some weak life signs, but they are faint and they don't match anything in the data-scripture."

Marson was trying to deduce which planet would dare break the sanctity of Earth. "What kind of orbit has the object assumed?"

"It's not in orbit. It's slowly drifting out to space. It's currently fifty thousand kilometers above the surface. We have twelve cloud ships patrolling Earth's atmosphere. Should I send one of them to intercept?"

Without hesitation Comet said, "No, I'll take the Cumulus and investigate. We need them to stay in position in case there are more ships or this is some sort of ruse by the Hollowmen."

Marson was already at work at another terminal, "I'll have the fleet on standby. We don't want to enact a full military operation until we know what we're dealing with. Earth's technology is advanced enough that they might detect multiple ships.. He looked Comet deep in the eyes, "Don't forget Comet, the penance for any non-sanctioned ship approaching Earth is death."

Comet paused in confusion. It was not like the major to quote him dogmatic regulations.

Venusians have strict rules about space travel. Depending on orbits, policy states that it can take anywhere from one to five hours to fly from Venus to Earth. After checking his charts, Comet was disappointed to see that it would be four hours at regulation speed. "Regulations be damned," he thought as he pushed his ship, The Cumulus, to the red. He was in Earth's orbit thirty minutes later.

Comet activated his sensors and at first he couldn't find anything unusual, mostly just communication satellites relaying banal conversations around the planet. After some creative sensor sweeping, he found a flying saucer, less than five meters in diameter. Following strict protocol, he activated his shields, charged his weapons and slowly approached the object.

He had never seen anything like it. It was definitely a ship of some kind, very sleek and elegant, but it couldn't be from this system. It didn't resemble any ship from the inner or outer planets. There was a clear bubble in the center that would be a crew compartment if it wasn't so small. As Comet approached, he positioned his ship so he could look inside. To his utter amazement, there was a tiny, green creature lying motionless in the bubble. Comet could hear Major Marson's words echoing in his head. He could hear years of theological bootcamp playing over and over. He could hear every boring sermon he managed to stay awake through. Regulations and commandments were clear, he must destroy this vehicle and its occupant.

But Comet hesitated.

For all their faults, the Earthlings were good people. They were primitive and childlike and deserved to be protected.

Comet put his finger on the trigger.

But this creature looked even more pathetic than the humans. It was as small as a newborn Venusian.

His finger moved away.

But it did have a spaceship that was capable of interplanetary travel. And though Comet couldn't make out any weapon systems, it might be capable of incredible destruction, especially against Earth's meager defenses.

His finger went back to the trigger.

But why had he not seen a ship like this before? Why was it drifting? What kind of being was this? Why was it motionless?

Suddenly he remember the first commandment / prime order: "Compassion". One word. No sub-paragraphs. No criteria.

Instead of firing his weapons, Comet activated the tractor beam and pulled the alien ship into the Cumulus' cargo hold.

After flying his ship a safe distance from Earth (and Venus), Comet went down to the hold, bow-blaster in hand, to examine the saucer and it's occupant. The exterior of the ship was very smooth and did not appear to have an exterior control panel that would open the ship's bubble. Comet did the most scientific thing he could think of, he tapped on the canopy.

The purple-haired Venusian watched.

The green being opened his eyes.

A white being appeared.

With flapping wings, the Venusian bowed in midair to the angelic, white creature

With a sigh and a shrug, the green man sat up and yelled at his annoying stalker.

Without a sound, the white being did nothing. Then was nothing.

Purple hair fell to the floor.

Green antennae fell to the floor.

Comet's hands were shaking and his wings were twitching as he got up from where he crashed to the floor. The white being had disappeared. Did he imagine it's appearance? No, the green creature had reacted too. Comet stared at the minute creature.

It was moving around, putting on its helmet and finally pushed a button that opened the canopy. The first thing to come out was a stench so bad that Comet feared it was a chemical weapon. Next came the creature itself, who appeared to be wounded and covered in its own filth. But Comet's attention was completely focused on its right hand, which held what looked to be a weapon.

Without a sound, the creature looked from Comet's eyes to the bow-blaster pointed at its face. It quickly tossed his own weapon away and squatted into a small pile on the floor. Comet took a position between the being and

its weapon and finally asked, "Who are you? Where do you come from?"

The creature looked confused and made some high pitched sounds that must have been its way of communicating.

Comet must have looked even more confused than the creature. He pulled the translator device off his belt to see if it was working. He had met aliens from all over the system and the translator was always able to discern their languages. After verifying that device was working, he tried to talk to it again, with comical results: the creature simply passed out on the deck.

The Book of Olympus defines compassion as "Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, giving water to the thirsty, and sheltering the homeless." So that is what Comet did.

For the next several hours, he cared for this creature. He took it to his medical temple and had the computer analyze the air in the creature's suit. Comet then created a quarantine section around the creature and changed the atmosphere inside to be conducive to what the alien needed. Comet had to wear his own helmet to enter the chamber. Once inside he carefully removed the creature's helmet and monitored its respiratory functions for several minutes. When he was confident that the creature was breathing fine, he cut off its clothes, cleaned it, dressed its wounds (some of which appeared to have been recently stitched up), then placed it in a bed large enough to hold ten of whatever it was. He set the monitors to notify him when it woke up. In the meantime he examined and even cleaned the inside of the flying saucer, twice. He had just found the creature's spare clothes when the ship's computer notified him that it had awoken.

Back in the med-temple, Comet tried to talk to it again but neither being could understand the other. After several frustrating attempts, the creature pointed to the clothes that Comet was holding. Comet let it dress while he got it some water and a couple of communal, protein wafers. When it saw the glass of water, its eyes widened, as if that was the largest glass of water it ever saw. It slowly took a few sips then kept pushing the glass to Comet, insisting that they share it. In the end, it drank very little of the water but ate several of the wafers.

Comet found an extra translator in a nearby compartment, he changed a few settings and it handed to the alien. It was a flat, gold device and one side was lit with the picture of a triangle. Comet pointed at it and said "triangle". The creature said something in its own language. The machine beeped and changed the picture, this time to a circle. The creature seemed to understand, so he sat down on the bed and started identifying different pictures.

Comet had known that the device could learn new languages, but he had never seen it used before. At first he was fascinated, but he started to grow impatient. The creature did not seem to get impatient or frustrated. Either it was genuinely interested in the process or so desperate to communicate that it didn't mind the monotony. After a while it took a break to eat and drink some more.

Comet knew he had to report back to Venus. If they assumed he had flown at regulation speed, they would think that he was just arriving at Earth. He sent a cryptic message that said, "I have finally located the craft and am trying to determine its cargo and origin." That should confuse them for a while longer. When he returned to the medbay, he was surprised that the translator on his belt started to translate short words and phrases that

the creature uttered. It was certainly missing nuances, but a large amount of vocabulary was now available. The creature said something that his translator believed to be the word “sleep”. The alien was obviously exhausted and still healing, so it laid down. Comet turned down the lights, sat in a corner and closed his eyes. As a trained combatant, he knew he would wake at the slightest movement.

Whether it was physical exhaustion, mental exhaustion, spiritual indifference, or inexperience with tiny aliens, he didn't notice when the creature woke up and quietly resumed teaching the translation device his language. Comet was finally awoken when the device chimed. The creature's translator started speaking in high-pitched gibberish that Comet's own machine translated to, “Thank you for answering these basic questions. We were able to use your answers to deduce the fundamentals of your language. While the process is not perfect, we hope the complexity of these sentences will instill you with confidence. The more you use it, the more the machine will learn and adapt to your language. This machine is our gift to you, it will allow you to communicate with any species and any language that has ever used one before. As we speak, your language has been sent by interplanetary packet to the central database on Venus where it is being uploaded to all active translators throughout the system. If you ever do encounter a language it can't translate, just hand it to the speaker and say 'new language'. It will lead them through the initiation process and you'll be communicating with them in a short period of time.”

The alien looked up at Comet and said something. Comet's machine said, “So you're from the second planet?” Comet replied, “Yes, and in the name of our Cosmic Creator, where are you from?” The creature's translator squealed something. Using the translators, they were finally able to have a conversation.

“My name is Alpha 7 and I come from the fourth planet, Mars.”

Comet recoiled at this claim, “Impossible. I've been to Mars and there isn't even a bacteria crawling around in that dust bowl.”

“Well I've been to Mars too, lived there my whole life, and I can assure you that there are several million of us. Until recently, we lived deep underground.” Alpha 7 left out the fact that they hadn't known there was a planet surface or a solar system.

“Why are you defiling the innocence of Earth?”

“I don't understand your question?”

“What were you doing on a planet that has been quarantined from the other planets?”

“Look, my people have been kind of out of it for several thousand years and I didn't see any 'No Landing' signs posted anywhere. And as you noted, there isn't much on Mars. We are running out of food and water. If we don't find some soon, Mars will certainly become lifeless.”

“Who do you think you are? Just because you squandered your planet's resources doesn't mean you can probe around someone else's!”

“Why not? The Earthlings sent their probes to Mars first.”

Comet had to concede that point. He was aware of Earth's fledgling space program. He was also sensing no hostility and no deception coming from the supposed Martian. The only hostility in the room was coming from

himself. "Excuse my curt attitude. My name is Commander Comet and I am in charge of protecting Earth."

"Protecting Earth from what?"

"Protecting Earth from those who would take advantage of its primitive inhabitants and exploit its resources."

"You mean there are even more types of beings?"

"Yes, all of the planets have advanced societies that can easily travel the system, except Earth and Mars."

Alpha 7 smiled and said, "You mean except Earth."

"So it would seem. We thought that Earth was the only planet still evolving."

"It is. Mars had space travel thousands of years ago. We don't know what happened, but we retreated to our caves and forgot who we were. For a long time, we lost our technology, our motivation, and our understanding in anything beyond ourselves."

These words stung Comet in his own doubts.

The alien continued, "But we finally found them all, again. I have to ask, can you travel to other stars?"

"Not yet, but we think we are getting close. We'll verify your story later. Right now, I have to know, who was that white angel that appeared?"

Alpha 7 looked confused again, "What's an angel?"

Comet was intrigued. Did the translator miss something or did he just discover a race of agnostics?, "Do your people believe in a god, or almighty power, or something beyond yourself? This kind of belief is central to my people. Don't you ever wonder who created the universe or what happens when you die?"

Now it was Alpha 7's turn to feel stung. He finally answered, "After thousands of years of life in a cave, we lost our curiosity and our passion. We have started getting it back, but it is a slow, confusing process. If we believe in anything, it's survival and discovery. As to the white creature, I don't know who he is, but this is the third time I've seen him. I saw him once on Mars, then on Earth just a few hours ago, and just now. He's really starting to annoy me. Every time he shows up I feel like I'm in between reality and a dream. It makes me feel like I did when I was very young, being held by mother. It also makes me feel very sick and tired. Both at the same time."

Commander Comet understood. He had felt the same conflicting emotions in the angel's presence. "The people of Venus have been watching over Earth for thousands of years. We believe the Creator wants all planets to develop without other planets invading or plundering them. We have also watched Earth in ships, cloaked in clouds to hide our presence. But a few thousand years ago, one of our novices named Zeus gave into temptation, landed in a village, and tried to communicate with them. When they first met, he reported seeing a white visitor. He said he felt dizzy in its sight, but it quickly disappeared. This visitor has been a source of debate for centuries. Did Zeus make him up? Was it an angel? No one knows. But I believe the being we just saw might be the same kind of angel. And I haven't believed anything in a long time. I must fill out a form of Thanksgiving and send it to Olympus."

Whether trying to introduce levity or just satisfy a curiosity, Alpha 7 responded with a most surprising question, "Am I short? I have met three different species and you are all so much taller than my people"

For the first time in days, Comet laughed. "I am afraid that you are very short. All the other planets have creatures my size or bigger. In fact, I thought you were an infant when I first saw you."

For reasons he couldn't explain, Alpha 7 felt embarrassed. He was about to ask what was going to happen next, but Comet must have been thinking something similar and said, "Scripture dictates that I must destroy you and your ship." Alpha 7 didn't know what scripture was, but he did know that he didn't want to be destroyed.

To Alpha 7's relief, Comet continued, "But I do not believe you are a threat. I honestly don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Alpha 7 smiled and said, "I've never felt that way. I always knew what I was supposed to do, even though it meant being disdained by my own people."

"How did you cope with that kind of loneliness?"

"By being right. By standing up time and time again, as if to say, 'Go ahead and punch me in the chin. I can take it. In fact, here's my chin. Hit it again.'"

"And they eventually followed you?"

"No. They followed the same path as me."

From that moment on, the two felt connected in a way that neither of them could ever define, even though they still had difficulty understanding each other. When Comet suggested they should pray about their situation, Alpha 7 had no idea what he meant. The best interpretation he could come up with was that he should do nothing. If he had one defining trait, it was that he was not very good at doing nothing. And because Alpha 7 was too embarrassed by how Martians had squandered the last millennia, it took Commander Comet a while to understand how dire their situation was.

After much debate, they finally agreed that Commander Comet would not kill Alpha 7, as long as Alpha 7 agreed that Comet was supposed to.

But Comet was torn what to do next. The most logical thing to do was to bring Alpha 7 back to Venus to plea to his people. But Comet wasn't sure he'd be heard, and Alpha was too concerned for his own people, "I don't have time to travel further from my home and I will not return to my planet empty handed. You believe the earthlings need to be protected. I admire that. But I must take care of my own people. I must return to Earth and figure out how to bring water and food back to Mars. Have you no compassion?"

Without knowing it, Alpha 7 said the magic word. Comet sighed and asked, "Is your ship capable of towing other things?"

Surprisingly, it wasn't hard to attach Venusian cargo containers to a Martian ship. In the end, Comet gave Mars two containers: one held 10,000 gallons of water, the other held all the rations from the Cumulus. But there was another problem to deal with: Earth's alarms were triggered again. This time from deep inside the planet

instead of outside it.

While many humans believe that they were created by divine providence and that they are the most advanced creatures in the universe, they are the least developed of all the planets in their own system. In fact, they aren't even the most developed on Earth. For underneath Earth's fragile crust is a group of intelligent beings so savage that they have no emotional core. They have no support system or depth to their depravity, and thus they are called the Hollow Men. The only force that has kept them from killing all the humans and claiming Earth's surface as their prize is the Venusians. And now one of their ships was trying to climb from the depths of the molten core, through melting glaciers in the arctic circle, to lay havoc and terror on the people of Earth.

Comet marveled at the timing of the situation, "This might be Providence. The Venusian Armada might be just preoccupied enough with Hollow Men to give you a big enough head start. Can you do me a favor? Can you return to Mars and patiently wait for me to smooth the situation with my superiors?"

Though Alpha 7 nodded at this, but he couldn't deny his one defining trait, that he was not very good at doing nothing.

Commander Comet was sitting alone in his cockpit, talking to a projection of Major Marson. Having just heard the full report on Alpha 7, the Major was not pleased. "Comet, do you realize what you have just done?"

Commander Comet calmly replied, "I showed compassion."

"Perhaps. We may never know the full ramifications of your actions. But I was thinking that you just ended your brilliant military career. I need to you to return to Venus for your excommunication."

"I will sir, but you forget that the Hollow Men are attempting to launch a ship through the arctic barrier. I will return to Venus after this situation is resolved."

"We have other ships that can deal with that."

"Despite what I have done for the Martians, I will not turn my back on my responsibilities to Earth. I do not believe the Martians pose any threat, but we know the Hollow Men do. I will return when my duties are finished."

Major Marson sighed. Comet had already defied one order, and Earth was too far away to prevent more defiance. "Comet, I will pray for you. I suggest you do the same."

Comet thought of their conversation earlier that day. "I asked you before, and I ask you again, is prayer just an end in itself?"

The question stung the major, who quickly terminated his transmission, then did nothing.

Comet was left alone with his prayers and his deeds.